
Adverse Childhood Experiences and Health: Policy implications

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Can Income & Resource Policies Influence ACE?

The Impact of Early Childhood on Future Health

The PROBLEM
The origins of Chronic Disease - heart and lung disease, diabetes, mental health problems, obesity - often lie in the first 1000 days of life

Professor Michael Marmot

"The foundations for virtually every aspect of human development - physical, intellectual and emotional - are laid in early childhood"

The CAUSE
Adverse experiences - in utero and in the first 2 years of life - impact on the child’s developing brain and other biological systems

How adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) influence health

Early Death
Disease, Disability and Social Problems
Adoption of Health Risk Behaviour
Social, Emotional and Cognitive Impairment
Adverse Childhood Experiences

Increase in ACEs increases health risk
As the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk for negative health outcomes

The SOLUTION
Interventions in early life are more cost-effective than those in later years

How can we support our children’s future health?

SUPPORT FOR PARENTS IS KEY

The Growing Literature on ACE

Figure 1. Number of scientific publications with ‘Adverse childhood experience’ in their titles per year recorded on the Web of science

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)

Karen Hughes et al (Lancet 2017) systematic review identified 4+ ACE with long-term consequences:

- Childhood physical abuse
- Household substance abuse
- Childhood sexual abuse
- Household mental illness
- Exposure to domestic violence
- Emotional, psychological or verbal abuse
- Parental separation or divorce
- Household criminality
- Neglect
- Family financial problems
- Family conflict or discord
- Bullying
- Death of parent or close relative or friend
- Separation from family (e.g. out-of-home care)
- Serious childhood illness or injury
Pooled Odds Ratios

Metzler et al (2017) Adverse Childhood Experiences and Life Opportunities: Shifting the Narrative, Children and Youth Services Review, 72, pp141-149
Life Time Effects Of Preschool Education

Figure 1
Major Findings: High/Scope Perry Preschool Study at 40

(see Schweinhart et al. 2005)
The policy relevance of the results
Lessons learned for policy making

Figure 2
High/Scope Perry Preschool Program Public Costs and Benefits

Benefits
- Education savings: $7,303
- Taxes on earnings: $14,078
- Welfare savings: $2,768
- Crime savings: $171,473
- Total Public Benefit: $195,621

Costs
- $15,166

$12.90 return per dollar invested.

(Constant 2,000 dollars, 3% discount rate)
Early Childhood Development is a SMART INVESTMENT

The earlier the investment, the greater the return

Source: James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics
Should We Focus on ACE?

- Built on the literature associated with ‘child maltreatment’
- Welcome recognition of the importance of early life for adult health, psychological development and economic success
Weaknesses of the ACE Approach

- The concept elides a variety of processes
- Simple summary leads to measurement error
- Definitions sometimes include SEP and deprivation when these should be earlier in the causal pathway
- The concept should be used at group or population level, not individual
  - The majority of those experiencing even 4+ ACE do not experience poor outcomes
- Focus on ACE can draw attention away from provision of the resources and services parents need to parent effectively
It’s Not Just About Health Behaviours

• Early physical & social environment shapes:
  • Birthweight
  • Respiratory health
  • Growth patterns
• Psycho-social environment influences educational development and later environment
Policy Implications

- Provision of adequate basic income to families and responsive income protection: avoid ‘income cliffs’
- But high quality community services are as, if not more important than income protection
- Integrated community services including dedicated child orientated public health nurses important
- Building human capital in childhood essential
- Preschool education can help equalise social background
- Improving home-school interaction improves outcomes