

Got Your ACE Score? What's Your ACE Score

There are 10 types of childhood trauma measured in the ACE Study. Five are personal — physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect. Five are related to other family members: a parent who's an alcoholic, a mother who's a victim of domestic violence, a family member in jail, a family member diagnosed with a mental illness, and the disappearance of a parent through divorce, death or abandonment. Each type of trauma counts as one. So a person who's been physically abused, with one alcoholic parent, and a mother who was beaten up has an ACE score of three.

There are, of course, many other types of childhood trauma — racism, bullying, watching a sibling being abused, losing a caregiver (grandmother, mother, grandfather, etc.), homelessness, surviving and recovering from a severe accident, witnessing a father being abused by a mother, witnessing a grandmother abusing a father, involvement with the foster care system, involvement with the juvenile justice system, etc. The ACE Study included only those 10 childhood traumas because those were mentioned as most common by a group of about 300 Kaiser members; those traumas were also well studied individually in the research literature.

The most important thing to remember is that the ACE score is meant as a guideline: If you experienced other types of toxic stress over months or years, then those would likely increase your risk of health consequences.

Prior to your 18th birthday:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? or Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
No ___ If Yes, enter 1 ___
2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often... Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? or Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
No ___ If Yes, enter 1 ___
3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever... Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? or Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?
No ___ If Yes, enter 1 ___
4. Did you often or very often feel that ... No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? or Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
No ___ If Yes, enter 1 ___
5. Did you often or very often feel that ... You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? or Your parents were too drunk or high to take

care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?

No ___ If Yes, enter 1 ___

6. Were your parents ever separated or divorced?

No ___ If Yes, enter 1 ___

7. Was your mother or stepmother:

Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? or Sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? or Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?

No ___ If Yes, enter 1 ___

8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?

No ___ If Yes, enter 1 ___

9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide? No ___ If Yes, enter 1 ___

10. Did a household member go to prison?

No ___ If Yes, enter 1 ___

Now add up your “Yes” answers: This is your ACE Score

Now that you have your ACE score, what does it mean?

First....a tiny bit of background to help you figure this out.....(if you want the back story about the fascinating origins of the ACE Study, read [The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study — the largest, most important public health study you never heard of — began in an obesity clinic.](#))

The CDC’s Adverse Childhood Experiences Study ([ACE Study](#)) [uncovered](#) a stunning link between childhood trauma and the chronic diseases people develop as adults, as well as social and emotional problems. This [includes](#) heart disease, lung cancer, diabetes and many autoimmune diseases, as well as depression, violence, being a victim of violence, and suicide. The first research results [were published in 1998, followed by more than 70 other publications through 2015](#). They showed that:

- childhood trauma was very common, even in employed white middle-class, college-educated people with great health insurance;
- there was a direct link between childhood trauma and adult onset of chronic disease, as well as depression, suicide, being violent and a victim of violence;
- more types of trauma increased the risk of health, social and emotional problems.
- people usually experience more than one type of trauma – rarely is it only sex abuse or only verbal abuse.

A whopping two thirds of the 17,000 people in the ACE Study had an ACE score of at least one — [87 percent of those](#) had more than one. Thirty-six states and the District of Columbia have done their own ACE surveys; their results are similar to the CDC's ACE Study.

The study's researchers came up with an ACE score to explain a person's risk for chronic disease. Think of it as a cholesterol score for childhood toxic stress. You get one point for each type of trauma. The higher your ACE score, the higher your risk of health and social problems. (Of course, other types of trauma exist that could contribute to an ACE score, so it is conceivable that people could have ACE scores higher than 10; however, the ACE Study measured only 10 types.)

(By the way, lest you think that the ACE Study was yet another involving inner-city poor people of color, take note: The study's participants were 17,000 mostly white, middle and upper-middle class college-educated San Diegans with good jobs and great health care — they all belonged to the Kaiser Permanente health maintenance organization.)

As your ACE score increases, so does the risk of disease, social and emotional problems. With an ACE score of 4 or more, things start getting serious. The likelihood of chronic pulmonary lung disease [increases](#) 390 percent; hepatitis, 240 percent; depression 460 percent; attempted suicide, 1,220 percent.

What causes this?

At the same time that the ACE Study was being done, parallel research on kids' brains found that [toxic stress damages the structure and function of a child's developing brain](#). This was determined by a group of neuroscientists and pediatricians, including neuroscientist [Martin Teicher](#) and pediatrician [Jack Shonkoff](#), both at Harvard University, neuroscientist [Bruce McEwen](#) at Rockefeller University, and child psychiatrist Bruce Perry at the [Child Trauma Academy](#).

