

# PREVENTING ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

## HOME VISITING

## COMPANION

## GUIDE



2025

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# PACE Home Visiting Companion Guidance

## Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Home Visiting

Research has demonstrated that ACEs are both widespread and impact long term physical and mental health, parenting, and stress response.<sup>1</sup> Many families in home visiting are unaware that the challenges they face in their life today are related to trauma experienced when they were a child, or that their own childhood experiences can continue to impact how they parent their own child(ren). Challenges that you see in supporting families every day: substance use, mental health, challenges with breastfeeding, challenges with follow through and poor decision making, etc., can be linked to the impacts of ACEs.

ACES can be intergenerational (things that also happened to the child's parents/grandparents/caregivers). Home visiting provides supports and connections to services that are protective factors in reducing the experience of ACEs for children and breaking those cycles.<sup>2</sup> Home visiting provides this intervention on two levels: with the caregiver to reduce the continued impacts of ACE history, and with the child(ren) in the home in fostering protective factors and positive childhood experiences (PCEs) that can reduce the impact of already experienced ACEs and prevent future ACEs through building a strong foundation with their family and community.

## Protective Factors and Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs)

Having experienced ACEs is not entirely predictive of poor outcomes. Some individuals are able to build resilience through adversities and more recent studies have shown that interventions and supports that foster protective factors and PCEs are key to building resilience and reducing the negative impacts of past, current, and potential future ACEs. These elements build resilience in individuals and families as they move through life.

### Protective Factors<sup>3</sup>

- Nurturing and attachment
- Knowledge of parenting for child and youth development
- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Concrete supports for parents
- Social and emotional competence of children

### Positive Childhood Experiences<sup>4</sup>

- The ability to talk with family about feelings
- The sense that family is supportive during difficult times
- The enjoyment of participation in community traditions
- Feeling a sense of belonging in high school
- Feeling supported by friends
- Having at least two non-parent adults who genuinely cared
- Feeling safe and protected by an adult in the home

## When to Use with Families

Home visitors are positioned to be a powerful support for families with current or historical ACEs through their role and relationship with families during pregnancy and infancy. The knowledge that adverse experiences of the past are on balance with positive experiences and protective factors underscores the need to discuss ACEs, PCEs, and protective factors with families, especially those in which there is an existing history of multiple ACEs. Possible questions and prompts are included in the following pages and referenced tools are available on the Center for Quality Family Support website. Questions and prompts in the PACE companion guide were adapted from many sources, including the NEAR@Home<sup>5</sup> and more recent work on positive childhood experiences and protective factors.

Home visitors are encouraged to use several sources of information when deciding whether a family would benefit from a conversation about PACEs. These may include information from referrals, intake/enrollment procedures, and information gathered throughout the course of services. Home visitors can always use their professional observation and judgment to indicate a benefit to having a conversation about PACEs.

## Starting the Conversation with Families

It may feel difficult to start the conversation about PACEs with families. The Childhood Experiences Worksheet includes both positive support factors and ACE history the caregiver(s) have experienced. Additional prompts to introduce intervention topics are included throughout this Companion Guide. Home visitors can use the suggested prompts as written or adapt them to better fit their own voice and community.

## Leaving Families Whole

There may be times when conversations get uncomfortable, caregivers have feelings of guilt or surprise, or the time for the visit is not enough. In those times it is helpful to provide reassurances to families such as:

### Discomfort

“

**These are hard things to talk about.** We do not have to talk a lot about the past if you do not want to. What really matters is building on the strengths I see in you, and how I can support you in being the parent you want to be for your child.

### Time

“

**You have shared a lot today, and I thank you for being so open in this conversation, I wish we had more time together today.** Can we continue to talk at our next visit? Please reach out if questions come up before then.

## Guilt

“

**You had no control over what happened during your childhood and are not responsible for what happened when you were little.** You have built a lot of strength and resilience which I see in your relationship with your child; it is never too late to build new experiences with them no matter their age. Can we continue to talk at our next visit?

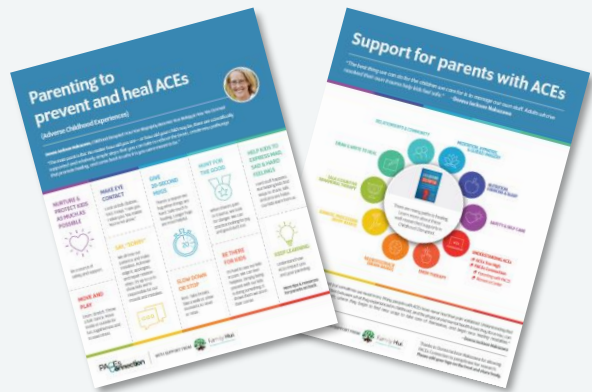
## Resource

### Parenting to Prevent and Heal ACEs

Available in English



Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.



