



ACE Study Findings on Alcoholism

Growing Up with Alcoholism

What is it like to be the child of an alcoholic parent? Sadly, many of you readers already know from personal experience. If you are among the fortunate who do not know, just for a moment, put yourself into the role of the child in the scenario below:



You could be any age, 18 or under, but in this scenario, let's say that you are small: three or four years of age. You are sitting on the kitchen floor, playing with a toy. Your parents are at the kitchen table, and one or both of them are drinking (beer, wine, gin—it doesn't matter). They've been there for a long time, arguing and drinking. Their voices are getting louder. You know that

Highlights: ACEs and Alcoholism

A major finding in the ACE Study has been that **adverse childhood experiences are common and strongly associated with personal alcohol abuse later in life**; they account for a large proportion of adult alcohol abuse.

They affect the risk of alcohol abuse regardless of parental alcoholism; but **for people with alcohol-abusing parents, adverse childhood experiences create a population at even higher risk.** These findings, taken with the tendency to marry an alcoholic, create a self-perpetuating cycle that puts the next generation at risk for both ACEs and alcohol abuse.¹



trouble is coming because you've seen all this before. Your heart beats faster; you can feel it throbbing in your ears. You pretend to focus on your toy, but all of your systems are on Red Alert, waiting for the inevitable, wondering how things will pan out for you, worried for your Mom, wishing yourself invisible.

Suddenly, you feel the vibrations of your Dad's chair scraping against the floor as he stands up and backhands your mother across the face. She still has bruises from the last time...just a few days before. Blood spurts from her nose. Her lip is cracked wide open. She begins to cry. She stumbles out of her chair, cowers, retreats to the corner of the kitchen, trying to put space between them. Dad picks up the ketchup bottle and throws it at her. It hits the wall, shatters into a thousand pieces, and ketchup oozes slowly down the yellow paint.

You freeze, like a small rabbit in danger. You hold your breath. You want to cry; the tears are welling up inside your chest, and you want to let them go, but you know that if you do, he'll hear you. He'll see you. He'll hurt you. You want to get up and go into a different room. You want to get up and comfort your mother, but you know that if you do, you'll be noticed. You dare not even whimper. What will it be this time? Will he kick you across the floor screaming, "What the hell are you looking at?" Will he bend down and grab your toy, send it hurling after the ketchup bottle?

He turns away from your mother shouting, "Bitch!" He sees you on the floor. (How can he see you? You've been so still!) He grabs you off the floor, dragging you behind him, and you can smell the booze and his sweat and his anger. "Let's go for a ride," he says, as he tosses you into the back seat of the car. If you're lucky, it won't be long before he's pulled over by the police, and they take you home

to Mom. Maybe they'll put Dad in jail for a few days again, and there will be quiet in the house for a while.

If you're not stopped by the police, you'll bounce around in that back seat until he wears himself out driving as fast as the car will go, cursing other drivers, running red lights, ignoring stop signs and bumping the tires against the curb when he turns right.

You dare not say a word unless he asks you a question. And then, you answer carefully, if you understand what he means. If you don't, you fake a smile and do your best to reply. By the time you get home again, he'll either be so angry that he beats you for being bad company, or so tired that he will just crash on the couch.

You just never know what will happen. The one thing you do know is that it won't be good.



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If you really were that child, in keeping with the findings of the ACE Study, you would have something in common with 23.5% of the people who participated in the Study. These findings are consonant with the 1988 National Health Interview Survey that found that 18.1% of adults had lived with an alcohol abuser during childhood.²

You would also have been more likely to experience sexual and/or physical abuse than a child whose parents were not alcoholic.³ You would already have an ACE Score of five, being attributed one point for each of the following:

1. **living with an alcoholic**
2. **witnessing violence against mother**
3. **being verbally and psychologically abused**
4. **being physically abused**
5. **living in a household where a member was incarcerated**

“Growing up with an alcoholic parent often means enduring the stress and trauma of a dysfunctional or chaotic home life, witnessing domestic violence, and experiencing childhood abuse, all of which can have a lifelong negative impact. . . The contribution of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and parental alcohol abuse to the risk of alcohol misuse and abuse in the next generation is of substantial importance to medicine and public health.”¹

ACE Study findings indicate that, as such a child, the chances of your growing up to misuse alcohol are substantially greater than for someone with an ACE Score of 0. While genetics plays some role in alcoholism, these findings suggest that the environment—adverse childhood experiences—plays a very large role in the development of alcoholism. This notion is reinforced by the finding that the risk of alcoholism increases strongly as the ACE Score increases for persons with, and also those without, a history of parental alcoholism (Figure 1). ACE Study findings suggest that adverse childhood experiences fuel the propensity of the child to adopt the alcoholic behavior of the parent, thus contributing to a self-perpetuating cycle of alcoholism and abuse.¹

