



THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
INSTITUTE FOR FAMILY VIOLENCE STUDIES

# Adverse Childhood Experiences: Implications For Supervised Visitation

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# The Origins of the Study

- **How the Study Started**
  - Dr. Felitti was originally working on a weight loss study consisting of female participants when many of the **women started to drop out** of the study.
  - He interviewed those who had dropped out of the study and after reviewing their life history discovered that **over half** of the female participants **had experienced sexual abuse** in their childhoods.

# The ACE Study

- Dr. Felitti decided to conduct a study that would **observe the relationship** between **adverse childhood experiences** and the adult development of **mental health problems/physical illnesses**.



# The Study's Details

- The ACE study had more than 17,000 participants from 1995-1997.
- Participants were **asked questions about anything traumatic or stressful** that they might have encountered as a child and their current health status.
- These traumatic or stressful events are known as adverse childhood experiences and the **participants ACE scores** were determined by their answers to the questions.

# The Questions Asked

- The study asked questions regarding:
  - ***Abuse***: Emotional, Physical, Sexual
  - ***Neglect***: Emotional, Physical
  - ***Household Dysfunction***: Mother treated violently, household substance abuse, household mental illness, parental separation or divorce, incarcerated household family member.

# The ACE Questions

- Before Age 18
  1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often: Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you? —OR— Act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt?
  2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often: Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you? —OR— Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?

# The ACE Questions Cont.

- Before Age 18
  3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever: Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way? —OR— Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?
  4. Did you often or very often feel that: No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? —OR— Your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?

# The ACE Questions Cont.

- Before Age 18
  5. Did you often or very often feel that: You didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you? —OR— Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
  6. Was a biological parent ever lost to you through divorce, abandonment, or other reason?



# The ACE Questions Cont.

- Before Age 18
  7. Was your mother or stepmother: Often or very often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her? —OR— Sometimes, often, or very often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? —OR— Ever repeatedly hit over at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?
  8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?

# The ACE Questions Cont.

- Before Age 18
  9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?
  10. Did a household member go to prison?

# The ACE Score



- **The ACE Score**
  - Is the **total count** of the number of **ACEs** reported by respondents.
  - Is used to **determine the amount of stress** that an individual experienced during childhood.
  - Plays an important part in the **major findings** of the study.

# The Findings

- Out of the study's participants:
  - **More than half** reported **at least one ACE**
  - At least **1 out of 5** had **three or more ACEs**
- The findings concluded that as an **individual's ACE score increased so did their risk** for developing certain health problems.



# Prevalence (%) of Abuse & Neglect

<b>Abuse</b>	<b>Women (N= 9,367)</b>	<b>Men (N= 7,970)</b>	<b>Total (N=17,377)</b>
<i>Emotional</i>	13.1	7.6	10.6
<i>Physical</i>	27.0	29.9	28.3
<i>Sexual</i>	24.7	16.0	20.7

<b>Neglect</b>	<b>Women (N= 9,367)</b>	<b>Men (N= 7,970)</b>	<b>Total (N=17,377)</b>
<i>Emotional</i>	16.7	12.4	14.8
<i>Physical</i>	9.2	10.7	9.9

# Prevalence (%) of Household Dysfunction

<b>Household Dysfunction</b>	<b>Women (N= 9,367)</b>	<b>Men (N= 7,970)</b>	<b>Total (N=17,377)</b>
<i>Mother Treated Violently</i>	13.7	11.5	12.7
<i>Household Substance Abuse</i>	29.5	23.8	26.9
<i>Household Mental Illness</i>	23.3	14.8	19.4
<i>Parental Separation or Divorce</i>	24.5	21.8	23.3
<i>Incarcerated Household Member</i>	5.2	4.1	4.7

# Prevalence (%) of ACEs

<b>Number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE Score)</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>0</i>	34.5	38.0	36.1
<i>1</i>	24.5	27.9	26.0
<i>2</i>	15.5	16.4	15.9
<i>3</i>	10.3	8.6	9.5
<i>4 or more</i>	<b>15.2</b>	<b>9.2</b>	<b>12.5</b>

