

# childhood trauma's lasting impact



Trauma experienced during childhood can have lasting, lifetime adverse effects into adulthood. Abuse and neglect can impact how a child perceives the world around them and how they interact with other children and adults.<sup>1</sup> **Children are incredibly resilient** and can often overcome trauma with the support of caring adults and responsive systems.

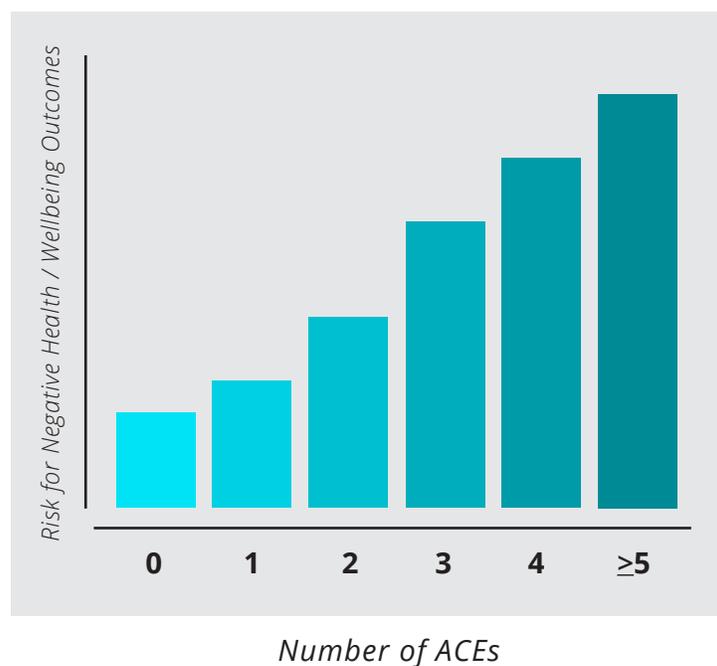
## SEXUAL ABUSE IN CHILDHOOD

A person sexually abuses a child when they coerce or manipulate that child into witnessing or participating in a sexual act. **Approximately 93 percent of perpetrators know and are trusted by the child they harm.**<sup>2</sup> Sexual abuse can be contact or non-contact (*e.g. showing a child pornographic material*). People who abuse children will often push contact and non-contact boundaries before escalating to contact sexual abuse – these are sometimes referred to as “grooming behaviors.”

Child sexual abuse is a serious public health problem affecting hundreds of thousands of children and families each year. National research from the CDC found that 43.2 percent of female victims and 51.3 percent of male victims of completed or attempted rape reported it first occurred before they turned 18.<sup>3</sup>

Like all sexual violence, fear and shame can inhibit survivors from reporting abuse – especially when the person who harms them is an adult they trust. A survey of adult survivors of child sexual abuse found almost half did not tell anyone for over a year.<sup>4</sup>

▶ **adverse childhood experiences (ACEs):**  
10 types of child abuse, neglect, and family circumstances that lead to “toxic stress.”



## ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

**Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are linked to a host of long-term outcomes.**<sup>5</sup> ACEs include sexual abuse, emotional neglect and abuse, physical neglect and abuse, and sexual abuse, among others.

A national study revealed **almost 64 percent of participants reported at least one ACE**, and 21 percent reported experiencing contact sexual abuse as a child.<sup>6</sup> ACEs have been linked to an increased likelihood of harmful physical health outcomes, such as alcohol abuse, depression, and an increased risk for intimate

partner violence, among others. People who experienced at least four ACEs were twice as likely to be smokers, seven times more likely to experience alcoholism, 10 times more likely to use illicit drugs, and 12 times more likely to have attempted suicide.<sup>7</sup>

ACEs impact physical and mental health beyond the initial years of the trauma. ***Proactive and intentional prevention and early intervention are keys to reducing the long-term impact of trauma and abuse.***

### ACEs INCLUDE:

- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Contact sexual abuse
- Emotional neglect
- Physical neglect
- Mother treated violently
- Someone in the house who has a mental illness
- Someone in the house who has been incarcerated
- Parental separation or divorce
- Someone in the house with a substance use history

## CREATING SAFER SPACES FOR YOUTH

Communities have the wisdom, resources, and strength to create safer spaces for all children. Traditionally, education around child sexual abuse has focused on talking to children about their boundaries and personal safety. While this is an important piece of the puzzle, true prevention efforts combine a **focus on adults – parents, teachers, and others who care for children** – as the responsible parties for preventing and reporting

sexual abuse of children. Adults must take responsibility for keeping children safe and holding other adults accountable for inappropriate behavior.

It takes a tremendous amount of courage for a child to tell someone about abuse they are experiencing or have experienced. Simply saying, ***“I believe you and you have the right to feel safe”*** can have a significant impact on how that child will feel.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey ACE Data, 2009-2014. Atlanta, Georgia: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Sexual Assault of Young Children as Reported to Law Enforcement (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Smith, S.G., Chen, J., Basile, K.C., Gilbert, L.K., Merrick, M.T., Patel, N., Walling, M., & Jain, A. (2017). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010-2012 State Report. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, D. W., Letourneau, E. J., Saunders, B. E., Kilpatrick, D. G., Resnick, H.S., & Best, C. L. (2000). Delay in disclosure of childhood rape: Results from a national survey. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 24, 273-287.

<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey ACE Data, 2009-2014

<sup>6</sup> Anda, R. & Felitti, V. (2003). Origins and essence of the study. *ACE Reporter*, (1/1).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

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The New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NJCASA) is the statewide organization representing 21 county-based rape crisis centers and Rutgers University's Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance. NJCASA elevates the voice of survivors and service providers through advocacy, training, and support for efforts to create safer communities for all people.

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