

Addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences in Native American Communities

Understanding Impacts and Implementing Strategies

Neil Tift
Outreach Project Coordinator
Native American Fatherhood and Families Association (NAFFA)

Introduction to ACEs

The **Adverse Childhood Experiences** Study (ACE Study) is a research study conducted by the American health maintenance organization Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Participants were recruited to the study between 1995 and 1997 and have been in long-term follow up for health outcomes. The study has demonstrated a strong correlation between ten adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and significant health and social problems as an adult.

What's Your ACE Score?

START THE QUIZ

Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES)*

- Physical abuse by a parent
- Emotional abuse by a parent
- Sexual abuse by anyone
- An alcohol and/or drug abuser in the household
- An incarcerated household member
- Someone who is chronically depressed, mentally ill, institutionalized, or suicidal
- Domestic violence
- Loss of a parent
- Emotional neglect
- Physical neglect

Felitti et al. 1998

Adverse Childhood Experiences...
...are very common.
...occur together - if you have one ACE, there's an 87% chance you have more.
...the more you have, the higher your risk of physical, mental and social problems.

Before age 5
90% of a child's brain development happens

90% Brain development before age 5
10% Brain development after age 5

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Introduction to ACEs

"One in every four students currently sitting in American classrooms have experienced a traumatic event, and the number is even greater for those living in impoverished communities," and, "Young children exposed to more than five adverse experiences in the first three years of life face a 75 percent likelihood of having one or more delays in language, emotional, or brain development." --Neena McConnico, Director of Boston Medical Center's Child Witness to Violence Project

ACEs among Native Americans

In the report, "*A Framework to Examine the Role of Epigenetics in Health Disparities among Native Americans*," the authors state, "Native Americans disproportionately experience ACEs and health disparities, significantly impacting long-term physical and psychological health.

In addition to these experiences, the persistence of stress associated with discrimination and historical trauma may add immeasurably to these challenges."

ACEs among Native Americans

Native American persons reported the greatest average number and variety of ACEs than persons from any other racial/ethnic group, and reported the highest rates of physical abuse, sexual abuse, parental substance abuse, and witnessing violence than members of any other racial/ethnic category.

ACEs among Native Americans

Native American females reported the greatest rates of emotional abuse, while Native American males reported the greatest rates of physical neglect; the highest rates of parental substance use among the race/ethnicity-sex dyads were reported by both Native American females and males. Significantly higher rates of sexual violence were reported by Native American females compared to other groups; almost 1 in 4 Native American females reported sexual violence.

ACEs among Native Americans

Exposure to ACEs among children varies by demographic characteristics, including race and ethnicity, parental education, and income level.

The proportion of children who had experienced two or more ACEs was highest among:

- non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native children, of whom two-fifths (40.3 percent) had experienced two or more of these ten life events.
- non-Hispanic Black children and non-Hispanic children of multiple races, of whom about one-third had experienced such events (31.1 and 32.7 percent, respectively).

ACEs among Native Americans

- ACEs disrupt a child's sense of safety and the nurturing they need to develop, thrive and learn.
- ACEs also include being judged or treated unfairly due to their race or ethnicity and living in homes where parents have difficulty getting by on their income.
- Most children with any one ACE have at least one other.



Introduction to ACEs

American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) in Washington State suffer some of the greatest health disparities of any racial/ethnic group.¹ Using state and tribal data, the Northwest Tribal Epidemiology Center (NWTEC) determined that the overall premature mortality rate for AI/AN for 2006 through 2010 was 71 percent higher than for non-Hispanic whites.

Introduction to ACEs

According to a 2018 Washington State Health Assessment, AI/ANs had the highest prevalence of having had three or more ACEs, and Asians had the lowest prevalence.

Having had three or more ACEs increased as levels of education and household income decreased.

Introduction to ACEs

From a survival perspective, the body can respond to perceived or actual threats with the “fight or flight” stress response.

However, if this threat is constant over a prolonged period of time, the endocrine and neuron systems stay activated, which can overtax the child and prevent the body from establishing stability, centeredness and a sense of self.

Introduction to ACEs

Childhood adversity is invisible — it usually takes place behind closed doors or within the impenetrable family bubble. But skyrocketing chronic health problems, prison populations, mental illness, high school discipline and dropout rates show clearly that most humans are suffering the shortand long-term effects of toxic stress.

