

Helping Children through Negative Experiences

Experiences children have while growing up, both negative and positive, contribute to their development and influence their behavior as adults. With support from trusted friends and adults, children who experience adverse or traumatic life events can overcome them. However, without adequate support, severe or consistent negative experiences may lead to serious problems later in childhood and adulthood.

Individuals who serve youth cannot protect them from all negative experiences, and oftentimes do not even know whether a youth has been affected by such an experience. But vigilant adults who understand the potential effects of trauma on children can help provide all children with coping skills to help them interpret and move forward from adverse events¹ and refer specific children to more specialized help when appropriate.

The Research

Two large studies show the prevalence of childhood trauma in different ways:

The National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV) surveyed children ages 17 and younger – or caregivers if the child was under age 10 – about exposure to 45 different kinds of violence, abuse, and victimization in the past year and over the course of their lifetime.⁴

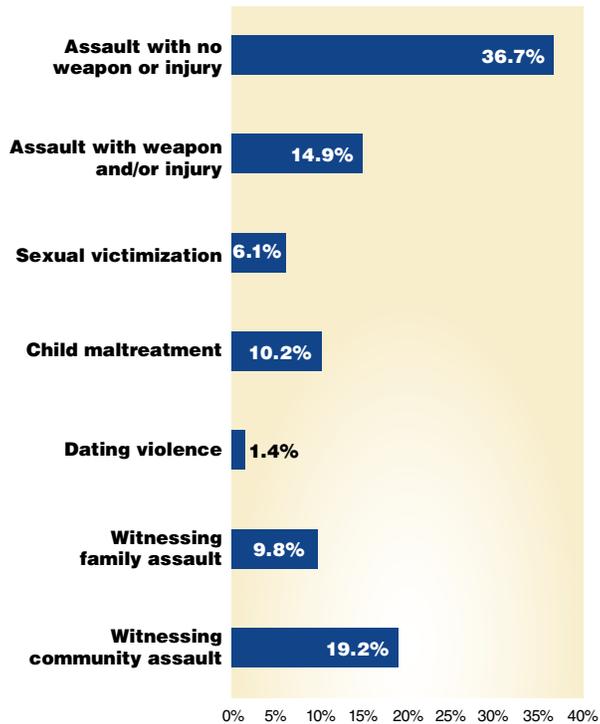
This survey found that nearly 15 percent of children experienced assault with a weapon or injury, nearly one in ten witnessed a family assault, and 19.2 percent witnessed a community assault in the past year. Furthermore, it found that 86.6 percent of children who had been exposed to violence during their lifetimes also were exposed within the past year, which indicates that children who have previously experienced violence are at-risk for multiple such experiences during their childhood.⁵



Definitions of “adverse” or “traumatic” events vary between disciplines.

In this brief, we recognize that what a child experiences as traumatic depends on the child's previous exposure, point of view, and maturity level.² Situations such as witnessing domestic or community violence, having a parent deployed by the military, being involved in a natural disaster, becoming homeless,³ experiencing the death of a loved one, living with a family member who has an untreated mental illness, being a victim of abuse or neglect, experiencing prolonged adversity, or being a victim of direct physical or sexual assault all may be viewed as traumatic experiences by a child.

Past Year Exposure to Selected Categories of Violence for All Children Surveyed



Source: Finkelhor, D., Turner, H., Ormrod, R., Hamby, S. and Kracke, K. (2009). Children's exposure to violence; a comprehensive national survey. *Juvenile justice bulletin*.

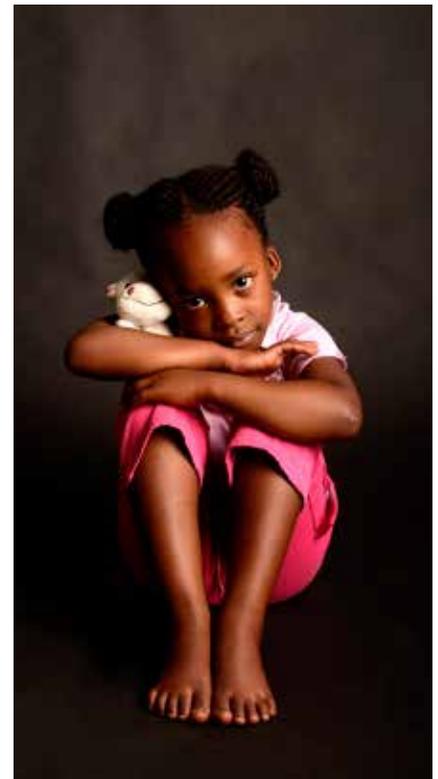
The Adverse Childhood Experiences Survey (ACES) surveyed adults about their current health status and behaviors as well as about seven categories of adverse childhood experiences: psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; violence against mother; and living with household members who were substance abusers, mentally ill or suicidal, or ever imprisoned. The questionnaire used in this study can be found at the following site and used free of charge: <http://www.cdc.gov/ace/questionnaires.htm>

The latest data from this survey shows that 60% of adults endured at least one of the seven types of negative experiences during childhood, and more than one in five reported experiencing three or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Research based on this study also found that the more ACEs a person experiences as a child, the greater his/her risk is for numerous health problems such as drug or alcohol abuse, mental health issues, and chronic health diseases later in life.⁶

Who's at Risk?

