# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)


**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

4B Springfield Court, Summerfield Road,
Off Manchester Road, Bolton, BL3 2NT

01204 369130

**www.canw.org.uk**

Registered Charity No: 222533


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Child Action Northwest



# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

**Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic experiences that occur during childhood (0-17 years) and can have a significant impact on a child's emotional, psychological and physical development.**

Common ACEs include abuse, neglect, domestic abuse, parental separation, parental mental ill health, substance misuse, and household instability. Research demonstrates that the accumulation of ACEs increases the risk of poorer health, wellbeing and life outcomes in adulthood.

While parental separation itself is often identified as an ACE, evidence suggests that it is not the separation alone that affects children most significantly. Rather, it is frequent, intense and poorly resolved parental conflict, whether parents live together or apart, that presents the greatest risk to children's wellbeing and development.

# HOW PARENTAL CONFLICT AFFECTS CHILDREN

**Children exposed to ongoing parental conflict may experience:**

- Increased anxiety, stress and emotional distress.
- Low mood, depression and reduced self-esteem.
- Difficulties concentrating and engaging in education.
- Behavioural difficulties, including aggression, anger or withdrawal.
- Problems forming and maintaining healthy relationships with peers.
- Feelings of guilt, responsibility or being caught in the middle of parental disputes.
- Sleep disturbances and physical symptoms such as headaches or stomach aches.

**Research also indicates that children who are regularly exposed to unresolved parental conflict are at greater risk of experiencing longer-term difficulties, including:**

- Poor mental health and wellbeing.
- Reduced educational attainment.
- Increased likelihood of substance misuse.
- Difficulties establishing healthy adult relationships.
- Increased risk of anxiety and depression in adulthood.

# WHY CONFLICT MATTERS MORE THAN FAMILY STRUCTURE

Evidence consistently shows that children's outcomes are influenced more by the quality of the inter-parental relationship than by whether parents are together or separated.

Children can thrive following separation when parents are able to communicate respectfully, cooperate around parenting decisions, and shield children from adult conflict. Conversely, children can experience significant harm when exposed to ongoing hostility, arguments, criticism, or attempts to involve them in parental disputes.

# PROTECTIVE FACTORS

**The impact of parental conflict can be reduced when parents:**

- Communicate respectfully and focus on problem-solving.
- Keep children out of adult disagreements.
- Maintain consistent routines and boundaries.
- Reassure children that the conflict is not their fault.
- Support the child's relationship with both parents where safe to do so.
- Seek support early to improve co-parenting relationships.

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# References:


CDC - About Adverse Childhood Experiences

A parent's guide to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and parental separation

gov.uk - Reducing Parental Conflict: the impact on children

Local gov.uk - Reducing Parental Conflict

Foundations.org.uk - Measuring parental conflict and its impact on child outcomes


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## CONTACT US

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**eft@canw.org.uk**