



## Vermont Child Health Improvement Program



Build Strengths to Buffer ACEs:  
Focus on Foster Care

# Build Strengths to Buffer ACEs: Focus on Foster Care

A Facilitated Discussion

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# Objectives

- ▶ Review ACEs and Toxic Stress
- ▶ Understand what Buffers/Mitigates ACEs
- ▶ Use a framework for Family Strengths
- ▶ Be aware of HOPE: Health Outcomes of Positive Experiences
- ▶ Learn how to boost Personal Strengths
- ▶ Explore ways to use a Strength-Based Approach

# Moving from

What is wrong with you?

to

What happened to you?

What is right with you?

to

What is healing for you?

# ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACES)

## Abuse



Physical



Emotional



Sexual

## Neglect



Physical



Emotional

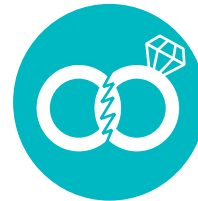
## Household Challenges



Mental  
Illness



Intimate  
Partner  
Violence



Parental  
Separation  
or Divorce



Incarceration



Substance  
Misuse or  
Dependence

# ACES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH INCREASED RISK FOR 9 OF THE 10 LEADING CAUSES OF DEATH IN THE U.S.

Leading Causes of Death in the U.S., 2021		Odds Ratios for $\geq 4$ ACEs (relative to no ACEs)
1	<b>Heart disease</b>	2.1
2	<b>Cancer</b>	2.3
3	COVID-19	Unknown
4	<b>Accidents</b> (unintentional injuries)	2.6
5	<b>Stroke</b>	2.0
6	<b>Chronic lower respiratory disease</b>	3.1
7	<b>Alzheimer's disease</b> or dementia	11.2
8	<b>Diabetes</b>	1.4
9	<b>Chronic liver disease</b>	2.4
10	<b>Kidney disease</b>	1.7

# Pediatric ACE-Associated Health Conditions (Children with $\geq 4$ ACEs)

## Condition/Odds Ratio

- ▶ Asthma: 1.7-2.8
- ▶ Allergies: 2.5
- ▶ Headaches: 3.0
- ▶ Overweight & Obesity: 2.0
- ▶ Poor dental health: 2.8

## Condition/Odds Ratio

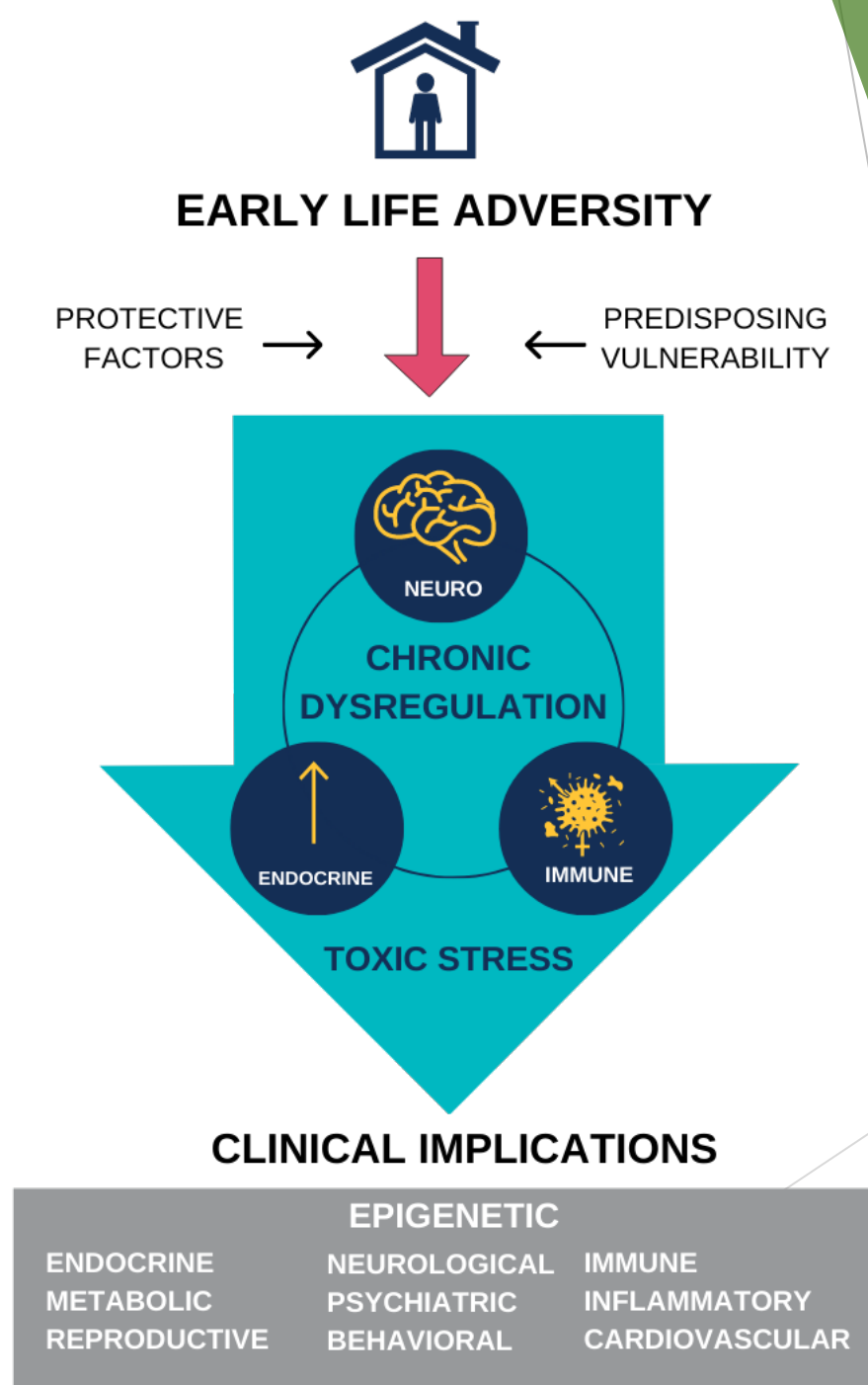
- ▶ Learning and/or behavioral probs: 32.6
- ▶ Depression: 3.9
- ▶ ADHD: 5.0
- ▶ Use of alcohol before age 14: 6.2
- ▶ Early sexual debut: 3.7



