

HOW CAN THE CHURCH ADDRESS ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES?

By Tamara Fyke



Of the roughly 74 million children in the United States, just under 51 million are preK–12 public school students. Every day, [13 million](#) of these children go hungry. A report of child abuse is made [every ten seconds](#). And 2.7 million have a parent in prison. Our children are living in a state of emergency. How can we, as the church, expect them to attend to a relationship with God when they are living in a constant state of fight or flight?

Even though the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente conducted the first study on [adverse childhood experiences](#) (ACEs) from 1995 to 1997, ACEs did not gain widespread attention until [2012](#). Perhaps that's because ACE-related questions can make people uncomfortable. They uncover the hidden problems in families: verbal, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; alcoholism; lack of necessities; or feelings of being unloved or neglected. These problems transcend race, religion, and socioeconomic status just as issues of mass violence, racial prejudice, and catastrophic events do. Every one of them can contribute to mental illness. How can the church help children and youth succeed in life and faith despite ACEs?

One way we can help is to adopt [positive development and universal prevention strategies](#). Recognizing that many children and youth spend more awake time at school than they do at church or at home, we need to accept—and *embrace*—that our role as the church includes partnering with parents and educators to develop the whole child, which includes a focus on social and emotional learning.

Relationships, Common Language, and Purposeful Activities

According to Hawkins and Catalano ([1992](#)), three elements help children move from risk to resiliency: a caring, nurturing environment; high expectations; and meaningful engagement. In other words, relationships, common language, and purposeful activities.

When I worked with Maury Nation at Vanderbilt's Center for Safe & Supportive Schools, he reminded our team regularly that no program is the magical fix for building and maintaining a healthy culture and climate at any organization. Culture is what we do; climate is what we feel. The key to building resilient children and

youth is relationships. A connection with a child, especially one who has experienced great loss, may begin with a baby step—a smile or high-five each morning, or an invitation to help with a special job in the classroom. Or maybe it starts with intentional conversation during a dedicated learning time. Once a connection is established, church members, including lay people and leaders, need to nurture it with regular, positive interactions. It's simple, but not always easy.

Recognizing and Responding to the Effects of ACEs

Integrating social and emotional learning requires intentionality with content and process, and provides the foundation for trauma-informed ministry that is responsive to the mental health needs of children and youth. Here are some ideas for recognizing and responding to a child's needs:

1. **Create a safe place with established norms.** Work with students to create a ministry creed that defines the children or youth community and how its members interact with each other. Have the students create posters of the creed and display them around the room. This activity helps students know that your time together is a safe place that values their voices. Talk about this creed often—in relation to the content being learned and when positive and negative examples of the creed are displayed by community members.
2. **Value student voice with guided conversations.** Provide opportunities for students to talk about their personal experiences in connection to a text, particularly Scripture. You may integrate this discussion into the regular learning time as well as set aside designated time for deeper conversations during weekly programming, lunch visits or special activities.

Listening to what our students say—and what they don't say—offers insight into their trauma.

- 3. Be on the alert for unusual behaviors.** A student who is acting out repeatedly is often asking for help. Personal troubles are not an excuse. However, it is important to uncover the root of the negative behavior. Talk to the child and ask what is prompting them to act this way. Likewise, a student who continuously comes to church tired, depressed, or unkempt, especially if he or she has a history of being focused, happy, and eager to participate, may have recently experienced a traumatic event. Seek additional support from other ministry staff, the school counselor or school social worker for the child as well as for yourself, particularly if your child's experience has triggered you.

Remember, outside the home, the church provides an additional line of defense for children and youth. If you can follow this advice, you'll strengthen your relationships with your children and youth and hopefully become their trusted ally in working through any trauma they've experienced. ACEs are among the leading factors contributing to the state of mental health among our young people. Informed, dedicated church leaders and volunteers have the power to make a tremendous difference in the lives of their children and youth.