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# Childhood Experiences Worksheet

## ABOUT THE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES WORKSHEET

The Childhood Experiences Worksheet (ChEW) grew out of a pilot study with the Maternal Infant Health Program (MIHP). It is important and informative for both families and home visitors to understand caregivers' own childhood experiences. Since these questions can be very sensitive, it is best to discuss at a time when families and home visitors have developed a stronger relationship. It is important to note that the ChEW is designed to support conversation around childhood experiences and is not a screening tool. Use your professional judgment, expertise in serving families, and relationship with each family to guide how and when you use the ChEW.

### Starting the Conversation

“

**Our experiences in childhood help shape the adults we become.** Many of us have a mix of positive and negative experiences from growing up. I have a worksheet that explores some of those experiences. Are you interested in looking at it together?

“

**Sometimes remembering our own childhood experiences helps us understand why we parent the way we do.**

“

**You and your partner may have different childhood experiences that make you parent differently.** Understanding these can help you work together to decide what types of parents you want to be for your child.

### Key Points

**1** Most people have a mix of positive and adverse experiences from childhood.

**2** Caregivers' own childhood experiences can impact how they parent.

**3** Caregivers can work towards building positive experiences for their children.

## Resources for Families

### Childhood Experiences Worksheet (ChEW)

Available in English



Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.



# Talking About ACEs with Caregivers

## WHAT ARE ACEs?

ACEs means adverse childhood experiences. They are very common and over 60% of US adults have experienced one or more ACEs.<sup>6</sup> They can impact our health long term and how we parent; however, there are things we can do to lessen that impact.

### Starting the Conversation

“**All parents want the best for their child.** Even when we are/were loved and appreciated by our own parents, there are still some things we want to do differently when we have our own children. I have information that helps us understand why changes are challenging at times and how to help us make the changes we want most for our children. Would you like to hear more about this?”

“**Scientists have proven that the things that happen to you when you are young – positive and negative– can affect your health for your whole lifetime.** The good news is we also know some things you can do to buffer some of those experiences, so you can be the kind of parent you really want to be, be healthier, and do the things in life you hope to do.

“**We know strong relationships are very important for raising healthy children** and we now know that some things can get in the way of strong relationships.

“**I just went to a training** and learned about ways that our childhood experiences can impact health later in life, and things we can do now to help children become healthier as adults. I found the information really interesting. Would you like me to share it with you?”

“**From what you have shared before,** I see that there are some tough things that have happened in the past to you. How have these experiences affected you? What would you like to see be different for your child?”



## Key Points

- 1** ACEs are common and impact how we live and make decisions.
- 2** There are also positive childhood experiences that support health.
- 3** All caregivers want what is best for their child(ren).

## Resources for Families

### Understanding ACEs Handout

Available in English, Spanish, Arabic, Dari, Farsi

Source: PACEs Connection



Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.



# ACEs and Parenting

Parenting with a history of ACEs can be challenging at times. ACEs can impact how we parent and how we handle the stresses of parenting.

## Starting the Conversation

- “ **We know strong relationships are very important for raising healthy children** and we now know that some things can get in the way of strong relationships.
- “ **From what you have shared before**, I see that there are some tough things that have happened in the past to you. What would you like to see be different for your child?
- “ **I appreciate how hard it is to think about these difficult experiences**. How do you think these experiences affect your parenting now?
- “ **How do you want it to be different for your child?**
- “ **I’m so impressed with your strong determination to be a great parent/grandparent/foster parent/caregiver!** With all the things that happened in your childhood, you have found a way forward!

## Key Points

- 1** ACEs can impact our parenting without us knowing.
- 2** Caregivers want better things for their own children.
- 3** ACEs history can build resilience in caregivers.

