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THE IMPACT OF ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

BY INGRID WEISS SLIKKERS AND ERICK PENA

INTRODUCTION

It was in the late 1990's that the original Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs- <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>) study through CDC-Kaiser Permanente was done. This groundbreaking research opened the door to the reality that childhood and household challenges, including but not limited to abuse, neglect and even divorce, can dramatically impact a person's health and well-being throughout life. Much work has been done since 1997 to further study and subsequently reduce ACEs' impact, but the sad truth is that although much effort has been put forth to combat adverse experiences, ACEs are still very prevalent today and even our own congregations are touched. Notwithstanding that this study was done in the United States, the implications from it are transferable into all areas around the globe and give us reason to pause.

So, can ACEs be reduced? This is clearly the goal and should be emphasized and tirelessly worked towards. However, considering the difficult state of our world, we would like to suggest that our focus should also be on lessening the *impact* of ACEs by buffering these negative experiences with intentional positive ones. "Research demonstrates that both positive and adverse experiences shape brain development and health across the life span." (Bethell, Jones, Gombojav, Linkenbach, & Sege, 2019) In a study that used data accumulated by the 2015 Wisconsin Behavioral Risk Factor Survey, the researchers concluded that "assessing

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and proactively promoting PCEs [Positive Childhood Experiences] may reduce adult mental and relational health problems, even in the concurrent presence of ACEs.” (Bethell, Jones, Gombojav, Linkenbach, & Sege, 2019).

This chapter will briefly discuss the seven positive childhood experiences suggested by the forementioned researchers and published by the *Journal of American Medical Association Pediatric* applying them specifically within our Seventh-day Adventist context. It is our hope that as Christians the clarity of the connection to our faith practices will further a sense of refocus and energy into our intentionality of implementation.

1. THE ABILITY TO TALK ABOUT FEELINGS

Children need to feel free to talk about whether they are afraid, alarmed, sad, happy, or excited. As adults, we need to normalize, to model, and teach feelings recognition and regulation. Are we pausing and discussing what emotions our Bible heroes felt? Even allowing for mixed emotions. How did the children of Israel feel when they started to walk across the Red Sea? Excited? In awe? A little scared? We need to allow the presence and acknowledgment of all feelings even in the presence of our faith and belief. Knowing where these feelings are felt in the body can help better identify and express them accurately. Structured check ins of feelings are ideal and become part of the culture of caring for each other.

2. A FELT EXPERIENCE THAT FAMILY WILL STAND BY DURING DIFFICULT TIMES

Children need to know that no matter what they do or what happens to them, they have a family that will be there for them. A family that will not abandon each other when things get tough but that will hold on to tighter than ever before. For some, this concept weighs heavy as to what “family” means. Many feel concerned due to single parent homes or a grandparent raising a child that do not fit the norm. But note, the message is “family,” it does not name which members. Researchers have long established the importance of a primary care providers and connected attachment. Even if the family is going through devastating circumstances, is there a family member that will be there through thick and thin (this does not mean they have to have all the answers or solutions, simply being there is what is important)?

3. ENJOYING PARTICIPATING IN COMMUNITY TRADITIONS

Participating in community activities is another experience that can buffer the effects of ACEs. Participating in community or church traditions can clarify and strengthen family values and help deliver sources of identity. Community and church traditions can help families bond closer together. These experiences guarantee that people take time for emotional connection, and this has

been seen throughout history and cultures. Traditions help to provide kids with a sense of security in such a chaotic world. Starting with Ellen White's writings and as an Adventist denomination, we have celebrated and encouraged traditions, small and large. What can we do to continue to support that our communities are able to do this?

4. FELT A SENSE OF BELONGING IN HIGH SCHOOL

Adolescence is a critical and delicate stage in a person's life. This is the stage where young people are trying to figure out what is happening in their bodies and who they are. Feeling like they belong in an environment can truly become a factor in how they deal with the harmful stresses in their lives. It may seem obvious that our academies work intentionally on this, but not every adolescent is able to attend our schools or even feels this. Sensing they belong in an environment can truly become a factor in how they deal with the harmful stress teens face in their lives. Here again we can see the positive impact that a youth group, singing group or even a weekly Bible study in a home can make.

The Sanctuary Model of Care is a secular model that was developed by psychiatrist Sandra Bloom (<https://www.thesanctuaryinstitute.org/about-us/the-sanctuary-model/>) to promote safety and recovery from adversity. At the core, this model reminds us of the importance of, instead of asking, "what is wrong with you?" as a society, we ask, "what happened to you?" Bringing this question to the forefront can help high school students develop empathy for each other and, as a byproduct, increase a sense of belonging during this pivotal stage in life.

5. A FEELING OF BEING SUPPORTED BY FRIENDS

Humans are relational beings. When God created Adam, he made it clear that it was not good for humans to be alone (Genesis 2:18). Even though a long time has passed since God expressed those words, they continue to be true today. A feeling of being supported by friends is an essential part of resilience building. It is so important that even Jesus, the perfect lamb of God, used it for his benefit. Jesus had at least three intimate friends in Peter, James and John. There are various suggestions that a quick internet search will show as to the number of friends needed to be healthy. Most do seem to agree that 2-3 close friends are vital. Are we encouraging and teaching our youth how to have deep relationships with a couple of people versus the need to have hundreds of superficial friends on social media?

6. HAVING AT LEAST TWO NON-PARENT ADULTS WHO GENUINELY CARED ABOUT THEM

The response of individuals who had a high ACE score but who were able to manage the effects of trauma and live a productive life show the importance of key relationships. According to this study having at least two other adults that genuinely care about a child is as important as having parents or a parent that does the same. Church congregations are fertile ground for children to build

healthy relationships outside of their parental circle. A genuine church community can provide the external influence that children need to grow and thrive. The question surfaces again, what are we doing to intentionally assure this is happening?

7. FEELING SAFE AND PROTECTED BY AN ADULT AT HOME

No one can argue against the importance of a child's safety at home. Home is supposed to be a place of refuge, a place where the hostile world is locked outside, and those within the walls of the home are loved and protected even if it is not perfection. Again, the question arises sometimes as to "what if I don't have the ideal two parent home?" Read the line again. It says, "adult." This might even be an adult sibling that still lives at home that can make a significant positive impact. Can we share this message with everyone?

CONCLUSION

We all desire a perfect family and environment for every child, but we know that is not reality and that our enemy comes after our children. But suppose the principles of these seven positive experiences are further intentionally incorporated into everything we do as an Adventist community, from relationships to programs? With the help of our Lord and Savior, Adventism will become a catalyst for building resilience within our homes, the church, community, and world.

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