When children are overloaded with stress hormones, they're in flight, fright or freeze mode. They can't learn in school. They often have difficulty trusting adults or developing healthy relationships with peers (i.e., they become loners). To relieve their anxiety, depression, guilt, shame, and/or inability to focus, they turn to easily available biochemical solutions — nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, methamphetamine — or activities in which they can escape their problems — high-risk sports, proliferation of sex partners, and work/over-achievement. (e.g. Nicotine reduces anger, increases focus and relieves depression. Alcohol relieves stress.)

Using drugs or overeating or engaging in risky behavior leads to consequences as a direct result of this behavior. For example, smoking can lead to COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) or lung cancer. Overeating can lead to obesity and diabetes. In addition, there is increasing research that shows that severe and chronic stress leads to bodily systems producing an inflammatory response that leads to disease.

In addition, toxic stress can be passed down from generation to generation. The field of epigenetics shows that we are born with a set of genes that can be turned on and off, depending on what's happening in our environment. If a child grows up with an overload of toxic stress, their stress-response genes are likely to be activated so that they are easily triggered by stressful situations that don't affect those who don't grow up with toxic stress. They can pass that response onto their children.

Fortunately, brains and lives are somewhat plastic. Resilience research shows that the appropriate integration of resilience factors — such as asking for help, developing trusting relationships, forming a positive attitude, listening to feelings — can help people improve their lives.

Kind, connected parenting builds life-long skills of resilience and mental health, and primes children for optimum health, learning and behavior outcomes. The science agrees: *The single most important factor influencing a child's healthy development is having safe, stable, and nurturing relationships with a mother, father, or other primary caregiver.*

For more information about ACEs science and how it's being used, go to: [ACEs Science 101](#).

For more information about the ACE Study, check out the [CDC's ACE Study site](#).

Here's a link to the [long questionnaire \(200+ questions\)](#).

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Adverse Childhood Experiences Are Common

Household dysfunction:

Substance abuse	27%
Parental sep/divorce	23%
Mental illness	17%
Battered mother	13%
Criminal behavior	6%

Abuse:

Psychological	11%
Physical	28%
Sexual	21%

Neglect:

