

ACEs in Action, case studies from around the country

'Starve the beast,' say these cities, but don't cut people off; reduce the need for services instead

In a plain brick building on a tree-lined street in Albany, NY, a 67-year-old man brought to his knees from a lifetime struggle with alcohol addiction fills out a survey. Across town, on the bucolic campus of a residential treatment center for troubled teenage boys, a counselor asks a 13-year-old the same questions.

- Did a parent often swear at you, insult you, put you down or humiliate you?
- Did you see your mother being hit, pushed, slapped or kicked?
- Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?

What's the point of dredging up bad memories with these and seven other questions? Believe it or not, there's a long-term payoff for the man, the boy and the city and county of Albany.

Strangely enough, it has to do with the short-term, beneficial effects of the drugs they're using. Nicotine reduces anger, increases focus and relieves depression. Alcohol relieves stress.

States moving ahead on ACE surveys, meetings practices

Last week, nearly 800 adults — human services professionals, educators, judges, business leaders, philanthropists, and policy makers — sitting in a room in Des Moines, Iowa, imagined they were 12 years old. At the request of the speaker, half stood up. These kids are regular smokers, the speaker, Dr. Robert Anda, told the audience. All of those of you who are seated do not smoke, he explained. The half that are standing also have high ACE scores (ACE = adverse childhood experiences). That means that they have experienced or are living with four or more of the following:

- sexual, physical or verbal abuse;
- physical or emotional neglect;
- a parent who is diagnosed mentally ill or who is addicted to alcohol or another drug;
- a mother who is regularly beaten or verbally abused;
- a family member who is in prison;
- the loss of a parent through abandonment or divorce.

So, at the very least, these kids, the smokers, are dealing with the effects of those adverse childhood experiences — anxiety, depression, and difficulty concentrating, he explained. Nicotine makes those effects disappear....for a little while. And when they come back, what makes them go away again?

Another cigarette.

Anda asked the people who were sitting to give those who were standing a round of applause for “figuring out a biochemical coping strategy.”

Massachusetts, Washington State lead US trauma-sensitive school movement

SINCE AT LEAST 2005, A FEW DOZEN INDIVIDUAL schools across the U.S. have adopted some type of trauma-sensitive approach. But the centers of gravity for the action are in Massachusetts and Washington. These two states lead the way in taking a district-wide approach to integrating trauma-informed practices, with an eye to state-wide adoption.

With a school-wide strategy, trauma-sensitive approaches are woven into the school’s daily activities: the classroom, the cafeteria, the halls, buses, the playground. “This enables children to feel academically, socially, emotionally and physically safe wherever they go in the school. And when children feel safe, they can calm down and learn,” says Susan Cole, director of the Trauma Learning

Policy Initiative, a joint project of Harvard Law School and Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

“The district needs to support the individual school to do this work. With the district on board, principals can have the latitude to put this issue on the front burner, where it belongs.”

Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, WA, tries new approach to school discipline, suspensions drop 85%

THE FIRST TIME THAT principal Jim Sporleder tried the New Approach to Student Discipline at Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, WA, he was blown away. Because it worked. In fact, it worked so well that he never went back to the Old Approach to Student Discipline. This is how it went down: A student blows up at a teacher, drops the F-bomb. The usual approach at Lincoln – and, safe to say, at most high schools in this country – is automatic suspension. Instead, Sporleder sits the kid down and says quietly:

“Wow. Are you OK? This doesn’t sound like you. What’s going on?” He gets even more specific: “You really looked stressed. On a scale of 1-10, where are you with your anger?”

Port Townsend, WA, learns that to change health culture, it takes a community

Last week, I posted a story about how a family services clinic in Port Townsend, WA, includes childhood trauma in regular health screenings for pregnant women and families. They’re doing this because the research is very clear: Toxic stress from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) causes adult onset of chronic diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes. It causes suicide and depression. It also leads to committing violence or becoming victim of violence.

The purpose is to reduce toxic stress in children, so that they grow up to be healthier and happier. As far as the staff at Jefferson County Public Health knows, they are the first in the country to figure out a way to integrate into their daily work the research about the consequences of adverse childhood experiences. If there are other clinics doing this, please let me know – this ACEsTooHigh community wants to hear about you.

What IS certain is that, of all the community systems in Jefferson County that support, intervene or interact with children and families, Quen Zorrah and the staff at the Family Services clinic were the first to jump in the pool. The pool, of course, is the metaphor for the place where everybody’s talking ACEs and integrating ACEs research into their everyday activities.

The big question that Jefferson County is grappling with now is: How do you get everyone else to jump into the pool?

Public health clinic adds child trauma to tobacco, alcohol, HIV screening

When a pregnant woman visits the Jefferson County Public Health clinic in Port Townsend, WA, a town of about 9,000 people on the northeast tip of the Olympic Peninsula, she's asked the typical questions about tobacco, alcohol and other drug use. She's also screened for something that most public health departments, ob-gyns or primary care providers don't even consider asking: her childhood trauma.

That's because the public health nurses at Family Health Services know that a childhood full of toxic stress causes a lifetime of health problems, and, if not addressed, is usually passed on from parent to child.

But setting up a system to screen for child trauma, which seems so logical in hindsight, wasn't an easy thing to do, says Quen Zorrah, a public health nurse who led the effort. Even after years of talking, reading research and preparation, the staff was still reluctant. But in the end, she and her co-workers concluded: If we can teach a client to put on a condom, we can ask a client about ACEs.

PERC uses ACE scores to keep ex-offenders out of prison

It wasn't a light-bulb moment that prompted Denise Hughes-Conlon to institute a few changes at the Pinellas Ex-offender Re-entry Coalition. It more like a nudge. Specifically, a nudge from Robin Saenger, then vice-mayor of Tarpon Springs, FL, who asked, "What small piece can you bring to Peace for Tarpon?"

Hughes-Conlon's piece? Have her clients – "not always the nicest, kindest people" she says – fill out the short 10-question version of the 200-question ACE survey.

How can answering a few questions on a survey possibly help ex-offenders or the people who help them?

Spokane, WA, students' trauma prompts search for solutions

PROMPTED BY RESULTS from a large study of Spokane, WA, schoolchildren that showed how childhood trauma is taking more of a toll than many imagined, an innovative project is underway that will test three types of intervention in 900 families that participate in Spokane's Head Start program. The study of 2,100 children was done in ten elementary schools in Spokane, WA, in late 2010. The study found not only that trauma is common in kids' lives – trauma includes divorce, homelessness, witnessing family violence, involvement with child protective services, a family member abusing alcohol or other drugs, neglect, or mental illness in a family – but it's also the main reason that children missed school or got into trouble. It's the second-highest predictor of academic failure, after a child being in special education classes.

Tarpon Springs, FL, may be first trauma-informed city in U.S.

TARPON SPRINGS, FL, ONCE KNOWN for harboring the nation's largest sponge-harvesting industry, today boasts a new designation: it may be the first city in the country to declare itself a trauma-informed community. It isn't that the 24,000 residents of the scenic Gulf Coast community know more than the rest of us about emergency room techniques, spend their time crunching spreadsheets of violence data, or watch more episodes of "America's Most Wanted". It means that the community has made a commitment to engage people in all walks of life – education, juvenile justice, welfare, housing, medical practices, businesses, etc. – in a common goal of less trauma...large and small, immediate and generational.