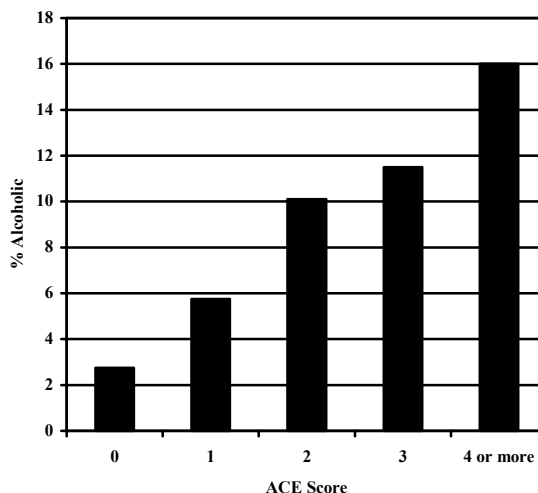
Not surprisingly, “The presence of distress associated with depression or anxiety may compel persons experiencing them to use alcohol. This category of drinking has been labeled ‘drinking to cope’ and is defined as the tendency to use alcohol to escape, avoid, or regulate unpleasant emotions.”¹

In the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, the

highest risk of heavy drinking (24.2%) and self-reported alcohol problems (30.7%) was observed among adults with both an ACE Score of 4 or higher and a history of parental alcoholism. An increasing ACE Score makes it increasingly likely that you yourself will turn to heavy alcohol use. Figure 1 shows the powerful relationship of personal ACE Score to later, self-acknowledged alcoholism. A greater than 500% increase is depicted.

Figure 1.

ACE Score vs. Adult Alcoholism



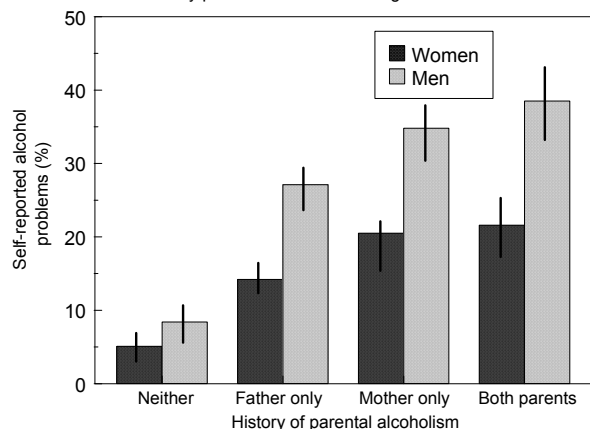
In addition, no matter how many adverse childhood experiences were reported, the likelihood of becoming an alcoholic adult was further increased by growing up with alcoholic parents. Furthermore, the high burden of ACEs that often occurs in families with alcoholic parents makes children of alcoholics more likely to be depressed as adults.⁴

Figure 2¹ (below) demonstrates that while men are more likely than women to have alcohol problems, the relationship between personal alcohol abuse and having had alcoholic parents is similar for both men and women. Also, if you were the child in the above scenario, you would be three times more likely to marry an alcoholic.¹

This combination of tendencies strongly suggests the next generation is at an increased risk for adverse childhood experiences because parental alcoholism does not occur in an otherwise well-functioning and supportive household. In other words, it is highly likely to produce additional categories of adverse experiences for the children. For instance, childhood sexual abuse is far more likely by an alcoholic than by a non-alcoholic parent. (continued on page 3)

Growing Up with Alcoholism (continued from page 2)

Figure 2.-Prevalence (%) of self-reported alcohol problems by parental alcoholism and gender.*



*Vertical lines represent 95% confidence intervals, adjusted for demographic factors.

The cyclic nature of the abused child's becoming an alcoholic who then abuses his or her own children, who then often themselves escape into alcoholism, is literally and figuratively deadly to our society. Because parental alcohol abuse is so strongly associated with children's enduring adverse childhood experiences, it is essential that those who work in the medical field, social services, and law enforcement recognize the relationship and routinely seek the presence of co-existing problems.

Even those of us who are not in any of the aforementioned fields can help. How? By observing, asking, and listening. "Hope lies in the potential presence of two key roles in a person's life: that of the 'helping witness,' a person who stands beside the endangered child while offering positive emotional support to the child; and that of the



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<http://www.issd.org/>

thereby offering the global community easy access to important lessons learned from the ACE Study.

'enlightened witness,' who offers unconditional support to the adult suffering the long-term after effects of a traumatic childhood. These people do not have to be professionals; however, compared with other professionals, people in the medical and teaching fields have greater opportunity to engage in these roles."⁵ Not for nothing do we think of bartenders, hairdressers, and some of our best friends as amateur psychotherapists.



Meet Shanta R. Dube, MPH

Ms. Dube is an Epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, and has been working on the ACE Study since July 1999. Influenced by her exposure to the medical field since childhood, Shanta has an inherent curiosity about factors that lead to ill health and how individuals overcome these. At the CDC, her present focus is on the association of early traumatic experiences with mental health and substance abuse in adolescence and adulthood.

Shanta has a B.S. in Microbiology from the University of Maryland and an MPH in Epidemiology from The George Washington University, and is currently pursuing a PhD in Health Promotion and Behavior from the University of Georgia. Shanta's goal is to work on health promotion efforts in relation to adverse childhood experiences; she has authored and co-authored numerous publications on matters related to adverse childhood experiences.