# THE TOXIC STRESS RESPONSE

*“prolonged activation of the stress response systems that can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment, well into the adult years...”*

Nadine Burke Harris. "Adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress"  
Presented at Breaking Barriers Conference, Burlington, VT 4/29/23.





# Biological systems disrupted by toxic stress

SYSTEM	MECHANISM(S)	HEALTH IMPACT
<b>Neurologic; Neuroendocrine</b>	- Dysregulation of SAM and HPA axes; autonomic imbalance	Difficulty modulating, sustaining, or dampening the stress response; heightened or blunted stress sensitivity
	- Altered reactivity and size of the amygdala	Increased fear responsiveness, impulsivity, and aggression
	- Inhibition of the prefrontal cortex	Impaired executive function, with poorer planning, decision-making, impulse control, and emotion regulation
	- Hippocampal neurotoxicity	Difficulty with learning and memory
	- VTA and reward processing dysregulation	Increased risky behaviors and risk of addiction
<b>Immunologic; Inflammatory</b>	- Increased inflammatory markers, especially Th2 response; inhibition of anti-inflammatory pathways; gut microbiome dysbiosis	Increased risk of infection, auto-immune disorders, cancers, chronic inflammation; cardiometabolic disorders
<b>Endocrine/ Metabolic</b>	- Changes in growth hormone, thyroid hormone, and pubertal hormonal axes	Changes in growth, development, basal metabolism, and pubertal events
	- Changes to leptin, ghrelin, lipid and glucose metabolism, and other metabolic pathways	Increased risk of overweight, obesity, cardiometabolic disorders, and insulin resistance
<b>Epigenetic/ Genetic</b>	- Sustained changes to the way DNA is read and transcribed	Mediates all aspects of the toxic stress response
	- Telomere erosion, altered cell replication, and premature cell death	Increased risk for disease, cancer, and early mortality

# Buffering the Toxic Stress Response



**Neurologic/Neuroendocrine:** MRI studies found that institutionalized children randomized to **high-quality nurturant caregiving** showed normalization of the developmental trajectory of white matter structures. **Responsive caregiving** also improves cortisol reactivity in children. **Time in nature** reduces sympathetic nervous system activity and increases parasympathetic activity.



**Immunologic:** **Meditation** was associated with decreased IFN- $\gamma$  and NK cell production of IL-10 and with increased T cell production of IL-4 (anti-inflammatory). **Healthy sleep** reduces infection risk and improves vaccination response, increasing NK cell activity, IL-6, and TNF-alpha levels. **Moderate exercise** decreases infection risk.



**Endocrine/Metabolic:** **Oxytocin** inhibits the stress response, enhances bonding, protects against stress-induced cell death, has anti-inflammatory effects, enhances metabolic homeostasis, and protects vascular endothelium. **Social support** buffers stress-related cardiovascular reactivity and decreases catecholamine levels. The **Mediterranean diet** reduces inflammation and risk for depression, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and mortality.



