

The Impact of Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The Challenge

Over two-thirds of children report having experienced at least one traumatic event by the age of 16.* 52% of children ages 2-5 years old have experienced a severe stressor in their lifetime.** The pandemic and children's experiences in 2020 are likely to result in increases to these statistics.

Children who have had exposure to ACEs are more likely to be **chronically absent** and are more likely to be **suspended and even expelled** from school (including preschool programs).

When children are exposed to trauma (particularly complex trauma) their **brains are in stress response** mode.

The Impact

Exposure to adverse childhood events (ACEs) can have long term, wide-ranging impacts on children's physical health (including frequent illness, obesity, asthma and speech problems) and **mental health** (including learning, memory, mood, relational skills and aspects of executive function).

Suspensions and expulsions don't lead to behavior improvement—quite the opposite. Children who have been suspended from school are **more likely to drop out of high school and later, become incarcerated**.

Not only does being in **flight, fight or freeze mode make it difficult for children to focus on learning**, long-term exposure to stress chemicals (toxic stress) can **damage the architecture of the developing brain**.

The Impact of Trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) – Continued

The Challenge

Children who've been exposed to trauma are more likely to **exhibit behaviors that challenge their teachers**. In these moments of heightened stress, teachers aren't always able to respond in ways that align with their goals for children's development and success.

Educators often have been impacted by ACEs themselves.

The Impact

Most teachers have been trained with strategies for managing challenging behaviors through discipline practices. But **when the behaviors are associated with the response to toxic stress, discipline practices that blame children for their behavior don't work**. Children need supportive relationships to help them regulate their emotions and behaviors through preventative practices and intentional interactions.

Working with children who have been impacted by trauma can trigger teachers who have experienced their own trauma and are already overwhelmed by their daily responsibilities. This can lead teachers to respond in less-than-ideal ways; leaving them feeling frustrated, isolated and upset by these challenging interactions.

*Source: <https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma>

**Egger, H.L., and Angold, A. (2006). Common emotional and behavioral disorders in preschool children: Presentation, nosology, and epidemiology. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47(3-4), 313-337.

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