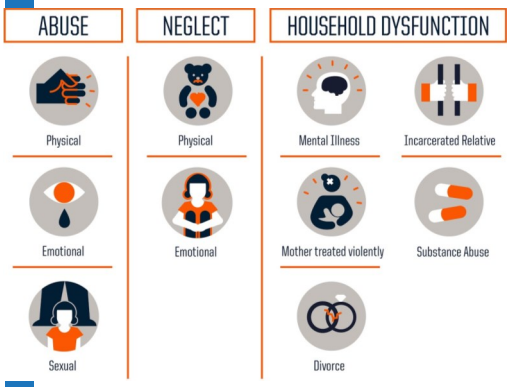
Court-Involved Youth and Trauma

CHILDREN ARE EXTREMELY VULNERABLE

to their environment. When a child experiences a traumatic event, there can be life-long, detrimental effects on their mental and physical health. One way to assess children's exposure to trauma and extreme stress is by tracking Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The ten ACEs categories (developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) fall into three areas: abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction.



Court-involved youth are more likely to have experienced an ACE. In a recent study, over 90% of court-involved youth reported at least one ACE, while 56.8% reported multiple exposures to trauma. About half of the national youth population reported average ACE scores between zero and one.

There is a clear disparity between court-involved youth and youth nation-wide, in respect to exposure to traumatic childhood events. Court-involved youth report more mental health problems than the national average and those who carry a diagnosis of PTSD are at greater risk for other psychiatric conditions. In the same study of detained youth, researchers found that **93% of participants with PTSD were diagnosed with at least one other psychiatric condition**.

The physical health effects of ACEs have also been studied, demonstrating a strong link between higher ACE scores and an elevated risk of developing long term health problems due to:

* Heart disease
* Asthma
* Smoking
* Stroke
* Diabetes
* Liver disease
* Alcoholism
* Illicit drug use
* Sexually transmitted diseases

DANIEL'S* EXPERIENCE

Daniel is one of the many young people ACS has served. His experience is just one example of the relationship between childhood trauma and future court-involvement.

Daniel was eight years old when he witnessed his mother die in a tragic accident in their country of origin. Daniel also sustained a head injury during the same event. Over the next couple of years, he developed some highly disruptive behaviors. These behaviors became so problematic that he was transferred from school to school as his father tried desperately to find a setting that could meet his needs.

*To protect confidentiality, ACS does not use the names, photos, or identifying features of our clients.

Daniel and his father eventually moved to the U.S., where they were frequently displaced from their living situation due to Daniel's behaviors. Daniel was hospitalized several times due to his aggressive behavior and concerns for his safety. Daniel was exhibiting symptoms of PTSD, including flashbacks of the events that resulted in his mother's death and his own injuries.

When Daniel was referred to ACS, his clinician soon recognized his behaviors as symptomatic of trauma. She knew that Daniel lacked the security and stability in his environment that is essential to the healing and recovery of traumatized children. She recommended that Daniel be placed in a specialized residential program where he could receive trauma-informed treatment while developing the coping skills he would need to begin to function more independently.

THERE IS A CLEAR LINK BETWEEN EARLY CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND LONG-TERM PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS.

Trauma can have a lasting impact on children and can underlie some of worrisome behaviors that lead to future court-involvement. The role that ACS clinicians play is vital. Our clinicians lay out the full picture of the adolescent's life and the circumstances that led to them becoming court-involved. They make sure the necessary steps are taken to connect the individual and family with the right resources to fully treat the problem.

CURRENT CRISIS

In a recent example, around 2,000 children were separated from their parents as they crossed the U.S. border. This is a growing population of youth experiencing a traumatic event. Both the American Psychological Association and American Public Health Association declared the zero tolerance immigration policy a "mental health" and "public health crisis," respectively. With a clear link between exposure to trauma in childhood and long term physical and mental health problems, there is major cause for concern for this growing population of children.

For more information or to help children like Daniel, please visit our website at www.acskids.org.

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