



INA FASSBENDER/AFP via Getty Images

BACK TO SCHOOL: SEL AND THE HEALING POWER OF PLAY

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"We have the capacity for neuroplasticity throughout our lives, and our **environments** shape the way that our brains respond to our experiences.

Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships. are healing for kids, and for all of us."

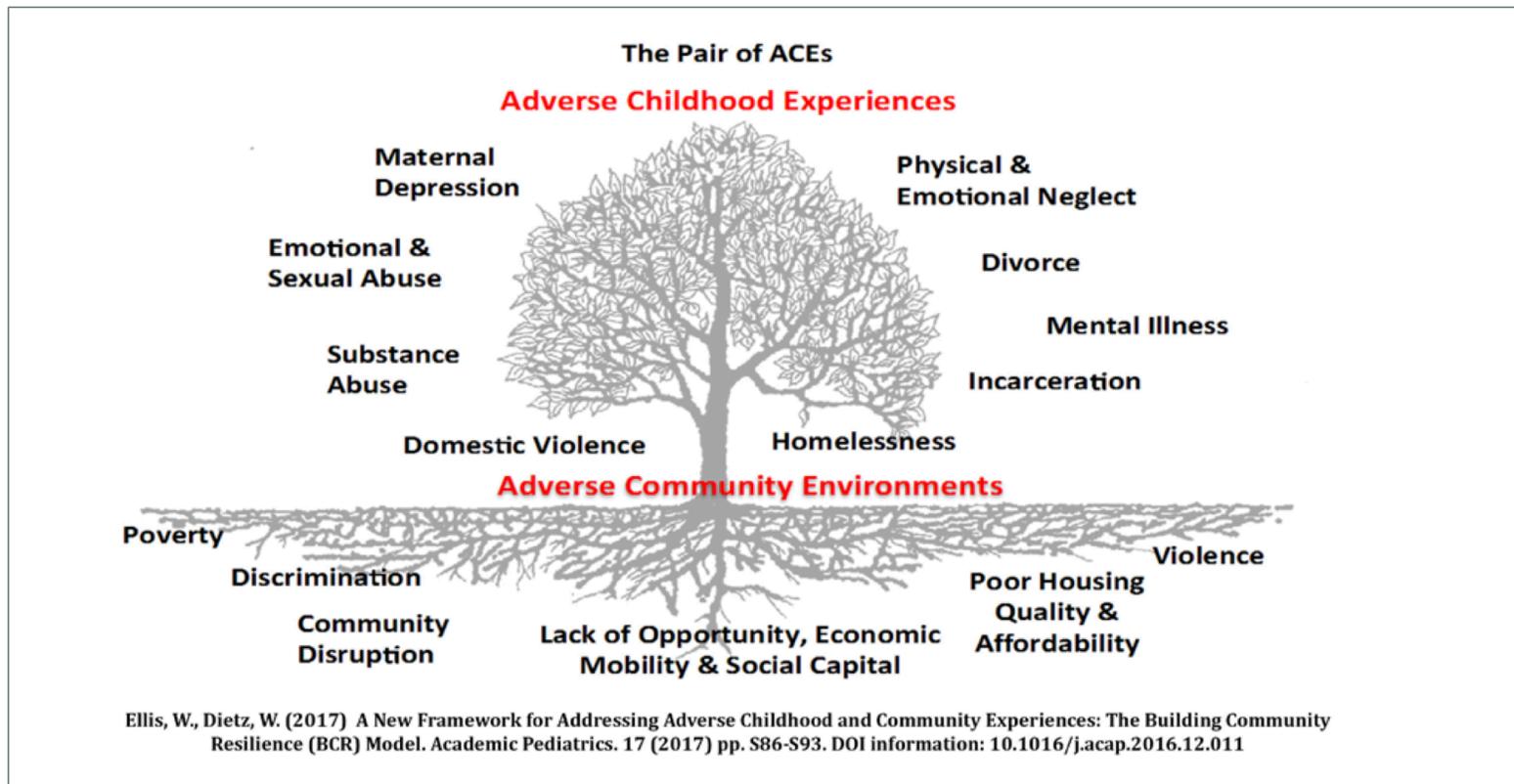
Nadine Burke Harris, M.D.