# The Link Between ACE and Health Problems



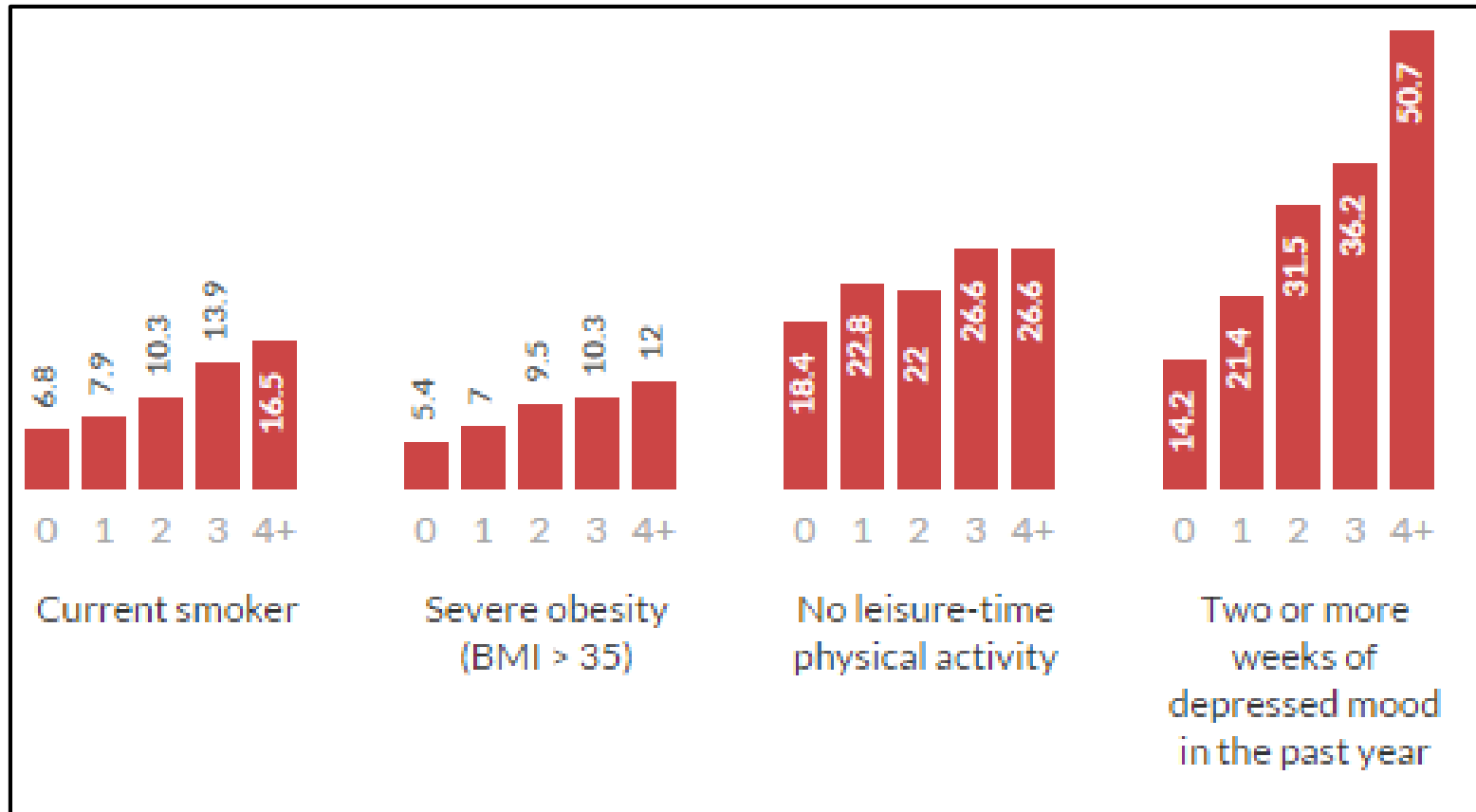
- As a person's number of ACEs increases, **it was more common** for those individuals to **engage in behaviors** such as smoking or drug use which can contribute to health problems.
- However, the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors as adult can be linked to the effects that ACEs have on a child's developing brain.