Focus upon Positives

- ACE scores don't tally the positive experiences in early life that can help build resilience and protect a child from the effects of trauma.
- Research indicates that having a grandparent who loves you, a teacher who understands and believes in you, or a trusted friend that you can confide in may mitigate the long-term effects of early trauma.

Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational trauma is a concept developed to explain years of generational challenges within families. It is the passing down of oppressive or traumatic effects of historical events to children and grandchildren.

This is found in families who survived Nazi concentration camps and Native people who survived colonization, brutal boarding schools and multiple relocations.

Intergenerational Trauma

Sadly, many families cope with intergenerational trauma by employing two primary coping responses.

Denial-refusal to acknowledge that the trauma happened to them.

Minimization-ignoring the impact of the trauma and viewing the experiences appear smaller than they truly were.

Intergenerational Trauma

In order to address this major concern, it is important that local resources be identified and developed to specifically address these mental health issues using a supportive and affordable approach.

This may be accomplished by providing staff training for community clinics, schools, family service programs and tribal government agencies.

Defining Adversity or Stress

Positive Stress

- Brief, infrequent, mild to moderate intensity
- Most normative childhood stress
 - Inability of the 15 month old to express their desires
 - The 2 year old who stumbles while running
 - Beginning school or daycare
 - The big project in middle school
- Social-emotional buffers allow a return to **baseline**

(responding to non-verbal clues, consolation, reassurance, assistance in problem solving)

Impact of Stress upon Children

- Children who are exposed to adverse childhood experiences may become overloaded with stress hormones, leaving them in a constant state of arousal and alertness to environmental and relational threats.
- As a result, they may have difficulty focusing on school work and consolidating new memory, making it harder for them to concentrate on tasks and to learn at school.
- One suggestion is to assist children in helping them to distinguish between good stress and bad stress in their lives.

Impact of Stress upon Children

- Fight, flight or fright (freeze) response
- Short attention span
- Struggle learning (fall behind in school)
- Respond to world as constant danger
- Distrustful of adults
- Unable to develop healthy peer relationships



Techniques to Help a Child

First, we must be aware of some of the most important messages from your culture, your family, your clan that you want to instill in your children? How do you want to do that?



Techniques to Help a Child

When working with children who are dealing with the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), try an approach that does not focus on a skill set as much as it focuses on a mind set.

Techniques to Help a Child

There are two different types of mindset: People with a fixed mindset believe that their qualities are inborn, fixed, and unchangeable. Those with a growth mindset, on the other hand, believe that these abilities can be developed and strengthened by way of support, commitment and hard work.

Techniques to Help a Child

The mind set to working with Native children and adults is to try to understand and appreciate core elements of the influential messages that children receive and internalize as a result of their cultural identity, family heritage and first language.

Techniques to Help a Child

- ▶ High-quality nurturing caregiving—safe, stable, nurturing relationships—can actually change the structure of children's brains, and that is why early detection is extremely important.
- ▶ Economic hardship and divorce or separation of a parent or guardian are the most common ACEs reported nationally, and in all states.

Techniques to Help a Child

- ▶ Identify children at risk through routine screenings, pre-school assessments or surveillance.
- ▶ Assess family strengths and assets as well as challenges to help identify needs for specific services and/or supports in the future.
- ▶ Establish relationships with community resources that address trauma in children.
- ▶ Create a comprehensive list of community or tribal resources available (local United Way organizations may be a good start).

Techniques to Help a Child

- ▶ Locate or develop support groups that center upon specific needs of the children, including emotional management, transitions and grief and loss.
- ▶ Recruit and train mentors who are older adolescents or young adults with proven skills in working with children in need.
- ▶ Promote investment in local programs that focus upon helping others to heal.

Techniques to Help a Child

- ▶ Sponsor opportunities for children and adolescents to enhance their self-care skills.
- ▶ Locate and participate in culturally-based classes and group activities for children that promote protective factors.
- ▶ Help the child develop a coping skills booklet or similar tool.

Techniques to Help a Child

- ▶ Write down what is bothering the child and majestically throw it away.
- ▶ Create an obstacle course or build a fort.
- ▶ Talk to someone they trust
- ▶ Cook or bake something tasty.
- ▶ Offer artistic opportunities for the child to express their situations in a safe manner.

