

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Background: ACEs describe a wide range of stressful or traumatic experiences that may occur up to 18. The original ACEs study in the late 1990s referred to ten specific categories of exposure: abuse (emotional/physical/sexual), neglect (emotional/physical), household (mental illness, domestic abuse, substance abuse, divorce and parental incarceration). Other types of adversity include poverty, homelessness, bullying, discrimination, separation from care giver to foster care or migration.

Why it Matters: ACEs are common – in the UK nearly 50% of people have experienced at least one ACE, with 9-12% experiencing four or more. Without the right support, ACEs can potentially have negative, long-lasting effects on physical and mental health and social outcomes. In the absence of supportive relationships, studies have found that there is an increased risk of disrupted nervous, hormonal and immune development, emotional and learning problems, engaging in health harming behaviour, being involved in violence and suffering illness like diabetes, heart disease and cancer.

Question to ask:

Do I know how to support someone displaying signs of trauma? Do I know where to signpost/refer people or families? Do I show compassion/trauma-informed practice in my work? Does the team know how to identify ACEs/trauma? Does the team know how to support someone displaying signs of trauma? What policies & procedures are in place? What training is required?



Information: Each person responds to trauma in their own way based on different factors but trauma can commonly present itself as angry outbursts, poor self-esteem, withdrawn, 'on edge', 'regression' into childhood, distrusting, feelings of guilt/shame, impulsive, hyper-vigilant, difficulty controlling emotion, perceives hostility in others when none is present.

What to do:

- Raise awareness of ACEs.
- Ask about ACEs – this should be part of assessments when working with families.
- Ensure access to effective interventions.
- Promote positive parenting.
- Promote personal and community resilience.
- Embed ACE-informed practice including taking a trauma sensitive approach.

Being aware of ACEs allows practitioners to adopt a trauma-informed approach that shifts the emphasis from *what people do*, to *what they have experienced*. Research has shown that adults do not routinely disclose, and it may take many years and contacts with a service before they reveal their ACEs. Reduce unnecessary causes of stress and create a kind environment in which people can avoid triggers for their past trauma and where they can thrive by learning to manage their emotions.

People who experience ACEs are not bound to suffer the negative consequences described above. Instead, support from a trusted adult and building resilience through focusing on protective factors like problem-solving skills, how to manage emotions, creating a stable environment and participation in hobbies and interests (among others) are ways to guard against the potential negative impacts of ACEs.