

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES AND THEIR CONNECTION TO TOXIC STRESS

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events occurring before age 18. ACEs include all types of abuse and neglect as well as parental mental illness, substance abuse, divorce, incarceration and domestic violence.⁽¹⁾

Collective traumas such as racism, discrimination, and police brutality can also impact Black & Brown kids.⁽²⁾

These individual and collective traumas cause excessive activation of the stress-response system.

Because not all stress is bad, it's important to distinguish among three kinds of responses to stress: positive, tolerable, and toxic.⁽³⁾

POSITIVE

Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels

TOLERABLE

Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships

TOXIC

Prolonged activation of stress-response system in the absence of protective relationships

RESPONSE TO STRESS

When a young child's stress-response is activated, and they have a caring, supportive relationship with an adult, they can lower their stress level, returning to baseline. The result is the development of a healthy stress-response system.

If the stress response is extreme and long-lasting, and supportive relationships are not available, the result can cause excessive activation of the stress-response system resulting in toxic stress.⁽⁴⁾

If left untreated, toxic stress can lead to lifelong health problems like heart disease or cancer. It can also lead to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse or suicide.⁽⁵⁾

Not all children who experience an adverse event (or even more than one) are negatively affected. Much of the impact depends on the context in which the trauma occurs -- particularly the context of positive relationships.⁽⁶⁾

Recognition of the impact of trauma and toxic stress on your young athletes enables you to understand their experiences and challenges and contribute to their healing with these important relationships.

The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is having at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver or other adult.⁽⁷⁾

Go to [Understanding Trauma's Impact on Behavior](#) to learn more about how coaches can positively impact young people in sports.

1. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/preventionmonth/resources/ace>

2. Wade, Roy Jr., Judy A. Shea, David Rubin and Joanne Wood. "Adverse Childhood Experiences of Low-Income Urban Youth." *PEDIATRICS* Volume 134, no.1 (July 2014)

3. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

4. Best Practices Breakthrough Impacts report, visit: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/from-the-best-practices-to-breakthrough-impacts/>

5. <https://centerforyouthwellness.org/ace-toxic-stress/>

6. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/prevalence-adverse-childhood-experiences-nationally-state-race-ethnicity>

7. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/resilienc>