Techniques to Help a Child

- Offer opportunities for children of all ages to enhance their coping skills, such as:
- ▶ Help them give words to their feelings
 - ▶ Recognize the child's triggers
 - ▶ Stick with what they love to do (to cope)
 - ▶ Model active listening
 - ▶ Ask open-ended questions
 - ▶ Help them engage the five senses

Techniques to Help a Child

- Promote assertiveness skills. Give children ample opportunities to:
- ▶ Respectfully say "no" to others
 - ▶ Feel and express anger in safe ways
 - ▶ Express their needs, thoughts, emotions and ideas
 - ▶ Ask for help when needed
 - ▶ Feel supported
 - ▶ Be proud of their accomplishments

Techniques to Help a Child

- ▶ Decide how to help children through transitions
- ▶ Be present during important times
- ▶ Redirect the child during stressful times with humor, music, reading, games, toys, sports.
- ▶ Offer opportunities to express feelings through finger painting, drawing, molding clay and other physically artistic expressions.
- ▶ Encourage child to play with a pet

Techniques to Help a Child

Remember, it's not the child's fault

- ▶ Do not ask: "What's wrong (with you)?"
- ▶ Rather ask: Can you tell me what happened to you?



Techniques to Help a Child

- Listen to and explore the child's self talk. If it is primarily negative or put-downs, offer them suggestions on how to shift to more positive self talk.
- Learn how to differentiate a child having a fear response from one who is just being willful or difficult.
- Explore age-appropriate techniques that promote and enhance resiliency skills in children.

Seven Roots of Resilience

| ASPECT OF RESILIENCE | AREA OF FOCUS | CORE PRACTICES |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| Balancing Brain Chemistry | Biochemical Body | Diet, supplements, medications when needed |
| Managing Energy | Energy Body | Exercise, supplements, activities |
| Aligning with Nature | Rhythmic Body | Sleep, hormones, cycles of activity/rest, balanced lifestyle |
| Calmng the Mind | Thinking Mind | Mindfulness of breath, body, thought, speech |
| Skillfully Facing Emotions | Emotional Mind | Awareness of inner experience, grounding in the moment, releasing "my story" |
| Cultivating a Good Heart | Heart Capable of Love | Opening to self-acceptance, loving-kindness, generosity, gratitude |
| Creating Deep Connections | Soul Capable of Unity | Connecting, developing a sense of belonging, seeing interconnection, knowing "All will be well" |

Techniques to Help a Child

To overcome adversities, children draw from **three sources of resilience** features labelled:

I HAVE
I AM
I CAN.

What they draw from each of the three sources may be described as follows:

Techniques to Help a Child

I HAVE

- People around me I trust and who love me, no matter what
- People who set limits for me so I know when to stop before there is danger or trouble
- People who show me how to do things right by the way they do things
- People who help me when I am sick, in danger or need to learn

Techniques to Help a Child

I AM

- A person people can like and love
- Glad to do nice things for others and show my concern
- Respectful of myself and others
- Willing to be responsible for what I do
- Sure things will be all right

Techniques to Help a Child

I CAN

- Talk to others about things that frighten me or bother me
- Find ways to solve problems that I face
- Control myself when I feel like doing something not right or dangerous
- Figure out when it is a good time to talk to someone or to take action
- Find someone to help me when I need it *

Video

We will now watch a 4:32 You Tube video "We Can Prevent Aces" and discuss your reaction to it.

NAFFA's approach to addressing ACE's

- In order to permanently reduce the negative impact of adverse childhood experiences, NAFFA suggests an approach that has assisted thousands of fathers and mothers to grow happy and safe families.
- Utilizing the Fatherhood Is Sacred™ and Motherhood Is Sacred™ program, consider applying some of these elements.

The purpose of life:

- To have a happy and safe family

The purpose of NAFFA:

- To strengthen and keep families together
- To promote responsible fatherhood and motherhood to bring unity to our Native Nations

Everyone has the power to change their attitude and behavior but no one has the power to change anyone else.

