

## TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE · ALL GRADES

# ACEs Explained

For primary teachers

## What ACEs are

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is a term from a major 1998 study by Felitti and Anda at Kaiser Permanente, with follow-up work continuing today. The original study identified ten types of childhood adversity that, when accumulated, predicted poorer adult health outcomes — physical illness, mental illness, addiction, early death. The finding that surprised researchers: the relationship was DOSE-DEPENDENT. The more ACEs a child experienced, the worse the outcomes. ACEs were also far more common than previously assumed — present across all socioeconomic backgrounds, not just disadvantaged ones.

## The original 10 ACEs

Category	Examples
Abuse	Physical, emotional, sexual abuse
Neglect	Physical or emotional neglect
Household dysfunction	Domestic violence, parental mental illness, substance abuse, parental incarceration, divorce/separation

## Why ACEs affect children's behaviour

Children who've experienced repeated stress in early childhood often have: • Hypervigilant nervous systems — quick to perceive threat • Difficulty regulating emotion — small upsets become big ones • Compromised executive function — working memory, attention, impulse control affected • Disrupted attachment patterns — trust comes harder • Higher baseline cortisol — body is in 'on alert' mode much of the time These are NORMAL responses to abnormal experiences. The brain has adapted to a hostile environment. The problem is that those



adaptations don't switch off when the environment becomes safer.

## What this looks like in your classroom

<b>Hypervigilance</b> Notices every sound, every movement. Watches the room constantly. Knows the timetable better than the teacher. Picks up on adult emotions instantly.	<b>Quick to anger</b> Disproportionate reactions to small triggers. Going from 0 to 100 in seconds. Often genuinely surprised by their own intensity.
<b>Shut-down responses</b> Goes quiet, stares, becomes unresponsive. Can look 'rude' or 'oppositional.' Often actually a freeze response — nervous system has gone offline.	<b>Difficulty with transitions</b> Changes of activity, places, people, routines all trigger stress. Predictability is regulating; surprises are dysregulating.
<b>Trust difficulties</b> Hard to read adult intentions. Reads kindness as suspicious. Tests boundaries to see if they're real.	<b>Concentration / memory issues</b> Often labelled as ADHD or 'lazy.' Actually the cognitive cost of carrying a hyperaroused nervous system.

## What teachers can actually do

You don't need to know which children have ACEs (and probably can't). Teach as if many children might: 1. PREDICTABILITY. Visible timetables, consistent routines, advance warning of changes. 2. RELATIONSHIPS. One trusted adult who's stable, attuned, doesn't withdraw when challenged. 3. CALM. Quiet voice, slow pace, low arousal. Children can borrow regulation from regulated adults. 4. CHOICE. Powerlessness is part of the trauma signature. Even small choices reduce the stress response. 5. REPAIR. After ruptures, repair quickly. 'I'm sorry I raised my voice. We're OK.' 6. PHYSICAL SAFETY. Sensory considerations, respect for personal space, no surprising touch. None of this requires a programme. All of it requires deliberate practice.

## What ACEs aren't

Important context, often missed: • ACES ARE NOT DESTINY. Many children with high ACE scores grow into thriving adults. Resilience research shows that ONE consistent caring adult — including a teacher — can fundamentally alter outcomes. • ACES ARE NOT A CHECKLIST FOR DIAGNOSIS. The ACE score predicts outcomes statistically across populations. It doesn't predict any individual child's path. • ACES ARE NOT THE WHOLE PICTURE. Protective factors matter as much. Community, faith, hobbies, friends, schools — all moderate the impact. • ACES SHOULDN'T BE INVOKED CASUALLY. Talking about a specific child's ACE score in casual conversation is inappropriate and may breach safeguarding. Use the framework to inform your teaching, not to label children.