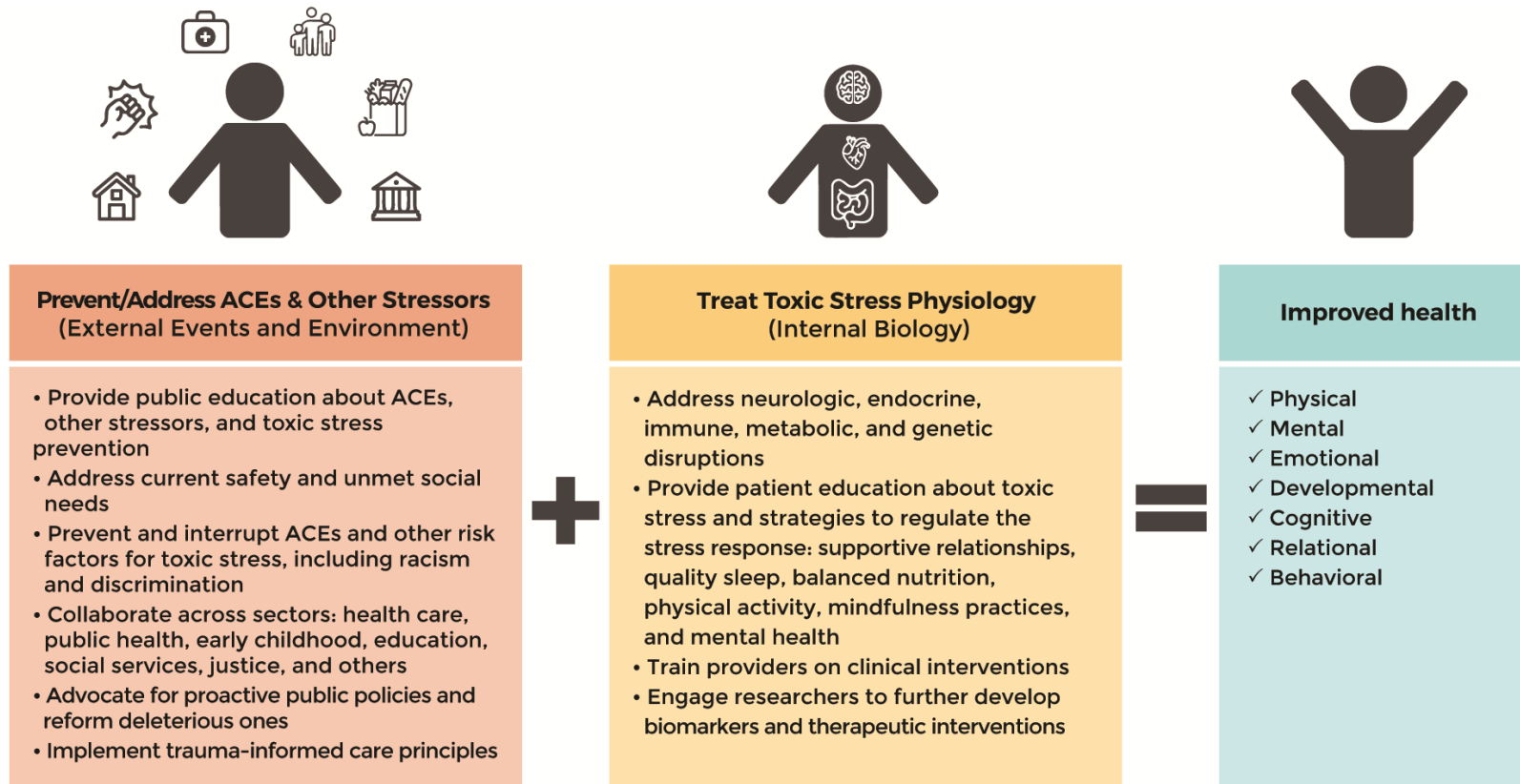
**Epigenetic:** Meany and colleagues found that **nurturant caregiving** was associated with epigenetic changes that led to greater stress tolerance, more normal functioning of the stress response, and improved cognitive performance.

# Evidenced-Based Buffering Interventions



Source: Adapted from Burke Harris, Nadine. *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018.

# We CAN Address ACEs and Toxic Stress!



Gilgoff R, Schwartz T, Owen M, Bhushan D, Burke Harris N. Opportunities to treat toxic stress. *Pediatrics*. 2023;151(1):e202105591

# Clinical Response to ACEs & Toxic Stress

- ▶ Apply principles of **trauma informed care**, including establishing trust, safety, and collaborative decision making
- ▶ Supplement usual care for ACE-associated health conditions
  - ▶ provide **patient education** on toxic stress
  - ▶ offer **strategies to regulate the stress response** (using the 7 evidence-based strategies)
- ▶ **Validate existing strengths and protective factors**
- ▶ **Refer** to patient resources or interventions such as educational materials, social work, school agencies, care coordination or patient navigation, community health workers
- ▶ **Follow-up** as necessary, using the ACE-associated health condition(s) as indicators of treatment progress.

# What is the Role of Strengths in Health?

- ▶ World Health Organization:
  - ▶ Health involves much more than simply the absence of disease; health involves optimal physical, mental, social and emotional functioning and well-being.
  - ▶ Deaths of Despair: (suicide, drug & alcohol overdoses, alcoholic liver disease)
    - ▶ Increased the death rate among White, non-Hispanic, rural Americans (CDC, 1999)
    - ▶ Increased by >20% during the COVID lockdown
- ▶ Strengths (or protective factors)
  - ▶ Build resilience
  - ▶ Help young families succeed
  - ▶ Influence youth decision-making about health behaviors

# Research shows Three sets of factors that differentiate children who overcame the odds

## 1. Protective factors within individuals

- ▶ Temperament sociable, good impulse control, social-emotional competence
- ▶ Language, communication, and problem solving skills
- ▶ Realistic plans with strong achievement motivation, internal locus of control

## 2. Protective factors in the family

- ▶ Close bond with at least one emotionally stable, nurturing person
- ▶ Substitute caregivers, supportive adults often recruited by child

## 3. Protective factors in the community / larger environment

- ▶ Reliance on community for positive support (assumes availability)
- ▶ Services and supports toward better life options, mental health recovery
- ▶ Experiences of competence in larger domain

