

# Youth Resilience in the Face of Adverse Childhood Experiences

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)<sup>1</sup> are potentially traumatic events that occur in children under the age of 18 years old. They are categorised into three groups:

1. Abuse (includes experiencing violence, physical, sexual or emotional abuse);
2. Household Challenges (includes aspects of the child's environment that can undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding such as growing up in a household with substance misuse, mental health problems, instability due to parental separation or household members being in jail or prison, and witnessing violence in the home or community); and
3. Neglect (both emotionally and physically)

ACEs is known to negatively correlate with a person's mental wellness. Having ACEs up to two or more times predict chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood. It can also negatively impact education and job opportunities.

When a young person processes resilience, he/she is considered to have a combination of abilities and characteristics such as "tenacity, self-efficacy, emotional and cognitive control under pressure, adaptability, tolerance of negative affect, and goal orientation". Awareness of what creates resilience comes to the forefront of ACEs or trauma treatment.

Art making provides a safe container for "self-reflection, perspective taking, connection, flexibility, and self-regulation", and these are also parallel to how resilience is built. The process of art making is actually a counter-ACEs which buffer the effects of trauma, and increases the likelihood of positive health outcomes. The use of arts and creativity<sup>2</sup> to address ACEs or developmental trauma<sup>3</sup> is well known<sup>4</sup> and acted as an invaluable intervention tool for the entire learning community<sup>5</sup>. Creativity is associated with enhanced executive functioning, resilience, and optimal functioning. While utilizing a mix of art with therapy, education, social work, or simply human connection, we are able to effectively help individuals cope with their negative experiences.

Through art making, young people

- find distances from the intense emotions, feel safe being buffered and contained in art medium;
- incorporate fictional or fantasy elements, bypass the verbal rationalizing;
- have fun, feel rewarding and empowered; enjoy the flow;
- record their plight and retain their humanity in symbolic, metaphoric and aesthetic means;
- feel comfortable, free to make use of the create artistic narratives to unload their lived ACEs;
- are able to communicate feelings and thoughts that are most difficult to verbally express;
- reconnect the implicit (sensory) and explicit (declarative) memories of the ACEs;
- gain control, clarity and insight of their experiences;
- find support and connectedness, coming together to communicate; express and discuss their frustrations and feelings regarding their past, their family and the stigma surrounding the adversity they faced;
- make use of opportunity to restructure traumatic events to provide them with meaning, to gain control over such events, and to gain a sense of control or psychological resolution;
- become aware of their growth, re-wire the brain, re-create their future; and
- are having opportunities that their artistic expressions being heard, witnessed, mirrored and attuned by their care takers, and develop healthy attachment through art media.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00111/full>

<sup>3</sup> [https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1349&context=expressive\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1349&context=expressive_theses)

<sup>4</sup> <https://conservancy.umn.edu/bitstream/handle/11299/190742/ClarkeKFinalProject.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.naesp.org/principal-supplement-septemberoctober-2019-champion-creatively-alive-children/using-arts-address-adv>