

## INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

### QRTP Infosheet: Issue Ten

#### How Trauma Affects Generations

Trauma is an emotionally painful or distressing event, such as experiences of violence, abuse, or living in an unsafe, unstable household (e.g., drug use in the household, incarceration of a household member).<sup>1</sup> When these events occur in childhood, they are known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Prolonged exposure to trauma can result in toxic stress, a prolonged activation of the body's fight-or-flight response. Severe stress increases a person's risk of "wear and tear" on the body, impacting the immune, endocrine, and nervous systems.<sup>2</sup>

#### Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational trauma is the theory that trauma can be inherited because acute or chronic stress can cause changes to how genes function, a process known as - **epigenetic change**. Intergenerational trauma occurs when the effects of trauma are passed down through generations, affecting the physical, mental, and emotional health of the descendants. It can result from various sources of trauma, such as community violence, poverty, abuse, war, genocide, slavery, colonization, racism and other forms of discrimination, or natural disasters. These acute or long-term traumatic experiences can overwhelm survivors and impair their coping skills. This can also occur if a parent experienced ACEs, and the cycle of trauma undermines their ability to provide a secure, healthy, and nurturing family environment.

Trauma can alter the **gene expression** of the survivors, making them more vulnerable to stress and illness. These changes can be passed on to their offspring through epigenetic mechanisms.

*Researchers report paternal alcohol exposure prior to conception is associated with an increased risk of fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) and facial growth defects in their offspring.<sup>3</sup>*

*If a father smokes and the toxins in the smoke provoke an epigenetic alteration in his genome, that altered gene can be passed on to his child.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019). Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences: Leveraging the Best Available Evidence; Health Policy Institute of Ohio (2020). Health Impact of ACEs in Ohio.

<sup>2</sup> Health Policy Institute of Ohio (2020). Health impact of ACEs in Ohio.

<sup>3</sup> Father's Alcohol Consumption Before Conception Linked to Brain and Facial Defects in Offspring; *Neuroscience*, April 2023

<sup>4</sup> The Epigenetics of Childhood Trauma; Part 1: How childhood adversity can provoke long-term health consequences. Diane McIntosh, MD, *Psychology Today*, September 2019 [Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

When **experiences** during development rearrange the epigenetic markers that govern gene expression, they can change whether and how genes release the information they carry.

Thus, the epigenome can be affected by



**Positive** experiences

- Supportive relationships
- Opportunities for learning



Or **negative** influences

- Environmental toxins
- Stressful life circumstances

### Intergenerational Trauma and Parenting

Trauma can also affect the **parenting behaviors** and attachment styles, creating cycles of abuse, neglect, or dysfunction in their families and communities.

ACEs are often intergenerational, meaning that the children of parents with ACEs can be at greater risk themselves. Parents who have experienced trauma in their childhoods, without also having key protective factors, (e.g., an adult who makes a child feel safe and protected), may have developed an overactive stress response, which can increase their risk for both physical, mental, and behavioral health concerns. These health issues can tax a family's resources and interfere with a parent's ability to be a healthy support for their child. In addition, parents with an overactive stress response may have more difficulty managing stress and emotions and self-regulating in a healthy manner when engaging with their kids. This can affect their parenting practices, make parent-child interactions difficult, contribute to future problems, and keep the intergenerational cycle going. Trauma can manifest in different ways in the descendants, such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, substance use, low self-esteem, identity issues, or cultural disconnection.



Just because a person has [experienced several ACEs](#) does not mean that later social, emotional, or health problems are inevitable. Trauma can be healed through various approaches, such as therapy, education, cultural reconnection, storytelling, art, spirituality, and/or activism, and help the descendants understand, process, and transform their trauma. ACEs can also be buffered by assets and resources known as protective factors.

### **Preventing ACEs<sup>5</sup>**

There are several strategies that can prevent ACEs from happening in the first place as well as strategies to mitigate the harms of ACEs. The evidence tells us that ACEs can be prevented by:

- Strengthening economic supports for families
- Promoting social norms that protect against violence and adversity
- Ensuring a strong start for children
- Teaching skills to handle stress, manage emotions, and tackle everyday challenges
- Connecting youth with caring adults and activities
- Intervene to lessen immediate and long-term harms

These strategies focus on changing norms, environments, and behaviors in ways that can prevent ACEs from happening in the first place. The last strategy focuses on mitigating the immediate and long-term physical, mental, and behavioral consequences of ACEs. By addressing the conditions that give rise to ACEs and at the same time addressing the needs of children and parents, these strategies take a multi-generational approach to preventing ACEs and ensuring safe, and stable relationships and nurturing environments. Together, these strategies are intended to work in combination and reinforce each other to prevent ACEs and achieve greater impact.

## **RESOURCES**

### **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline**

Ohioans who are experiencing a mental health or addiction crisis and their family members can call, chat or text 988 to reach a trained counselor who can offer help and support.

### **Ohio Mental Health and Addiction Services**

- Crisis Text Line – Text 4Hope to 741 741 for free, confidential conversation  
[Crisis Text Line | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services \(ohio.gov\)](#)
- Ohio Careline (1-800-720-9616) for free, confidential connection to licensed provider  
[Ohio CareLine | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services](#)
- OhioMHAS Get Help for a variety of resources on control connection, and meaning  
[Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services | Ohio.gov](#)
- It is important to instill resiliency in Ohio's children. We can do that by giving them a strong start to their education and addressing childhood trauma

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<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019). Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences: Leveraging the Best Available Evidence

- Resources  
[Resources | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services \(ohio.gov\)](#)

### **Heath Policy Institute of Ohio**

The Health Policy Institute of Ohio (HPIO) is a statewide, nonprofit organization located in Columbus, Ohio, that was created in 2003 by a group of health foundations. These funders recognized the need for a statewide organization focused on independent, non-partisan health policy analysis. HPIO has earned a reputation as a trusted and credible resource for state policymakers and other key stakeholders. HPIO led the [Ohio ACEs Impact Project](#) includes a series of three policy briefs and this resource page to build on and amplify current efforts to address ACEs in Ohio.

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention**

*“Saving Lives, Protecting People”* - CDC is the nation’s leading science-based, data-driven, service organization that protects the public’s health. For more than 70 years, we’ve put science into action to help children stay healthy so they can grow and learn; to help families, businesses, and communities fight disease and stay strong; and to protect the public’s health. [Adverse childhood experiences \(ACEs\)](#) can have a tremendous impact on future violence victimization and perpetration, and lifelong health and opportunity. CDC works to understand ACEs and prevent them.

- [Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\): Leveraging the Best Available Evidence](#)

### **The Wellness Project**

[The Wellness Project](#) is a multimedia, multi-experiential collection of resources and practices to support and enhance your individual and organizational wellness and resilience. The purpose of this website is to discover a variety of ways for supporting helping professionals, so they can show up as the “best version of themselves.” It includes a holistic system of wellness activities such as reading, listening, watching, cooking, connecting, moving, breathing, and resting.

### **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration**

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) is the agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that leads public health efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation. [Understanding Child Trauma](#) provides information on the prevalence and impact of traumatic events on children, and what actions can be taken to support children who experience traumatic events.