

**Circumstances or Events That Can Cause Children to  
Develop a Trauma Response**

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Nearly 50% of all children have experienced one or more of these circumstances or events, and many have experienced them in chronic, unrelenting fashion. Not every child who deals with these circumstances will develop an impactful trauma response. The impact of trauma varies depending on how frequent, how threatening, how chronic or unrelenting the circumstances are, and the individual's sense of vulnerability and/or loss of control. Impact also depends on a variety of childhood protective or vulnerability factors, the amount of recovery time between exposure to these circumstances, and the level of support children receive in the other aspects of their lives, especially at school. This list does not include acute trauma (a single traumatic event, such as a car accident) or exposure to the range of natural disasters or community crises (which can be very impactful) because the incidence rate for children in any given school community is much lower than the list of events and circumstances listed below. The list below—addressing chronic or complex trauma—is in no particular order. This list includes the list of Adverse Childhood Experiences from the Kaiser ACE research (those items are labeled with \*), as well as other adverse childhood experiences that are known to cause trauma, but were not part of that original study.

1) **Live in a Dangerous neighborhood.** A child may often wake up to someone banging on the door trying to get in, or be listening to people on the street shouting and threatening each other, hear gunfire and windows smashed, or hear people screaming at each other at all hours of the day and night.

2) **Chronic experience of serious parental conflict** (verbally aggressive and threatening parental interactions). The child may be lying in bed at night, unable to sleep, listening to parents call each other names, threaten each other, shout at each other, escalate their threats, scream, lose control, throw things and break things.

3) **Chaotic home environment.** A home environment with no established routines around bedtime, meals, getting ready for school, doing homework, watching TV and use of electronics. Important notices are lost or forgotten, parents forget about medical appointments and school appointments. Clothes are not washed, too many animals live in the home. The home is noisy, dirty, messy and cluttered. People are constantly coming and going at all hours of the day and night. Adults and older siblings and their friends are exposing younger children to violent movies or violent video games and no one is supervising this.

4) **Chronic shaming, belittling, humiliation and rejection\*.** This could include being chronically berated by an upset parent and labeled with demeaning character traits, such as, "you're lazy, you're always so stupid, you're such a total screw up, you can't even read a book meant for kids half your age, you're an embarrassment to this family".

5) **Witness acts of aggression and violence.** The child may witness a raging parent breaking something, throwing something, hurting a pet, hitting someone, beating someone. The child may witness acts of aggression outside the home, in the neighborhood.

6) **Chronic parental neglect.\*** This pertains to the neglect of basic needs involving health and safety, and/or the inability of the parent to provide adequate care. A parent may chronically

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forget to pick up a child up from baseball practice, or a parent is often passed out on the couch and unable to make dinner, or the child is fully aware that there's not enough money to pay the bills and there's a threat of eviction. There is no place to sleep, not enough beds for all the children, clothes don't fit or they are in poor condition, but they have to be worn to school anyway. There isn't enough food in the house. No one is making a lunch for school or returning important notices or getting the child to medical appointments.

7) **Lack of love and care.\*** A chronic feeling of being unloved, feeling unimportant to the adults in the family, where family members are not at all close and don't look out for each other.

8) **Parental separation or divorce.\***

9) **Physical abuse of a parent.\*** This includes witnessing a parent grabbed, slapped, kicked, bitten, hit with a fist or with a hard object, threatened with a weapon, or had something thrown at them.

10) **Chronic changes in family constellation.** This may include a child who has to move out of the house and live with a neighbor or relative, a relative with problems that has to move in and stay with the family, nonfamily members indiscriminately coming and going, sometimes staying for an extended time, so a child has to give up a bedroom. A child has to move into a foster placement.

11) **Exposure to illegal activity.** The child may be involved with people in the home who are dealing and using drugs, or stealing and dealing in stolen goods, or involved in acts of vandalism, or gang-related activities.

12) **Chronic exposure to people with serious mental health impairment.\*** This includes children living with parents who are depressed and can't get out of bed, parents who have disabling anxiety and can't leave the house or they incessantly press their anxieties onto their children. It also includes living with parents and siblings who have explosive anger disorders, dramatic, unpredictable, and sometimes threatening and frightening mood swings, siblings with developmental disabilities who are not getting proper treatment, and parents with delusional disorders who create a pervasive unreality for their children.

13) **Exposure to families embroiled in community conflict.** This includes families with frequent police involvement, parents fighting with school personnel, parents chronically arguing with neighbors, parents feuding with neighbors, assaulting neighbors and vandalizing the neighbors' property.

14) **Drug and alcohol abuse.\*** This includes living with a household member who is/was a problem drinker, an alcoholic or a drug abuser

15) **Chronic experience of a parent losing control.** This includes frequently witnessing parents having a "meltdown" or having frequent explosive temper outbursts. It may include being yelled at indiscriminately and unpredictably, being blamed repeatedly for the parent's misery and misfortune.

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16) **Frequent moves.** The family is almost continually in the process of leaving one home and moving to another house. The child is frequently changing schools or school placement.

17) **Bullying.** This includes being frequently teased, shamed, and/or humiliated by peers or siblings, or being physically attacked by peers or siblings, or frequently threatened by peers or siblings. It also includes being repeatedly harassed, and/or having belongings taken or destroyed by peers or siblings.

18) **Incarceration.**\*This refers to living in a household where a member was sent to prison.

19) **Physical\* or Sexual\* Abuse.** This includes being physically or sexually assaulted by an adult (or anyone older and more powerful than the child) in the household or by a neighbor or relative or someone else in a position of caring for the child (coach, clergy, teacher, babysitter, bus driver, etc.).