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For Immediate Release

Break the Cycle of Childhood Trauma

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Over half of us grew up in families with childhood experiences that were marked with challenges and were certainly less than idyllic. The sobering truth is that the experiences we had as children may unknowingly contribute to perpetuating the same adverse experiences for our own children.

A year or so ago, five Iowa State University Extension and Outreach family life specialists—including myself, had the opportunity to interact with Dr. Robert Anda, co-investigator with the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACES) conducted with the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente Healthcare during the 1990's. In short the study, led by Anda and Dr. Vincent Felliti, found that childhood experiences of physical, emotional and sexual abuse including neglect as well as household dysfunctions like substance abuse, divorce, incarceration, hunger, domestic violence, mental illness and incarceration can lead to a host of adult health and social problems. Plain and simple, childhood trauma is the nation's No. 1 public health problem. The ACE Study -- the largest public health study you never heard of -- shows that childhood trauma is very, very common. The study found that two-thirds of United States adults have experienced at least one type of childhood trauma.

Children who are exposed to many adverse childhood experiences may become overloaded with stress hormones, leaving them in a constant state of fight or flight, and unable to focus. Children learn adaptive and coping behaviors in response to these experiences. Anda and Filleti also found that adverse childhood experiences seem to cluster. In other words, 40% of those studied had two or more adverse childhood experiences. The more experiences the more health issues that are likely to results. The number of experiences was strongly associated with adulthood high-risk health behaviors such as smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, promiscuity, severe obesity, and correlated with ill health including depression, heart disease, cancer, chronic lung disease and shortened lifespan.

The ACE Study broke new ground in exposing the physical manifestations of childhood trauma. The effects of adverse childhood experiences can last a lifetime, but they don't have to for our children.

The cycle can be broken by developing safe, stable, and nurturing relationships that heal the parent and the child. The key to success is healthy relationships and building resiliency.

The encouraging facts are that a third of all adults have an ACE score (adverse childhood experiences) of 0, and these adults have few, if any, risk factors for diseases that are common causes of death in the US. Can you imagine how creative, vital, healthy and innovative our country would be if every child had an ACE Score of ZERO! But, unfortunately, we can't go backward and correct the past.

Learn more from the blog through the Science of Parenting, www.scienceofparenting.org, where ISU Extension and Outreach specialists share and discuss research-based information and resources to help parents rear their children. Parents can join in the conversation and share thoughts and experiences, as well as how they handle parenting responsibilities.

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