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Knowing about ACEs can help protect children

Sylvia Ulloa New Mexico In Depth

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I took the Adverse Childhood Experiences survey, and my ACE score is 1. That puts me among 61 percent of New Mexico adults.

Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, are things like losing a parent to separation, divorce, death or incarceration. It means, as a child, you might have suffered from physical, emotional or sexual abuse. You might have lived with someone who had substance abuse or mental health issues.

Plenty of people have had hard-knock lives. They survive. They move on, right? Plenty of New Mexico kids have hard-knock childhoods, as well. According to a recent study, New Mexico and Arizona lead the nation with 18 percent of their children experiencing three or more “ACEs.”

But it turns out, kids don’t just move on. It seems obvious in hindsight, but having a tough childhood can affect a person’s health and well-being for the rest of their lives. According to a ground-breaking 1990s CDC-Kaiser ACE Study, people with three or more ACEs have an increased risk for substance abuse; smoking; depression and suicidal thoughts; unintended pregnancies; and health problems like cancer, liver and heart disease. There is also research that indicates chronic stress in childhood can hurt a person’s educational attainment, employment and income potential.

A recent effort spearheaded by City Councilor Kasandra Gandara, a former manager at Children Youth and Families, has gotten underway in Las Cruces that aims to collect data on ACEs in Doña Ana County so that schools, social workers, behavioral health providers, child welfare advocates and others can help prevent child abuse and deaths, and treat children in a way that helps them recover from trauma.

That’s the main focus, and it’s a big one that will take a lot of effort. But the working group’s secondary aim is to bring awareness of ACEs out of the behavioral health and emergency

responder arena, and into public consciousness.

Why does it matter whether regular parents, business people, or your Facebook friend even know about ACEs?

Ask Jolene Martinez. Martinez spent 10 years as a social worker at Child Protective Services and is now clinical director at Families and Youth Inc., a behavioral health agency in Las Cruces. Despite all her experience, she and her husband had no idea how challenging it was going to be to adopt a child who had experienced trauma and spent time in foster care. It put a huge strain on their marriage. She needed the wider community to help.

“My grandma said you used to have to depend on your neighbor for a ride, or a cup of flour, or a piece of meat,” Martinez said. “Now you think about our needs and they’re so much more complex.”

A few other things have changed as well. A couple of generations ago, people thought you shouldn’t pick up and comfort a child every time he or she cried, or you would turn them into a “chillón,” or cry baby. Now we know comforting a child helps them learn that they can count on someone to take care of them. It helps them learn to regulate their emotions and builds resilience to tough times.

People also didn’t talk about things like domestic abuse, or drinking. They kept that sort of thing “in the family.” Others were more likely to turn a blind eye to those problems. Now, the stigma is beginning to lessen. A couple of generations ago, families also lived more closely together, fewer women worked and neighbors might tell you when your child was misbehaving.

These days things have changed. But technology is bridging those gaps.

Martinez marveled at how the founder of the Facebook group Las Cruces Moms was able to mobilize women with that ubiquitous platform. People helped each other with diapers, fundraisers or events. “Just connecting women in a way that was like you would in a small community.”

Being aware of ACEs and their effects could prompt community members to reach out to a neighbor they know is struggling with food, or gas. Preparing a meatloaf. Buying a backpack. Checking whether your kid’s friends at school have a ride, Martinez said.

“I think we all come across ways that we can help,” she said. “It’s just bearing witness to those opportunities. Like OK, I see it, so I’m going to do something about it now, and not think, ‘I

There are other things to know about ACEs. They don't happen just to poor people, or uneducated people. In the original Kaiser study, 75 percent of the participants had at least some college education. They all had health insurance. Another is that being exposed to ACEs doesn't mean you will have a terrible life.

Child Trends, the nonprofit research organization that put out the state-by-state analysis noted that toxic stress "can be substantially buffered by a stable and supportive relationship with a caregiver."

When the community knows about ACEs, people can step forward and be that supportive caregiver or mentor. Big Brothers Big Sisters Mountain Region still has more than 25 kids awaiting a match in Doña Ana County. Or people can chip in to fund the \$1,250 it takes to make a match.

So, I challenge you. Take the survey. What's your ACE score?

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