

ACEs in Alaska
(ACE- Adverse Childhood Experience)
By Jan Adasiak
Part 1: ACEs Explains a Great Deal of Our Poor Emotional Health

May 15, 2017

“ACE” stands for an Adverse Childhood Experience and a larger percentage of Alaskans suffer from them than do those in the “lower 48”. This is the first in a series of six articles in which I will explain what ACEs are, what serious long-term harm they can do, how to recover from their effects, and what we as Christians may be able to help those who are hurting in our communities. The term ACE came out of a large public health study which I will describe below.

Part of our Christian vocation must be to care about others and to do what we can for them. And we must care for ourselves, too. Due to a revolution in public health knowledge regarding the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), we can learn how to prevent physical and mental illness in our families and communities, and experience more serenity and joy in our own lives.

In my career as a psychiatric nurse practitioner at Anchorage Community Mental Health Services I was fortunate to be present at the birth of a new idea in this country about the causes of some types of mental illness. This new explanation involved Adverse Childhood Experiences and their effect on people over their lifespan. It has provided new answers to the question of what causes both physical and mental health problems, and has changed my ideas about how I see the world and the people in it. I want the ACEs ideas discussed here to inform your knowledge about yourself and others. This way, you can be part of the change that needs to happen everywhere to heal our childhood wounds so we and our children can lead physically and emotionally healthier lives.

The ACE study was done jointly by Dr. Vince Felitti of Kaiser Permanente Health Plan in San Diego, CA, and the Dr. Robert Anda of the Centers for Disease Control in Washington D.C. in the late 1990’s. It looked at ten common types of adversities that children may experience, and correlated those with information from the health plan members’ records. Over 14,000 adults took part in the original study.

Here are the ten kinds of adverse experiences we are talking about, the kinds of toxic stress that can affect children so strongly.

Five are personal:

1. physical abuse
2. verbal abuse
3. sexual abuse
4. physical neglect
5. emotional neglect

Five are related to other family members:

6. a parent who is an alcoholic
7. a mother who is a victim of domestic violence
8. a family member in jail
9. a family member diagnosed with a mental illness
10. the disappearance of a parent through divorce, death or abandonment

Such experiences can be so intense and/or long-lasting that they become a toxic stress or trauma that marks a child and shapes their future – negatively. A child affected by these experiences may develop a bad temper, be disobedient, be angry and destructive, be unable or unwilling to pay attention or follow instructions. The adult they become may be an alcoholic, unable to hold a job, and may carry his/her

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own abuse into marriage and perpetuate the cycle. Beyond that, if a person has an ACEs score of six or more their predicted life expectancy is about 20 years shorter than average.

Adding up the kinds of childhood abuse a person has suffered will produce his or her ACEs score. Considering Alaska's high ACEs scores, we must direct our efforts to understand the situation in each of our communities and work towards solutions that will improve the future of our state and its people. These six lessons will give you information you need to get started.

Interesting homework:

--For a video introduction, go to the bigthink.com website (web address below) to hear a seven-minute talk by Dr. Vincent Felitti in which he explains how the ACE study got started and what he and Dr. Robert Anda discovered. <http://bigthink.com/videos/vincent-felitti-on-childhood-trauma>

---For a more complete (and fascinating) piece of journalism about Drs Felitti and Anda and the beginnings of the ACE Study, click on the following:
<https://acestoohigh.com/2012/10/03-the-adverse-childhood-experiences-study-the-largest-most-important>

--See and hear pediatrician Dr. Nadine Burke Harris whose clinic is in South San Francisco's poorest district. Her TED Talk address: www.tedmed.com/talks/show?id=293066

<https://acestoohigh.com/aces101/>

<https://acestoohigh.com/got-your-ace-score/>

There is also a "calculate your resilience" scoresheet.

acestoohigh.com is the nationwide web site for matters dealing with ACEs, and, as you will see if you explore it a little, there is a lot of information. But don't worry. I will be presenting what you need to know as pastors and lay people who want to get started helping each other and their communities in order to make Alaska a better place.

For specific information about ACEs in Alaska, enter: "acestoohigh.com" in your search browser. When the home page opens, scroll down until you come to the "CATEGORIES" heading in the column on the right and click on "Alaska." It is interesting to see what other States are doing, also.

Next time, in Part 2 of ACES in Alaska we will learn about how our brains are affected by ACEs.

Questions? Whenever you have questions, please e-mail me, Jan Adasiak, at adasiakjan@gmail.com and I will answer them as best I can.

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