

## How Foster Care and ACEs Impact Child Development

### The Tension of Keeping Children and Youth Safe as They Develop

When placed into foster care, children and youth leave behind more than a home. They leave behind their family, friends, neighbors, teachers and other familiar supports and surroundings. Research shows that taking children out of their family home and placing them in foster care can increase the risk of academic, behavioral, developmental and psychological issues (Curtis, Dale, Kendall & Rockefeller, 1999). Unfortunately, children and youth placed in foster care will most likely move from placement to placement for years, causing further instability, confusion and fear.

### Adverse Childhood Events, Trauma and the Reactionary Brain

Children and youth who enter foster care, especially those who are very young, are undergoing major brain development and are sensitive to the world around them. They are very vulnerable to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including the 10 types of childhood traumatic incidents of abuse, neglect or household instability that were identified in the landmark CDC-Kaiser Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE Study). These experiences include:

- Physical, emotional and sexual abuse.
- Physical and emotional neglect.
- Living with a family member who has substance abuse issues.
- Living with a family member who is depressed or has other mental health issues.
- Experiencing parental divorce or separation.
- Having a family member who is incarcerated.
- Witnessing the mother being abused.

According to the [ACEs Connections<sup>1</sup>](#) website, enduring ACEs causes children and youth to experience toxic stress – a chronic state of fight-flight-or-freeze (or appease), where they learn reactionary coping mechanisms such as lashing out (fight), running away (flight), emotionally shutting down (freeze), or people pleasing (appease). Simply put, toxic stress can wire young brains for reaction because they’re focused on survival.

### Using a Trauma-informed Care Lens for Children in Foster Care

Knowing that children and youth in foster care are most likely trauma survivors, how you interact with them is crucial to their development, well-being and futures as adults. Building resilience through caring and stable relationships can help reverse the effects of ACEs.

The key question that frames trauma-informed care shifts from “What’s *wrong* with you?” to “What *happened* to you?” A trauma-informed lens helps us view a child’s or youth’s difficult behaviors as misplaced coping mechanisms for enduring abuse, neglect or instability.

### What You Can Do

There are many strategies we can implement to help children and youth in foster care achieve better outcomes. In a 2015 study, researchers interviewed children and youth in foster care about their trauma experiences before, during and after their times in foster care and gave six recommendations for better outcomes.

- **Intervene earlier.** Give families who are at risk supports sooner, including assistance to address challenges such as poverty, substance abuse or mental health issues.
- **Provide better foster placements.** Children and youth deserve to be in placements where they are loved, accepted and protected, and where foster parents understand the impact of trauma on a child or youth, and how to best respond to prevent further traumatization.
- **Create access to caring adults.** Children and youth need caring adults who understand what they have been through. Adults need to be consistent and reliable in children’s and youth’s in foster care lives.
- **Offer better training for foster parents.** Foster parents need to be better equipped for handling the needs of children and youth who have experienced trauma, while also knowing how to meet their own self-care needs.
- **Create continuity in relationships.** Help children and youth in foster care keep in touch with their family members, especially siblings. Having the same caseworker throughout their time in foster care can also provide a greater sense of stability for the child or youth.
- **Create leadership activities.** For older youth, give them a voice in policymaking and programmatic activities. And always include the voice of the child or youth in their own treatment and permanency planning.

## Resources

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.acesconnection.com/blog/the-developing-brain-and-adverse-childhood-experiences-aces>