


**Learning from the Voices and Experiences of Adult Children Exposed to Domestic Violence**



**Casey Keene**  
Comprehensive Approaches to Trauma Resiliency  
The Children's Center on Family Violence | May 17, 2019

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**The ACE-DV Leadership Forum**



Established to amplify the voices and experiences of Adult Children Exposed to Domestic Violence (ACE-DV) to enhance our work to end domestic violence.

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**Core Beliefs**

1. Children exposed to domestic violence can heal and thrive.

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 **ACE-DV**  
ADVANCED COMMUNITY EDUCATION

**Core Beliefs**

2. Each of us should be allowed and encouraged to name our own experience.

*While trauma is self-defined, the experience does not define you.*

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 **ACE-DV**  
ADVANCED COMMUNITY EDUCATION

**Core Beliefs**

3. There is a difference between loving an abusive person and condoning their behavior.

*If we are to offer helpful and effective means of accountability and change, we must understand that people who choose to abuse are human.*

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 **ACE-DV**  
ADVANCED COMMUNITY EDUCATION

**Core Beliefs**

4. Violence is learned and reinforced by societal norms, yet accountability and commitment to change can create a new path.

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 **ACE-DV**  
ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**Core Beliefs**

5. Our non-abusive parent was faced with limited and complex choices.

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 **ACE-DV**  
ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**Core Beliefs**

6. Our unique experiences bring added value to the movement.

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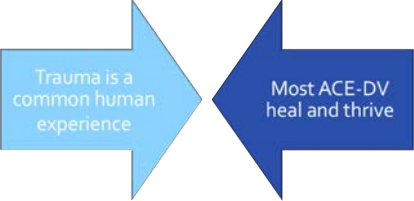
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 **ACE-DV**  
ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

**Themes from Our Stories**



Trauma is a common human experience

Most ACE-DV heal and thrive

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 **ACE-DV**  
Adverse Childhood Experiences - Domestic Violence

### Themes from Our Stories



Different impacts/outcomes, even in the same family system

Families form strong bonds in order to survive together

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 **ACE-DV**  
Adverse Childhood Experiences - Domestic Violence

### Themes from Our Stories



Complex trauma & layers of oppression across the lifespan

Our experiences offer points of growth and specialized adaptations

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### Trauma

Trauma is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience that has a lasting effect on a person's life.

- What is trauma for one is not for another.
- Trauma is self-defined and self-identified.
- Domestic violence is commonly experienced as an ongoing, cyclical traumatic event.
- Average first trauma exposure in children who experience trauma occurs by five years old.

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## Types of Trauma




**Historical Trauma**  
 Cumulative trauma existing over a lifespan and across generations  
 Significant group experiences



**Intergenerational Trauma**  
 Transferred from one generation to the second and further generations  
 Transgenerational cycle of violence



**Multi-abuse Trauma**  
 Multiple layers of trauma/oppression  
 Co-occurring issues that negatively impact safety, health, or well being



**Complex Trauma**  
 Prolonged and repeated abuse  
 Involves repetitive or prolonged stressors over time

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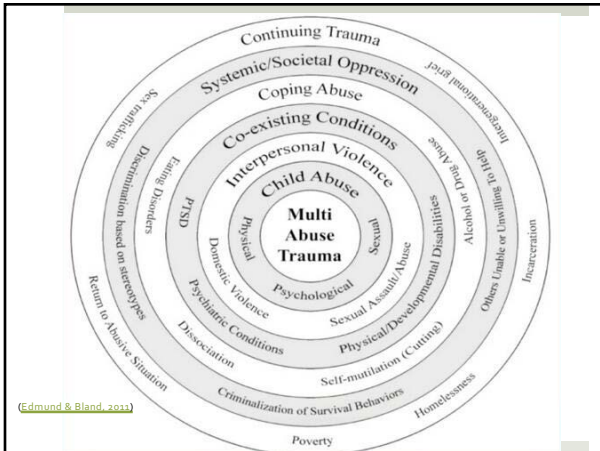
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## Children's Exposure to Violence

- Most of our society's children are exposed to violence in their daily lives, either directly or indirectly.
- More than 60% were exposed to violence in the past year.
- Lifetime exposure rates are 1/3 to 1/2 higher.

(National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence, 2009)

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### Common human experience

"Trauma is a *common human experience* that is largely overlooked in existing explanations of and responses to human behavior."  
*(Joan Schladale, Resources for Resolving Violence)*

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### ACEs

ABUSE	NEGLECT	HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION	
Physical	Physical	Mental Illness	Incarcerated Relative
Emotional	Emotional	Mother treated violently	Substance Abuse
Sexual		Divorce	

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### Sources of childhood trauma

- Substance abuse
- Psychiatric challenges
- Disability/medical conditions
- Loss
- Poverty/homelessness
- Food insecurity
- Incarceration
- Bullying
- Community violence
- Gang involvement
- Unemployment
- Natural disaster
- Sexual violence
- Child abuse
- Domestic violence
- School violence

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**Post-traumatic growth**

- Deficit model is incomplete
- ACEs develop specialized skills for adaptation
- "See through the darkness to leverage what it gives us."

*(Bruce Ellis, University of Arizona)*

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**Your ACE Assets**

What did you gain?

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**Positive impacts of trauma**

- Renewed appreciation of life
- Commitment to live life to the fullest & value each day
- Improved relationships with loved ones
- Search for new possibilities
- Enhanced personal strengths
- New spiritual changes

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### ACE-DV Assets

- Enhanced awareness of red flags
- Advanced protective capacity
- High tolerance for stress
- Creative, high-level problem solving skills
- Greater flexibility/acceptance in relationships
- Positive parenting choices
- Increased empathy

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### Parenting strengths/assets of survivors

- Increased empathy and caring for children (20% in one study)
- Children rated mothers as highly available to them – indicated nurturing behaviors such as hugging and expressing love (nearly all)
- Maternal warmth or “mothering resilience” may play a critical protective role for children exposed to perpetrator behavior

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### What does “mothering resilience” look like?