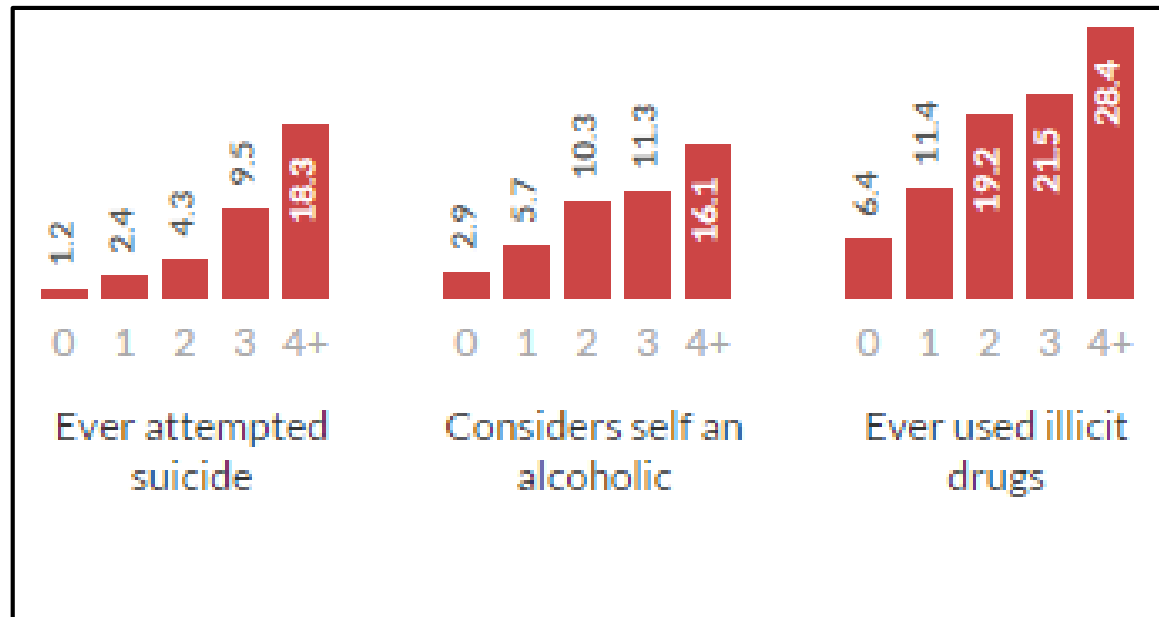
# Effects of ACEs on a Child

- When children experience traumatic events the stress from such events can have **lasting effects on the developing brain** of a child.
- When a children experience toxic stress it is possible they might lose the ability to process events (good or bad) properly.
- This can lead to the development of unhealthy coping skills such as **substance abuse** that adolescents may use when faced with difficult events.

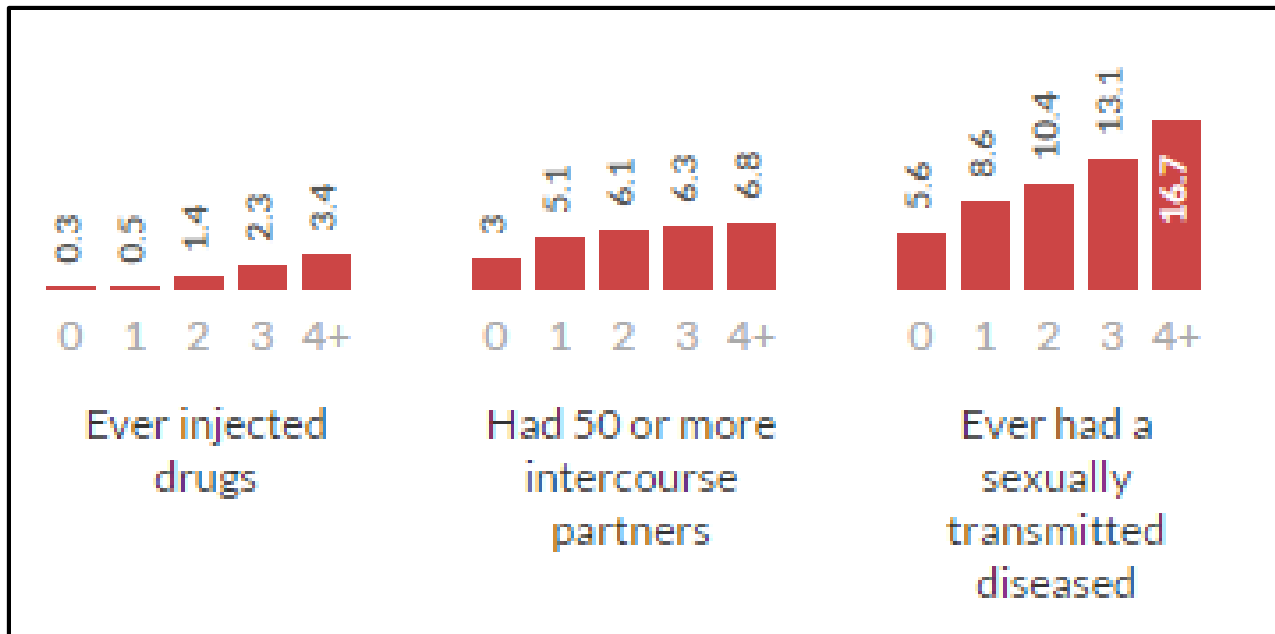
# The Prevalence of Physical & Mental Health Problems