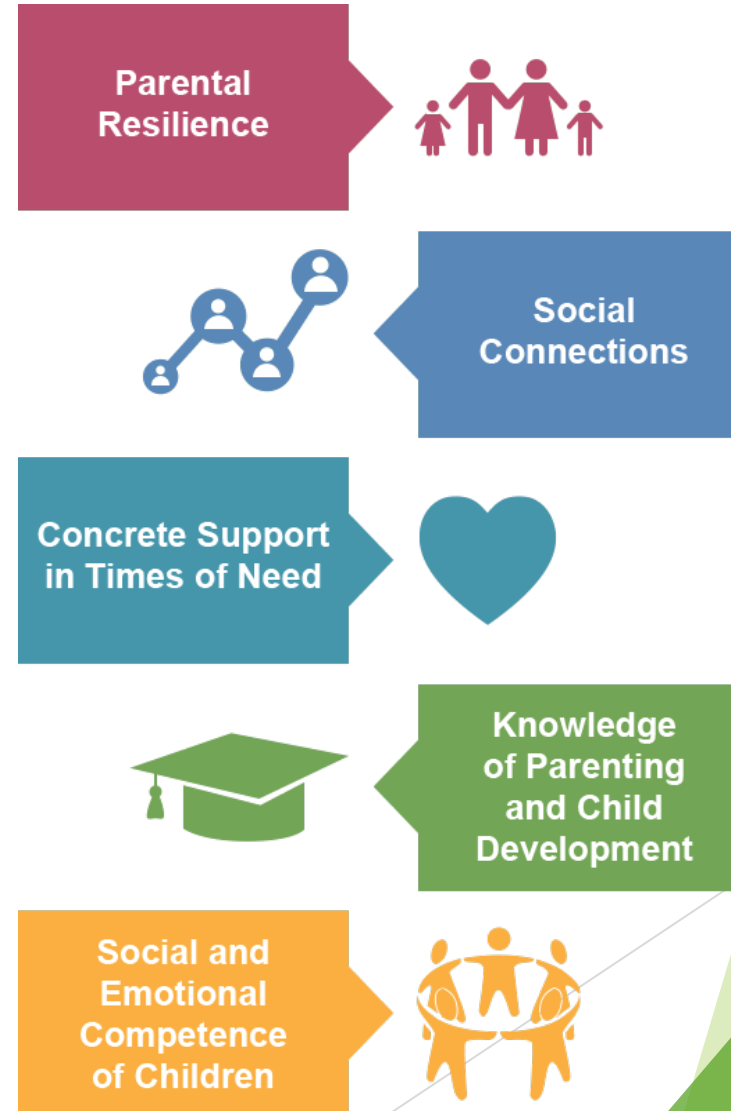


# The Strengthening Families Model

## Alaska Strengthening Families

1. **Parental Resilience:** Be strong, not stressed
2. **Social Connections:** Get and give support
3. **Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development:** Learn more so you can parent better
4. **Concrete Support in Times of Need:** Get help when you need it
5. **The Social-Emotional Competence of Children:** Help your child manage feelings and relationships

*Center for the Study of Social Policy*



# Resilience is the process of managing stress and functioning well even when things are difficult.

## Being resilient as a parent means...

- ▶ Taking care of yourself and asking for help when you need it.
- ▶ Feeling good about yourself and hopeful about your future.
- ▶ Planning for the future and for what you will do in situations that you know are challenging for you.
- ▶ Not allowing stress to get in the way of providing loving care for your child.
- ▶ Taking time to really enjoy your child and what you like about parenting.



# Social Connections: Get and Give Support!

Sometimes being a parent can be very stressful. It's easier to handle parenting challenges when we have positive relationships with family, friends and neighbors. Having a network of caring people in our life helps us feel secure, confident and empowered – and this helps us become better parents.

## Build a strong social support system by...

- ▶ Focusing on the relationships where you feel respected and appreciated
- ▶ Being willing to accept help from others and looking for opportunities to help them back
- ▶ Building your skills and comfort in reaching out to others, communicating, resolving conflict and doing all the other things that help to keep a friendship strong
- ▶ Building your network so you have multiple friends and connections to turn to

