

early childhood educators & professionals



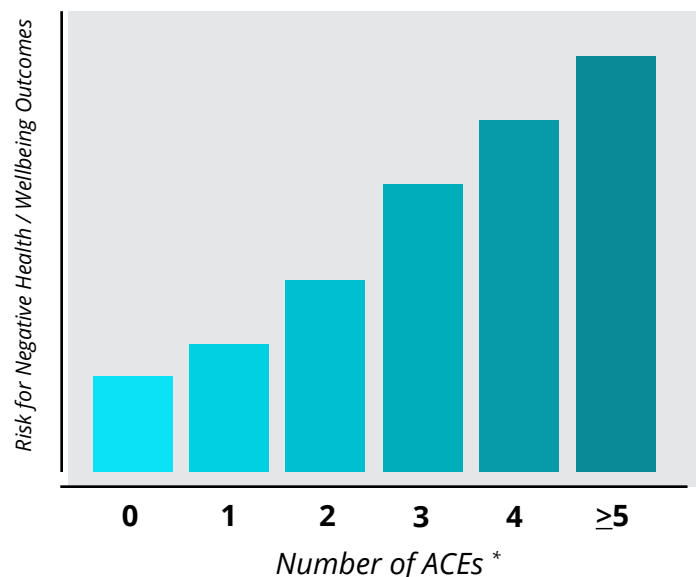
Early life is a time of exploration, learning through play, and discovering the world. Professionals who work with young children dedicate their time and energy to ensuring this time is nourishing and healthy. Whether it is a day care specialist, preschool teacher, or Head Start educator, these individuals are **allies in promoting community wellness and safety**. This technical assistance resource offers reasons why partnerships between sexual violence preventionists and early childhood professionals support prevention throughout the lifespan, and provides ideas for how to develop successful and meaningful partnerships.

WHY COLLABORATE WITH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS?

Trauma in childhood can have lasting effects throughout the lifespan. **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** refer to 10 types of child abuse, neglect, and family circumstances that lead to "toxic stress." The impact of ACEs has been explored many times since the late 1990s.

The first study, which focused on adult members of a health maintenance organization, illuminated ways in which exposure to ACEs related to a range of poor health outcomes in adulthood, including increased risk of adolescent alcohol and drug use, mental health concerns, poor physical health, and risk-taking behaviors.¹ Additional research efforts have further demonstrated how the stress associated with ACEs can disrupt brain development, compromise immune systems, and increase the likelihood of an individual engaging in harmful habits.²

▶ **adverse childhood experiences (ACEs):**
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Although childhood trauma can have lasting effects, there is hope for decreasing the impact of these stressors or preventing them altogether. **Professionals and caring adults who intervene on behalf of a child can counter toxic stressors and enhance resilience.**³ These interventions – however small – can promote feelings of hope and connection for a child.

In addition to mitigating the long-term impact of childhood trauma, early childhood educators can be strong advocates for primary prevention programming and promoting organizational policies designed to respond to and prevent abuse.

These partners bring an expert knowledge of child development and learning styles. Early childhood professionals also have strong relationships with parents, guardians, and families of the child under their care; they are regarded as trusted resources and can facilitate necessary conversations with influential community leaders. Together, sexual violence preventionists and early childhood professionals can explore innovative and age-appropriate ways to promote respecting boundaries, consent, and empathy.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION & TRAINING

To set the stage for later interventions and prevention strategies, we must lay a solid foundation of trust and respect. There are many areas where sexual violence preventionists and early childhood educators can collaborate – below are a few ideas to begin the process.

The long-term consequences of childhood trauma

Offering training on ACEs from a trauma-informed prevention perspective could provide new ways to think about early life. For example, offering training on shared risk factors for perpetrating violence and connecting them to toxic stress and community trauma. We can contextualize individual trauma within the “bigger picture” of systems and forms of inequality. When we situate toxic stress in childhood with either perpetration behaviors or victimization experiences later in life, we can help professionals see their role in the primary prevention of sexual violence.

Responding appropriately to expressions of childhood sexual development

Representations of sexuality saturate U.S. culture, yet we do not get many opportunities to have honest and accurate conversations about sexual development. This is particularly true in regards to childhood sexual development; discussions of sexuality and children either are conflated with abuse or are approached with an adult understanding of sex and sexual behavior. However, sexuality is something that is experienced throughout the lifespan – including in early childhood. Being able to address behaviors in an appropriate and non-shaming way is incredibly important for promoting healthy boundaries and keeping children safe from abuse. **Professionals in the sexual violence prevention movement can help early childhood educators identify healthy age-appropriate behaviors, as well as problematic behaviors that could require intervention** (e.g. early indicators of sexual abuse or perpetration behaviors in children acting out abuse they have experienced).