## Resources for Families

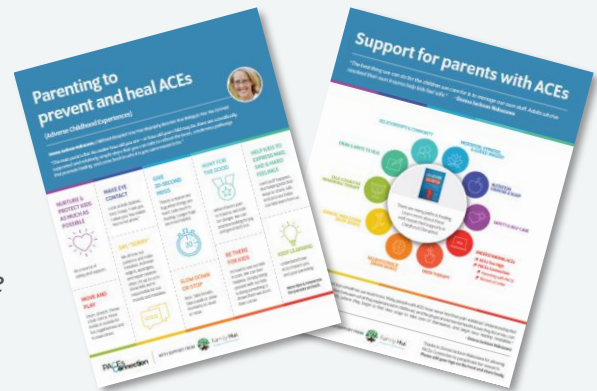
### Parenting to Prevent and Heal ACEs

Available in English, Spanish, Dari

Source: PACEs Connection



*Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.*



# Positive Childhood Experiences

## WHAT ARE PCES?

PCEs are positive childhood experiences that can reduce the impact of ACEs like a balancing scale. The more positive experiences you have, the more likely you are to be able to handle adverse experiences.

### Starting the Conversation

“**Scientists have proven that the things that happen to you when you are young – positive and negative – can affect your health for your whole lifetime.** The good news is we also know some things you can do to buffer some of those experiences, so you can be the kind of parent you really want to be, be healthier, and do the things in life you hope to do.

“**Maybe you have also had some helpers who helped you through hard times?**

“**How would you like your child’s life to be different than yours?**

“**As your child grows, we will keep talking about how brains work and how to manage stress.** We will talk about things you can do to make sure your child has more positive than difficult experiences.

### Key Points

**1** No matter ACE history, there are likely also positive experiences.

**2** Consciously building more positive experiences for our child(ren) will help them be able to handle future challenges.

# Resources for Families

## The Four Building Blocks of HOPE

Available in English, Spanish

Source: Tufts Children’s Hospital Healthy  
Outcomes from Positive Experiences  
HOPE



*Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.*



# Protective Factors

## WHAT ARE PROTECTIVE FACTORS?

Protective Factors are strengths we build into our families to make it easier to handle adversity and parenting challenges ahead.

### Starting the Conversation

“

**As your child grows, we will keep talking about how brains work and how to manage stress.**

We will talk about things you can do to make sure your child has more positive than difficult experiences.

“

**I appreciate how hard it is to think about these difficult experiences.** How do you think these experiences affect your parenting now?

### Key Points

**1** Protective factors are the building blocks for healthy resilience.

**2** Providing supports to families that nurture the development of protective factors will lessen ACEs for the child(ren) in the home.



*Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.*

# Stress Reduction and Self-Care

Reducing stress and integrating self-care is important as ACEs history correlates with lessened ability to handle stress.

## Starting the Conversation

- “ **When we have adversity in our past it is sometimes hard to handle stressful situations.** How have you handled stressful events in the past? How might you want to change that?
- “ **When something comes up that gives you strong feelings, what do you do to feel better?**
- “ **What have you tried** in the past that has helped you feel better, even just a little bit?
- “ **What has worked for you** in the past to get through difficult times?
- “ **What do you do** to take care of yourself?

## Key Points

- 1** ACEs history can impact how we handle stress.
- 2** Finding ways to reduce stress and create space for self-care is important in reducing ACEs in the home.



Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.

# Additional ACE Factors

## SUBSTANCE USE & MENTAL HEALTH

ACEs have the potential to increase mental health and/or substance use in adulthood. Parenting when any adult in the household is experiencing untreated mental health challenges or substance use can increase the likelihood of ACEs for children currently in the home. Talking about intergenerational ACE impact on long term health outcomes for them and their child can reduce feelings of shame or guilt and help the family to engage with treatment and support services.

### Starting the Conversation: Substance Use

“

**You are trying so hard to quit [SUBSTANCE].** Those of us who have many difficult childhood experiences might have to try many, many times but can succeed.

“

**You have mentioned how your partner continues to use.** This is a very difficult spot to be in as a partner and as a parent. What strategies can we think of together to help you and your child access support?

### Starting the Conversation: Mental Health

“

**Depression has many causes** but ACEs might increase the risk that a person will struggle with depression.

“

**You have mentioned how your partner struggles with their mental health.** This is a very difficult spot to be in as a partner and as a parent. What strategies can we think of together to help you and your child access support?



# INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE/EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Being exposed to or directly experiencing violence and/or emotional abuse during childhood is an ACE with potential lifelong impacts. Discussing long term health impacts of exposure to violence and/or emotional abuse for both caregiver and their child(ren) can reduce feelings of helplessness, shame or guilt and increase referral acceptance. The support of a home visitor can provide connections to and help families navigate services for healthier outcomes.