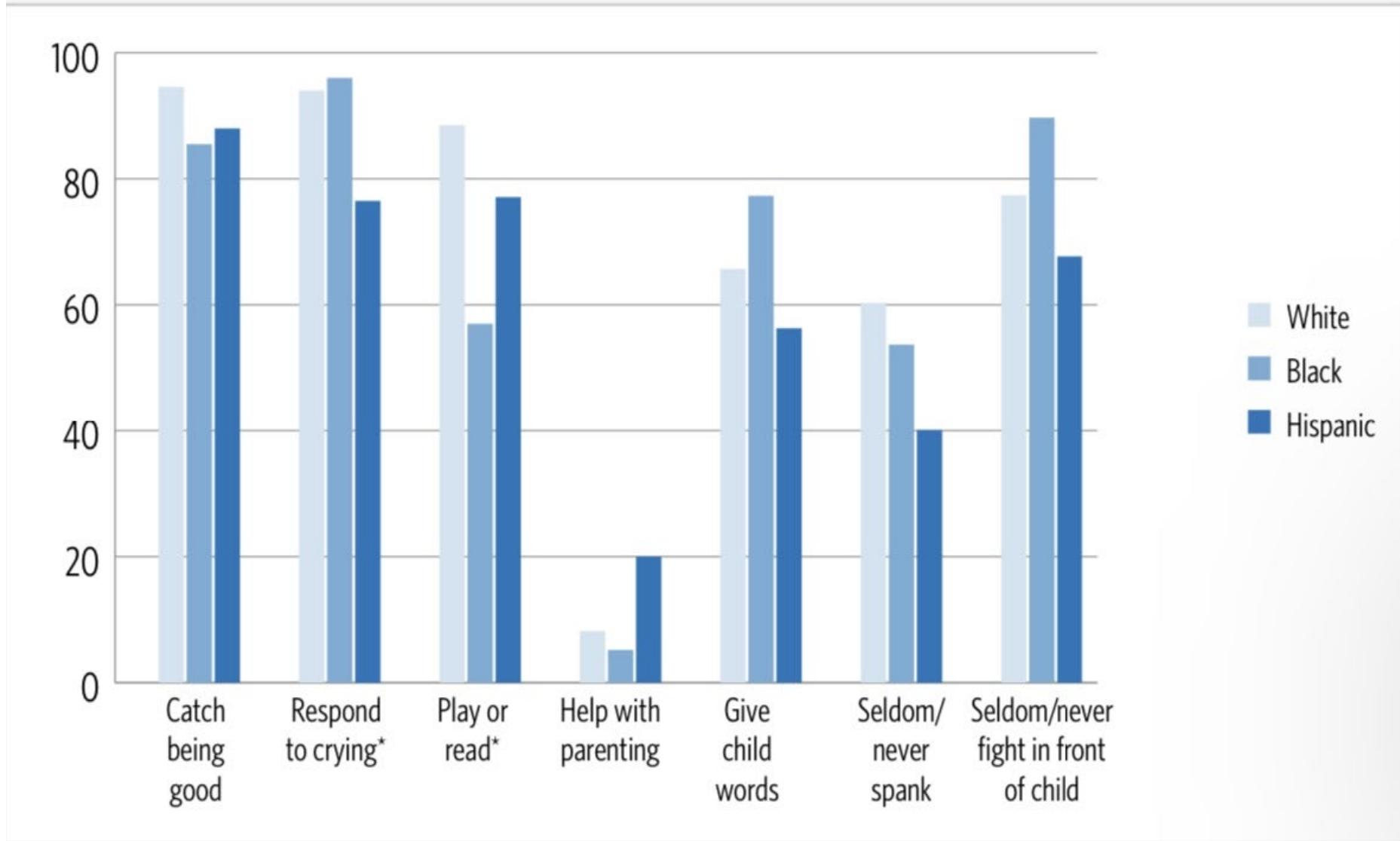
# Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

**There is no such thing as a perfect parent, but knowing what to expect does make the job a lot easier.**

## Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development Helps Us.....

- ▶ Know what to expect as your child grows and how you can best help her learn and thrive
- ▶ Use new skills to help your child be happy and healthy
- ▶ Recognize your child's unique needs
- ▶ Understand how to respond in a positive way when your child misbehaves
- ▶ By learning what our children need to do their best, we can give them the best start in life, enjoy parenting more and build strong, healthy families

FIGURE 9. POSITIVE PARENTING PRACTICES BY RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THE YOUNGOV.COM SURVEY



*In a survey of 2,500 American adults conducted by yougov.com, respondents with children under 5 years at home (n=416) were asked about a series of positive parenting practices. As shown above, other than for Hispanic parents in some areas, the response patterns were quite similar across racial and ethnic groups.*



# Concrete Support in Times of Need

All families go through tough times.

However, knowing where to get help in the community can make things a lot easier.

## It Is Important that Parents...



- ▶ Know what help is available.
- ▶ Ask for help when we need it.
- ▶ Get what we need to keep our families healthy and safe.
- ▶ Help others when possible.

# Concrete Supports: Helping with Social Determinants of Health

- ▶ When our families' basic needs are met:
  - We can spend less time worrying
  - More time helping our children learn and develop.
- ▶ Have you ever felt embarrassed to ask for help?
  - Take some time to remember how you feel when someone else asks you for help.
  - It can be hard to be the one asking, but everyone needs help sometimes.
  - Not only is there nothing wrong with getting help when you need it, but getting the help you need for yourself and your child is part of being a good parent.



# Social & Emotional Competence

Helping children develop social-emotional competence allows them to manage their emotions and build healthy relationships with their peers and adults.

The things we do to model & help our children learn these skills makes a huge difference. We can help our children develop these skills by:

- ▶ Responding warmly and consistently to your child
- ▶ Teaching your child the words they need to express how they feel
- ▶ Allowing your child to express their emotions
- ▶ Being a role model: show your child how to be kind and how to interact positively with other people

# Balancing ACEs with HOPE

## (Health Outcomes of Positive Experiences)

- ▶ **The Science of Thriving!** The possibility for flourishing even in the face of adversity
- ▶ National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH): Childhood Resilience related to 3 parental attributes:
  - ▶ Parents could discuss things that mattered
  - ▶ Parents participated in their child's activities & knew their friends
  - ▶ Parents managed their own stress around parenting
- ▶ The positive effect is profound regardless of the other adversities the child experiences!!

