

Insights

Did You Know Childhood Trauma Affects Nearly Half of American Children?



“Early childhood trauma transcends economic, cultural and racial demographics; it can happen to anyone regardless of their background,” says NICHQ Project Director Colleen Murphy, MSMOB.

In the United States, [34.8 million children](#) (ages 0-17)—nearly half of American children—are exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that can severely harm their future health and well-being. The implications are so severe that, according to [a CDC ACE Study](#), exposure to six or more ACEs can lower an individual’s life expectancy by nearly 20 years.

ACEs fall under the category of early childhood trauma, a rampant and often unreported problem in the U.S., and [include stressful or traumatic events stemming from abuse, neglect, household dysfunction and toxic stress](#). This trauma can:

- activate the sympathetic nervous system by releasing stress hormones, resulting in an increased heart rate and breathing, constricted blood vessels, tightened muscles and dilated pupils.
- negatively impact children’s developing brains—which are especially vulnerable to the stress induced by trauma—by releasing hormones that physically alter developing brain

structure and function.

- adversely impact a child's developing immune system, hormonal systems and even the way the body reads and transcribes DNA.
- lead children to spend most of their lives in fight-or-flight mode, making it difficult for them to build healthy relationships, thrive at school or maintain future employment.

“Early childhood trauma transcends economic, cultural and racial demographics; it can happen to anyone regardless of their background,” says NICHQ Project Director Colleen Murphy, MSMOB. “In our efforts to improve early childhood systems and achieve health equity, we need to acknowledge trauma as a critical social determinant of children’s health.”

An Early Childhood Trauma Collaborative Innovation Network (Trauma CoIN) is addressing this issue head on. The Trauma CoIN, a subset of the NICHQ-led Infant Mortality Collaborative Improvement and Innovation Network ([Infant Mortality CoIIN](#)), seeks to raise awareness among parents, community members and policy experts about how to define and understand early childhood trauma and its impact across society, and to promote resiliency and healing.

Are you interested in starting a Collaborative Innovation Network to improve children’s health outcomes? [Contact NICHQ](#) to find out how.

The Trauma CoIN leverages a collaborative framework to bring together practitioners and subject matter experts from multiple sectors to develop their collective expertise and build awareness about childhood trauma. Their work has led to the following tips for those seeking to establish momentum in their community or state:

- **Provide the appropriate language:** While people are already discussing the importance of addressing early childhood trauma, this conversation can be stalled when participants are confronted with misinformation or unexplained jargon. Creating a place for accessible, evidence-based information can generate productive, equitable conversation, bringing together participants of different backgrounds and levels of expertise.
- **Build awareness:** Much of the current conversation takes place within academia, meaning that many possible allies and resources are left untapped. Moving the conversation into the mainstream media by raising public awareness can build vital energy and momentum.
- **Study successful models:** A number of states have legislation that addresses early childhood trauma and support a trauma-informed health system. From developing ACE screenings to incorporating trauma-informed processes into multiple early childhood systems, [these bills and statutes](#) signify a growing national momentum.

The first two tips are already being addressed by the Trauma CoIN with an [Early Childhood Trauma Wikipedia page](#) that provides an accessible site for individuals to learn about early childhood trauma and access educational materials. By exploring their page, you can join the conversation and help build lasting awareness.

“Early childhood trauma is one in a lengthy list of social determinants impacting children’s health,” says Murphy. “We’ll achieve true health equity—where every child in every population reaches his or her health potential— when all childhood systems, from health to education to housing, account for all social determinants of health.”

The Trauma CoIN is continuously growing and welcomes further collaborations to help raise awareness of early childhood trauma and its impacts across the lifespan, and to promote resilient and responsive systems. If you are interested in joining, [please subscribe](#) to the listserv to receive announcements of future meetings. For additional questions, please email the list owners at TRAUMA-COIN-request@LIST.NIH.GOV.