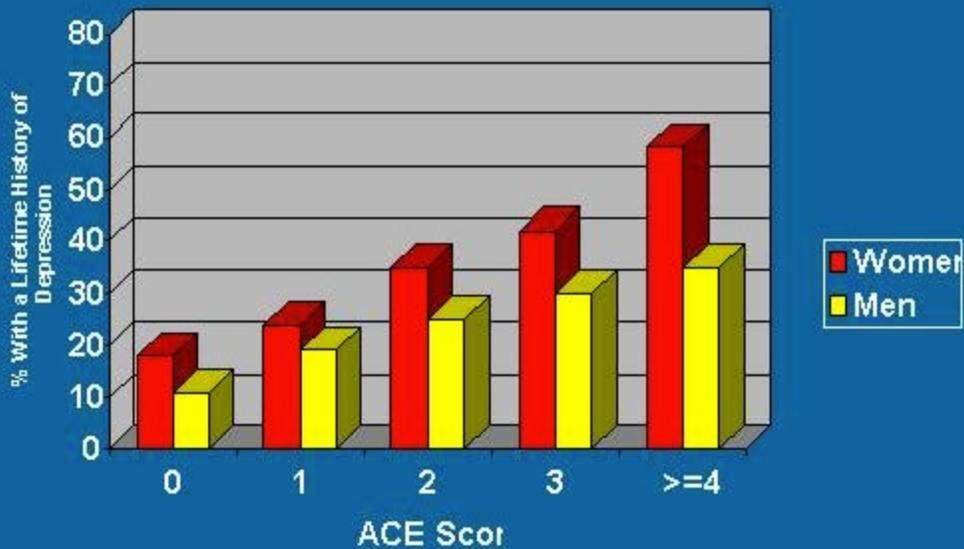
Emotional	15%
Physical	10%

Health Risks

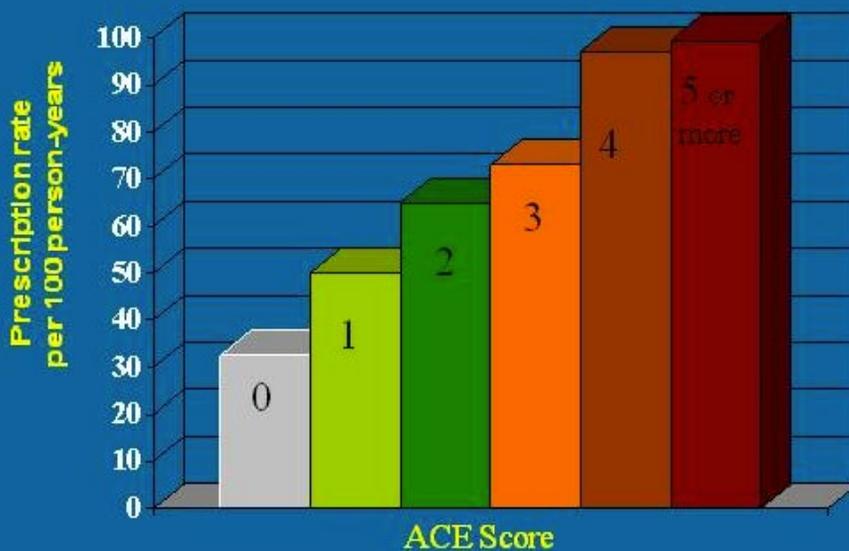
Childhood Experiences vs. Adult Alcoholism



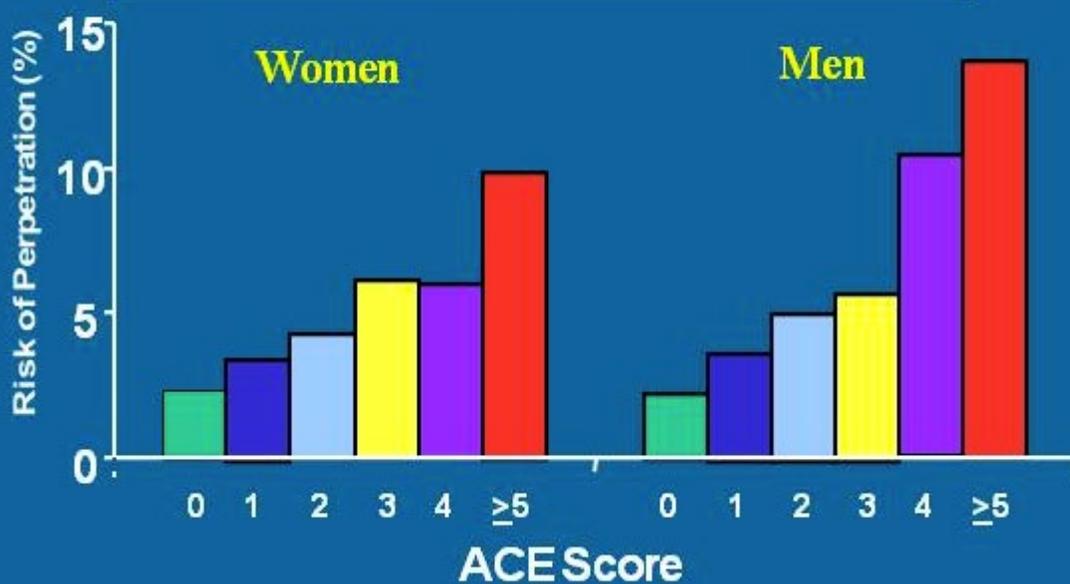
Childhood Experiences Underlie Chronic Depression



ACE Score and Rates of Antidepressant Prescriptions approximately 50 years later



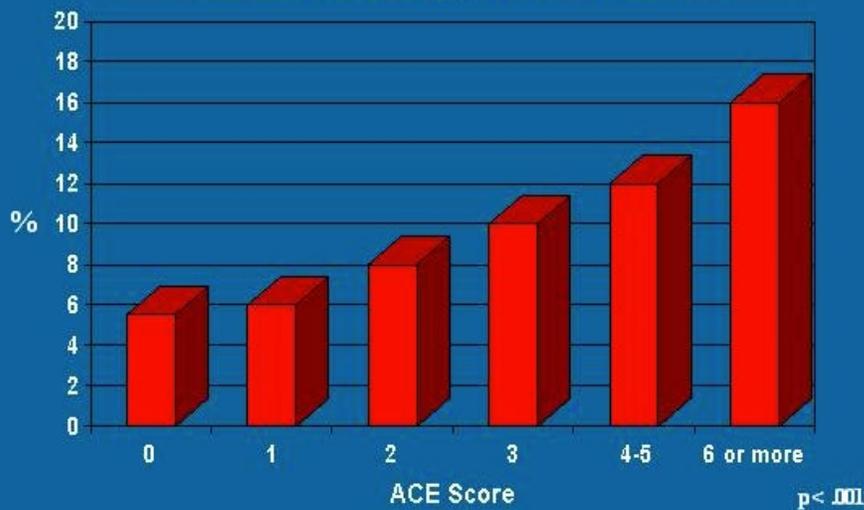
ACE Score and the Risk of *Perpetrating* Domestic Violence



