

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

Ashley M. Saenz  
Attorney at Law  
(214) 368-2560  
[asaenz@whalenlawoffice.com](mailto:asaenz@whalenlawoffice.com)

## Why an ACE Score Should Matter to 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 a child has experienced. The higher someone’s ACE score is correlates with a high negative impact on lifelong health, opportunity, and future violence victimization and perpetration.<sup>2</sup>

In particular, high ACE scores are linked to alcoholism and alcohol abuse, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), depression, fetal death (miscarriage during pregnancy), health-related quality of life, illicit drug use, ischemic heart disease (IHD), liver disease, risk for intimate partner violence, multiple sexual partners, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), autoimmune disease, smoking, suicide attempts, unintended pregnancies, early initiation of smoking, early initiation of sexual activity, and adolescent pregnancy.<sup>3</sup> Long story short, child trauma and adverse childhood experiences, without mitigating interventions and therapeutic help, are premature death sentences or “go straight to jail” cards for many children exposed to violence, abuse, and trauma.

Unfortunately, while it is getting better, there is not enough focus on a child’s trauma in the juvenile justice system. A lot of times, instead of educating teenagers about the trauma they have experienced and why it is wrong, teenagers are prosecuted, sometimes even as adults, and thrown into the legal system without learning that violence is not the answer to their problems or receiving any type of counseling or mentorship.<sup>4</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 twenty-four percent greater chance of committing sexual assault crimes, a seventy-four percent increased incidence of committing crimes against the person, and a fifty percent higher chance of abusing drugs and/or alcohol.<sup>5</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

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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%2Facesstudy%2Ffastfact.html](https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fviolenceprevention%2Facesstudy%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, 23-25 (2015).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 13-14.

<sup>4</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>5</sup> *Id.*

domestic violence.”<sup>6</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 society functions.<sup>7</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>8</sup>

### Calculating an ACE Score

The sum of the total number of categories (not incidents) that a child reports is their ACE score.<sup>9</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>10</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. See the ACE score calculator below:

While you were growing up, during your first eighteen years of life:

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?

No \_\_\_ If Yes, enter 1 \_\_\_

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?

No \_\_\_ If Yes, enter 1 \_\_\_

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**

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<sup>6</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).

<sup>7</sup> Ashley Phillips, *How to End the Cycle of Domestic Violence: Policies Focused on Children*, 9 CHILD & FAM. LAW J. 60 (2021).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> Gwinn, *supra* note 2, at 13.

<sup>10</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.

Attempt or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you?

No\_\_\_ If Yes, enter 1 \_\_\_

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?

No\_\_\_ If Yes, enter 1 \_\_\_

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?

No\_\_\_ If Yes, enter 1 \_\_\_

6. Were your parents ever separated or divorced?

No\_\_\_ If Yes, enter 1 \_\_\_

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?

No\_\_\_ If Yes, enter 1 \_\_\_

8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic, or who used street drugs?

No\_\_\_ If Yes, enter 1 \_\_\_

9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide?

No \_\_\_ If Yes, enter 1 \_\_\_

10. Did a household member go to prison?

No \_\_\_ If Yes, enter 1 \_\_\_

Now add up your "Yes" answers: \_\_\_\_\_ This is your ACE Score.<sup>11</sup>

I am hoping to create a personal focus on children with ACEs that end up in the juvenile justice system. Society needs to encourage these children in order for them to accept, understand, and learn from their trauma instead of falling victim to it. I would love to use my position as a juvenile defense attorney to make connections, provide resources, or help in any way I can. If you have any questions or know of any children or families that are struggling with trauma, please reach out to me. If you know of any children that have made their way into the juvenile justice system, I would love the opportunity to represent them. Give me a call at Whalen Law Office, (214) 368-2560.

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<sup>11</sup> Gwinn, *supra* note 2, at 23-25.