# Factsheet – Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are challenging and traumatising events or situations that children may face during their upbringing. These experiences can have long-term impacts on physical and mental health, as well as an individual’s life opportunities. Studies have shown a strong link between exposure to ACEs and the development of chronic diseases, mental health issues like depression and anxiety, access to education and employment, and risky behaviours in adulthood (Nelson et al. 2020).

The original ACEs study (Felitti et al. 1998) identified different types of adverse experiences, including abuse (physical, emotional, sexual), neglect (physical, emotional), and household challenges such as mental illness, violence, substance abuse and divorce.

Later studies found that adults who had been exposed to 4 or more ACEs as a child were:

* 10.3 times more likely to have injected drugs
* 6 times more likely to have had or caused unintended teenage pregnancy
* 2.5 times more likely to contract sexually transmitted infections
* 15 times more likely to have committed violence against another person in the previous 12 months
* 20 times more likely to have been incarcerated during their lifetime
* 4.6 times more likely to suffer from depression
* 12.2 times more likely to have attempted suicide (Emerging Minds and The Australian National University 2020)
* Less likely to achieve in their schooling. Children and young people who experience ACEs generally have lower educational attainment. This means they achieve less formal education or academic success compared to a standard or expected level (Houtepen et al. 2020).

In 2023, the Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS) generated Australia’s first nationally representative data on the prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia and their associated health impacts through life (Haslam et al. 2023). Data was collected on:

* physical abuse
* sexual abuse
* emotional abuse
* neglect
* exposure to domestic violence
* multi-type maltreatment.

The ACMS found that child maltreatment is at endemic levels in Australia. Across the population, the study identified high prevalence of physical abuse (32%), sexual abuse (28.5%), emotional abuse (30.9%), and exposure to domestic violence (39.6%). Neglect was less prevalent (8.9%). For children or young people who have experienced trauma, school can be a difficult place as they try to cope in an environment that imposes expectations on them that they may find hard to meet (CESE 2020). Students’ reactions to trauma differ and not all possible signs of trauma are indicative of actual trauma. CESE (2020) suggests the possible indicators that teachers should be aware of may include:

* increased tension and irritability
* anxiety
* low self-esteem
* aggressive or violent behaviour
* difficulty managing emotions
* tiredness in class due to sleep disturbances
* problematic or harmful sexualised behaviours
* general aches and pains with no clear cause
* over or underreaction to noises lights and sudden movements
* difficulty forming relationships with peers.

The ongoing research has shown that having just one positive, caring relationship can substantially improve a child’s recovery and healing from adverse childhood experiences. Adults who had significant adversities in their childhood but had support figures such as family members, friends, neighbours, coaches or teachers report leading successful and fulfilling lives.

Teachers play an important role in supporting students who may have been affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences. By fostering safe, predictable and supportive classroom environments with consistent routines and clear expectations, building strong relationships with students and the school community, and understanding trauma and its effects on learning and behaviour, teachers can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

For more information on simple approaches that schools can implement to create trauma-sensitive environments that are viewed as safe and trustworthy, explore the [Trauma sensitive environments](https://resources.education.nsw.gov.au/detail/IPR-KF220505090103) and [Trauma sensitive environments (Secondary)](https://resources.education.nsw.gov.au/detail/IPR-KF220505090104) resources in the Universal Resources Hub. By considering ACEs, teachers are better equipped to support their students holistically, addressing both academic and emotional needs and contributing to the healing process.

## References

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