



Can Positive Childhood Experiences Protect Against Adverse Childhood Experiences?

May 23, 2024

Elizabeth Zeichner, MD, Pediatrics Resident, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia

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Article type: [Pediatrics Blog](#)

Topics: [Child Abuse and Neglect](#), [Developmental/Behavioral Issues](#)

Editor's Note: *Elizabeth Zeichner (she/her) is a former high school teacher. She recently graduated from Emory University School of Medicine and is now a pediatrics resident at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. -Rachel Y. Moon, MD, Associate Editor, Digital Media, Pediatrics*

Both adverse and positive childhood experiences can shape children and adolescents' lives and futures. Examples of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) include experiencing or witnessing violence as a child, or growing up in a household that has instability, which could be from parental separation or incarceration.

Conversely, positive childhood experiences (PCEs) are positive events or relationships in a child's life that help build resilience and can act as a buffer, or even offset, challenging or adverse childhood experiences.

This week, *Pediatrics* is early releasing an article, "Parental Legal System Involvement, Positive Childhood Experiences, and Suicide Risk" by Lilian Bravo, PhD, and colleagues from UCLA, which presents new findings surrounding adverse and positive childhood experiences ([10.1542/peds.2023-062566](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2023-062566)). This study explores the association between adverse parental legal system involvement (such as incarceration or arrest) and suicide risk and examines the role of PCEs in moderating this risk.

Bravo and colleagues used data from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study, a national, prospective study of youth brain development and health, which followed over 11,000 children, starting at ages 9–10, and their parents for a decade. The researchers identified a group of 10,908 children at 2-year follow up (11–12 years old at the time of sampling) and looked at exposure to parent incarceration

or arrest, suicide risk measures (lifetime suicidal ideation, attempts, or non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI)), and number of PCEs.

The authors found:

- Children had almost twice the risk of suicidal ideation if they had a parent who had been incarcerated (1.70 relative risk) or arrested (1.84 relative risk).
- Interestingly, although children had almost 3 times the risk of suicide attempt if they had a parent who had been arrested, parent incarceration was not significantly associated with suicide attempts or NSSI for the child.
- Children with PCEs had a reduced relative risk of both suicidal ideation and NSSI.

This new research shares important new findings surrounding one specific ACE—parental legal system involvement—and the protective role of PCEs for these children and adolescents with regard to suicide risk. The authors emphasize the many structural inequities in the legal and law enforcement systems that disproportionately affect youth of color and the importance of upstream prevention through legal system reform. However, it is reassuring that exposure to positive experiences can help offset risk in youth who are affected by parental legal system involvement.

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