The ACE Score and the Prevalence of Liver Disease (Hepatitis/Jaundice)

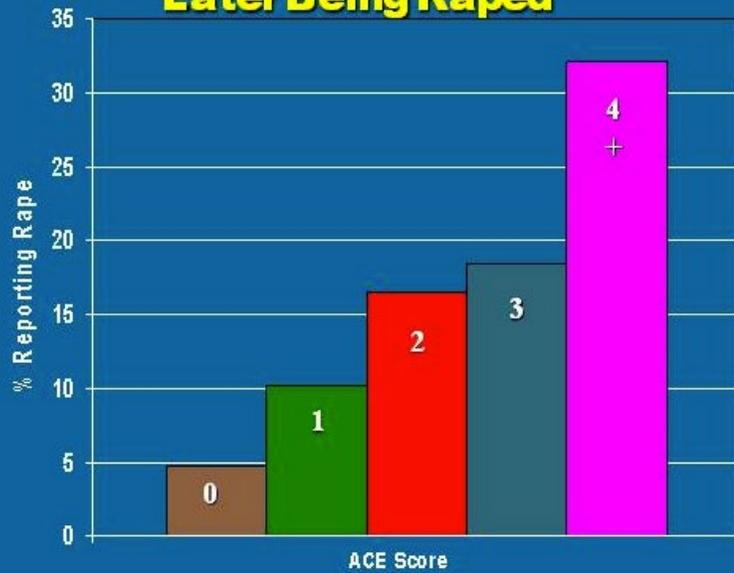


Adverse Childhood Experiences vs. Smoking as an Adult



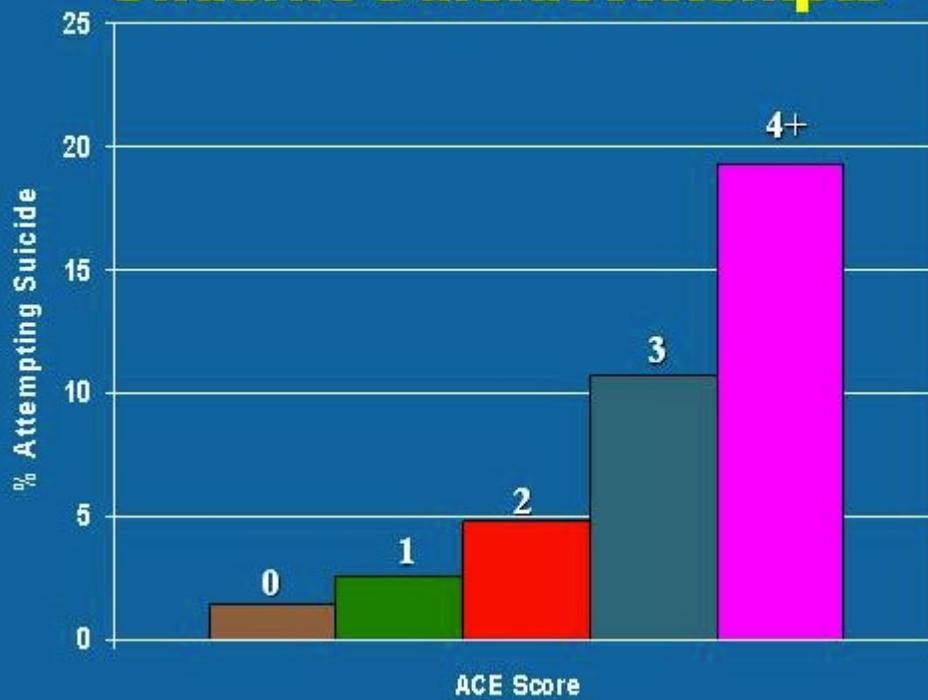
Well-being

Childhood Experiences Underlie Later Being Raped

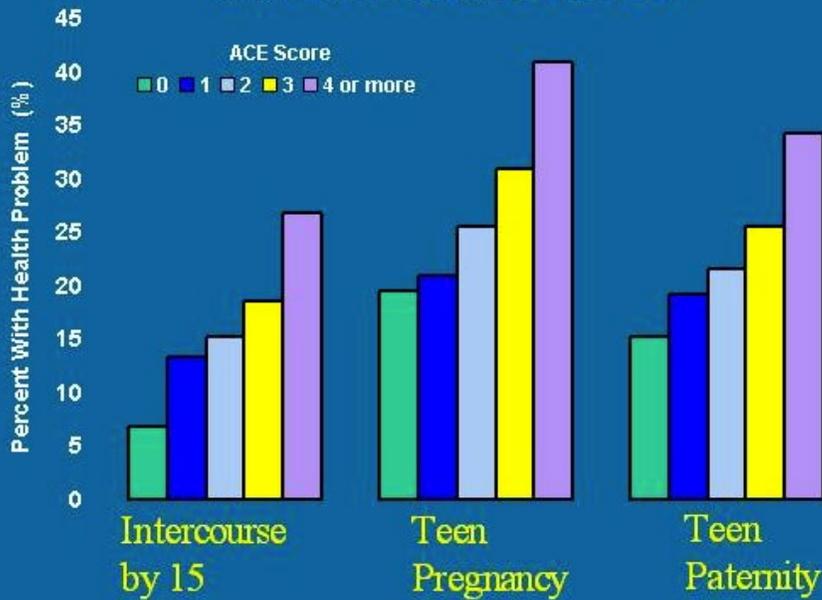


