

# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in the Juvenile Justice System

ACE scores are typically very high for children that find themselves in the juvenile justice system. “ACE” stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences, which are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years).<sup>1</sup> ACEs are used to identify the amount of traumatic stress an individual has experienced. While it has gotten better in the last few years, there is not enough focus on a child’s trauma in the juvenile justice system.

The sum of the total number of categories (not incidents) that a child reports is their ACE score.<sup>2</sup> While these ACE scores can be tough to acknowledge, they serve as an important recognition point in children, parents, and families, which can help stop a negative generational trend and lead a child towards healing and hope.<sup>3</sup> Your own ACE score can help you understand and process some of your own struggles, as well as help you understand the needs of trauma-exposed children and adults. You can calculate an ACE score by following the link [here](https://whalenlawoffice.com/practice-areas/juvenile-law/) (whalenlawoffice.com/practice-areas/juvenile-law/).

The higher someone’s ACE score is correlates with a high negative impact on lifelong health, opportunity, and future violence victimization and perpetration.<sup>4</sup> High ACE scores, without mitigating interventions and therapeutic help, serve as “go straight to jail” cards for many children exposed to violence, abuse, and trauma. A lot of times, instead of educating children about the trauma they have experienced, or giving them any type of counseling or mentorship, they are prosecuted, sometimes even as adults, and thrown into the legal system.<sup>5</sup>

For example, a major contributing factor to a higher ACE score is growing up in a violent home. Children growing up in violent homes have a 24% greater chance of committing sexual assault crimes, a 74% increased incidence of committing crimes against the person, and a 50% higher chance of abusing drugs and/or alcohol.<sup>6</sup> Once a child witnesses or becomes a victim of domestic violence, they are at risk for “anxiety, depression, social isolation, increased physical and psychological aggression, and propensity to perpetuate the cycle of domestic violence.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, when a child sees and grows up with violence in his or her environment, the child cannot be expected to know that violence is not the normal relationship response or the way that

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<sup>1</sup> Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fviolenceprevention%2Facestudy%2Ffastfact.html](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fviolenceprevention%2Facestudy%2Ffastfact.html) (last visited May 27, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Casey Gwinn, CHEERING FOR THE CHILDREN: CREATING PATHWAYS TO HOPE FOR CHILDREN EXPOSED TO TRAUMA, 13 (2015).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to receive emotional support when calculating ACE scores. It is also important to realize that even if a score is low or zero, it does not mean that someone’s life is perfect or without challenges.

<sup>4</sup> Gwinn, *supra* note 2, at 13.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah M. Buel, *Why Juvenile Courts Should Address Family Violence: Promising Practices to Improve Intervention Outcomes*, 53 JUV. & FAM. CT. J. 1-2 (2002).

<sup>6</sup> Gwinn, *supra* note 2, at 23-25.

<sup>7</sup> Chan M. Hellman & Casey Gwinn, *Camp HOPE as an Intervention for Children Exposed to Domestic Violence: A Program Evaluation of Hope, and Strength of Character*, 34 CHILD ADOLESCENT SOC. WORK J., 269 (2017).

society functions.<sup>8</sup> It is essential to intercede in this cycle early with children and focus on educating them that abuse and violence are not normal or appropriate ways to deal with conflict.<sup>9</sup>

It is critical for criminal defense lawyers who represent juveniles to better educate judges, provide resources such as pro bono services, or help in any way possible. However, the burden does not just fall to attorneys representing juveniles in the criminal justice system. It is important for society to better address and understand children with high ACEs so that we can encourage these children to accept, understand, and learn from their trauma instead of falling victim to it.

A few organizations to consider supporting are the [Lone Star Justice Alliance](#), a nonprofit legal organization that improves the lives of youth and emerging adults in the justice system and [Ethos Education Group](#), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote and deliver character development curriculum to inspire youth dealing with serious issues such as self-esteem, eating disorders, drug and alcohol addictions, bullying, and violent behavior to address and overcome these challenges by teaching self-value and foundational character traits.

Together, we can make a difference in the lives of these children.

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<sup>8</sup> Ashley Phillips, *How to End the Cycle of Domestic Violence: Policies Focused on Children*, 9 CHILD & FAM. LAW J. 60 (2021).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.*