

# info sheet 21



## Preventing ACEs: Supporting Fathers as a Protective Factor

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) research that began in the 1990s has been replicated with different populations in a number of states including Minnesota with very similar results. ACEs assess patterns of behavior in family settings that are experienced by children that pose long-term risks for individual health, mental health and social problems. The search for effective prevention strategies has led to an array of programs that focus on different levels of influence.<sup>1</sup> Fathers in specific roles serve as protective factors that have clear connections to risk factors identified in this research.

**55% of Minnesotans who participated in this study reported experiencing one or more ACEs.**

This infosheet examines what is known about ACEs in Minnesota, gender as a factor in how ACEs are experienced and reported, and strategies to support fathers to serve as protective factors.

Figure 1 depicts the prevalence of individual ACEs as reported in the 2011 Minnesota Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System.<sup>2</sup> 55% of Minnesotans who participated in this study reported experiencing one or more ACEs. Minnesotans reporting one ACE are more likely (60%) to report having had more than one ACE.

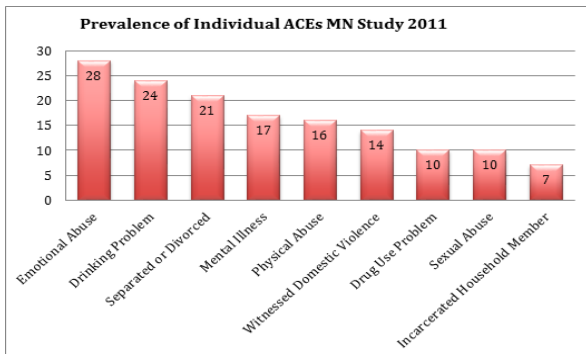


Figure 1: 2011 Minnesota ACEs Study

Because ACEs, as listed, all occur within the family setting, any prevention or intervention efforts must focus on children and parents as individuals and family relationship patterns. The majority of individuals (55%) are likely to report at least one adverse childhood experience with emotional abuse being the most frequently reported experience. The ACEs often occur in clusters, for example one individual with four or more ACE categories, is at significantly greater risk for later social, health and mental health issues.

### Profile Difference Between Genders

A recent Minnesota study (2007)<sup>3</sup> of school-age children (Grades 6, 9 & 12) applying a sub-group of ACE categories, revealed a different profile of prevalence. In this study, results indicated 25% of boys reporting one or more ACEs and 33% of girls reporting one or more ACEs versus the 55% of adults in the 2011 Minnesota study. The difference between genders is interesting to note in Figure 2.

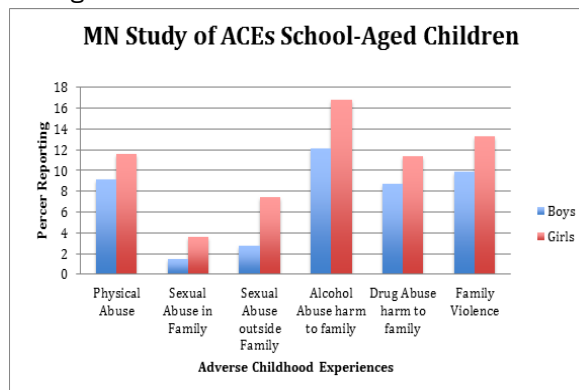


Figure 2: MN School-Aged Children Report of ACEs

It appears that school-aged girls reported experiencing a higher level of the 6 areas that were studied. It would be expected from other reports of sexual abuse that there would be gender differences. However, the gender differences in all of the areas suggest that boys may discount their family experiences or have a different frame of reference for reporting ACEs. This may also impact how fathers think about their own experiences as children and how they view ACEs.

### General Principles to Consider in Work with Fathers

The ACEs categories focus on family level dynamics for fathers in both residential and non-residential family settings. The larger social context is also important for understanding ACEs. For many families, this includes poverty, racism, social isolation, violent neighborhoods and limited access to resources. These societal level factors increase the risk of young children experiencing ACEs within their families.

Continued on page 2. ►

**Tips for Professionals: What we know about ACEs and strategies to engage and support fathers as protective factors**

**See also MFFN info sheet 19: The Protector: Dads as assets for child safety and wellbeing**

### Our mission

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network promotes practices and policies that support positive father-child relationships and family relationships through informed practice, public policy and system change.

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**Minnesota Fathers & Families Network**  
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**Leading Minnesota's campaign for healthy fatherhood.**

**What do we know about ACEs as risk factors?** What can we do to build and support the protective potential of fathers to help them break intergenerational patterns of ACEs within their family? The set of principles that follows provides guidance for focusing our efforts on the promotion of parenting and relationship skills in fathers that serve as protective factors, prevention of risky behaviors and early intervention strategies when risk factors are present.

