



IMMANUEL COLLEGE

PARENT RESOURCES

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Adverse Childhood Experiences are stressful events occurring in childhood, including

- **domestic violence**
- **parental abandonment through separation or divorce**
- **a parent with a mental health condition**
- **being the victim of abuse (sexual and/or emotional)**
- **being the victim of neglect (physical and emotional)**
- **a member of the household being in prison**
- **growing up in a household in which there are adults experiencing alcohol and drug use problems.**

HOW WILL MY CHILD MANAGE AT SCHOOL?

Children with ACEs often have problems with their behaviour at school, and the condition can negatively affect a child's academic progress.

Speak to your child's teachers or our Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) about any extra support your child may need.

In some circumstances, we may suggest an application should be made for an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) in order to provide emotional support for your child.

The school has a toolkit of strategies to help support children with ACEs.

Adverse Childhood Experiences can have lasting, negative effects on health, well-being and future life experiences.

ACEs can be prevented. Creating and sustaining safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for all children and families can prevent ACEs and help all children reach their full health and life potential.

TRAUMA IS MORE SEVERE WHEN...

- Is repeated again and again
- different stresses add up
- it happens at a younger age
- the child has fewer healthy personal relationships
- The child has fewer coping skills (language, intelligence, good health, and self esteem)



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HOW THE BRAIN REACTS TO TRAUMA

When something scary happens, the brain makes sure you do not forget it. Traumatic events are remembered in a special way. They are often experienced as a pattern of sensations with sounds, smells, and feelings mixed together. Any one of these things can make a child feel like the whole event is happening again. These sensations are called “triggers.”

TRIGGERS

Triggers can be smells or sounds. They can be places or tones of voice. Even emotions can be a trigger. For example, being anxious about school may bring up the memory of being anxious about violence at home. This can cause dramatic and often unexpected behaviours such as physical aggression or withdrawal. Triggers can be hard to identify, even for a child. Children will try hard to avoid them.

Remembering a traumatic event can cause some of the original “fight, flight, or freeze” reaction to return. This might look like a “tantrum.” It might also look like the child is overreacting. Sometimes anxiety can cause a child to “freeze.” This may look like defiance. A child who sees the world as a place full of danger may do this. Many children who have been abused or neglected go through life always ready to flee or to fight.

STRESS

Not all stress is bad. Some stress is healthy and positive because it prepares us to respond to temporary challenges in our lives, such as running a race or starting a new job. Our stress response activates and then quickly returns to normal. More intense or longer-lasting stressors can be tolerable if we have support systems in our lives to help us cope. If we don't have support, severe or frequent exposure to certain types of stress can have a “toxic” effect on the body and brain.

It is this toxic stress that, when not properly acknowledged and reduced, can lead to long-term behaviour issues, health complications, and diseases that are caused by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

Positive stress involves brief increases in heart rate and mild elevations in stress hormone levels.

Tolerable stress involves serious, temporary stress responses that are buffered by supportive relationships.

Toxic stress occurs when there is prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.



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SIGNS OF STRESS INCLUDE

- pathy or lack of energy,
- difficulty making decisions,
- difficulty “keeping track” of things,
- feeling on edge,
- experience a change in eating habits,
- sleeping more than usual or having trouble falling asleep,
- Stress can also make people more emotional.

TOXIC STRESS

Toxic Stress changes how a child’s brain develops and how their brain and body works. It also causes physical and emotional illnesses, including: migraines, headaches, anxiety, depression, skin problems, stomach ailments, sleep problems, difficulty concentrating. It can cause a child to have reactionary coping skills related to ‘fight, flight, or freeze’ that carry into adulthood. These body changes may cause your child to:

- often act aggressively – shouting, throwing things, fighting, saying mean/horrible things
- often get into trouble at school
- get labelled, a behavioural problem
- get excluded from school
- have trouble concentrating and learning
- be mistakenly diagnosed with ADHD

These behaviours are the symptoms of what is going on in that child’s life.

WAYS TO PREVENT TOXIC STRESS

- Provide a nurturing, safe and stable environment.
- Help your child learn to cope with a difficult time.
- Reduce your child’s ACE exposure.
- ACE’s work through experience, not just exposure. Exposure alone doesn’t necessarily mean a child is affected. If the ACE is prevented from causing toxic stress, the harm should not occur. With a caring and nurturing environment, we can build children with the resilience to protect them from ACEs.



