

# RISING TOGETHER

FOR ALL TO THRIVE



**A Guide to Understanding and Healing the  
Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)**



Learn What You Can Do to Improve Your and Your Family's Health

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What are

# ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES?

Many people can identify someone in their lives who struggles with a chronic health condition like heart disease or diabetes, or even know someone experiencing mental health, substance use or relationship challenges. Lifestyle factors such as unhealthy diet, smoking and physical inactivity are often considered the leading causes of the most serious and common health conditions facing our society today.

Now more than ever, we are beginning to understand how exposure to traumatic experiences during childhood have profound lifelong implications for the health and well-being of children, adults and families.



## Adverse Childhood Experiences

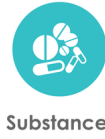
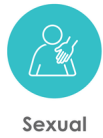
Many of us face hardship and distress during our childhood. Things can happen to our children and to us that we can't control and may not be our fault. You are not alone.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur when we are young. **ACEs are common** and can affect you, those you care for and also those around you. **Two-thirds of us have experienced at least one ACE.**

The term "ACEs" refers to 10 categories of adversities experienced before the age of 18 that were identified in the landmark 1998 study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente, often referred to as the ACE Study. Research has shown that childhood events, such as physical abuse, emotional trauma, parental separation or divorce, can have negative, long-lasting effects on our bodies, behavior and minds.

# 3 Types of ACES

<b>ABUSE</b> Physical, emotional or sexual	<b>NEGLECT</b> Physical or emotional	<b>HOUSEHOLD CHALLENGES</b> Growing up in a household with incarceration, mental illness, substance dependence, absence due to separation or divorce, or intimate partner violence
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Other traumatic events have also been found to be both associated with ACEs and with risk of declined health and well-being, including exposure to community violence, food and housing insecurity, bullying, death of a family member, racial and intergenerational trauma, poverty, racism and other forms of discrimination.

**It is now known that ACEs can profoundly impact the fundamental and healthy development of a child’s brain and body and affect overall health across the lifespan - through a biological mechanism known as the toxic stress response.**



# What is **TOXIC STRESS?**



**Stress is normal and an essential part of growth and development. The body responds to stress by increasing heart rate and blood pressure and releasing stress hormones. These reactions cause the brain to be more focused and alert and our muscles to be ready for action.**

Children need to experience some stress to develop healthy coping mechanisms and problem-solving skills. When a child confronts a new situation where they feel safe and have some control, stress can help a child rise to the new challenge or learn a new skill. There are 3 types of stress:



First day of school, an exam,  
a presentation at work

Loss of a family  
member, natural  
disaster

Stressful events (i.e. ACEs)  
without buffering supports

- **Positive Stress:** This is the body's brief, normal and healthy stress response to a tense situation, task or event. Adjusting to positive stress is part of everyday life and learning, and is part of healthy development and growth.
- **Tolerable Stress:** Temporary activation of the body's stress response to a long lasting or severe situation or event. This type of stress can be buffered by the presence of safe and supportive relationships to help a child adapt and recover.
- **Toxic Stress:** Strong, frequent or prolonged activation of the body's stress response to chronic, uncontrollable stressful events. The body's stress remains elevated long after the triggering experience has passed.

**Children are uniquely vulnerable to the effects of an overactive stress response because their brains and bodies are still developing.**



Toxic stress happens when a child feels they don't have control over a situation or event, or their safety is threatened. When a child experiences stressful events such as ACEs, without having enough support from a safe and caring adult, toxic stress can impede their ability to learn, function and grow in a healthy way, and lead to lifelong health problems.

# How ACEs & Toxic Stress AFFECT HEALTH



The most significant finding from the ACE study was the strong relationship between the number of ACEs and the development of risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults, including cancer and heart and lung disease.

The more ACEs an individual has been exposed to, the greater likelihood they will experience physical, cognitive, health and mental health problems into adulthood, including:

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
|  Heart disease          |  Cancer                    |  Sexually transmitted diseases |
|  Asthma                 |  Diabetes                  |  Smoking                       |
|  Depression             |  Intimate partner violence |  Suicide                       |
|  Alcohol and drug abuse |  Liver disease             |   |
|  Obesity                |  Teen pregnancy            |   |

People who experience **4 or more ACEs** have a higher risk of poor physical, mental and behavioral health as adults than those with fewer ACEs.

