

adverse childhood experiences

Written by Keryn O'Neill MA, PGCertEdPsych, Knowledge Manager



What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?

ACEs refer to a range of negative experiences that are serious or ongoing and challenge children's ability to cope. They can be:

- Direct: Things that affect tamariki directly (e.g. physical abuse)
- Indirect: Things that affect tamariki indirectly (e.g. conflict between their parents)
- A one-off serious event (e.g. death of parent)
- Something that happens often, or continues over time (e.g. parent experiences mental health episode, parent in prison)

The ACEs Study

In the 1990s a large US study found associations between adverse experiences in childhood, up to the age of 18 years, and poor adult outcomes in physical, emotional and mental health.

The particular adversities they focused on were:

- psychological, physical, or sexual abuse
- emotional and physical neglect
- violence against mother
- living with household members with substance issues, or who had mental illness, attempted suicide, or spent time in prison
- parental separation or divorce

It's worth noting that these are not the only types of adversity that tamariki or rangatahi may experience.



Key findings from the ACE studies:

- ACEs are relatively common; more than half of those studied had experienced at least one ACE
- Many ACEs are interconnected; exposure to one ACE is often associated with exposure to others as well (e.g. violence is often connected to parental mental illness, substance use or involvement in crime)
- As the number of ACEs increase, so does the chance of poor health outcomes
- The effects can be wide ranging, and impact on both physical and mental health (e.g. heart disease and depression)
- Associations from adversity during childhood can be seen across the lifespan, decades after the experience
- ACEs can occur across all socio-economic groups. However, those growing up in poverty, are more likely to experience many ACEs than those whose family have enough resources
- While the ACE studies show associations between ACEs and health outcomes, they do not prove that ACEs caused the health outcomes.

According to research, poor outcomes are not inevitable

- Research shows that exposure to ACEs increases the risk of poor health outcomes, but this doesn't mean that all children will have poor health outcomes
- Positive experiences, especially caring relationships with committed adults, support the ability to deal with adversity and increase the chance of positive outcomes.

To sum up

The ACE studies, and other research, show the potentially lasting effects of childhood adversity. This means it's important to:

- reduce children's exposure to adversity
- increase children's access to positive experiences, and
- provide timely, effective supports for those who have experienced adversity.



Want to know more?

See these articles:

"Adverse Childhood Experiences: Understanding their effects"

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/adverse-childhood-experiences-understanding-their-effects/>

"Adult health: What's childhood got to do with it?"

<https://brainwave.org.nz/article/adult-health-whats-childhood-got-to-do-with-it/>