

Safeguarding

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)



Types of Childhood Adversity

The 10 most common and recognised Adverse Childhood Experiences fall under the following 3 categories: ABUSE – Physical, Emotional, Sexual. NEGLECT – Physical, Emotional. HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION – incarcerated relative, Divorce, Mother treated violently, Substance abuse, Mental illness.

This list is not an exhaustive list and there are many other traumas that can have the same impact on a child, such as community violence or a natural disaster etc.

Many studies have identified that the higher a persons ACE's score (meaning the number of adverse childhood experiences they have endured), the higher the level of impact can be seen both immediately and long term.

Have a look on the next page at the different types of stress that can be experienced and how they differ from one another.

Positive stress – The body's normal and healthy stress response to a tense situation/event e.g. First day of school or work.

Tolerable stress – Activation of the body's stress response to a long-lasting or severe situation/event e.g. Loss of a family member, but with supportive buffers in place.

Toxic stress – Prolonged activation of the body's stress response to frequent, intense situations/events e.g. Witnessing ongoing domestic violence in the home.

What is toxic stress?

It is important to first acknowledge and understand that all children experience differing levels of stress. The diagram above provides an example of how the graduated levels of stress may occur. What is significant when we move from tolerable stress to toxic stress, is the 'buffer' The support of stable and caring adults in the child's life, to help them cope with these adversities.

Task 1

Watch [The Biology of Toxic Stress - YouTube](#) and discuss with a partner some key messages that are either new to you or reaffirm what you already knew about toxic stress.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4CD6jWw2A>)

Task 2

Consider your existing curriculum. Do you allow opportunities for children to discuss their worries or fears?

A popular activity with young children is to use a feelings board where children can select a mood that represents their current emotion. Whilst this is a useful tool, consider how you could dig deeper.

- What opportunities have the children had to explore how to define these emotions; how do they 'feel' to them? E.g. happy is a warm feeling in my tummy, angry is a horrible itchy feeling in my body etc.
- Do they have time or space to share why they think they may feel that way? How do you nurture an environment where children can share their hopes, fears etc.?
- How could you facilitate these opportunities for the different ages/stages/characters? E.g. Abdi may prefer drawing what makes him feel afraid, Sasha may prefer talking in the cosy corner with a familiar adult about why she's feeling sad etc.

Consider how a child experiencing toxic stress may behave?

- How might this look?
- What is the child's behaviour telling you?
- Are staff able to see beyond the presented behaviours and ascertain the reason behind it?

Preventing toxic stress and building resilience:

“If children don’t know that they have a right to be healthy, happy, and safe, how are they to know that things should be different for them?”

What can you do?

- Helping children to understand what is ‘normal’
- Understand that children experience stress and recognise the impact
- Provide opportunities for children to reflect on and share their feelings and the causes
- Be a stable, caring adult for the child
- Work in partnership with parents, sign posting to supporting agencies such as early help
- Promote mindfulness and meditation activities to support children in developing resilience and coping strategies
- Promote the value and impact of good nutrition, adequate sleep, and regular exercise on a child’s wellbeing.

Further reading

- [Understanding child brain development | NSPCC Learning](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-health-development/childhood-trauma-brain-development) or type <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-health-development/childhood-trauma-brain-development>
- [Overview - Resilience \(kpirfilms.co\)](https://kpirfilms.co/resilience/) or type <https://kpirfilms.co/resilience/>