

# Impact of Early Experiences on Children's Brain Development and Well-being

Early Years Nigeria Initiative

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## Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

ACEs are negative or stressful events that children under the age of 18 experience that could have long lasting negative effects on their physical health and well-being (Felitti et al., 1998).

### Types of ACEs

- Physical abuse
- Emotional or verbal abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Physical or emotional neglect
- Domestic violence
- Substance abuse in the home
- Divorce or separation of parents
- A person with mental illness in the home
- Other negative experiences like death of a loved one, unsafe neighborhoods, or bullying

As the number of ACEs a child experiences increases, their risk for poor developmental outcomes also increases.

### Impact of ACEs on Development

ACEs affects the brain, the body and behavior.

- **Brain:** ACEs alter the structure of the brain and can hinder the development of neural connections, affecting cognitive abilities and emotional regulation. ACEs affect how well the brain learns and remembers things, making it harder to focus on or remember information.
- **Body:** Research shows a link between ACEs and increased risk of chronic physical health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer in adulthood.
- **Social and Emotional Behavior:** Children exposed to ACEs struggle to form healthy relationships, exhibit behavioral problems like aggression or withdrawal, and have difficulty managing emotions due to impaired social-emotional development.
- **Mental Health:** Children with ACEs are at a higher risk of developing mental health problems like anxiety, depression, PTSD, and substance abuse issues later in life.

## ACEs in Jos Metropolis



The typical child in Jos experiences 5.45 ACEs in their childhood from 0 to 18 years.



Eight (8) out of ten (10) children in Jos experience more than 1 ACE.

## Frequency of ACEs in Jos Metropolis

Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)	Percentage of Children Experiencing this ACE
Emotional/psychological abuse	74%
Death of a loved one	53%
Neglect	51%
Family financial issues	49%
Child labor	43%
Family conflict	43%
Domestic violence in the home	33%
Physical abuse	31%
Substance use in the home	25%
Raised by a single parent	23%
Mental illness in the home	17%
Criminality in the home	15%
Sexual abuse	13%

# Resilience

Resilience is the ability of a child to properly adapt to adversity and overcome challenges or hardships by displaying positive outcomes

- Resilient children learn to deal with problems in healthy ways instead of getting defensive, aggressive, depressed, or frustrated.
- Children who are resilient have better physical and mental health, happier relationships, and are more successful in school.
- Resilience is built over time and it can be learned by learning skills that foster resilience.
- Whether or not a child develops resilience depends on their personal resources and the resources made available to them in their homes and the community.

## Protective Childhood Experiences (PACEs)

PACEs are positive experiences that can increase resilience and protect children against risk for mental and physical illness.

According to Hays-Grudo et al. (2020), the top 10 PACEs are:

- Unconditional love by parent or guardian
- Spending time with a best friend
- Volunteering or helping others
- Being active in a social or religious group
- Having a mentor outside of the family
- Living in a clean, safe home with enough food
- Having opportunities to learn
- Having a hobby
- Being physically active or playing sports
- Having routines and fair rules at home

**In Jos Metropolis, our research found the two most important PACEs are:**

- Parent/guardian encouraging the child and giving them a sense of worth with words or actions
- Knowing of and admiring a role model who overcame challenges to succeed

## Role of the School in Building Resilience

- Specifically teach children skills to help them develop resilience, including problem solving skills, emotional and behaviour regulation, healthy coping strategies, a positive self-image, and perseverance, hope, and joy.
- Promote strong relationships in the school, including teacher-pupil relationships, pupil-pupil relationships, and school-home relationships.
- Encourage and support teachers and staff to be positive role models.
- Provide fair rules and limitations to promote children's safety and behavioural regulation.
- Avoid harsh punishment. Instead, use corrective discipline to address misbehaviours by clearly stating the misbehaviour, explaining how the misbehaviour negatively impacts others, giving the child a chance to apologize or fix their mistake, and giving a reasonable consequence.
- Strive to continually improve the quality of education at your school through professional development for staff. Continually improve the school environment to promote children's cognitive skills, socio-emotional skills, student safety and sense of belonging.
- Educate staff and parents about ACEs and PACEs, and what they can do to promote resilience.

# Policy Recommendations

- Policies that promote healthy families and safe communities can prevent ACEs from occurring, leading to healthier future generations.
- Children's resilience can be developed through policies that:
  - Promote quality early childhood education programmes and curriculum to improve children's opportunities to learn.
  - Provide a variety of positive extracurricular activities in schools, religious groups, and communities to give children opportunities to develop positive skills, form strong relationships, and contribute to their own personal well-being and the well-being of others.
  - Promote good parenting through teaching parenting skills, helping parents meet their child's needs, and providing support to parents to develop their own emotional skills and coping skills.
  - Design a culturally relevant and age appropriate character development curriculum for schools that builds young children's character and impacts resilience such as Tarbiyya for pupils and Kauna for teachers.



Tarbiyya is a character education curriculum for young children that helps them develop personal resources that improves resilience.



Kauna is a professional development programme that helps educators improve the teacher-pupil relationship, thereby promoting children's resilience.



## Conclusions

ACEs are common in Jos and Northern Nigeria. The detrimental impact of a child's exposure to ACEs can be combated by promoting resilience. Children are more likely to develop resilience when the impact of PACES outweigh the impact of ACEs. This means that children with a history of significant adversity require more positive experiences to tip the scale and become resilient.



Parents, Teachers, School Leaders, and Policy Makers all have a role to play in promoting children's health and well-being.



08184405179



EarlyYearsNigeria@gmail.com



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