



**(Note to Editor:** Please note that there is a sidebar at the end of this column that we hope you can pull out and feature in a box to give it added visibility. It invites the public to participate in an upcoming event related to this topic.)

**For IR Public Health column**

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## **We All Can Help Ensure Positive Early Childhood Experiences**

**By Melanie Reynolds  
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One of the biggest public health discoveries of all time has led us to understand the impact that early childhood experiences have on lifelong health.

This research is called the Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACE, study, and it confirms with certainty that our experiences as children have a profound impact on our physical, mental, and social health.

In the 1990s, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention partnered with the Kaiser Permanente Health System to look at health data related to more than 17,000 of Kaiser's members. The age range of the survey participants was 19 to 94. The researchers gathered information on all aspects of their lives – from their experiences as children to their mental health status, substance use, disease risks, and disabilities. What they discovered is changing how we look at lifelong health and well-being.

### **What's Your Score?**

Each one of us has an "ACE" score between 0 and 10, depending on our experiences before the age of 19. Experiences such as repeated physical abuse, a chronically depressed caregiver, or witnessing domestic violence all contribute to the ACE score. The higher the score, the more at risk a person becomes for struggling with issues related to physical, mental, and social problems.

If you want to determine your personal ACE score, you can find the study questionnaire on the Elevate Montana website at [www.elevatemontana.org/find-your-ace-score/](http://www.elevatemontana.org/find-your-ace-score/).

The ACE study proves that adversity in childhood increases a person's risk of experiencing some of our leading causes of diseases and death: depression, heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. In fact, those with ACE scores of 6 or more die on average 20 years earlier than those who are lucky enough to have a low ACE score. Of the 17,000 participants in the study, those with an ACE score of 7 or more attempted suicide five times more often than those with lower scores.

## **Explaining the Science**

Since the 1990s, there have been huge advances in the fields of neurobiology, or brain science, and epigenetics, the study of how our genes are changed by our environment and experiences. This research explains the results of the ACE study. Our bodies develop rapidly from conception to age 3. What this research has demonstrated is that experiences affect human development, from our neurological system, to our organs, to our immune system.

Human development and potential are best served when a child is raised in a safe, stable, and nurturing environment with access to consistent and loving caregivers, nutritious food, medical care, and quality early learning experiences – like being read to, taken outside to play, and reassured when they are hurt. These children are more likely to go on to be stable, productive, healthy adults.

When our youngest and most vulnerable residents experience high levels of stress and adversity, they are at a higher risk of cumulating a high ACE score. This increases their risks later in life of dissatisfaction, divorce, productivity loss, disease, disability, and early death.

## **Adversity Isn't Destiny**

Fortunately, adversity isn't destiny. There are many things each of us can do to help keep ACE scores low among our community's children. Helena is known as "a great place to raise kids." Unfortunately, our recent Community Health Report, published last fall, includes some statistics indicating that the health and well-being of our youth need attention. In 2013, for example, close to 15 percent of high school students in the Helena area attempted suicide. The ACE study attributes 67 percent of suicides and attempts to adverse early childhood experiences.

Understanding ACEs, developing a common language around them, and incorporating this new understanding into the way we do business across all sectors in Helena has the potential to greatly benefit our community. We believe your participation is integral to creating real and achievable progress.

For more information about the ACE study, visit the CDC website at <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>.

## **Sidebar: What You Can Do**

What can you do to help give our community's children a healthy start on life? First, we all have to understand that experiences matter, and that safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and experiences are the foundation for health and well-being.

Next, you can join us for a Community Cafe (styled after the World Cafe model) on Tuesday, May 24, from 6 to 8 p.m. at the St. Paul's United Methodist Church Fellowship Hall. This event will provide us with a chance to have an open and intimate discussion about how we deal with ACEs in the Helena community. To RSVP for the event, please visit <http://goo.gl/tWSp12>.