



Quick Tips for Providers: *Identifying and Addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences*

Children who have had adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are exposed to toxic levels of stress that may have long term impacts on mental and physical health. Pediatric primary care providers can help to identify children exposed to ACEs, provide psychoeducation, and connect families to appropriate services.

Common Symptoms

ACEs include child abuse, neglect, separation from a caregiver, witnessing domestic or community violence, and other adverse events. Children who have experienced ACEs may present with one or more of the following symptoms:

- Emotional distress (anger, sadness)
- Difficulty sleeping
- Somatic complaints (headache,
- Behavioral problems
- Difficulty concentrating
- Regression (toileting issues)

Screening for ACEs

Routine screening for ACEs in the pediatric primary care setting can help children and families get connected with appropriate services and mitigate the negative health impacts of toxic stress. The Pediatric ACEs and Related Life Events Screener (PEARLS) was developed for use in primary care, is free to use, and can be completed in 5 minutes. The PEARLS is appropriate for use in youth ages 0-19. *To access, please visit our website at <https://mdbhipp.org/screening-resources.html>.* There are 3 versions of the screening tool:

- Children ages 0-11 (completed by caregiver)
- Adolescents ages 12-19 (completed separately by caregiver and adolescent)

Discussing Adverse Childhood Experiences with Families

When children and families report ACEs it is important for the pediatric primary care provider to respond in a supportive manner. The PCP can provide psychoeducation on the impact of toxic stress and the protective factors that support healthy child development. Consider the following suggestions:

- “If you have seen or heard something that made you feel upset or confused, you can talk with a safe adult. Safe adults are people that you know well and that care about you. These could be family or teachers or even me, your doctor! Who are the safe adults in your life?”
- “When we experience something scary or upsetting, we may start to feel and act differently. It is helpful to talk with someone we trust so that we can understand how we are feeling.”
- “It is normal to act and feel differently after something scary happens. This is called a stress response. There are ways we can help our minds and bodies to better handle stress.”

For more information, please visit acesaware.org.

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