

On the Table for Mental Health



Community Violence and Childhood Trauma

Being exposed to violence and other traumatic experiences can have long-term damaging effects on children. Trauma and toxic stress can derail a child's healthy development, damaging a child's underlying brain architecture and resulting in increased incidence of physical and behavioral health issues ranging from diabetes and heart disease to depression and substance use disorder.ⁱ

Key Facts

- Stress is not necessarily harmful and can actually be beneficial when children experience manageable levels of stress in an environment with supportive and caring adults.ⁱⁱ
- However, stress can have a toxic effect when children experience adversity that is strong, repeated or prolonged, particularly in an environment lacking supportive adult relationships.
- The greater number of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) a person has, the greater likelihood of negative outcomes, including depression, suicide, and other mental health and substance use disorders.
- ACEs can include: emotional, physical or sexual abuse, exposure to community or domestic violence, household mental illness or addiction, parental separation/divorce, incarcerated parent, stress caused by poverty, war/terrorism, or bullying.
- People who have been exposed to 6 or more ACEs have a life expectancy 20 years below people who have been exposed to none (80 years vs. 60 years).ⁱⁱⁱ
- About 20-25% of children in the U.S. will experience childhood trauma at some point.^{iv}
- Untreated childhood trauma can increase the likelihood of children perpetuating violence as they grow up.^v
- The early intervention of caring adults who build supportive, responsive relationships with children can prevent – and even reverse – the damaging effects of trauma and toxic stress.

Possible Questions for Discussion

- How has childhood trauma or community violence impacted your or your family?
- What can we do to identify and help children who have experienced trauma?
- Does community violence and trauma create a cycle that perpetuates more violence?
- What can we do as a community to decrease childhood trauma and interrupt violence?

What You Can Do to Help Prevent and Treat Trauma

Recognize the Symptoms of Childhood Trauma

- Birth to 2: Unusual clinginess, agitation, aggressive behavior, easily startled, tantrums that last more than a few minutes.
- Ages 3-5: Difficulty focusing or learning, acting out, stomach aches / headaches, unusual clinginess, bedwetting, high level of anger or excessive temper.
- Ages 6-12: Sleeplessness / nightmares, irritability, school problems, withdrawal from friends and family, difficulty concentrating, recreating the traumatic event during play, eating problems, confusion.
- Ages 13-18: Self harm, panic attacks, depression, hostility, suicidal thoughts / actions, fighting, aggression, mistrustful, loneliness.

Help Children Recover from Trauma^{vii}

- Make sure that traumatized children feel physically and emotionally safe.
- Provide adult support and engage adults in your family, school, and community for the child to turn to for comfort, attention, and support.
- Help children recognize and describe their feelings and teach them self-soothing techniques such as counting to ten or deep breathing.
- Reinforce and praise children for their strengths and positive behaviors.
- If distress or symptoms continue, consult a mental health professional trained in trauma care.

Responding to Community Violence^{viii}

- Encourage your child to talk and ask questions. Be honest, while helping your child feel safe.
- Correct inaccurate information about what happened using clear, age-appropriate language.
- Limit media exposure about the violence.
- Be a positive role model and let a child know that they are not alone in their feelings. Talk about positive reactions to tragedy such as how people helped each other afterwards.
- Be patient while a child works through their feelings, but turn to a mental health professional if negative behavior changes continue.

About The Kennedy Forum

Just as President Kennedy rallied the nation to dream big and set audacious goals 50 years ago, The Kennedy Forum in Illinois is working toward lasting change in the way mental health and addictions are considered and treated. Our mission is to end stigma against mental health and substance use disorders in both attitudes and practice. We believe that strong, bold leadership, strategic collaboration with partners and concerted action, it is possible to build a future with a health system that fully recognizes that the brain is part of the body and all persons are treated with dignity. Join us at www.thekennedyforumillinois.org

Resources

- Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition, *Look Through Their Eyes*: <http://lookthroughtheireyes.org/> Illinois Children's Mental Health Partnership: <http://icmhp.org/>
- Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child, Toxic Stress: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: <http://www.nctsnet.org/>
- National Child Trauma Stress Initiative: <https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma>

ⁱ Harvard University, Center on the Developing Child, Toxic Stress, <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Center for Disease Control, Adverse Childhood Experiences: Looking at how ACEs affect our lives and

society, https://vetoviolence.cdc.gov/apps/phl/resource_center_infographic.html.

iv Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition, Look Through Their Eyes, <http://lookthroughtheireyes.org/>.

v Arsenault, Samantha, "Childhood Trauma, a Cycle of Violence: Worcester, MA" (2016). International Development, Community and Environment (IDCE). Paper 91, http://commons.clarku.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1012&context=idce_masters_papers.

vi Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition, Look Through Their Eyes: How Can I Identify It? <http://lookthroughtheireyes.org/how-can-i-identify-it/>.

vii Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition, Look Through Their Eyes: Is It Treatable? <http://lookthroughtheireyes.org/is-it-treatable/>.

viii Illinois Childhood Trauma Coalition, Look Through Their Eyes: How Can Parents Help Their Children Deal with Community Violence? <http://lookthroughtheireyes.org/community-violence-can-lead-to-childhood-trauma/how-can-parents-help-their-children-deal-with-community-violence/>.