

The Impact of Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) on Behavioral Health Outcomes



Purpose

The Impact of Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) on Behavioral Health Outcomes is a resource developed to support and educate violence prevention partners, and those who work within child-serving systems, about community-led efforts to adopt and implement evidence-based strategies that can prevent Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), promote PCEs, and improve the lives of California's children, families, and communities.

Background

ACEs are potentially traumatic events, such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction.¹ ACEs have been shown to put children at risk for delays in social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development lasting into adulthood.¹ PCEs, such as supportive relationships and safe environments, have been shown to enhance resilience and mental well-being, helping to buffer the negative effects of ACEs.^{2,3}

ACEs and PCEs shape emotional regulation, brain development, and health outcomes. Experiencing four or more ACEs increases the risk of mental health challenges in adulthood, while PCEs are critical for fostering resilience and better behavioral health outcomes.^{4,5} There are four types of PCEs that support lifelong psychological well-being and encourage children to thrive and grow into resilient adults. The Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (HOPE) Framework describes these four key types of PCEs – Relationships, Environments, Engagement, and Emotional Growth – as the Four Building Blocks of HOPE. (Figure 1).^{4,6} The Four Building Blocks of HOPE can be used by organizations, communities, and individuals as an accessible and actionable framework when undertaking policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) change efforts.⁷

HOPE[®]



Safe and supportive relationships within the family and with other children and adults



Safe, equitable, and stable environments where children can live, learn, and play



Opportunities for social and civic engagement to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness



Opportunities for emotional growth where children feel supported through difficult events and emotions

Figure 1: The Four Building Blocks of the HOPE Framework^{4,7}

PCEs Impact Behavioral Health




Growing research shows that when ACE scores remain low (i.e., ≤ 3), and PCEs increase, PCEs can positively influence the behavioral health and well-being of children and adults.^{2,5} Examples of how PCEs can influence behavioral health include:





- Adults who had fewer PCEs were more likely to report experiencing Depression or Poor Mental Health (D/PMH) compared to those with higher PCEs.²
- The lowest rates of D/PMH were found among people who had higher PCEs and either no ACEs or strong social supports.²

These findings emphasize the importance of implementing PSE change efforts that elevate and promote PCEs to complement ACE prevention efforts.

Community Action Can Create PCEs

Building environments that promote PCEs can be achieved through community-led efforts. When communities adopt and implement strategies that are rooted in promoting access to PCEs, conditions can be created that improve youth behavioral health and long-term health. The following are strategies that communities can utilize to promote PCEs:

Strategy	How this strategy promotes PCEs	Type of PCE ⁴
Youth Coalitions and Leadership Opportunities	Establishing youth coalitions and supporting engagement in participatory planning efforts can foster civic engagement, school and community connectedness, and a sense of belonging. ^{8,9}	 ENGAGEMENT
Trauma-Informed Policies and Training	Adopting trauma-informed definitions and implementing staff training across child-serving systems (e.g., education, healthcare, public safety) can lead to safe, stable, and nurturing environments and increase supportive relationships for youth. ^{10,11,12,13}	 ENVIRONMENT
Social-Emotional Learning and School Climate Programs	Implementing social-emotional learning curriculum and positive behavior frameworks supports emotional regulation development, resilience, and stronger school-based relationships. These strategies also support goals under the Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) framework related to School Climate (LCAP Priority Area Six). ^{14,15,16}	 EMOTIONAL GROWTH

Strategy	How this strategy promotes PCEs	Type of PCE ⁴
Caregiver Support Services	Positive parenting workshops, home visiting programs, and caregiver peer support groups can enhance emotional support and the presence of nurturing adult relationships in the lives of youth. ¹⁷	 <p>RELATIONSHIPS</p>
Access to Behavioral Health and Wellness Services	Expanding access to school-based behavioral health professionals, culturally responsive care and services, and mobile crisis teams can ensure reliable connections for youth to trusted adults and behavioral health services. ^{18,19}	 <p>EMOTIONAL GROWTH</p>
Safe and Inclusive Spaces	Community investment in youth centers, parks, libraries, and after-school programs can create safe and stable environments for youth that encourage exploration, connection, and consistent adult support. ^{20,21,22}	 <p>ENVIRONMENT</p>
Family and Community Engagement	Strengthening collaboration between schools, families, and community-based organizations encourages shared decision-making with youth and can help foster a sense of connection, belonging, and support across settings. ²³	 <p>RELATIONSHIPS</p>



Conclusion

Positive and Adverse Childhood Experiences (PACEs) impact development and health outcomes throughout the lifecycle. When ACE prevention efforts are complemented by strategies and approaches that promote PCEs, PCEs can foster resilience and reduce the risk of depression, anxiety, and other behavioral health challenges in adulthood.² Approaches described in this resource can directly foster nurturing relationships, emotional support, and improve community connectedness, which are critical to improving long-term behavioral health outcomes.^{2,3,4,6}

Community coalitions, public health practitioners, and child serving systems can support community-led efforts to advance meaningful change by embedding PCE-aligned strategies into programs and policies, supportive environments, and investment in community solutions. Additionally, PCE-focused strategies can reduce long-term societal costs of ACEs. In California, costs across the lifetime associated with ACEs are estimated to exceed \$284 billion annually, highlighting the urgent need for preventive strategies.²⁴

Grounding these efforts in the four types of PCEs (i.e., Relationships, Environments, Engagement, and Emotional Growth) ensures a more coordinated, impactful approach. Centering early education, mentorship, caregiver support, and housing stability can build healthier, more resilient communities, and ensure every child has a foundation for lifelong success.



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