

ACEs and the Impact on Children: Second in a series on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

July 2018 by Lisa Turner, Counselor

Michael (not his real name) cannot sit still. He constantly fidgets in his seat and is always restless. Currently in the fourth grade, he reads at a second grade level and slips a little bit every year, especially after breaks from school. Michael is eligible for free and reduced lunches, but his teacher suspects that he comes to school hungry, which contributes to his inability to sit still and focus. He is noticeably disheveled and often uses the school's supply of winter coats and gloves every year. Occasionally, he has unexplained outbursts that result in him being removed from his classroom until he can calm down. It is common knowledge that Michael's dad has been absent from the family for some time due to various criminal offenses including domestic violence and drug use, and that his mother also struggles with a substance use disorder.

The first few years of life are the most important in terms of brain development. Genetics go a long way in forming who we are as people, but experience plays a role also. Learning to cope with stress is a major part of human and brain development. When a body experiences anxiety or danger, our first instinct is to fight, flight, or freeze. Our stress hormones, including cortisol, and our heart rate and blood pressure rise. These early, biological instincts are meant to keep us safe. As infants and toddlers, it is our primary caregivers who are to keep us safe when our bodies go on high alert. They provide safety and security by making appropriate eye contact and touch, using calm voices, and maintaining a lifestyle that is free from chaos.

In homes and families where there are more ACEs present – physical, verbal, and/or sexual violence; substance misuse; mental illness; divorce or separation of the parents; the incarceration of someone in the household; or domestic violence – the level of stress experienced by a small child hits the toxic level. As babies and toddlers have not yet developed their own ability to self-soothe, and as their primary caregivers are preoccupied with abuse and household dysfunction, their stress hormones, heart rate, and blood pressure remain at an elevated level for too long. This prolonged activation of the stress response system interrupts the development of the brain and other organs, increasing the risk of developmental delays and health problems later in life.

According to *IowaAces360*, in Iowa alone, 21 percent of children ages four months to five years are at risk for developmental, behavioral, and social delays; 19 percent of children live below the poverty line; and 10 percent of youth disagree with the statement, "I have a happy home." Research indicates that the best forms of treatment are early intervention and Trauma Informed Care.

Trauma Informed Care promotes an environment of safety, empowerment, and healing in both physical and mental health settings. Trauma Informed Care suggests that we assume

most people have experienced a trauma and to approach them that way, with holistic care that is respectful.

Research has shown that teaching and building resilience in kids can counteract the effects of a high ACEs score. According to *IowaAces360*, resilience is the ability to thrive, adapt, and cope despite adversity. What this boils down to is that instead of looking at a child and asking, "What is wrong with them?" we stop for a minute and ask, "What happened to them?" The treatment for this is as simple, and as hard, as being non-judgmental, showing unconditional love, and being a consistent person in their lives.

Simply fostering community within churches and other communities of faith can reduce levels of toxic stress in children, by "breaking the intergenerational passage of trauma." Churches and other communities of faith can participate in Trauma Informed Care by creating safe, nurturing environments, by practicing active listening skills, by offering support, and by destigmatize toxic stress and trauma.

Another way to help destigmatize the effect of ACEs, and other types of mental illness, is to attend a training in Mental Health First Aid. Catholic Charities has taken the initiative to have three of its counselors – Clinical Director Lynne Lutze in Dubuque, Lori Eastwood in Decorah, and Lisa Turner in Ames – trained as certified instructors in Mental Health First Aid. Mental Health First Aid "is the help offered to a person developing a mental health problem or experiencing a mental health crisis. The first aid is given until appropriate treatment and support are received or until the crisis resolves." As trainers, Catholic Charities will be at the forefront of educating others how to preserve life, provide help, promote and enhance recovery, and provide comfort and support within the Archdiocese. This training is available for individual adults and organizations.

So what about Michael? Michael would benefit from support systems in his life who are patient and understanding and who, instead of blaming him and punishing him for his behavior, seek to understand it and work with him to succeed in spite of a high ACEs score.

For more information, or to talk to a counselor, go to www.catholiccharitiesdubuque.org/catholic-charities-services/counseling-services, or call 800-772-2758.

A Prayer for Children

Taking a child he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it he said to them, "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the One who sent me."

MARK 9:36-37

GRACIOUS AND LOVING GOD, WATCH OVER THE YOUNGEST AMONG US WHO FACE UNRELENTING AND OVERWHELMING ILLNESS AND INJURY.

Send your grace upon them so they will know your loving and healing presence. Give to these sick children strength, hope, and joy as they face difficult treatment and recovery. You called us to receive the children, may we provide support and care necessary for their journey to health. We look to you and your Son, Jesus Christ, as a sign of mercy and joy. We ask this through the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes in the name of your Son, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. **AMEN.**

Resources

Experiences Build Brain

Architecture https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=10&v=VNNsN9IJKws

Still Face

Experiment https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=apzXGEbZht0

Lamia, Mary C. PhD. *Understanding Myself: A kid's guide to intense emotions and strong feelings*. Magination Press, 2011

Paper Tigers: The Documentary, 2013. (Be advised: adult content)