Washington State
**Prevention Research
Collaborative**

Building Positive Childhood Experiences as a Foundation for Lifelong Health and Wellbeing

What are Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs)?

Positive childhood experiences (PCEs) are everyday interpersonal connections that support healthy developmental outcomes[1, 2, 3]. They are a type of social and relational protective factor [2, 4, 5] that can occur in different settings where families, schools, and communities interact and engage with children[5].

PCEs are the opposite of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and other events that cause major stress and trauma in a child's life. Along with building protection, PCEs can help offset the negative consequences of adversity[6, 7, 8, 9].

Examples of PCEs

Children can receive and engage with PCEs in many ways, including but not limited to these:

- A positive and caring relationship with at least one caregiver
- A positive connection with at least one teacher
- A mentor or coach who provides support
- A healthy connection with an encouraging neighbor
- Volunteer involvement and other fun, safe, and supportive activities outside the home

Why are PCEs Important?

PCEs can influence positive outcomes for all children, even those impacted by adversity[2, 7] or involved with juvenile legal systems[10, 11].

When children have enough positive experiences or encounter experiences across multiple settings, PCEs offer an important counterbalance to the negative effects of ACEs and other adversity[4]. The accumulation of PCEs can offset risk exposure and may also help explain why some people exposed to adversity don't develop expected negative outcomes[5].

PCEs are realistic and feasible to implement. Positive, supportive, and nurturing experiences can be intentionally built into programmatic efforts with **children**, **youth**, and **young adults** across developmental and cultural contexts[4].

Outcomes Across the Lifespan

The benefits of PCEs can also ripple through every stage of life (see Table 1). Outcomes have been documented from infancy through adulthood and across generations.

Table 1: Lifelong Benefits of PCEs

Stage of Development	Outcomes Associated with PCEs
Infancy and early childhood	• Better social, emotional, and cognitive functioning[3, 12] • Greater school readiness[3]
Middle childhood, late childhood, and adolescence	• Improved mental health, wellbeing, and prosocial behaviors[1, 7, 12, 13, 14, 15] • Lower odds of arrest and delinquency[11] • Lower odds of absenteeism or repeating a grade[16] • Lower odds of being bullied or being a bully[17] • Higher levels of academic achievement[13]
Adulthood	• Improved mental and behavioral health[2, 5, 13, 18] • Better physical health[2, 18] • Lower aggressive behaviors; higher prosocial behaviors[2, 13] • Positive parenting attitudes and experiences[9, 13, 18] • Better economic outcomes[13]
Across generations	• Lower rates of prenatal depression and stress[4] • Fewer psychosocial challenges[2] • Nurturing parenting attitudes that support bonding[9] • Better academic, social, and behavioral outcomes[12, 13] • Better family health[6]

How can Practitioners and Policymakers Foster PCEs?

Practitioners and policymakers can increase the prevalence and frequency of PCEs by implementing and funding evidence-based strategies that are focused on social and relational health in community, school, and other settings serving children and families. They can also support screening for PCEs, which helps service providers identify and build on existing strengths.

Strategies for Social and Relational Health

The **Social Development Strategy (SDS)** is a proven approach for building protection[12, 13, 15] and can be used to enhance PCEs. The strategy strengthens **positive bonds** and connections between children and positive adults (e.g., parents, teachers, peers, coaches, faith leaders) by **providing opportunities for positive involvement, skills to be successful, and recognition of children's effort and outcomes.** The bonds forged help motivate children to abide by **clear standards for behavior** set by those who have provided opportunities, skills and recognition, which results in healthy behaviors at home, in school, and in the community.

Intentionally building these components into social and relational experiences that are offered to young people can provide a practical and effective approach to enhance PCEs.

Tiered intervention approaches are another way to increase children's experience of PCEs. For example, communities might offer **family-based curriculum** to families and caregivers, while offering **school-based strategies** and **community-based mentoring** to reach children and families with more intensive support.

Policymakers can also support greater access to PCEs through **investments in effective strategies** with demonstrated impact on bonding and social connection. Prevention policies that address families' social needs[19] (e.g., by reducing poverty, by increasing access to quality services and relational support) are also critical to increasing the prevalence and frequency of PCEs.

Monitoring PCEs Among Washington's Young People

Practitioners, policymakers, and others can use student self-report data from the biennial **Washington State Healthy Youth Survey** (HYS) to understand students' experiences of PCEs and monitor trends over time. For example, statewide HYS data from 2018-2023 consistently show a positive community norm with 60-70% of 10th grade students reporting opportunities for positive social involvement[20]. This data indicates the potential to further increase positive community norms and improve youth outcomes by providing children increased exposure to PCEs.

Opportunities for Prosocial Involvement

Source: **https://www.askhys.net/**
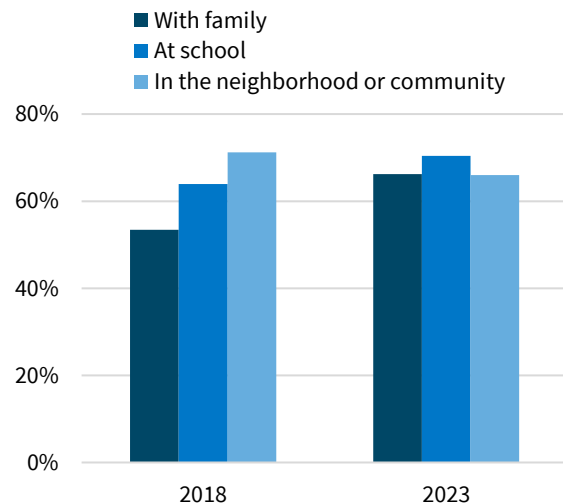
Future Directions for Building PCEs

Future research, practice, and policy efforts are needed to better understand the preventative and protective role of PCEs for individuals and across entire communities and systems. For example, further work is needed to understand how PCEs amplify the strengths and capacities of both individuals and communities[5].

Ongoing implementation of PCEs is also needed to better understand whether developing and

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sustaining PCEs across multiple domains and developmental stages can meaningfully offset the negative impact of adversity[5], and how PCEs can complement and operate in tandem with other prevention and intervention efforts.

PCEs can also be integrated into broader prevention infrastructure to strengthen the foundation for healthy and successful children, families, organizations and communities. For example, policymakers have several options for ensuring PCEs are included in:

- Economic and social programs
- Workforce development priorities
- Assessment and governing practices
- Funding strategies

Key Messages

- PCEs are everyday interpersonal experiences in family, school, peer, and community settings that support children's healthy physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive development.
- PCEs are associated with positive long-term outcomes for children and adults.
- PCEs can help counterbalance the impact of risk.
- PCEs can have intergenerational impact, with PCEs in one generation associated with healthier outcomes in the next generation.
- PCEs can be enhanced by policy and other social, economic, and practice strategies.

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