Adverse experiences occur among all ethnic and racial groups; in all types of communities; and among families and neighborhoods at every socioeconomic level.⁷ Exposure to trauma and violence occurs often and children's responses to the experiences vary greatly.⁸ Therefore it is difficult for adults to know whether a child has been affected. Authorities do know about a majority of serious victimizations including incidents of sexual abuse by an adult, gang assaults, and kidnappings, but many other kinds of serious victimizations do not come to their attention. The National Crime Victimization Survey found that only 28% of violent crimes against juveniles ages 12 to 17 become known to the police.⁹ And school officials, who know about victimization considerably more often than police or medical personnel, still miss more than half of the episodes (58%).¹⁰

Although trauma and victimization are relatively common, some populations are at higher risk and therefore may benefit from being supported by adults who can provide trauma-informed care. These groups include youth living in poverty, those who identify as LGBT, Latinas, individuals with disabilities, and those who live in neighborhoods with high crime. Additionally, boys are significantly more exposed to community violence and serious injury than girls,¹¹ and nearly all youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems have experienced some type of childhood trauma.¹²



What do I do if I suspect a child has experienced a trauma?

The most appropriate response to children who have been exposed to trauma depends a great deal on their age, personality, and prior experiences. Therefore teachers, youth workers, and other adults who know to watch for the variety of reactions a child may have to an adverse experience, will be best able to provide trauma-informed support to the child.

Here are some common steps that will help you respond appropriately to children of all ages who have experienced trauma of any kind:

Ensure Immediate Safety

The first and most important thing you can do for a child who has experienced a traumatic or violent event is to ensure his/her immediate safety. If you believe a child is in immediate danger, call 911!¹⁴ Make the child feel safe and affirm that you will do whatever possible to ensure the child remains safe.

Listen to Them

Give youth a chance to talk about what happened, but do not force them to talk if that is not their preference. Remember that when a child comes to the attention of youth-serving professionals, the trauma identified may not be the one that is most distressing to him or her.

Be aware of the child's needs. For example, young children may want to be with people they know well, school-aged children may want to talk about their feelings, and teenagers may feel more comfortable confiding to their friends about what happened, rather than to adults.

Mental Health America offers the following ways to guide conversations about fear and violence:

- encourage children to talk about their concerns and express their feelings,
- validate their feelings,
- talk honestly about your own feelings regarding violence,
- create and discuss the safety procedures that a child can take,
- recognize behavior that might indicate that the child is concerned about his/her safety,
- empower children to take action and/or report specific incidents,
- keep the dialogue going over time,
- and seek help when necessary.

As you listen, be careful not to blame the child for what happened or downplay the child's feelings by using phrases like, "don't worry," or "everything will be alright." Do help youth understand that they are not alone, the experience was not their fault, and that there are people who can help and will protect their privacy. You also may help children think of positive ways to keep busy.

Call Child Protective Services as Necessary

Every single person in the state of Indiana is a mandatory reporter of child abuse and neglect. Any adult who has reason to believe that a child has been abused or neglected is required to immediately call law enforcement or Child Protective Services (CPS), part of the Indiana Department of Child Services. Individuals who report suspected abuse or neglect may be anonymous and are immune from all civil and criminal liability, provided they have made the report in good faith.² Child Protective Services (CPS) operates a 24-hour, 7-day a week hotline for reporting suspected child abuse or neglect reachable at 1-800-800-5556.

Domestic violence is not always considered child abuse or neglect. Therefore some cases of domestic violence may be reported to the police rather than CPS. When responding to families affected by domestic violence, it is very important to consider simultaneously the safety of the child and the safety of the adult victim.¹⁵ For state-by-state information on mandatory reporting laws, visit: www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/laws_policies/state

Create Structure

It is especially important for children and youth who have experienced trauma or violence to be in a structured environment. Boundaries and routines are a great way to make youth feel safe. Ensure you set and respect personal boundaries and do not let a

child break the rules out of sympathy. For more information about creating a safe program environment, check out the Indiana Youth Institute's Issue Brief on Program Safety.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration suggests maintaining usual routines, making sure the child is not being isolated, providing a safe place where the child can talk about the incident, being sensitive to potential environmental cues that may cause a reaction (e.g., an approaching storm, noises that sound like gunfire, or the anniversary of an event), preparing the child in advance of a change in routine or other event that could be unsettling, monitoring what information the child shares with other children to prevent excessive curiosity from peers, nurturing the child's positive self-view, and drawing on cultural and familiar assets to make the child comfortable.