1.4x

more likely to have diabetes

2x

more likely to have a stroke, cancer or heart disease

3.1x

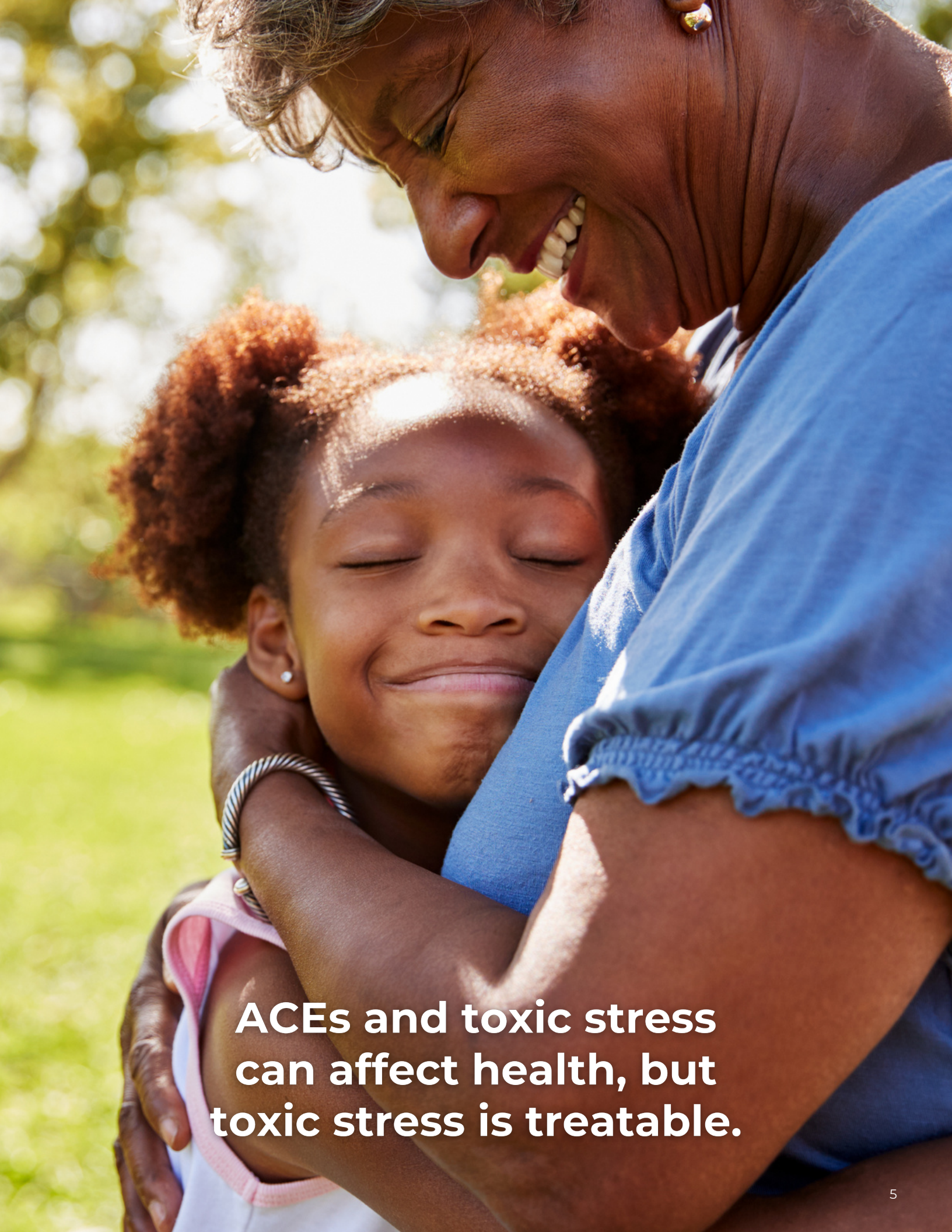
more likely to have chronic lower respiratory disease

11.2x

more likely to have Alzheimer's or dementia

37.5x

more likely to attempt suicide



**ACEs and toxic stress  
can affect health, but  
toxic stress is treatable.**

# What You Can Do to **SUPPORT YOURSELF AND YOUR FAMILY**

**You have the capacity to heal, thrive and build a healthier future for yourself and your whole family.**

**ACEs do not define who you are.**

It is important to know that exposure to ACEs does not determine your or your child's future health and well-being. Exposure to ACEs does not always lead to toxic stress – children and adults survive and even thrive despite the trauma they've experienced.

The presence of positive experiences and protective factors, like supportive relationships, can lower the toxic stress response and alter the risk of related health outcomes.

There are steps you can take to cope with stress and improve the health and well-being of you and your whole family, now and for the future.

You took the first step by reading this document. You now know more about trauma, ACEs and toxic stress.

The next few pages will explore what you can do next.



## **Build Resilience**

Building resilience — the ability to draw on supportive resources and recover from adversity, tragedy and other significant sources of stress — can help reduce the effects of ACEs and toxic stress.

The good news is that resilience skills can be learned to help you and your child manage stress and feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, and improve your ability to handle difficult situations in the future.



# How to BUILD RESILIENCE



## Supportive Relationships

The **strongest protective factor** linked with resilience to childhood trauma is the reliable presence of a **safe, stable, nurturing and responsive adult** in a child's life, such as a parent, caregiver, family member or mentor.

