



Day 19: Lessons from Laura

Laura was around 7 years old in this picture and had just experienced her first setback in life when her father and I divorced. Her childhood would be marked with other setbacks that I have called “adverse childhood experiences”. A combination of those experiences coupled with her genetic predisposition made Laura a high-risk candidate to suffer from the disease of addiction. 15 years ago, she became afflicted and last month she lost her life to an overdose.

Adverse Childhood Experiences Disrupt a Child’s View of their World

Most of us experience setbacks and adverse experiences, but somehow, we manage to bounce back and move forward, putting those experiences in the rear-view mirror. However, for some children, having an adverse experience in childhood rocks the foundation of who they are and how they feel safe in the world.

There is a biological underpinning to children that can’t manage their way through an ACE in childhood. When an adverse childhood experience occurs, the child’s brain is flooded with adrenaline in what is often called “Fight or Flight”. While this reaction helps the child react to any immediate dangers, it becomes toxic when turned on for too long.

When children are forced or perceive that they must constantly focus on surviving and avoiding harm, they are unable to focus on learning or developing skills to serve them in adulthood. Their ability to trust and relate to others never fully forms and they often experience depression, self-consciousness, and avoidance of challenges. This has a snowball effect as these children may turn to self-medicating with drugs or other troublesome behaviors to deal with the pain.

How do you know when a childhood event (divorce, change of school, move to a new neighborhood) becomes an adverse event in the eyes of your child? Here are some clues:

- They develop problems in managing their anger
- They become manipulative
- They seem to lack motivation
- They begin avoiding risks at all costs
- They tell you that bad things are happening to them on purpose
- They become withdrawn or depressed.
- They share a sense of hopelessness.

Treating people who have had ACE experiences in childhood and have not developed the coping skills in adulthood is expensive. According to one study, “ACEs cost the economy **\$124 billion** in over the lifetime of all those affected by ACEs including, **\$83.5 billion** in productivity losses and **\$25 billion** spent for health care to combat the effects of ACEs.”

My Takeaway

Adverse childhood experiences affect the way a child’s brain develops, reduces their ability to cope with day to day life stressors, and makes that child infinitely more vulnerable to addiction and other mental health issues. **Any event in your child’s life that creates a big change from the safety and security of their routine should be examined as a potential ACE in your child’s life.** Tomorrow’s Lessons from Laura will focus on how to help your child manage through these events and develop healthy coping skills.