Precisely, Our Method Is:

Uplifting: one's spirit, attitude, self-image, self-worth, feeling welcome, wanted, needed and special

Encouraging: strengthening hope, bringing new hope, inspiring a desire for change, confidence and trust in self and others

Assisting: with recognizing opportunities, identifying resources, improving life skills and problem solving abilities

Teaching: principles, responsibilities toward family, fatherhood, motherhood, marriage, and self-control

Promote Choice

- Next to life, the greatest possession we have is the right to choose
- Choice: freedom to act for yourself
- Self-respect: the right to make your own choices
- Respect for others: allowing others to make their own choices

Encourage Change

- Real and lasting change must come from within through **feeling**
- Outside pressure rarely brings lasting change
Example: knowledge, preaching, intimidation, etc.
- Change comes by filling life with **hope, gratitude, & understanding** and has a powerful affect on changing attitude and behavior

Promote and pursue healthy change

- Real and lasting change must come from within through **feeling**.
- Outside pressure rarely brings lasting change
Example: knowledge, preaching, intimidation, etc.
- Change comes by filling life with **hope, gratitude, & understanding** and has a powerful affect on changing attitude and behavior

Techniques to Help a Child

To counter the impact of adverse childhood experiences, consider local applications of the five protective factors. These include

- Knowledge of parenting and of child and youth development
- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Concrete supports for parents
- Social and emotional competence of children

Techniques to Help a Child

Exercise

In small group discussions, list several steps that you could take to enhance the application of one or more of the five protective factors in your families or those with whom you work.

Techniques to Help a Student

Because some children may not have experienced many positive relationships with other adults, the student-teacher bond can be the most important gift educators have to offer. Teachers who are reliable, honest, and approachable can offer the stability these students so desperately need.

Techniques to Help a Student

Teacher language—what is said to students and how it is said—is one of the most powerful teaching tools. It permeates every aspect of teaching.

Teacher language can lift students to their highest potential or tear them down. It can help them build positive relationships or encourage discord and distrust. It shapes how students think and act and, ultimately, how they learn.

Techniques to Help a Student

Decide to present new concepts in small, manageable steps (baby steps) to these students when it comes to learning behavior and classroom procedures.

If the student says something under his/her breath, it's okay to let them have the last word. It's a way of saving face as he/she refocuses on learning content.

Techniques to Help a Student

With the Two by Ten strategy, teachers may focus on their most difficult student. For two minutes each day, ten days in a row, teachers have a personal conversation with the student about anything in which the student is interested (as long as the conversation is appropriate for school). Researchers found an 85% improvement in that one student's behavior. In addition, the behavior of all the other students in class improved as well.

Techniques to Help an Adolescent

- ▶ Encourage enculturation in their heritage. This process offers opportunities for people to learn the dynamics of their surrounding culture and acquire values and norms appropriate or necessary to that culture and its worldviews.
- ▶ Promote language reclamation in the home and the schools.

Techniques to Help an Adolescent

- ▶ Provide safe dating and healthy relationship skills programs.
- ▶ Encourage adolescent/child mentoring opportunities.
- ▶ Recruit males as allies in violence prevention services

ACEs Impact Upon Adults

In a 2015 Indian Health Service (IHS) report, "Trends in Indian Health," finds that American Indians are 638% more likely to suffer from alcoholism compared to the rest of the U.S. population.

The impact of this addiction obviously impacts healthy child development and parent child relationships.



ACEs Impact Upon Adults

- ▶ It is generally understood that ACE scores between 4 and 10 can explain why we have chronic disease or identify those at risk for developing chronic diseases.
- ▶ Knowing our ACEs score is as important as knowing our cholesterol scores.
- ▶ Knowing can help us take steps to change or prevent behavior likely to result in disease and it can help us to prevent it in our children as well to ensure their healthy development.

ACEs Impact Upon Adults

Adults who have experienced ACEs in their early years may exhibit reduced parenting capacity or maladaptive responses to their children.

The physiological changes that have occurred to the adult's stress response system as a result of earlier trauma can result in diminished capacity to respond to additional stressors in a healthy way.

ACEs Impact Upon Adults

Adverse childhood experiences increase the chance of social risk factors, mental health issues, substance abuse, intimate partner violence, and adult adoption of risky adult behaviors.

All of these can affect parenting in a negative way and perpetuate a continuing exposure to ACEs across generations to come.