## Starting the Conversation: Interpersonal Violence/Emotional Abuse

*(The prompts below are from Head Start<sup>7</sup>)*

“

**It is clear how much you care about your child and how your child feels about you.** Do you sometimes think about how you would like your child to remember you when he or she is grown up? What do you want them to learn about what it means to be a member of your family?

“

**We can help you get connected to services that will help you and your family.** Are you interested in finding out about those services? It could be a very positive step for you and your child's future.

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## Key Points

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**1** Childhood exposure to in-home violence and/or emotional abuse can lead to intergenerational cycles of violence and abuse.

**2** Talking about how experiences of violence and/or emotional abuse impacts parenting, lifelong health, and relationship choices can lessen feelings of helplessness, shame, and guilt.

**3** Connecting or offering families support and resources that nurture development of healthy interpersonal relationships can reduce childhood ACE exposure.



*Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.*

# IMPACT OF DISCRIMINATION ON FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

Discrimination is defined as the act, practice, or an instance of discriminating categorically rather than individually.<sup>8</sup> If children experience discrimination because of their membership in a group (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, etc.), and not because of their own behavior, merit, or value as an individual, the experience can cause stress that may have long-term impacts on their health and wellbeing. Stress from perceived discrimination and other societal stressors outside the household has been shown to be as harmful as the originally identified household and family level ACEs.<sup>9</sup>

The effects of interpersonal and long-standing discrimination can impact multiple generations in a household and be an additional stressor for caregivers and children. Practicing good self-care, developing positive identities and cultural traditions, and connecting with community for support can help to mitigate the impact of these stressors.

## Starting the Conversation

“**The stress from experiencing discrimination has many different effects on families.** Parents may often worry about the wellbeing of their children, and they may feel fatigued or burned out as they navigate the experience. Do you relate to these experiences?”

“**You are not alone in these struggles.** Feeling connected to others can be an important source of support. What ways do you connect with your trusted friends, family, or community?”

“**What things in your culture or community** can you draw on to give you strength, healing, or hope?”

“**What things do you do** to build a sense of a strong positive identity for yourself and your child?”

## Key Points

**1** Stress from experiencing discrimination is common and can be intergenerational.

**2** Stress from experiencing discrimination can impact your health and wellbeing.

**3** Finding ways to support your emotional, psychological, and physical health is important.

**4** Connecting to your community and to your culture can be a way to find support, share experiences, and heal.



*Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.*

# FOSTER/KINSHIP CARE

Research has shown that infants can be impacted by previous generations' trauma through epigenetic (genes switched on or off from previous generations' experiences) changes as well as by ACEs experienced by their mother during pregnancy.<sup>10</sup> These intergenerational impacts can present in different ways that include inability to soothe, difficulty with eating, and developmental differences. Additionally, our own ACEs can impact how we as caregivers handle the stress of parenting no matter our relationship to the infant. Research also shows that children are resilient and having nurturing relationships with caregivers can help mitigate the effects of ACEs. It is important for caregivers, including foster and kinship caregivers, to promote positive experiences for children in their care.

## Starting the Conversation: Kinship

“ **From what you have shared**, I see there are some tough things that have happened in the past for your family. What would you like to see be different for (child's name)?

“ **I am impressed with your determination** to be a great caregiver for (child's name)! With all the things that happened in your family, you have found a way forward to be a strong support for (child's name)!

## Starting the Conversation: Foster Non-Related

“ **ACEs are very common** and can impact how we approach and handle parenting and caregiving for any child.

“ **From what you have shared**, (child's name) has already experienced some big stressors before and after they were born. These types of ACEs can impact them even if they can't remember. Are there behaviors you're seeing that might be related to this? (Examples: poor eating, poor sleep, inability to be consoled, lack of emotion, etc.).

## Key Points

**1** ACEs can be intergenerational, and trauma experienced in utero can have effects on infants.

**2** ACEs are common and can impact the way that we provide caregiving to any child.

**3** Kinship caregivers may have similar ACEs history to biological parent.

**4** ACEs can present differently in infants and toddlers.

# PARENTING WHILE RESETTLING: REFUGEE FAMILIES

Parenting while resettling brings some unique challenges to families and the home visitors who serve them. Here are some considerations when working with refugee families and how they may be impacted by ACEs. These were developed by experts who work with refugee families in Michigan.<sup>11</sup>

