

How to Reduce the Effects of ACEs and Toxic Stress



Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) may increase a child's risk of health problems, but parents' consistent care and support help to protect children's health. Relationships with loving and supportive adults can reduce children's stress levels. Even simple activities like playing with bubbles, bear hugs, lullabies, listening to music together, and coloring can make a difference.

What's the best way to respond to a child's ACEs? If possible, prevention of ACEs is best. In addition, you can:

- Tune in and learn your child's signals. Help your child calm down when you sense that she is stressed or scared. Soothe your child, and teach ways to calm down when feeling upset.
- Talk and play with your child. Babies like to be rocked, cuddled, and massaged. Toddlers thrive on hugs, shared stories and songs, and daily routines. These actions can help children feel seen, heard, and understood.
- Focus on managing your own stress. This can help you better adjust the way these feelings impact how you respond to your child. Having a calm parent will help protect your child during periods of stress.
- Take your child to regular medical visits. Your medical provider can help you understand when your child's health may be at risk.

Other ways to help your child's body deal with stress:

- Stick to daily routines. They help children know what's happening next, which can reduce stress.
- Have your child exercise regularly. Make sure your child is getting at least an hour per day of active play.
- Help your child eat well. Good nutrition builds brain health and protects the body. Serve fruits and veggies at meals and avoid junk food.
- Ensure your child gets adequate sleep. Sleep gives the body time to grow and recharge and children who get adequate sleep manage stress more easily.
- Seek mental health care if needed.
- Practice being in the moment; try breathing and meditation. It can help the body manage stress.
- Turn to supportive relationships in your family and community.
- Talk to your health care provider about whether your child's ACEs might be affecting his health and what you can do about it.

ACEs don't just affect children,

they affect families. Some of the most important things you can do to stop the effects of ACEs include learning to manage your *own* stress so you can be a healthy, stable, and caring presence for your child. This includes making lifestyle choices such as eating healthy food, getting regular exercise, making a good night's sleep a top priority, and practicing mindfulness. Getting mental health support can also be helpful if you experienced ACEs and trauma in your own childhood or are currently experiencing stressful or traumatic situations in your life. The good news is that science shows how bodies and brains grow and change *every minute of the day!* This means that by starting *today*, putting some of these lifestyle choices into action and getting the right help when you need it, can help build a healthier future for you and your family.

SOURCES

- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2007). The importance of family routines. Retrieved from <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/The-Importance-of-Family-Routines.aspx>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2018). Sleep. Retrieved from <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/sleep/Pages/default.aspx>
- Bucci, M., Marques, S. S., Oh, D., & Harris, N. B. (2016). Toxic Stress in Children and Adolescents. *Adv Pediatr*, 63(1), 403-428. doi:10.1016/j.yapd.2016.04.002
- Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2014). A decade of science informing policy: The story of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/decade-science-informing-policy-story-national-scientific-council-developing-child>
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., . . . Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *Am J Prev Med*, 14(4), 245-258.
- Gunnar, M. R., & Davis, E. P. (2008). Stress, coping, and caregiving. In L. Gilkerson & R. Klein (Eds.), *Early Development and the brain: Teaching resources for educators* (pp. Unit 7, 1-56). Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.
- Khoury, B., Sharma, M., Rush, S. E., & Fournier, C. (2015). Mindfulness-based stress reduction for healthy individuals: A meta-analysis. *J Psychosom Res*, 78(6), 519-528. doi:10.1016/j.jpsychores.2015.03.009
- Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (2018). Chapter 3: Active children and adolescents.
- Purewal Boparai, S. K., Au, V., Koita, K., Oh, D. L., Briner, S., Burke Harris, N., & Bucci, M. (2018). Ameliorating the biological impacts of childhood adversity: A review of intervention programs. *Child Abuse Negl*, 81, 82-105. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2018.04.014
- Shonkoff, J. P., & Garner, A. S. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e232-246. doi:10.1542/peds.2011-2663
- Yousafzai, A. K., Rasheed, M. A., & Bhutta, Z. A. (2013). Annual Research Review: Improved nutrition--pathway to resilience. *J Child Psychol Psychiatry*, 54(4), 367-377. doi:10.1111/jcpp.12019