# How Positive Childhood Experiences Affect Adult Well-being

## Positive Childhood Experiences



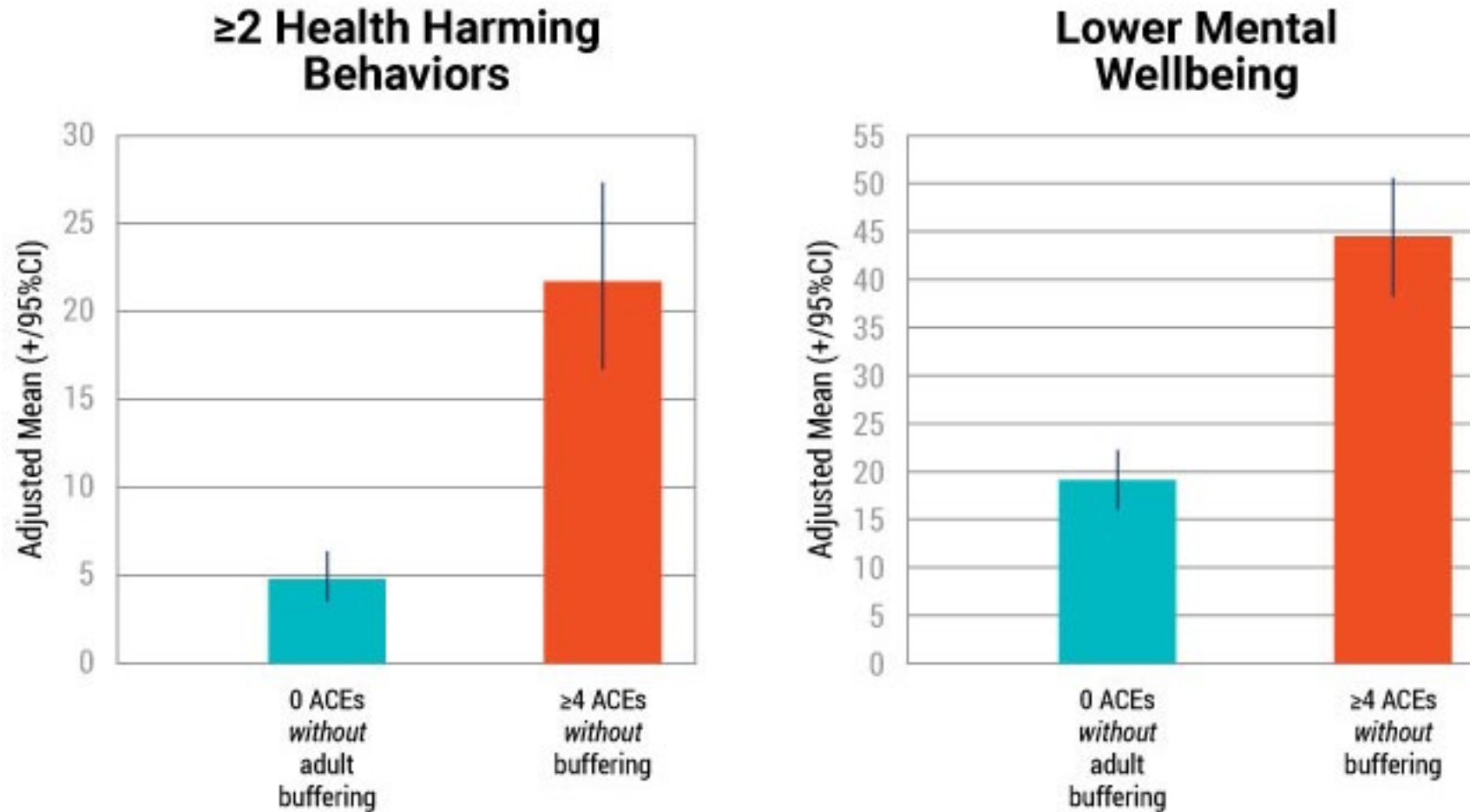
- ▶ Family stood by me
- ▶ Felt supported by friends
- ▶ Sense of belonging at high school
- ▶ Enjoyed community traditions