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LEARNING TO TRUST AFTER TRAUMA

Supportive, caring adults can help a child recover from trauma. Some children may not know that adults can help or that they can be trusted. They may resist the help of others. Not trusting adults can be mistaken for disrespect for authority. This can cause problems at home and at school. It can also make learning harder.

It can be hard to tell who is affected by trauma. Mistreated children may withdraw from people and seem shy and scared. They may also be very friendly with everyone they meet. They may cross personal boundaries and put themselves at risk for more abuse. They are choosing between “trust no one” and “trust everybody, but not very much.”

WHAT HELPS A CHILD BUILD RESILIENCE?

Ways to reduce their toxic stress are:

- getting help to talk about and protect themselves from ACEs (by talking to a trusted, caring adult, for example)
- learning what are called “self-soothing” techniques, like mindfulness

FIGHT-FLIGHT-FREEZE

The **fight-flight-freeze** response is the body’s natural reaction to danger. It’s a type of stress response that helps you react to perceived threats, such as a dog jumping up at you or being shouted at.

Freezing is **fight-or-flight** on hold, where you are preparing to protect yourself.

A frightened child may feel out of control and helpless, and the body’s protective reflexes are triggered.

This can make a child’s heart beat faster and blood pressure rise. The **fight-flight-freeze** panic response can kick in.

Some children are more sensitive than others. What is traumatic for one child may not be seen as traumatic for another child. It can be hard to tell what will affect a child.

Fear is guided by a child’s perception of what is frightening.

When a child’s body goes into fight, flight or freeze response often and unnecessarily, it can be very debilitating. As a result, children struggle with regulation.



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CALMING YOUR CHILD'S FIGHT-FLIGHT-FREEZE RESPONSE

The body's alarm system is located in the brain. The amygdala, part of the limbic system, is designed to recognise danger and prepare our body to react to it. When it's working properly, it should send signals only when there is real danger present. For some children, the system is faulty and transmits false alarms, sending them into full-blown fight, flight or freeze mode weekly, daily or even multiple times a day. Often, this faulty alarm system is due to increased cortisol levels due to prenatal stress or early childhood trauma.

The brain sees higher functioning tasks, such as logic and planning, as nonessential in a crisis, so it effectively shuts down that part of your brain once the fight, flight, or freeze response is triggered. This is good if you are in danger and need all your energy to run away, but not good if your amygdala is triggered by everyday occurrences such as loud noises or a particular smell.

FIGHT CAN LOOK LIKE:

- Kicking
- screaming
- spitting
- pushing
- throwing
- hands ready to punch
- glaring
- clawing at the air
- gasping for breath

FLIGHT CAN LOOK LIKE:

- darting eyes
- restlessness
- excessive fidgeting
- doing anything to get away
- running without concern for their safety

FREEZE CAN LOOK LIKE:

- holding their breath
- heart pounding
- shutting down
- feeling unable to move
- escaping into their own mind
- feeling numb
- whining
- daydreaming

There are ways that you can help your child to recognise when their brain starts to respond this way. The first step in helping them out of 'fight, flight, freeze' response is to recognise the signs as quickly as possible and help your child learn to identify them.

Talk to your child about what they notice in their bodies just before the fight, flight or freeze response, such as breathing getting quicker, a funny feeling in their tummy, their face getting hot, or their chest feeling tight.

Talk to them about calming down techniques so they can use them when they notice those same feelings.



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STRATEGIES TO TRY AT HOME:

- Create a safe area at home and guide your child to this area when they need to calm down and de-escalate. Give them their favourite comfort toy or blanket, then allow them time.
- Find and avoid any triggers as far as possible. Find out what distracts or makes your child anxious.
- Set up a routine for your child so they know what to expect. (visual timetable so your child knows what is coming next)
- Give your child a sense of control. Give simple, limited choices. Respect your child's decision.
- Do not take your child's behaviour personally.
- Try to stay calm and find ways to respond to outbursts that do not escalate the situation. Lower your voice.
- Do not get angry. Do not stare or look directly at your child for too long. Some children see this as a threat.
- When your child keeps you at a distance, stay available and responsive.
- Let your child feel that way. Teach your child words to describe their feelings. Show acceptable ways for them to deal with feelings. Then, praise your child for expressing their feelings or calming down.
- Be patient.
- Be consistent, predictable, caring and patient. Teach your child that others can be trusted to stay with them and help them.
- Ask for help when you have concerns, questions, or are struggling. Contact school and speak to our SENCo. You do not have to do this by yourself.