- Strong communication with children
- Words of encouragement
- Loving embraces
- “Essential” strengths
- Efforts to minimize exposure
- Creating joyful moments

*“When he is out of the way you think, ‘Right, we’ve got five minutes, let’s go and do something happy, let’s go and get soaking wet in the garden playing with the water... or let’s play hide and seek in the house.’ You know, stupid things, but for five minutes, that child is happy.”*

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*"Doña Ester was one person in my life who really helped me without even knowing that she helped me."*



Olga



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*"Through having us notice our surroundings, and having us carry ourselves on trails through the forest, and be together, and laugh together, and maybe even sing the same song – those things grounded us in our bodies and connected us to each other and made us feel like we had people when maybe other parts of our life were a little bit chaotic... She was bringing*

*wholeness to us that I think maybe she recognized we weren't getting from other places."*

Jonathan

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*"In a Christian religion, 'faith without works is dead,' so she really had to do some work within herself. I'm just amazed that she was able to pull love and kindness out of herself when I didn't see that much being poured into her... That is really where my admiration comes from, because she got it from somewhere, and I don't know where."*



Annika

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*"Giving has its rewards, in the sense that when we give, it should be unconditional. And she gave unconditionally. It cost her, and she sacrificed so much to give, and the reward that I believe she got was really about seeing people happy and seeing people enjoy life... She gave of herself that way, and that's one of the biggest lessons I've learned."*

**William**

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**5 everyday gestures**

- CELEBRATE**  
Use "put-ups," not "put-downs."  
[READ MORE](#)
- COMFORT**  
Stay calm and patient.  
[READ MORE](#)
- COLLABORATE**  
Ask for their opinions.  
[READ MORE](#)
- LISTEN**  
Show an interest in their passions.  
[READ MORE](#)
- INSPIRE**  
Expose them to new ideas.  
[READ MORE](#)

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**What is resilience?**

- Innate ability to adapt (not a trait)
- Human capacity to navigate and negotiate culturally meaningful resources to sustain their well being

*(Michael Unger, Resilience Research Center)*

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### Ordinary Magic

- 1/2 to 2/3 of children exposed to trauma go on to achieve successful and well adjusted lives  
*(Melissa Institute)*
- "The great surprise of resilience research is the ordinariness of the phenomena."  
*(Ann Masten, University of Minnesota)*

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### Factors promoting resilience

- Internal Support** • Abilities and skills
- External Support** • Caring supportive relationships
- Existential Support** • Meaning, values, faith

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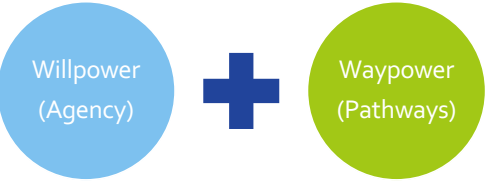
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**Hope**

"The belief that your future can be brighter and better than your past and that you actually have a role to play in making it better."



A diagram illustrating the components of hope. It features a blue circle on the left containing the text "Willpower (Agency)", a blue plus sign in the center, and a green circle on the right containing the text "Waypower (Pathways)".

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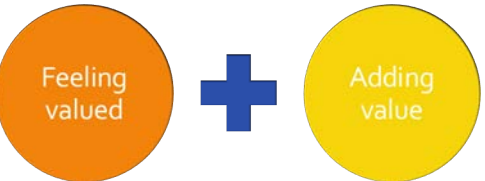
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**Mattering**



A diagram illustrating the components of mattering. It features an orange circle on the left containing the text "Feeling valued", a blue plus sign in the center, and a yellow circle on the right containing the text "Adding value".

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A blue rounded rectangular box containing the text "KNOW JUSTICE" on the top line and "KNOW WELLNESS" on the bottom line.

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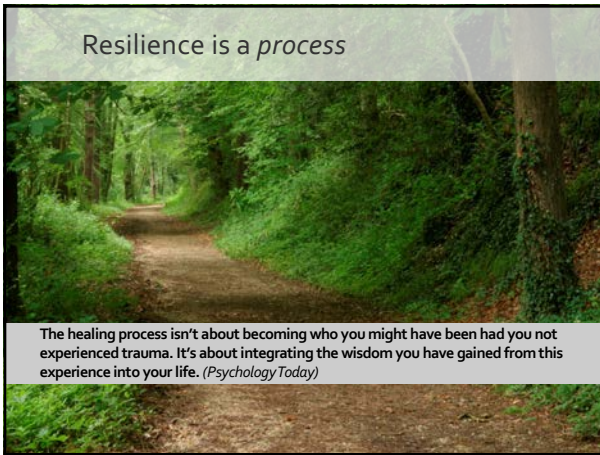
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### Bringing our Whole Selves

We believe that we can foster healthier individuals, families, and communities when we look to the **strengths, skills, and assets** we gain by **incorporating** our experiences of trauma into our whole selves.

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### Connect with us!

The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence ([www.nrcdv.org](http://www.nrcdv.org)) provides a wide range of free, comprehensive, and individualized technical assistance, training, and specialized resource materials. Access our publications online at [VAWnet.org](http://VAWnet.org).

-  Call: 1-800-537-2238
-  Email: [nrcdvTA@nrcdv.org](mailto:nrcdvTA@nrcdv.org)
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