Ensuring that you and your child live in a safe, trusting and healthy environment is one of the most important steps you can take to protect your child.



## Wellness Habits

Healthy nutrition, regular exercise, restful sleep, practicing mindfulness, staying connected to our social supports, and getting mental health care can help decrease stress hormones and improve health.



Source: Bhushan D, et al. The Roadmap for Resilience: The California Surgeon General's Report on Adverse Childhood Experiences, Toxic Stress, and Health. Office of the California Surgeon General, 2020.

# Resilience is the antidote to trauma and adversity.

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## Parenting Practices to Build Resilience in Children

- **Build competence** – Provide opportunities for children to learn new skills and experience mastery.
- **Build confidence** – Help children stay involved in activities and tasks over time to build confidence in their own abilities and help them feel empowered.
- **Build routine and rituals** – Children thrive on routines and schedules, like bedtime stories and eating together.
- **Build relationships** – Model and foster positive relationships with friends, family, school and community. Help children interact in a health way with others to build their own social supports.
- **Build empathy** – Listen to your child in a supportive way and help them manage their emotions and communicate their feelings and needs.



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## Parents and Caregivers Need Support Too!

Many parents and caregivers have faced trauma in their past or are currently experiencing stressful situations. Sometimes these experiences can impact how they respond and react to their children.

Asking for help and finding ways to take care of yourself can set a good example for your child.



Together, we can make sure every child is healthy, growing and thriving in a strong family, and supported by a safe and nurturing community.





# How Screening for ACEs Can **IMPROVE WELL-BEING**

**Talk to your doctor about the health risks associated with ACEs and toxic stress at your next medical visit.**

The ACE screening can help you and your family understand your history as a foundation for healing and recovery. By screening for ACEs, your primary care provider can better determine whether you and your child are at increased health risk due to a toxic stress response.

ACEs are not destiny. Your doctor can use the screening results to guide treatment decisions to improve your and your child's care, identify strengths and protective factors that you and your family already have in coping with stress, and help connect your family to the resources and support you need to thrive.



## ACE Screening Tools

The ACE screening asks about one's exposure to the 10 common forms of ACEs. Different screening tools are used for children and adults.

The *Pediatric ACEs and Related Life Events Screener (PEARLS)* is used to screen children and ages 0 – 19. The *ACE Questionnaire* is used to screen adults.



## What Does an ACE Score Mean?

The ACE score refers to the total reported exposure to the 10 ACE categories indicated in the ACE screening tools.

ACE scores range from 0 to 10. Exposure to any single ACE is counted as one point. A higher number of ACEs can mean a higher risk of physical and mental health problems.

## An Important Note About the ACE Screening

Due to the sensitive nature of the ACE screening, you may experience a range of emotions as you reflect on and revisit parts of your lived experiences.

These emotions can range from sadness or anger to feeling grateful about making the connections between ACEs, toxic stress, your and your child's current and future health, and receiving appropriate care for your and your family's healing and recovery.



# Join the **MOVEMENT**

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**Increasing ACEs awareness has never been so important.**

Parents, communities and health professions can join together to raise awareness and take steps to reduce the impacts ACEs and toxic stress, and help children, adults and families heal and thrive. Together, we can significantly improve the health and well-being of children, adults, and families.





## About the ACEs Aware Initiative

The ACEs Aware initiative is focusing our state's health care system on healing the negative impacts of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress.

Created in partnership with the Office of the California Surgeon General and the California Department of Health Care Services as part of Governor Newsom's *California For All* initiative, ACEs Aware strives to create a better world for our children, families and communities by working together across the health, human services, education and non-profit sectors to prevent and address the negative impacts of ACEs and toxic stress.

Visit [www.ACEsAware.org](http://www.ACEsAware.org) to learn more and join California's movement to reduce ACEs and toxic stress by half in one generation.



## About Tri-City Mental Health

ACEs Aware Grantee

Tri-City Mental Health, as an ACEs Aware grantee, is working hard to serve our community to address the impact of ACEs and toxic stress. Schedule or attend our free ACEs Aware Supplemental Trainings, available for both community members and medical providers: *Rising Together* and *The Power of Trauma-Informed Care*. We each play a vital role in supporting the health and well-being of children, adults, and families.

Contact [aces@tricitymhs.org](mailto:aces@tricitymhs.org) to learn more about our free ACEs Aware Supplemental Trainings.



## You Can Help Heal the Impact of Childhood Trauma and Toxic Stress

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We each play a role in recognizing, preventing and healing toxic stress in children, adults and families exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

Together, we can significantly improve overall community health and well-being, now and in the future.



Contact [aces@tricitymhs.org](mailto:aces@tricitymhs.org) to learn more