Promoting gender equity in the learning environment

Many of the root causes or risk factors of sexual violence perpetration stem from a strong adherence to traditional or dominant attitudes about gender.⁴ Sexual violence preventionists can help explain these links to professionals working with young children and brainstorm strategies for modeling equity and value for all genders. For example, educators can ensure that books in the classroom represent perspectives of young girls challenging stereotypes or common fictional tropes.

It is also important to support professionals in addressing inherent biases they may not know promote gender power imbalances. How often are they calling on young girls to answer questions? Are children disciplined in the same way for similar



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conduct? How are gender-nonconforming children spoken to or regarded?

This list is not exhaustive – there are a number of ways preventionists and early childhood educators can collaborate and cross-train: working to develop a deeper understanding of mandatory reporting and suspected child abuse, outlining steps for strengthening community resources for childhood trauma, and developing organizational and school policies that protect children from harm.



RESOURCES & STRATEGIES⁵

Partnerships between preventionists and early childhood professionals have resulted in resources detailing strategies for engaging parents and community members and creating safer organizations. The resources below are not an exhaustive list, but help us cultivate a deeper understanding of how these partnerships can look.

Understanding Childhood Trauma

The **National Sexual Violence Resource Center** created [a collection of online resources and tools](#) for caretakers, organizations, and communities assuming the responsibility of preventing child sexual abuse.

The **Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University** has a number of [resources on toxic stress](#) and the impact on development.

The **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** have collected and organized articles, data, and resources on the [Adverse Childhood Experiences Study](#).

Promoting Healthy Norms

The **Boston Area Rape Crisis Center's** research brief and training, "She did WHAT?" "He said WHAT?" are designed to support early childhood educators in promoting healthy development and protecting children from sexual abuse.

The 2013 national [Sexual Assault Awareness Month campaign](#) focused on healthy sexuality and child sexual abuse prevention. Resources were designed for adults, communities, and organizations to help identify risk factors, support healthy boundaries, and challenge negative messages.

The **Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape** and **Pittsburgh Action Against Rape** have worked together on [Parents In The Know](#), an innovative practice-based child sexual abuse prevention program that engages parents and caregivers in crucial conversations and skill-building.

Systems & Organizational Change

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have pulled together several research-based toolkits for partners in public health, [youth-serving organizations](#), and child protection.

The [Essentials for Childhood Framework](#) offers strategies to promote relationships and environments that help children grow up to be healthy and productive citizens.

The CDC also created a [technical package on preventing child abuse and neglect](#). The package includes tools for potential action steps and strategies, as well as examples of policies and procedures for keeping children safe.



PROGRAMS IN NEW JERSEY

New Jersey has a number of systemic and statewide efforts in place to address child abuse and promote safety for children in communities throughout the state. The **Department of Children and Families** has an [easy-to-understand site on reporting suspected child abuse](#), where residents can explore the process of contacting the state hotline. **Prevent Child Abuse New Jersey** has a [number of programs](#) focused on preparing adults and communities to respond appropriately to reports of child abuse and train professionals on prevention. **New Jersey Child Assault Prevention** provides educational presentations to schools across the state hoping to empower [children](#) and [professionals](#) to connect with community resources.

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² Edwards, V.J., Anda, R.F., Dube, S.R., Dong, M., Chapman, D.F., Felitti, V.J. (2005). "The wide-ranging health consequences of adverse childhood experiences." In Kathleen Kendall-Tackett and Sarah Giacomoni (eds.) *Victimization of Children and Youth: Patterns of Abuse, Response Strategies*. Kingston, NJ: Civic Research Institute.

³ American Academy of Pediatrics. (2014). *Adverse Childhood Experiences and the Lifelong Consequences of Trauma*. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics. Retrieved from: https://www.aap.org/en-us/Documents/ttb_aces_consequences.pdf

⁴ Tharp, A.T., DeGue, S., Valle, L.A., Brookmeyer, K.A., Massetti, G.M., & Matjasko, J.L. (2013). "A systematic qualitative review of risk and protective factors for sexual violence perpetration." *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, (14/2), 133-167. Available from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23275472>

⁵ The inclusion of all strategies referenced or listed in this resource should not be interpreted as an endorsement. NJCASA includes available research- and evidence-based practices as examples of how theory is operationalized and/or incorporated into practice.

**If you suspect child abuse or neglect, call the
New Jersey State Holtine at 1-877-NJ ABUSE
(1-877-652-2873).**

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The New Jersey Coalition Against Sexual Assault (NJCASA) is the statewide organization representing 21 county-based rape crisis centers and Rutgers University's Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance. NJCASA elevates the voice of survivors and service providers through advocacy, training, and support for efforts to create safer communities for all women, men and children.

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