## Effect on Adult Health



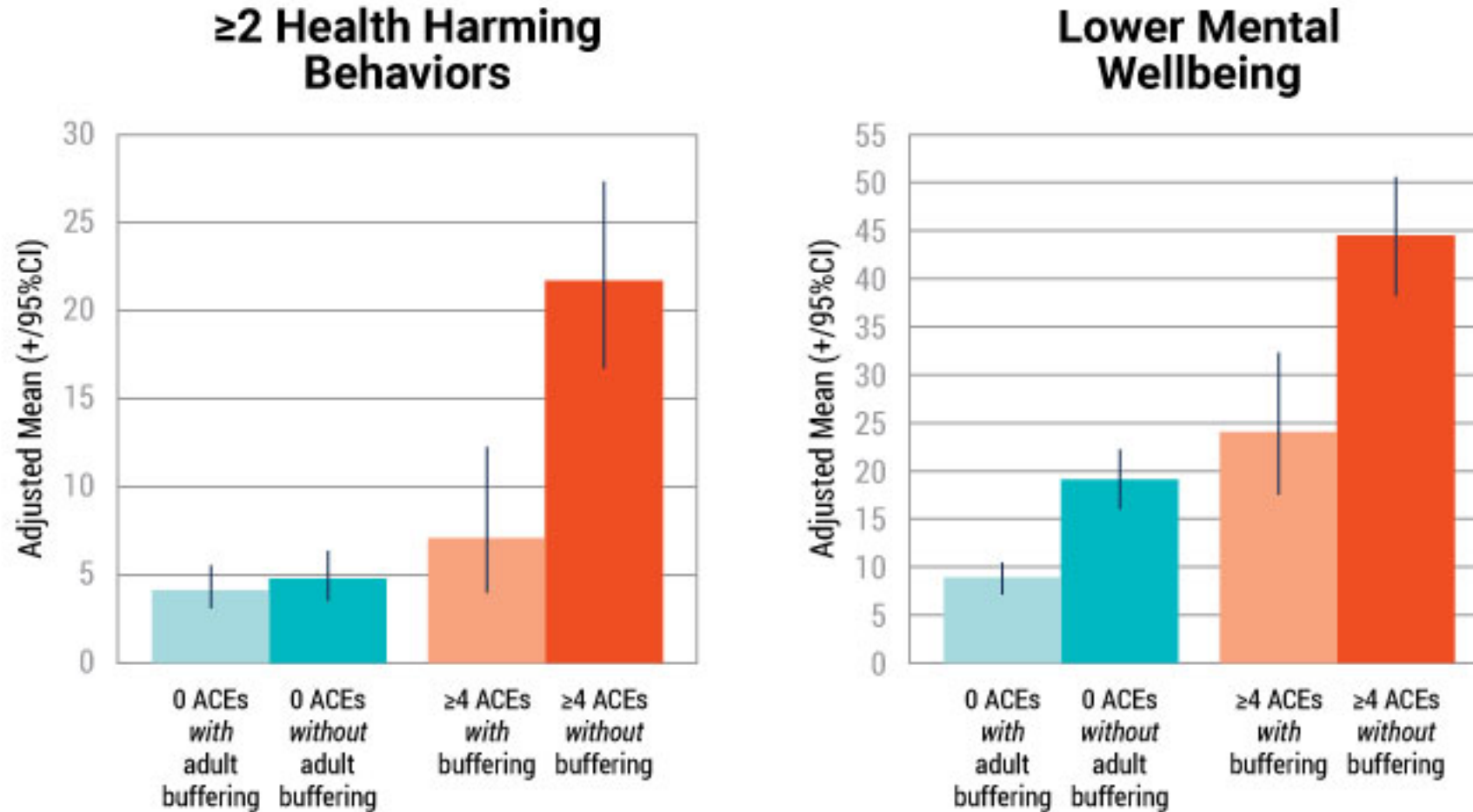
- ▶ Lower rates of poor/fair health
- ▶ Lower rates of obesity
- ▶ Lower rates of smoking

# IMPACT OF ACES



Source: Mark A. Bellis et al., "Does Continuous Trusted Adult Support in Childhood Impart Life-Course Resilience Against Adverse Childhood Experiences - A Retrospective Study on Adult Health-Harming Behaviours and Mental Well-Being," BMC Psychiatry 17, no. 1 (December 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-017-1260-z>.

# IMPROVED HEALTH OUTCOMES



Source: Mark A. Bellis et al., "Does Continuous Trusted Adult Support in Childhood Impart Life-Course Resilience Against Adverse Childhood Experiences - A Retrospective Study on Adult Health-Harming Behaviours and Mental Well-Being," BMC Psychiatry 17, no. 1 (December 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-017-1260-z>.

# Look for and Build Individual Strengths

- ▶ Infants, toddlers and young children rely on key adults in their environment to provide them with positive experiences, which will be the foundation to build their own strengths
- ▶ Older children and youth are in a position to begin to develop their own strengths
- ▶ Adolescents who have been exposed to ACEs and other stressors (negative SDoH, racism, bullying) may need help identifying and building their strengths

# Strength Frameworks: The Five (Seven) C's

K Pitman, Positive Youth Development;

K Ginsberg, Building Resilience in Children and Teens

- ▶ **Competence** - Act effectively in school, social situations, at work
- ▶ **Confidence** - Sense of self-worth, mastery; believe in your capacity to succeed
- ▶ **Connection** - Feeling of safety, structure, belonging; positive bonds with people
- ▶ **Character** - Taking responsibility; sense of independence and individuality; principles/values
- ▶ **Contribution** - Active participation in a variety of settings; making a difference
- ▶ **+Caring** - Sympathy/empathy for others; commitment to social justice
  
- ▶ **Coping** - Able to effectively deal with stress
- ▶ **Control** - Self-control; control over your decisions



# Strength Frameworks: The Circle of Courage

- ▶ Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg and Steve Van Bockern are co-founders of **Reclaiming Youth International**. They train people in and work directly with the Circle of Courage model. The visual representation of the Circle of Courage was created by a Lakota Sioux artist **George Blue Bird**.