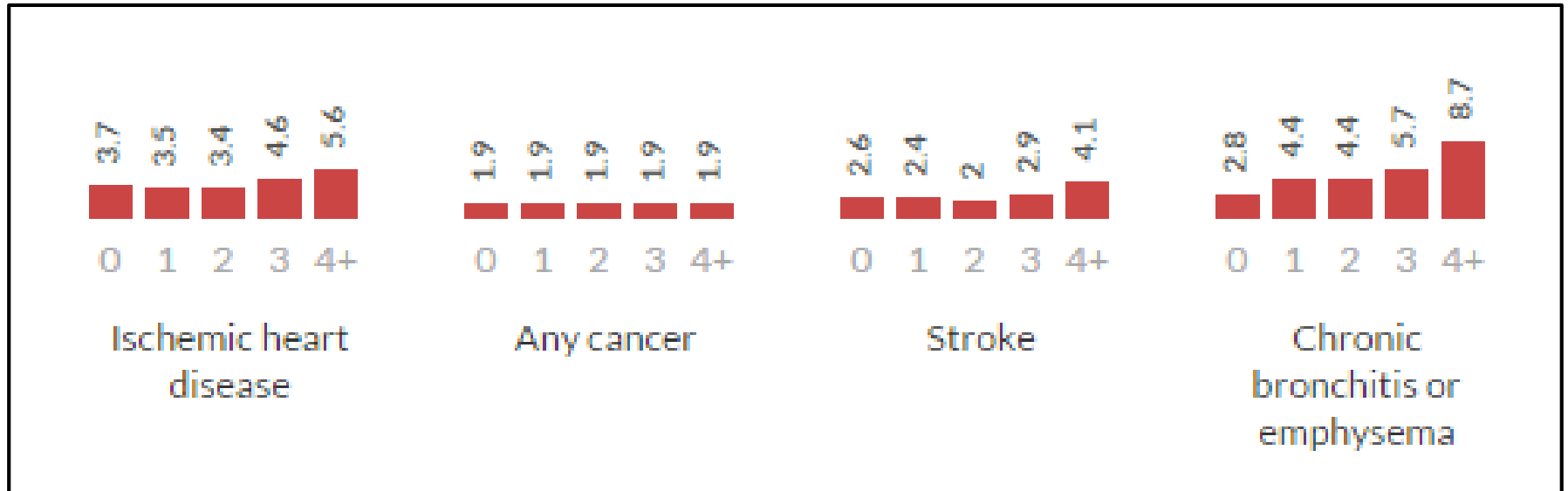
# The Prevalence of Physical & Mental Health Problems Cont.



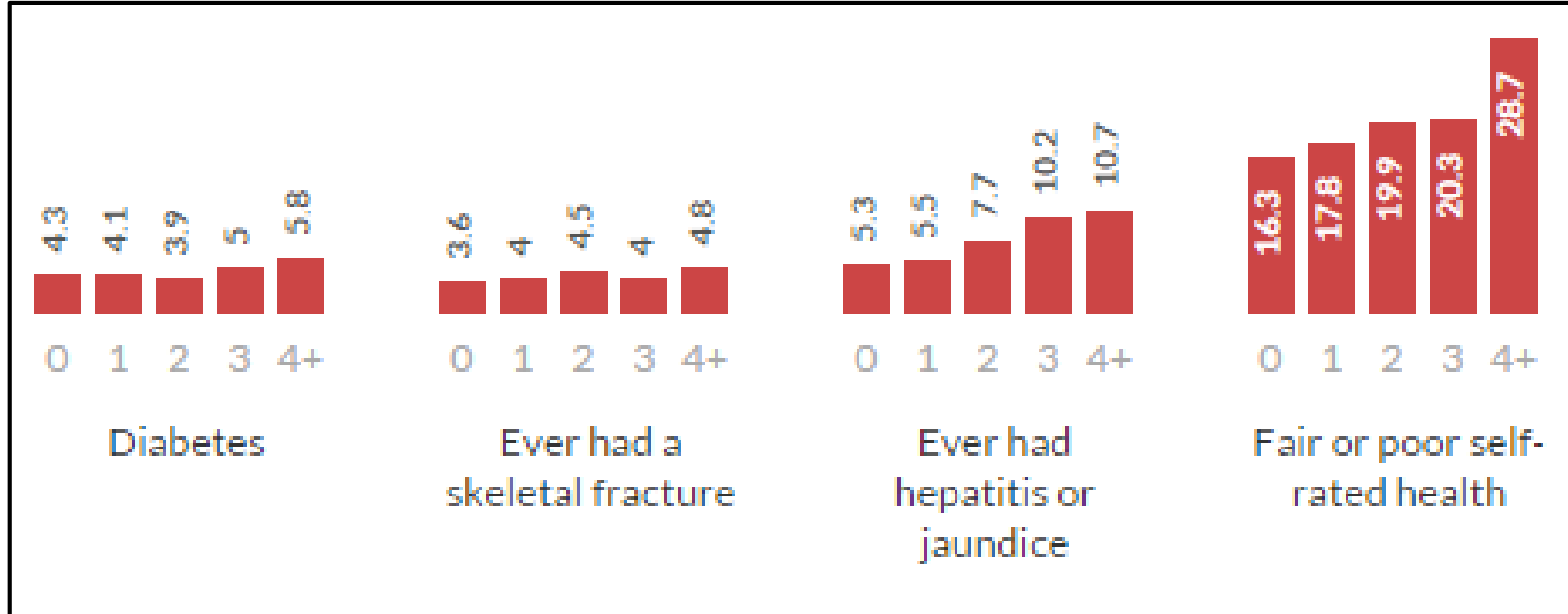
# The Prevalence of Physical & Mental Health Problems Cont.



