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Teacher discovers the magnitude of childhood trauma

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Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), such as abuse, neglect, and witnessing parental conflict or substance abuse, have been found to have devastating effects on the future health of children.

The Kaiser Permanente study that first brought the problem of ACEs to light shows a definite dose effect: the more ACEs in a child's life, the more devastating the cumulative effects. Children with three or more ACEs have twice the probability of cardiovascular problems and diabetes. Children with four or more ACEs are more likely to become alcoholic. Nationally, about a third of children have more than three ACEs. Some have called it the greatest public health concern we currently face.

I had been introduced to the ACEs study at a national legislator conference and through the book "Anna, Age Eight" written by a friend and child advocate. It seemed an appropriate topic for the advanced placement (AP) psychology class I teach. It is a difficult curriculum that deals with many aspects of how we think, behave, learn, survive and thrive. My classes consists of successful, high-achieving students.

Prior to administering the ACEs survey, I alerted our school guidance counselors. The survey and ensuing discussion could bring up difficult memories and issues for students. I had them complete the survey anonymously and record their ACE numbers. I then tallied the results while the class watched a short video on ACEs and the adverse effects of a high score. I recall a gasp from students when the video reported a 20-year reduction in life expectancy with six or more ACEs.

The results astounded me. Of the 34 students, 22 had three or more ACEs and an astonishing 12 had six or more. Way higher than what I expected or what the national averages indicate. I was struck that 12 of my students just heard that their life expectancy was 20 years less. What do I tell them? No wonder I'd heard that gasp. This was their life they were learning about.

The rest of the class was spent talking about the results and what it means. “ACEs are not destiny,” I tried to comfort them. “Knowing your ACE score helps you to manage a different trajectory for your future. Most of you will be parents. How will knowledge of your ACEs score help you to parent in a positive way?”

I tried to listen and let them talk while I was on the edge of tears as they told their stories. I couldn't help thinking, and these are the AP students who are doing well. How many other students are there who are not feeling any success? Maybe the results from the first class were an aberration.

Results from the second class were equally disturbing. One girl shared that everyone sees her as this great student who has everything and is doing well in school. “I feel I'm pretending. They have no idea what my life is really like.” Another student commented, “While my ACE score is 0, I have a completely different view knowing that the other students in this class don't have the same life and opportunities I have.”

It's human nature to see the world from an egocentric view. We think other people think and live lives similar to us. Giving the ACEs survey to my AP students was a shock. The trauma my students are experiencing was worse than I imagined. It has changed how I think about and treat them.

By far the most common question from the students after this exercise was, “Why haven't we done anything about this?” They are right. We need to do something about the trauma our children are experiencing. We can prevent it. And the time is now. It is an economic issue. It is a public health issue. It is a moral issue. We need to pull back the curtain and deal with this crisis in an open way. My students are demanding it!

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