

The Investor's Case: Early Adversity & Resilience



What Science and Research Tell Us...

- During our first years of life, our brains develop at an unparalleled rate. Early environments and relationships shape this growth, literally guiding the expression of our genes. This makes early childhood a window of unique opportunity *and* vulnerability.
- When children experience repeated adversity in the absence of caring adults, the effects “get under the skin.” In a process known as [toxic stress](#), children’s young brains and bodies are flooded with stress hormones that negatively rewire their neural circuitry, their hormone, cardiovascular, and immune systems, and even their DNA.
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) include abuse, neglect, domestic violence, parental mental illness, and other household instabilities. Children who face 6+ ACEs are [90–100% likely](#) to struggle with developmental delays, a nearly 10-fold increase in risk relative to their peers who have experienced 2 or fewer ACEs.
- And yet, resilience—or positive developmental outcomes in spite of serious threats—has been widely documented. Across decades of study, the most common factor among resilient children is a [reliable, responsive relationship](#) with a parent or caregiving adult.

Why It Matters...

- ACEs are a [public health epidemic](#), affecting children of all incomes, ethnicities, and geographies.
- Despite their widespread prevalence, ACEs are disproportionately concentrated among low-income children of color, putting them at risk for health, learning, and behavioral challenges into adulthood. The greater a child’s adversity exposure, the higher his or her risk for chronic disease, mental illness, school failure, incarceration, and early death.
- Reversing the effects of stress and trauma only grows more difficult as children get older. As such, early intervention to promote resilience is critical to disrupting intergenerational poverty and advancing equity.

What “Good” Would Look Like...

- To optimize the development of all children, particularly those facing hardship, we must:
 - *Prevent adversity* by addressing the upstream sources that disadvantage children and families, including racial and economic inequalities;
 - *Buffer toxic stress* by ensuring that ACEs are detected and treated early and that all children have bonds with stable, supportive adults;
 - *And promote resilience* by bolstering protective factors and leveraging assets inherent to children, families, and communities. This includes supporting and building the capacities of parents, child care providers, and early educators to facilitate loving, stimulating early environments.

Strategies for Scaled Impact....

Two-generation approaches that address caregivers’ and children’s trauma histories and strengthen adult capacities

Targeted interventions that leverage knowledge about individuals’ biological variation in response to adversity

Scalable models that pair adversity screening tools with community and institutional infrastructure to expand interventions’ reach

Dig Deeper: Early Adversity & Resilience

Key Terms

- **Epigenetics:** how environmental influences (relationships and experiences) affect gene expression
- **Protective factors:** biological, psychological, family, or community resources that buffer the effects of risk and increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for children
- **Strengths-based approach:** strategies that focus on an individual or community's existing assets as tools for change, empowerment, and self-determination

Key Research Studies

- Seminal ACEs Study
- Lifelong effects of childhood adversity and toxic stress
- How socioeconomic status can affect early brain development
- Children's differential sensitivity to adversity
- Intergenerational transmission of maternal maltreatment
- How internal and external factors jointly foster pathways to resilience

Field Leaders

- Center on the Developing Child drives science-based innovation to achieve breakthrough outcomes for children facing adversity
- Center for Youth Wellness, a pediatric center pioneering ACE screening and treatment to catalyze a movement nationwide
- ACES Connection promotes journalism and fosters local communities to prevent and mitigate childhood adversity

Promising Innovators

- The JPB Research Network on Toxic Stress develops versatile methods to identify toxic stress, such as biomarkers
- WINLA unites public agencies in LA to address intergenerational adversity
- The Early Head Start + Acelero Learning partnership buffers stress through strong parent-child relationships and stable home routines
- FINDConnect pairs adversity screening with targeted referrals
- *Visit our Venture Index for more!*

Key Funders

- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- JPB Foundation
- Tipping Point Community
- Buffett Early Childhood Fund
- Pritzker Children's Initiative
- Doris Duke Charitable Foundation
- *To learn more, check out this national database of funders in this space!*

Sample Metrics & Tools

METRICS

- Type, timing, & severity of adversity
- Toxic stress biomarkers (e.g., stress hormone levels, DNA methylation)
- Internal & external protective factors

ASSESSMENT TOOLS

- ACEs Survey (Adult- and Child-Facing)
- Child PTSD Symptom Scale (CPSS)
- Protective Factors Survey

Want to learn more? Check out Promise's full resource library!
Feedback on our materials? Share your thoughts with us!