Help Youth Plan for Future Safety

Another positive step for helping youth cope with experiencing violence – especially if it is an ongoing problem in one's life – is to help children make a concrete safety plan. For example, you may be able to help the youth plan which neighbor's house to visit in order to call 911 or get away, or which room he/she can go to get away from a fight. You also may be able to help youth plan to whom they can talk about what's happening in their lives or how they can feel safer at school or while they are out with their friends.

Ask for Help

Adults must know when to ask for help for a youth who has experienced trauma. Early identification and intervention is critical for addressing emerging problems for at-risk youth, and can help stop the negative chain reaction following exposure to traumatic stressors. Intervention programs can improve outcomes for children well in to the adult years.¹⁶

It is important to refer a child to professional intervention services if he/she does one or more of the following for longer than one month:¹⁷

- Has frequent nightmares or trouble sleeping
- Withdraws and doesn't want to play with other children
- Has angry outbursts
- Has nausea, headaches, or other physical illnesses
- Loses or gains weight
- Has problems at school

- Feels intensely anxious
- Avoids people, places or things that remind him/her of the event
- Seems depressed or hopeless
- Gets involved with alcohol and/or other drugs
- Gets in trouble with the law or takes dangerous risks
- Worries constantly about an unsettling experience
- Becomes involved in violent dating relationships, either as abuser or victim

Take Care of Yourself and Your Staff

Listening to stories from youth who have experienced trauma will take an emotional toll on staff. Take care to protect the well-being of yourself and other staff members at your agency who may be experiencing secondary stress or burnout because of their relationships with youth who have had adverse experiences. As a supervisor, provide professional development about trauma-informed services for your staff; utilize referral relationships with community partners or agencies that specifically provide trauma-related services; and encourage staff to know their limits and take care of themselves.

Here are a few quick "don'ts" for adults interacting with youth who may have had a traumatic experience. DON'T:

- **assume that all children will respond to trauma in the same way**
- **convey the message that trauma exposure inevitably results in long-term damage**
- **assume that all trauma-exposed children will have long-term damage or will need treatment**
- **create situations in which trauma exposed children have little choice or control**
- **force children or parents to tell their story (but listen carefully when they do)**
- **ignore your own stress from trauma-focused work**

Resources, Toolkits and Trainings

Indiana Youth Institute Webinar: “Safety and Security in Staff Policies.” Guidelines for background checks, evaluations, hiring, firing, and codes of conduct. <http://www.iyi.org/webinar-Safe-Hiring>

Virginia Beall Ball Library Resource: Reaching and teaching children who hurt: strategies for your classroom by Susan E. Craig. Through clear and readable explanations of current research and enlightening vignettes, educators will understand how violence and other forms of trauma affect the key elements of a child’s school and social success, including behavior, attention, memory, and language. <http://www.iyi.org/library.aspx>

Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence: An alliance of domestic violence programs and support agencies that provides technical assistance, resources, information and training to those who serve victims of domestic violence. ICADV focuses on prevention, legislative advocacy, public awareness, advocate training and legal assistance. <http://www.icadvinc.org/>

Indiana’s Child Advocacy Centers: These centers provide forensic interviews in a safe and child-friendly environment for children who have been abused. This link



provides the contact person, and websites, when available, for specific counties centers: <http://www.incacs.org/centers.htm>

Darkness to Light: Provides a list of trainings available by state for preventing sexual abuse. Indiana’s list can be found here: <http://www.d2l.org/site/c.4dICIJOkGcISE/b.6221427/k.C8E4/Indiana.htm>. The organization also provides statistics and prevention programs – including a page for youth serving organizations. http://www.d2l.org/site/c.4dICIJOkGcISE/b.6069293/k.D049/Child_Sexual_Abuse_Prevention_for_Youth_Serving_Organizations.htm

