

July, 2006

Chicago Dept of Public Health



OFFICE OF VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Violence Prevention E-Brief

Adverse Childhood Experiences Studies: A Bridge to Prevention

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, conducted by the Kaiser Permanente Medical Care Program in San Diego, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Emory University in Atlanta, and the University of Arizona Health Sciences Center in Tucson, suggests that childhood abuse and household dysfunction lead to the development decades later of the chronic diseases that are the most common causes of death and disability in this country, including heart disease, cancer, chronic lung and liver disease, and injuries.

<http://www.cdc.gov/od/oc/media/pressrel/r980514.htm>

The ACE Study has relevance for EVERY CDPH program and service and supports the efficacy of cross division communication and collaboration. In recent years, Chicago Safe Start has referred to the ACE Study as a primary source for understanding the implications of childhood exposure to violence and in our work to build a family support and mental health response. We are encouraged by the common ground this study provides for all of us involved in public health work in Chicago.

The ACE Study reveals a powerful relationship between our emotional experiences as children and our physical and mental health as adults, as well as the major causes of adult mortality in the U.S.. It documents the conversion of traumatic emotional experiences in childhood into organic disease later in life—a *reverse alchemy, turning the gold of a newborn infant into the lead of a depressed, diseased adult.* (www.acestudy.org/aboutacestudy.php)

The study makes it clear that time does not heal some adverse experiences—one does not just “get over” some things, not even fifty years later.

Each year in the U.S. approximately five million children experience some form of traumatic experience (www.ChildTrauma.org). More than two million of these are victims of physical or sexual abuse. Millions more are living in the terrorizing atmosphere of domestic violence, exposure to community violence, and natural disasters.

Why is it important to know about the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study ?

Because it provides compelling evidence that::

- ACEs are surprisingly common.
- They happen even in “the best of families”.
- They have long-term, damaging consequences.

Learning more about the ACE Study could clearly enhance our array of CDPH efforts to serve children and families— from primary health care and mental health services, to chronic disease prevention, from public awareness about childhood exposure to violence, to the KIDS SPACE Initiative at CDPH clinics and WIC Centers, from refreshing ourselves annually about child abuse and neglect, to our lead abatement and smoking cessation work...nutrition, substance abuse prevention...endless possibilities for cross walking!

"Prevention is better than cure." ~ Desiderius Erasmus

What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?

Growing up (prior to age 18) in a household with:

- Recurrent physical abuse.
- Recurrent emotional abuse.
- Sexual abuse.
- An alcohol or drug abuser.
- An incarcerated household member.
- Someone who is chronically depressed, suicidal, institutionalized or mentally ill.
- Mother being treated violently.
- One or no parents.
- Emotional or physical neglect.

The question to ask is:

How will these childhood experiences play out decades later in a doctor's office? How does one perform *reverse alchemy*, going from a normal newborn with almost unlimited potential to a diseased, depressed adult? How does one turn gold into lead?" <http://xnnet.kp.org/permanentjournal/winter02/goldtolead.html>

"Abused children may use behaviors such as cigarette smoking, heavy alcohol use, overeating, promiscuity, and drug use as a way of coping with damaging experiences much earlier in life," says a principal investigator of the study, Dr. Vincent Felitti, Chief of Preventive Medicine at Kaiser Permanente in San Diego.

"Traditionally viewed as public health problems, these behaviors appear to be coping mechanisms for people who have had adverse childhood experiences, the study found. The authors suggest the behaviors may also reflect the effects of the adverse experiences on the developing brain chemistry -- effects that may lead to the adoption of the coping behaviors."

"A striking finding was that adverse childhood experiences are vastly more common than recognized or acknowledged. Of equal importance was our observation that they had a powerful correlation to adult health a half-century later. It is this combination that makes them so important. Slightly more than half of our middle-class population of Health Plan members experienced one or more of the categories we studied. One in four was exposed to two categories of abusive experience, one in 16 to four categories. Given an exposure to one category, there is 80% likelihood of exposure to another. All this, of course, is well shielded by social taboos against obtaining this information. Further, one may "miss the forest for the trees" if one studies these issues individually. They do not occur in isolation; for instance, a child does not grow up with an alcoholic person or with domestic violence in an otherwise well-functioning household.

<http://xnnet.kp.org/permanentjournal/winter02/goldtolead.html>

- When we looked at self-defined current depression, we found that a person with an ACE score ≥ 4 was 460% more likely to be depressed than a person with an ACE score of 0.
- A male child with an ACE score of 6 has a 4600% increase in the likelihood of later using intravenous drugs than a person with an ACE score of 0.
- A person with a midrange ACE score of 4 is 390% more likely to have Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) than is a person with an ACE Score of 0.

An ounce of prevention is a ton of work. ~ Paul Frame

Interested in working with the Office of Violence Prevention on planning an event to learn more about Adverse Childhood Experiences and their effects on adult health?

Call Anne Parry at 312.745.0440