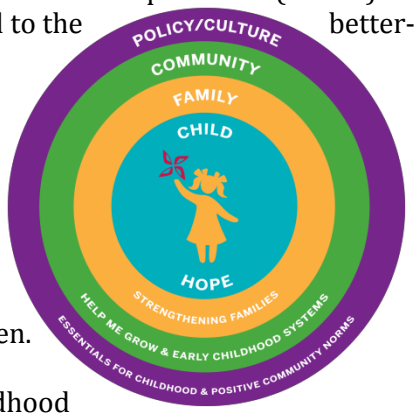
RDS

Introduction to HOPE – Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences

Our brains grow and develop in response to our own unique experiences. Exposure to intense, frequent, or sustained stress without the buffering care of a supportive adult effects children's brains and bodies, by altering learning, behavior, growth, hormonal systems, immune systems, and even the way genes are expressed. This *toxic stress* has been linked to risky health behaviors, chronic health conditions, low life potential, and early death. In short: 20th century science showed that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) may lead to toxic stress which in turn places the child's current and future health at risk.

However, many people have had childhood trauma and enjoy good health. An exclusive focus on adverse experiences leaves out an understanding of this resilience, and may have the unintended consequence of mislabeling children, families and communities. The HOPE (Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences) approach begins to explain flourishing in the face of adversity, and – most important - understanding those positive experiences that children need to grow and thrive.

The figure to the right places HOPE in the context of other recent strength-based approaches, using the familiar bio-psycho-social model. HOPE - Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences (center) highlights the child's own experiences, drawing an intentional parallel to the better-known adverse childhood experience. The Center for Study of Social Policy's Strengthening Families approach highlights *family-level* protective factors that promote children's healthy development and prevent child abuse and neglect. Help Me Grow, and many local early childhood systems, work at the *community level* to link families to available resources.



Finally, the CDC's Essentials for Childhood framework emphasizes *systems (policy and cultural) level* approaches to developing safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for American children.

HOPE – Healthy Outcomes form Positive Experiences offers an organizing set of research-based principles based on the positive childhood experiences that form the cornerstone of preventing, mitigating, and healing from toxic stress. The four pillars of HOPE are:

1. **Being** in nurturing supportive relationships;
2. **Living, playing and learning** in safe, stable, protective, and equitable environments;
3. **Engaging** in constructive social and civic activities that develop a sense of connection, and;
4. **Developing** social and emotional competence.

Why is this important? HOPE fundamentally changes the approach to toxic stress by adding an appreciation of the role of positive experiences on children's brain structure, health, and well-being. Positive childhood experiences (PCEs) may improve child and adult health in two ways: By blocking the development of toxic stress even in the face of adversity, and by providing experiences that promote healing and recovery even after adversity has occurred.

In summary: **HOPE – Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences framework** helps to guide how we organize care to break the link between toxic stress and adverse childhood experiences.

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