COVID-19 IS THE FIRST COLLECTIVE TRAUMA EVENT IN DECADES

- According to psychologist David Trickey (UK Trauma Council), trauma results when an event changes “the way you see yourself, the way you see the world, and the way you see other people.”
- In its breadth, depth, and length Covid-19 is unprecedented
- Children and adults have been exposed to different types and amounts of trauma
- *What are the long-term consequences? We do not know.*

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD AND COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES (ACES)?

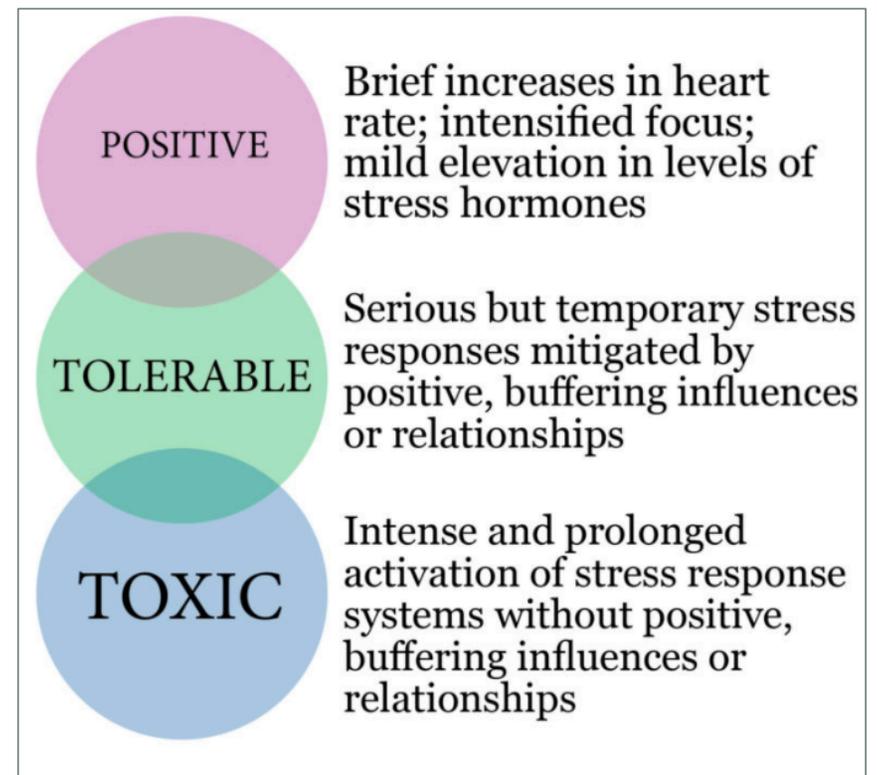


SOME ACES RESULTING FROM COVID-19

- Health – exposure to illness, hospitalization, and even loss of life
- Social – isolation from support systems, family stressors and safety, limited opportunities for healthy social-emotional development
- Emotional – undetected abuse and neglect, isolation, mental health
- Economic – unemployment or underemployment, food insecurity, housing insecurity, unemployment
- Family relationships – increased relationship dysfunction, more work/family responsibilities with less support
- **Differential impacts for children in low-income, Black, Latinx, immigrant families, and those marginalized in other ways**

HOW STRESS AFFECTS THE BODY

- Stress changes the brain chemistry and anatomy, and can have long-term consequences for academic and social-emotional learning
- With strong, prolonged or frequent levels of stress (toxic stress), the hormone cortisol is released into the blood at higher levels
- Children/youth can have more anxiety, impaired memory, problems with mood control
- **Importance of positive buffering influences and relationships**



HOW MIGHT CHILDREN REACT WHEN THEY ARE IN SCHOOL?