# Circle of Courage and Adolescent Development

## Generosity(Character, Caring, Contribution)

- Demonstrate honesty & caring
- Offer help to family, friends, community
- Develop empathy

## Belonging(Connection)

- Develop healthy interactions and relationships within and beyond the family
- Strengthen connections at school, in the community

## Independence(Confidence, Control)

- Practice independent decision making
- Sense of control over what happens
- Establish an identity, sense of self-efficacy

## Mastery(Competence, Control, Coping)

- Learn and maintain good health habits
- Learn to control emotions, behavior
- Find something meaningful to do in life

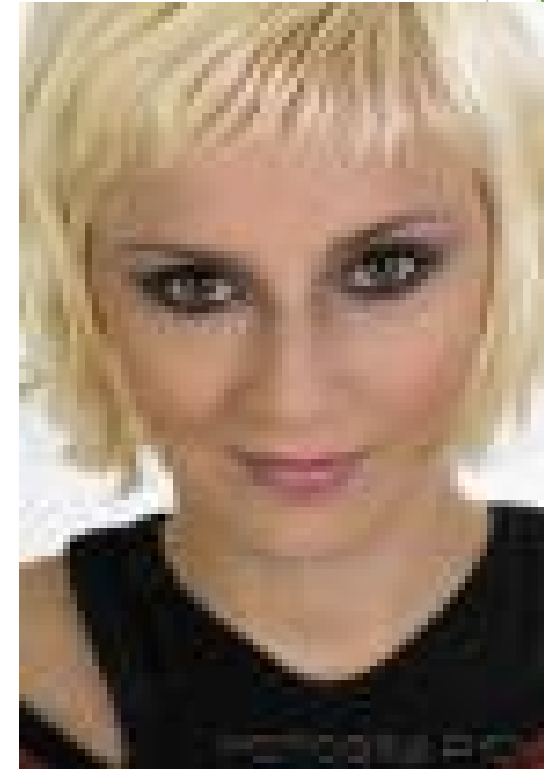
# Meet Tiffany!

- ▶ Tiffany is 17
- ▶ Living in 5<sup>th</sup> Foster Home (since 12 y/o)
- ▶ 12<sup>th</sup> Grade, failing math
- ▶ Past H/O tobacco, alcohol, marijuana use
- ▶ Sexually active w/o protection



# What are Tiffany's Strengths?

- B** - Feels like she fits in with new foster family, keeps in touch with former case worker in another county, new friends at new school, boyfriend
- M** - Knows how to take care of herself, get around town without a car, at grade-level, loves her art class, on track to graduate (except for math), wants to go to college
- I** - Making mostly healthy decisions around eating habits, no tobacco, etoh, drugs
- G** - Really cares about her friends and boy friend, shares food with them, wants to become a social worker and improve the foster care system



# Example Parent/Guardian Questions

- ▶ Tell me about the things your child does well.
- ▶ What do you like best about being your child's parent?
- ▶ What makes you most proud of your child? Of your family?
- ▶ How are you helping your child become a good decision-maker?
- ▶ How does your child help out at home? In the community?
- ▶ What are some of the things you do together as a family?

# Example Child/Adolescent Questions

- ▶ What are you good at? What are you passionate about?
- ▶ What do your friends like about you?
- ▶ Who are the important adults in your life? Who would you go to if you had a hard problem that you couldn't talk to your parents about?
- ▶ How do you stay healthy?
- ▶ What do you like to do after school?
- ▶ What are your responsibilities at home? At school?
- ▶ How do you help out your friends?
- ▶ If I were an employer, what are all the things that would make me want to hire you?

We do not Believe in  
ourselves until someone  
reveals that deep inside us  
something is valuable,  
worth listening to, worthy  
of our touch, sacred to our touch.  
Once we believe in ourselves we can  
risk curiosity, wonder, Spontaneous  
delight, or any experience that reveals  
the human spirit.

e.e. cummings



# Strength-Based Approach

- ▶ Identify parent/child/adolescent strengths
- ▶ Give feedback! Use a framework
- ▶ Explain how Strengths can buffer the effects of ACEs
- ▶ Document Strengths for future reference
- ▶ Incorporate Strengths & Stress Busters into Care Plans



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- ▶ Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire: <https://youthinmind.com/products-and-services/sdq/>

# Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire

- ▶ I try to be nice to other people. I care about their feelings
- ▶ I am restless, I cannot stay still for long
- ▶ I get a lot of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness
- ▶ I usually share with others, for example CD's, games, food
- ▶ I get very angry and often lose my temper
- ▶ I would rather be alone than with people of my age
- ▶ I usually do as I am told
- ▶ I worry a lot
- ▶ I am helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill
- ▶ I am constantly fidgeting or squirming
- ▶ I have one good friend or more
- ▶ I fight a lot. I can make other people do what I want
- ▶ I am often unhappy, depressed or tearful
- ▶ Other people my age generally like me
- ▶ I am easily distracted, I find it difficult to concentrate
- ▶ I am nervous in new situations. I easily lose confidence
- ▶ I am kind to younger children
- ▶ I am often accused of lying or cheating
- ▶ Other children or young people pick on me or bully me
- ▶ I often offer to help others (parents, teachers, children)
- ▶ I think before I do things
- ▶ I take things that are not mine from home, school or elsewhere
- ▶ I get along better with adults than with people my own age
- ▶ I have many fears, I am easily scared
- ▶ I finish the work I'm doing. My attention is good