

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Important Knowledge for Educators

What are they?

ACEs are Adverse Childhood Experiences. As so much of a person's development occurs in childhood, adverse experiences such as neglect, different types of abuse, and changes in life circumstances have become a concern as more and more students are exhibiting the signs and symptoms of trauma while in schools. Mental health issues, academically harmful actions, and other antisocial behaviours are ways in which ACEs manifest themselves. ACEs have been linked with changes in brain function, structure, and stress thresholds resulting in an array of possible impairments to students' neurological systems such as learning capacity and memory. The changes to these structures may account for the differences in neurodevelopment that affect a person's future health, resilience, and the presence of other protective factors. It's important to note that exposure to adverse experiences can begin in the womb. Exposure to drugs, toxins, and other environmental stressors while in utero may result in children being born with negatively impacted neurological systems making them more susceptible to future stressors.

ACEs in Schools

Unsurprisingly, common struggles resulting from the effects of adverse childhood experiences can take form as mental health and developmental issues. This in turn can significantly impact academic performance. Students living with these experiences may behave in less than acceptable ways with teachers and classmates, have difficulty with interpersonal relationships, and be at risk for suffering increased absences - behaviours often considered to be disruptive to classroom learning.

Examples of common ACEs:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Mental illness of a household member
- Problematic drinking or alcoholism of household members
- Regular household member drug use
- Divorce or separation of parents
- Domestic violence between adults in the household
- Incarceration of a household member

Effects on Academics

- In a study in 2014 involving 10,639 elementary students, researchers examined how concentrations of early risk factors affected school attendance and achievement in reading and math. Results indicated that high concentrations of children who were regularly exposed to ACEs were associated with lower reading achievement and school attendance.
- ACEs have been associated with significantly increased odds of reported learning/behavioural problems.
- Racialized students do not experience ACEs equally. Students of colour show a higher frequency of reported ACEs.
- Students who report enduring 3 or more ACEs have been found to be 2 ½ more times likely to fail a grade

Controversy Surrounding ACEs

Despite the knowledge that the stressful effects of ACEs may traumatize children, ACE exposure does not inevitably result in developmental problems, trauma, or other negative outcomes. Small doses of adversity are necessary for optimal child development, and individual tolerances, nurturing & healthy relationships, and/or family/community support help to mitigate the negative effects of ACEs. All children and youth have different stress thresholds/tolerances for certain situations. Therefore, it is not only the negative experience itself but the experience from the child's point of view which affects them and their development/outcomes. Experiences are complex, and there is a danger in assuming a causal relationship between an ACE and trauma. They do, however, offer some insight into the significant impacts adverse experiences can have on children and youth.



Is COVID-19 an ACE?

Research has been done to show the pandemic's effects not only on school performance but also on how it has affected children and youth developmentally. As a result, many mental health professionals, including those at the World Health Organisation, have begun suggesting that COVID-19 should be considered an ACE as it has led to increases in sedentary lifestyle, exposure to harmful environments, exploitation, and cyberbullying, and has the potential to impact physical and mental health in the longer term. ACEs affect children and youth in different ways, and to different extents; this is the same for COVID-19. Whether COVID-19 gets formally named an ACE, educators' awareness of the complex impacts this pandemic has had on students will support them to draw upon trauma-sensitive practices to support students in need.

Why Is This Important Knowledge for Educators?

Educators are uniquely positioned to notice the signs and symptoms of those entering the school with a background of ACEs, those holding trauma, or other descriptors of children in need. In their roles, educators are able to facilitate a safe and trauma-informed classroom, by modeling and implementing everyday practices that support student mental health, and that can identify students needing additional support. Equally, a knowledge of ACEs supports educators to seek to understand the behaviours through a trauma-informed lens.