Speaking of ACEs

Upcoming 2003 Presentations by Dr. Felitti

- Sept 10** Snowbird, Utah, University of Utah
- Sept 17-18** West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue University
- Sept 20** San Luis Obispo, California, County Child Safety Organization
- Oct 6** Amsterdam, Netherlands, Center for Child Studies
- Oct 22** Kansas City, Kansas, Kansas Children's League
- Oct 24-26** Atlanta, Georgia, International Health Evaluation Association (*with Dr. Anda*)
- Oct 30** Bellflower, California, Kaiser Permanente
- Nov 16-17** Seattle, Washington, State Department of Health Services
- Dec 4-5** Geneva, Switzerland, World Health Organization



Online Information on Alcoholism

A list of online resources available to alcoholics, their families, and anyone who might be interested in learning more about alcohol abuse:

<http://www.health.org/govpubs/phd688/>
US Dept of Health & Human Services

<http://familydoctor.org/handouts/152.html>
American Academy of Family Physicians

<http://alcoholism.about.com/cs/homework/>
About Network

<http://www.al-anon-alateen.org/>
Al-anon/Alateen

<http://www.edc.org/hec/>
US Department of Education

<http://www.ncadd.org/>
National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence

<http://www.partnershipforadrug-freecommunity.org/facts.html>
Partnership for a Drug-Free Community



Statistical Spotlight

In the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, 24% of women, and 20% of men, reported that at least one of their parents was an alcoholic. ***There was a substantially greater likelihood of growing up with an alcoholic father (18%) than with an alcoholic mother (2%).*** Four percent of women, and 3% of men, grew up with both parents alcoholic. ***The prevalence of each category of adverse childhood experience—except physical abuse and physical neglect—was higher for women than for men.*** Over 17% of women, and 11% of men, reported four or more categories of adverse childhood experiences.³



Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius -- and a lot of courage -- to move in the opposite direction.

Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

How to Get ACE Study Articles

ACE-Study-related articles may be procured as follows:

1. Go to the National Library of Medicine website:

<http://www.ncbi.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi>

2. Search for "felitti" or "anda" (without the quotation marks).
3. You should get 50 or more hits for your query.
4. The title and abstract of each article should be available.
5. For the full-text version, click on the bar just above the bold-faced article title.
6. That should take you to the Elsevier Science Direct page, where you should find a square in the upper right-hand corner that should let you select the format in which you would like to receive the article.
7. Clicking on your selection should take you to a registration page that should then prompt you for information and permit you to purchase the article.

ACE Reporter is currently unable to staff a Help Desk to assist you with this process, or with any technical difficulties you encounter during your search for articles, or opening or retrieval of ***ACE Reporter*** issues. However, at the time of this writing, the PubMed site does provide a link for Help Desk support for retrieval of articles. Here's how to reach those Help Desk services:

1. From the PubMed site (URL above), scroll down to the bottom of the page.
2. Click on the "Write to the Help Desk" link.
3. This should take you to the National Library of Medicine Help Desk page.
4. Click on "Get Copies of Articles".
5. This should direct you to further resources.

Wishing you the best of luck with your research!



Let Your Voice Be Heard! 



The National Call to Action
A Movement to End Child Abuse and Neglect

For more information on how you can help, see:

<http://www.nationalcalltoaction.com>



Editor's Corner – Dear Readers:



Response to the first issue of *ACE Reporter* has been overwhelmingly positive and supportive—so very typical of you

who are interested in, and engaged in the work of healing the long-term effects of adverse childhood experiences.

Many of you have written to ask me for copies of ACE Study-related articles. Due to copyright issues, I cannot freely distribute these. See page 4 for instructions on how to procure articles from the National Library of Medicine website.

Some of you have contacted me asking me to provide you with counseling services. While I am always glad to hear from you, and to offer a soft e-mail “shoulder” and a ready e-mail “ear”, it is important that you understand that I am not a licensed counselor or psychotherapist, and I do not offer psychotherapy or counseling per se. I am equally unqualified to recommend any particular therapist, but—depending upon your needs—I can attempt to direct you to appropriate professional organizations and/or publications that might prove useful to you.

Some of you have also asked me why the first edition included a “Meet the Investigators” article but not a “Meet the Editor” article. My reply? Space is limited, and the information about the ACE Study is far more interesting and important than profiling the woman who writes about it. I will, however, make you this promise: Should I run short of the exciting information learned from The Study, I’ll fill in with the boring facts about me in a future edition. If you really cannot wait that long, then e-mail me, and we’ll “talk”.

Know that I am deeply and personally grateful to you for helping to make *ACE Reporter* a success, and I am—as ever—wishing you peace,

Carol

Carol A. Redding



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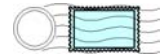
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⁵ Redding, CA. **Book Review: The Truth Will Set You Free: Overcoming Emotional Blindness and Finding Your True Adult Self by Alice Miller.** *The Permanente Journal.* 2003 Winter;7(1): 81-82.



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