ACEs Impact Upon Adults

Trauma not only effects those who directly experience it, but also those in the generations that follow.

Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart describes historical trauma as the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma."

Techniques to Help an Adult

- ▶ Encourage parents to seek "trauma informed" therapy, which may center upon art, yoga, exercise, mindfulness training and many other options.
- ▶ Identify resources in the community that offer parent education classes and workshops to help parents identify and attend to their issues.
- ▶ Make classes and workshops available to staff and parents that promote healthy problem-solving, non-violent conflict resolution and emotional management.

Techniques to Help an Adult

- ▶ Help parents understand the detrimental and dangerous effect of spanking and other forms of corporal punishment on their children.
- ▶ When considering job placement assistance, seek employment in businesses with family-friendly policies and practices.
- ▶ Locate and place children in culturally enriching child-care centers and pre-school programs.

Techniques to Help an Adult

- Promote healthy assertiveness skills to;
- ▶ Enhance awareness of their emotions and desires.
 - ▶ Identify areas where they are comfortable speaking up for themselves and where they are not.
 - ▶ Face their fears and practice being assertive with moderate self-exposure.



"I had a very lonely childhood.
I was an only twin."

Techniques to Help an Adult

- ▶ Enhance healthy parenting by encouraging families to request tribal-based home visiting services.
- ▶ Encourage adults to seek positive inputs – like calming music, unprocessed foods, sweats and walks through nature – to stimulate their system to regulate in favorable ways.

Techniques to Help an Adult

- ▶ Explore multigenerational approaches to recognize problems and pursue healing activities and attitudes.
- ▶ Support programs that encourage attachment, healthy relationships and culturally-based therapeutic interventions.
- ▶ Promote trauma-informed care in workplaces, schools, health services and community agencies.

Conclusion

As you review the content of this workshop, select three to five points raised that you want to apply to the families with whom you work.

How do you want accomplish this?

Homework Assignments

- ▶ Read “13 Signs of a Toxic Parent That Many People Don’t Realize” by Dr. Susan Forward.
- ▶ Ask yourself how these might apply to your work or personal life.

Sometimes self care isn't appointments, medication and therapy sessions. Sometimes it

Sometimes self care is getting up to eat and go back to bed. Sometimes it is blowing everything off and spending the day with someone we love. Sometimes it involves a rea



Conclusion

- ▶ “Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.” ~Chief Seattle, Duwamish
- ▶ “Don’t be afraid to cry. It will free your mind of sorrowful thoughts. ~Hopi
- ▶ “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me, and I may not remember. Involve me, and I’ll understand.” ~ Tribe Unknown

Conclusion

- "The greater a child's terror, and the earlier it is experienced, the harder it becomes to develop a strong and healthy sense of self." ~Nathaniel Branden, Six Pillars of Self-Esteem.
- "If the sound of happy children is grating on your ears, I don't think it's the children who need to be adjusted."
- ~Stefan Molyneux
- "If you carry your childhood with you, you never become older." ~Tom Stoppard

Conclusion

- "When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life so that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice." ~ Cherokee
- "If we wonder often, the gift of knowledge will come." ~ Arapaho
- "Everyone who is successful must have dreamed of something." ~ Maricopa saying
- "He who would do great things should not attempt them all alone." ~ Seneca

Conclusion

- "We will be known forever by the tracks we leave." ~ Dakota
- "You have to look deeper, way below the anger, the hurt, the hate, the jealousy, the self-pity, way down deeper where the dreams lie, son. Find your dream. It's the pursuit of the dream that heals you." ~ Billy Mills
- "You already possess everything necessary to become great." ~ A Crow saying

Sources of Information

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- Slides 35-37 "A Guide to Promoting Resilience in Children." by Edith Groberg, Ph.D. 1995 International Resilience Project.
- Slide 39 Henry Emmons, @partnersinresilience.com
- Slides 49-50 "The Impact of Historical and Intergenerational Trauma on American Indian and Alaska Native Communities, November 25, 2015. SAMHSA

Presenter

Neil Tift
Outreach Project Coordinator
Native American Fatherhood and
Families Association (NAFFA)
525 West Southern Avenue
Mesa, AZ. 85210
480.833.5007
[**neilt@aznaffa.org**](mailto:neilt@aznaffa.org)