- Happy or excited
- Withdrawn or sad
- Afraid or anxious
- Aggressive or impulsive
- Confused or forgetful
- Any other emotion or behavior!
- Changing emotions and behaviors



EFFECTS OF ACES ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH

PROBLEMS MEASURED	OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH HAVING MORE ACES
School-related behavioral outcomes	Chronic absenteeism, decreased school engagement, attention problems
Learning outcomes	Below average literacy skills, grade retention, special education, having an IEP
Social-emotional outcomes	Problems with attention, self-regulation, impulsivity, aggression, overall SE development delay

Adverse experiences in infancy and toddlerhood: Relations to adaptive behavior and academic status in middle childhood

Lorraine M. McKelvey ^{a, 2, 3}, Nicola Conners Edge ^a, Glenn R. Mesman ^b, Leanne Whiteside-Mansell ^a, Robert H. Bradley ^c

Child Abuse & Neglect
Volume 82, August 2018, Pages 168-177

LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF ACES INTO ADULTHOOD

Building a Framework for Global Surveillance of the Public Health Implications of Adverse Childhood Experiences

Robert F. Anda, MD, MS, Alexander Butchart, PhD, Vincent J. Felitti, MD, David W. Brown, DSc, MScPH, MSc

American Journal of Preventive Medicine 2010

PROBLEMS MEASURED	OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH HAVING MORE ACES
Diseases	Heart disease, cancer, lung disease/cancer, STDs, liver disease
Risk factors for poor health	Smoking, alcohol abuse, obesity, drug use
Mental health	Depression, anxiety, panic disorder, sleep disturbances, memory disturbances, poor anger control
Social problems	High perceived stress, impaired job performance, relationship problems
Mortality	Premature mortality

WHAT TO PRIORITIZE IN MITIGATING THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19?



START WITH HEALING

- American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a focus on healing before mitigating learning loss
- School looks different, need to provide a sense of emotional and physical safety
- Relationship-building and peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student connection will heal
- Social-emotional learning and positive school climate programs can aid the effort
- Extra supports for the most vulnerable children and families may be needed
- Focus on PLAY!

THE HEALING POWER OF PLAY



- Play therapy is a widely used clinical approach for working with abused and neglected children
- Play is naturally how children learn and work through their experiences (e.g., playing school, playing police)
- Play is how children learn and practice their social-emotional skills, like self-regulation, cooperation, self awareness, social awareness, decision-making
- Play sometimes involves physical activity, which boosts attention and cognition
- Play often takes place outside, which is good for virus control
- Play builds relationships between teachers/classes and children

PRIORITIZING PLAY IN SCHOOL RE-OPENING

DO...

- Provide training for staff who may be unaware about ACEs/trauma
- Encourage teachers to take play breaks and be playful
- Schedule daily or twice daily recess
- Provide safe play spaces
- Adapt for your school environment
- Use restorative practices

DON'T...

- Withhold recess or playtime for misbehavior
- Use recess or playtime for extra instruction or to make up work
- Force children to engage in certain play activities if they are resistant
- Create unsafe play spaces (e.g., competitive or exclusive games)
- Provide unequal access to play across schools or populations

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES IN ACTION (ADAPTED FROM COSTELLO ET AL., 2009,

[HTTPS://STORE.IIRP.EDU/THE-RESTORATIVE-PRACTICES-HANDBOOK-SECOND-EDITION/](https://store.iirp.edu/the-restorative-practices-handbook-second-edition/))



For the student with challenging behavior, ask:

- What happened?
- What were you thinking at the time?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been affected by what you have done?
- What do you think you need to do to make it right?

For the student who has been hurt, ask:

- What did you think when you realized what had happened?
- What impact has this had on you and others?
- What has been the hardest thing for you?
- What do you think needs to happen to make things right?

FOR A SAFE, HEALTHY AND INCLUSIVE BREAK, I RECOMMEND “ORGANIZED RECESS”

- Games have common rules are set up in predictable locations
- Each game has its own space and students playing other games do not run through
- There is free choice in what to do
- There is space for creative or imaginary games
- Equipment is centralized and available for play
- Adults support student play
- Games are inclusive
- Youth leadership opportunities



A FEW RESOURCES

<https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/covid-19-planning-considerations-return-to-in-person-education-in-schools/>

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/resource-guide/trauma_informed_school_strategies_during_covid-19.pdf

<https://www.playworks.org/news/safe-return-to-play-recess-guidelines/>

<https://www.psychonetworker.org/blog/details/1179/the-healing-power-of-play>

<https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/importance-recess-california-elementary-school-reopening>

<https://www.hepg.org/hep-home/books/rethinking-recess>