

Community Comment - Aug. 31st 2015
By Jon Sapper
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) Study

Many of the statements in this Community Comment are not my own. The information I want to share, however, has profound implications for Humboldt County. ACES, the Adverse Childhood Experiences study is one of the largest investigations ever conducted to assess connections between chronic stress caused by early adversity and later-life health. This study looked at multiple categories of childhood physical and emotional abuse and neglect, as well as household dysfunction like domestic violence, parental mental illness and substance abuse.

California's data showed adverse childhood experiences are very common; 67% of the 17,000 individuals surveyed having at least one significant negative childhood experience related to psychological, physical, emotional or sexual abuse and 13% of the population had 4 or more. A close relationship was found between the number of adverse childhood experiences and health problems. The higher the number of these experiences a child has, the higher the risk of developing chronic illnesses such as heart and pulmonary disease, depression and cancer later in life. Twenty years of research confirms that children carry the effects of these childhood experiences into adulthood. The challenges they face and the state of their health are often the symptoms of toxic stress. Toxic stress refers to the long term changes in the brain that develop after extreme and prolonged abuse and neglect. Constant psychological, physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect have a profound effect on children. Adverse childhood experiences such as violence at home or in the community, or having a parent with mental illness or drug use on a daily basis can lead to changes and functions of children's developing brains and bodies. Without support and protection from adults, children who have these experiences are at higher risk for a variety of health and social problems. It's not surprising these children also exhibit significant learning difficulties.

Why is this important? Thirty percent of residents in Humboldt and Mendocino counties, the highest in California, have 4 or more adverse childhood experiences compared to 13% statewide. These individuals are 12 times more likely to attempt suicide, 10 times more likely to use injection drugs, 7 times more likely to

be an alcoholic, 2 times more likely to have serious health issues, 39% more likely to be unemployed and 21% more likely to live in severe poverty.

A caring, supportive and trusted adult in the lives of children who are experiencing these kinds of trauma is certainly needed. We all need to step up and do what we can.

This has been Jon Sapper for Community Comment.