# The Prevalence of Physical & Mental Health Problems Cont.



# The Prevalence of Physical & Mental Health Problems Cont.



# Increasing Risk

- As a person's ACE score increased so did the risk for several of these health problems:
  - **Alcoholism**
  - **Depression**
  - **Illicit drug use**
  - **Injection of drugs**
  - **Ischemic heart disease (IHD)**
  - **Multiple Sexual partners**
  - **Sexually transmitted diseases (STD's)**
  - **Smoking**
  - **Obesity**
  - **Suicide Attempts**



# The Effects of ACEs

- Adverse childhood experiences produce toxic stress.
- **Toxic stress:** Occurs when the child experiences a strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity without adequate adult support (Harvard Center on the Developing Child)
- Persistent stress can **create neuron damage** in a child's brain which means that there are fewer connections being made.
  - Children have a harder time concentrating, following directions, or even learning because their **prefrontal cortex** (area responsible for self-regulation) **has been affected by early stress.**



# Effects of ACEs Cont

- Due to the effects on the prefrontal cortex, there are connections missing due to neuron damage caused by stress, which **affects a child's executive function.**
- Poor executive function has several consequences such as:
  - **The inability to control impulses**
  - **Regulate emotions**
  - **Difficulty handling challenges**

# How ACEs Can Cause Disease and Illnesses

- Children who experience toxic stress often have their **stress response being activated**.
- The stress response **affects or immune system**, which is what our bodies need in order to **fight off disease and illnesses**.
- Our immune system also serves to control the **levels of inflammation** in our bodies, therefore, when our stress response **keeps** our **inflammation levels from being regulated**, illnesses like heart disease and type 2 diabetes can develop.

# Implications

- When children have adverse childhood experiences the trauma from such events can affect them well into their adult lives.
- Adults who reported **higher amounts of ACEs** also had an increased likelihood of developing **mental** and **physical health problems** and that could lead to **death**.
- The **amount of ACEs** an individual has is an important part to understand for **prevention** and **intervention** purposes.

# The Role of Supervised Visitation

- The most important role of supervised visitation on this issue is to be **aware and educated on the effects that ACEs** can have on children and individuals.
- Many of the children and parents who are involved in supervised visitation have experienced one or more ACEs (domestic violence, divorce, substance abuse)



# Working with Families

- Understanding the **long-term effects** that ACEs may have on children will help you when providing services to families.
- **Provide children at visits with support and connect families to services** that will also aid in preventing the long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences.

# Conclusion

- Adverse childhood experiences have negative consequences on individual's.
- As social service providers, you can provide families and children with the support necessary for counteracting the effects of ACEs.
- If greater intervention and prevention efforts were increased, the **effects that ACEs have on individuals could be decreased.**

# Remember

- As a supervised visitation monitor, instead of asking your client's "what's wrong" with them, use "**what happened**" to you?
- Many people have ACEs and it is your responsibility as a social service provider to ask them questions about their past that others may avoid asking.
- Everyone has a story and your clients need **YOU** to listen to it. **It could save their lives.**

# References

- <http://ctmirror.org/2015/01/20/the-long-reach-of-childhood-trauma/>  
Provides information about the ACE study and its implications. Provides information about other research studies that have found similar findings. Has examples of effective intervention strategies.
- <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/index.html>  
Provides access to the original study and current research about adverse childhood experiences.
- <http://captus.samhsa.gov/prevention-practice/targeted-prevention/adverse-childhood-experiences/1>  
Summarizes the ACE study's findings and gives more information about another study relating adverse childhood experiences to substance abuse.



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