How do I know if a child has experienced a traumatic event?¹³

Young Children (5 years and under)	School-age Children (6-12 years)	Teenagers (13-18 years)
<p>These children’s reactions are strongly influenced by caregivers’ reactions. As a result of exposure to violence, they may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cling to caregivers • Experience changes in activity level • Regress to behaviors common to being younger (for example, thumb sucking, bed-wetting, or fear of the dark) • Repeat events over and over in play or conversation • Be irritable or fussy or have difficulty calming down • Have frequent tantrums • Become easily startled 	<p>These children may show problems at school and at home. As a result of exposure to violence, they may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fight with peers or adults • Become quiet, upset, or withdrawn • Show changes in school performance • Be tearful and sad or talk about scary feelings and ideas • Want to be left alone more or less than usual • Get into trouble at home or school • Have difficulty paying attention 	<p>These youth may exhibit a wide range of behavioral changes depending on their circumstances. As a result of exposure to violence, they may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complain of being tired • Refuse to follow rules or talk back with greater frequency • Talk about the event all the time or deny that it happened • Increase aggressive behaviors • Isolate themselves from friends and others • Engage in risky behaviors • Sleep more or less than usual • Experience frequent nightmares • Use drugs or alcohol, run away from home, or get into trouble with the law

Toolkit: Prevention and Awareness Week: Bullying, domestic violence, child abuse, and exposure to violence can interfere with a child's physical, emotional, and intellectual development. Use this toolkit to promote awareness of violence prevention efforts. <http://www.safestartcenter.org/resources/toolkit-cev-prevention-awareness-week.php>

Toolkit: Children Exposed to Domestic Violence: The Safe Start Center's Toolkit for Family Advocates is a collection of resources for parents, extended family members, and other professionals interacting with vulnerable families who wish to learn more about the prevalence and negative consequences of children's exposure to domestic violence and ways to be helpful. http://www.safestartcenter.org/infographics/infographic_cev-domestic-violence.php

National Criminal Justice Reference Service: Provides information and resources about juvenile victims of crime. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Topics/Topic.aspx?topicid=192>

Unlocking the Development of Children Exposed to Violence: Susan E. Craig, Jim Henry and Safe Start Center Director Elena Cohen discuss how exposure to violence impacts a child's development and ways that schools and the child welfare system can better respond to trauma. http://www2.jbsinternational.com/dc/files/ssc/unlocking_development_children_exposed_violence.pdf

SAMHSA Coping With Violence and Traumatic Events: Tip sheets for children, students, teachers, families, and first responders. These tip sheets include how to help children with natural disasters, ways for adults to manage their own stress, while aiding children through trauma and many other topics related to incidents of mass violence: <http://www.samhsa.gov/trauma/>

Safe Start Quick Guide: Provides information on what to look for and how to help by child age. This site also provides short fact sheets on trauma-informed care for Court Appointed Special Advocates, parents, child welfare staff, early childhood providers, men and fathers, domestic violence and homeless shelters, teachers, and other staff working with youth. www.safestartcenter.org

National Center for Victims of Crime: Provides a directory of programs that you can search by the type of victimization, assistance needed, special needs, age group, and state. www.victimsofcrime.org

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN): This site provides resources on helping children through traumas such as shootings and acts of terrorism, as well as how to cope with death and attending funeral services. This page includes age-specific resources as well. <http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-types/terrorism>

American Psychological Association (APA): Resources on this site provide tips on how to talk to children and when to ask for help after natural disasters and school shootings. <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/disaster/index.aspx>



Hotlines

- National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-422-4453
childhelp.org
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-7233 or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY)
loveisrespect.org
- National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-4673 rainn.org, or visit the online chat hotline at <https://ohl.rainn.org/online/>
- National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline: 1-866-331-9474 or 1-866-331-8453 (TTY)
loveisrespect.org
- Indiana Coalition Against Domestic Violence: 1-800-332-7385
icadvinc.org
- Indiana Child Abuse and Neglect Hotline: 1-800-800-5556
www.in.gov/dcs/2971.htm
- '2-1-1' Connect to Help: Simply dial 2-1-1 or visit connect2help.org/
- The Disaster Distress Helpline: 1-800-985-5990
disasterdistress.samhsa.gov/
- If you suspect a youth is being targeted online, report the incident to :
The CyberTipline
<http://www.missingkids.com/Cybertipline>

Sources

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IYI Resources

The latest data is at your fingertips with IYI's Data Center. Search statistics and gather data to improve your program planning and grant writing. Or, request customized data. Go to www.iyi.org/data.

Get the most comprehensive overview of children's well-being in Indiana. Download the Kids Count in Indiana Data Book at www.iyi.org/databook.

Want in-depth information on youth? Check out the free resources at IYI's Virginia Beall Ball Library. We will mail you the library materials and include a postage paid return envelope. Go to www.iyi.org/library for details.

Have a quick question or want to bounce an idea around? Contact Ask IYI for free resources and tips: call 1-855-2ask-IYI or visit www.iyi.org/ask.

Looking for training on youth issues? IYI provides regional trainings and free webinars on youth development and nonprofit management. Go to www.iyi.org/trainings for details.

Need one-on-one assistance with planning, evaluating, or expanding your organization? Benefit from IYI's Consulting Services and receive professional help at affordable hourly rates – discounted far below market value. Go to www.iyi.org/consulting-services for details.



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