Mental Health

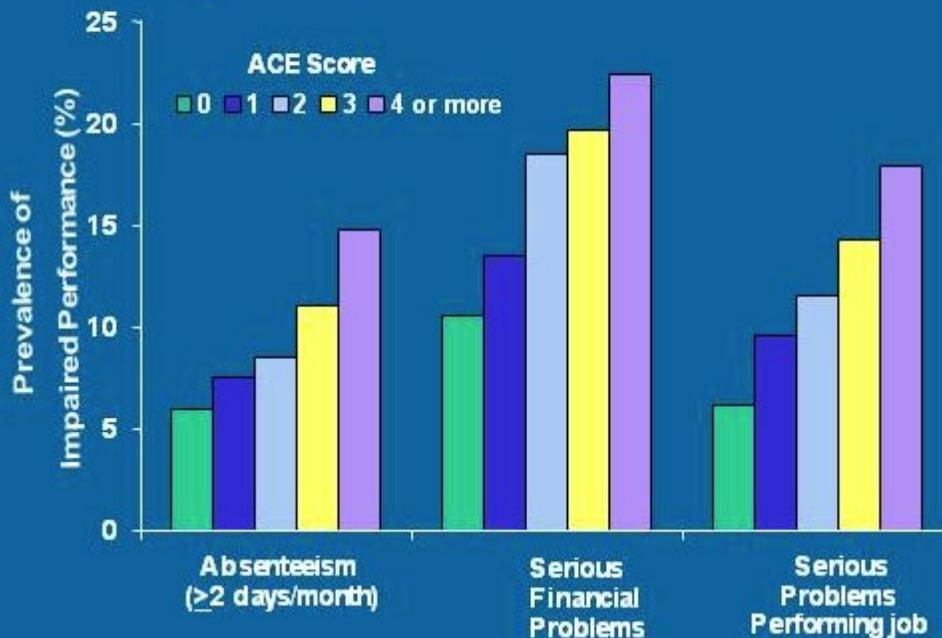
Childhood Experiences Underlie Suicide Attempts



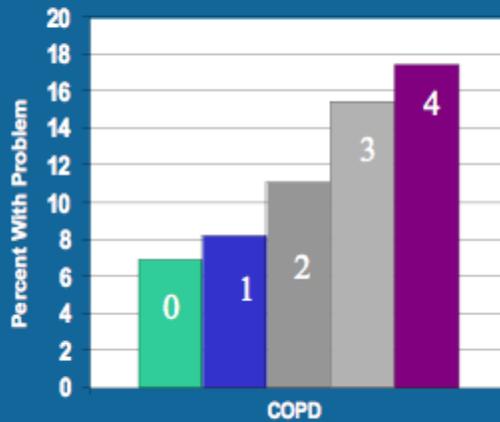
ACE Score and Teen Sexual Behaviors



ACE Score and Indicators of Impaired Worker Performance



ACE Score vs. COPD



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