- **Refugees and immigrants often have very stressful experiences from exposure to war to stresses of immigrating to a new country.** Refugees' stress and traumatic war experiences might cause anxiety, sadness, depression, hesitance to go to school or work, nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive war related memories, low energy and motivation, and difficulties controlling anger.
- **There are many ways to reduce symptoms of stress:** by talking to a counselor or doctor, attending groups focused on helping refugees, talking to one's confidants and peers, and receiving mental health care.
- **Parents can act as a buffer, so their children don't experience high levels of stress.** Even when parents are trying their best, children may sense the danger or stress in their environment based on their parents' behavior. Positive parent-child relationships can reduce behavior problems and stress in children.
- **Some parents who come as refugees had little formal education, strong cultural beliefs, and limited social support.**

## HOME VISITORS CAN...

- **Understand the transition process** of a refugee parent, determine their needs (e.g., physical or mental healthcare, self care, etc.), and plan effective interventions to promote well-being.
- **Provide appropriate referrals** to support refugee parents during the postpartum period including baby care items, child development, and self-care.
- **Provide specific education** for refugee and immigrant parents that is directed to address their needs, culture, and literacy level.

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## Starting the Conversation

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“

**You have done a lot for your children’s safety and their future.** Being a refugee parent can be sometimes difficult with all the changes of raising a child in a new country. We have some information about dealing with the challenges of being an immigrant parent.

“

**Parenting might be stressful after you fled your country.** We know that parent-child relationships are very important for raising healthy children and we know that some of your prior experiences, such as fleeing your country and living in camps, can get in the way of strong relationships. Can you tell me more about these stressful events and how they impact your relationship with your child?

“

**As a parent in a foreign country, what are your strengths in raising your children?** What are some good resources that have helped you strengthen your parenting skills?

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## Key Points

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**1** Previous experiences as a refugee can impact our parenting and relationship with our children without us knowing.

**2** Parents always want to give their children a better life.

**3** Experiences before, during, and after migration may also build resilience among refugee parents and children.



*Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.*

# PARENTING DURING AND AFTER AN EMERGENCY

Many families experience emergencies. These can include natural disasters (like floods or tornadoes), human-caused disasters (like gun violence), or other incidents of mass trauma (like community unrest or infectious disease outbreaks).<sup>12</sup> These incidents can cause stress in both parents and children. There are things parents can do to find help and support to buffer their children from the stress of an emergency.<sup>13</sup>

## Starting the Conversation

“

**Following the chaos of an emergency**, it is important to keep routines and structure (bedtimes, eating habits, play time, etc.). How have you helped your child feel secure?

“

**Children respond to overwhelming events in reaction to how you respond.** What do you need to get enough rest, maintain healthy eating habits, and stay connected with friends and family?

“

**Going through an emergency can make us feel like we don't have control over our lives.**

Creating a disaster plan and supplies kit can help your family feel more prepared for anything that might happen in the future. Even if they are never used, it can help you feel less fear and increase a sense of control. Are there other things you can do to help you feel you are prepared for an emergency?

## Key Points

**1** Emergencies are often unexpected and can contribute to feeling out of control.

**2** With support, families can successfully recover from emergencies and buffer their children from stress.

**3** Families can take action to be prepared for emergencies and to help keep healthy routines during an emergency.



Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.



# IMPACT OF INCARCERATION ON FAMILY

Over half of those incarcerated are parents of children under 18.<sup>14</sup> Incarceration of someone close to you, like a family member, can have lasting impacts on both caregivers and children. The effects of incarceration on families can be intergenerational and have long term impacts for children during their lifetime and also presents stresses and trauma for other caregivers.<sup>15</sup> There are things that families can do to support infants and young children who have experienced incarceration of someone close to them.<sup>16</sup>

## Starting the Conversation

“**When someone close to you, like a partner or other family member, is incarcerated** many parents can feel stressed and your children may show this stress in different ways as well. How are you coping as a family?

“**It can be challenging for [child’s name] to not have [incarcerated family member] around.** You are doing a good job of keeping things here at home stable. Can you tell me a little about the things you are doing or how you are feeling without [incarcerated family member]?

“**Having someone close to you who is incarcerated, like a family member, is not uncommon** and the impact can be felt both by you as a parent but also by [Infant/child]. There are things that we can do to support ourselves and our children. Do you want to talk a little about them?

“**Having someone close to you like a partner who is incarcerated can upend your day-to-day routines and be very stressful for you.** Do you feel you have the support you need? What are some things we can do?

## Key Points

**1** Incarceration is common: by the age of 18, one in 14 US children has had a parent incarcerated.<sup>17</sup>

**2** Supportive caregivers are a protective factor.

**3** With support, children can build resiliency and family bonds.



Please see the PACE resources section on the Center for Quality Family Support Website.

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