⇒ **Young children from conception through age 5 are most vulnerable** to the negative impacts of ACEs due to neurobiological impacts on the developing brain structure. Prevention and early intervention initiatives with fathers will be most influential during this time.<sup>4</sup>

⇒ **Young children ages 0-3 have the highest rate of documented reports of maltreatment.**<sup>5</sup>

⇒ **Family structures for infants have become less stable and more complex** with 33.1% of Minnesota's babies born outside of marriage. Non-marital births often lead to confusion about both the legal rights and responsibilities of this large group of fathers.<sup>6</sup>

⇒ **Fathers during the transition to parenting are experiencing a new awareness of their responsibility for their babies and are more open to changing their own risky behaviors.** So focusing on risky behaviors (e.g., substance abuse) that lead to ACEs would be most effective during this time.<sup>7</sup>

⇒ **Fathers can be a protective factor** when they support mothers who are struggling with mental health issues such as post-partum depression.<sup>8</sup>

**Fathers' support of mothers can reduce the stress in families and reduce the potential of ACEs. Supporting fathers' roles as attachment partners and protectors of children and families provides clear pathways to reducing ACEs and their impact on young children.**

## Services for Fathers and Families with Infants and Young Children

Evidence of effective practices for strengthening and supporting fathers of infants and young children in their development of skills related to protective factors exists.<sup>9,10</sup> However, fathers continue to be an under-utilized and under-supported resource for infants and young children and services specifically directed towards fathers are limited. It would be a powerful social change statement for parent and family education services for fathers of young children to be considered as important and commonly attended Childbirth Education classes.

The following suggestions for services for fathers reflect existing models. The proposed timing is based on the openness to learning during the transition to parenthood and the vulnerability of young children age 0-3 years to ACEs.

### Promotion and Prevention Strategies

**Young children from conception through age 5 are the most vulnerable to the impacts of ACEs.**<sup>4</sup>

**Prenatal Classes/Information:** Provide information about ACEs and the importance of father's role and support to mother and offer social support to fathers during the prenatal period.

**Transition to Parenthood:** Provide classes for mothers and fathers together that focus on couple relationships and forming parenting partnerships such as the Supporting Father Involvement and Bringing Baby Home programs.<sup>9,10</sup>

**Parent Education Classes for Parents of 0-3 Year Olds:** Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) classes in Minnesota provide opportunities to learn about child development and develop parenting skills around communication, emotion coaching and limit-setting related to prevention of child maltreatment.<sup>5</sup>

### Early Intervention Strategies

**Early Head Start:** Parent education services offered through home visits and classes for pregnant women and parents with children ages 0-3 who are facing stresses related to poverty.<sup>4</sup>

**Two-Generation Programs:** These are programs like Even Start- Family Literacy that focus on parental education and employment skills at the same time that early childhood education services are provided to young children ages 0-5. These programs must make a greater effort to focus on and include fathers.

**Young Fathers Programs:** The programs that focus on assisting young unmarried fathers (18-25 years) and support fathers through case management to connect fathers to resources (legal, education, job skills, and parenting and relationship skills) to help them fulfill their roles as responsible fathers.

**It would be a powerful social change statement for parent and family education services for fathers of young children to be considered as important and commonly attended Childbirth Education classes.**



There is a critical need for more intensive intervention services for fathers of young children who have been involved in child protection cases, domestic violence or have been incarcerated. Dyadic repair work with fathers and children who have experienced ACEs is also essential to break the generational cycle of ACEs within families. Without assistance to change their attitudes and behavior this group of fathers is likely to perpetuate ACEs and their detrimental impact through complex family structures with multiple partners. Often this group ends up with fewer resources to support their children in different family settings.

A closer examination of ACEs research confirms the relevance and importance of prevention and early intervention efforts with fathers of young children. Many of the ACEs prevention programs are currently directed towards older children and teens.<sup>1</sup>

Interventions that occur at a later age for children will need to be more intensive and focus on repair of early trauma. This is more costly and less effective than early intervention. Focusing our resources on prevention and early intervention during children's early years is much more cost-effective. Building fathers' capacity as protective factors directly addresses many of the ACEs that occur in families with young children. Prevention and early intervention services that focus on fathers of young children can be powerful protective factors in reducing the frequency of adverse childhood experiences.

**Focusing resources on prevention and early intervention during children's early years is much more cost-effective.**

### Contribute now

MFFN is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization. Donations are tax deductible to the extent allowable by law. Donate online at [www.mnfathers.org](http://www.mnfathers.org) or call for details at 763.473.7432. Thank you.

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