

ACEs and Divorce: How We Can Begin to Help Combat the Epidemic

By Caryn A. Stevens, Esquire



Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events from one's childhood that can have long-lasting, lifetime effects on a person's life. They are common, and pervasive, with about 61% of

surveyed adults in twenty-five states reporting that they have experienced at least one type of ACE in their childhood.¹ Studies have shown that ACEs have a direct connection to a person's increased likelihood of chronic health problems, mental illness or their own substance abuse issues in adulthood. ACEs were the subject of research conducted by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control, with researchers focusing on seven specific categories of ACEs, including the impact of divorce on a child's life.² Some common categories and examples of ACEs identified in these studies include a child witnessing domestic violence in the home, having a family member die by suicide, substance abuse issues in the home, or the child being a victim of violence or abuse.

One of the most significant ACEs that can impact a child's life is divorce. The traumatic conflict and stress experienced by children whose parents are divorcing is intense and severe. For these children, they are often experiencing instability and uncertainty in their family and at home for the first time in their lives. Quite often the parents display extreme rage, and the economic stress of divorce takes its toll on the entire household. Children often

find themselves being bounced back and forth between different houses, are often faced with moving out of the only home they have known, and are being separated from one or both parents during this chaotic time. While some children are resilient and may handle the divorce of their parents better than others (or at least appear to be handling handle the divorce better), we should not underestimate the long-lasting effect that divorce has on these children, and why divorce is one of the most significant ACEs in childhood. Family law practitioners may consider resiliency in children as their ability to "bounce back" from stress, adversity, and even trauma—but not every child "bounces back" in the same way as another child might. With 40-50% of marriages in the United States today ending in divorce, it is highly likely that many children will be directly impacted by this significant ACE.

ACEs are preventable with early intervention. Much of the intervention in combatting ACEs begins with the educating of parents, caregivers, and early childhood professionals. By raising awareness and providing education about ACEs, we can create a much more trauma-informed community. Also, by providing resources to these families and professionals that assist in creating safe and stable home environments for these children, we are assisting in combatting ACEs. Some of the cornerstones in conquering ACEs is to create home environments free of violence, substance abuse and mental illness, as well as focusing on the creation of safe places for these children to thrive in.

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The majority of family law attorneys have had minimal training in mental health or mental illness. While the Florida Bar recently raised awareness regarding our own self-care and mental health as attorneys, there still needs to be an even greater push to educate family law attorneys on how to REALLY help our clients by recognizing the signs of mental illness or substance abuse in our clients, as an example. We, as family law attorneys, also need greater education on resources, agencies, programs, and treatment options in our communities to which we can properly refer and recommend to divorcing parents and their children. The disconnect between the practice of law and mental health services must be bridged for the sake of the families we impact through our representation. We should always remain cognizant of the effects our work has on our clients as well as their children. Being aware of the existence and impact of ACEs should be foundational to any family lawyer's case plan.

Often in our work, we only "see" what presents in our office through the words and actions of our own clients. We need to dig deeper and ask tough questions. We need to really get our hands dirty and delve into the lives (and home lives) of our clients, their children, and the home environment. We need to focus on making recommendations (and referrals) to our clients regarding their own self-care, mental health treatment, substance abuse assistance, or violence prevention education. We frequently find ourselves placing far too much emphasis on what "effect" something will have on our "case" that we neglect to acknowledge that our clients, and their children, need REAL help. If our client really needs assistance with parenting skills, we need to reduce the stigma on encouraging our clients to seek that help. And if our client is repeatedly mentioning how

"depressed" he/she is feeling, we need to reduce the stigma on ensuring that our clients are getting the proper mental health treatment they need and deserve. While most divorce proceedings are short-lived in a child's life, the lasting impact of ACEs will permeate a child's development and impact his/her ability to function as an adult, thus having major impact on the physical and emotional health of that person. By focusing on ensuring that our clients are getting that REAL help, we are taking steps to help combat many of those ACEs that our client's children are exposed to at home. A happier, healthier, stable, substance-abuse-free parent makes for a much safer, stable, and nurturing home environment in which their child(ren) will grow and thrive.

So, MAKE those recommendations. HAVE those discussions with your clients. CALL OUT your client on those negative remarks he/she is making to the other parent in front of the children. Really LISTEN to what your client is telling you—and even what your client may not be telling you. RECOGNIZE those changes—even the smallest ones—in your client which may be signs that something far worse is happening below the surface, or at home. And for those of you who feel as though you do not know enough about HOW to help—take the initiative yourself: seek out training, CLEs, and presentations on these topics. For clients sitting in our office, going through a divorce may very well be the most traumatic event in their entire life. BE AWARE of that. Most importantly, think about how each of these symptoms, addictions, illnesses and actions of our clients impact even the youngest child living in their home. We are attorneys and counselors at law—so take those dual-roles seriously. It's not a coincidence that those words are often used interchangeably to describe our profession across the globe.

In both my prior practice as a mental health counselor and guidance counselor, and my current practice as a family law attorney, I

concentrate my help with clients on solution-focused assistance, rather than dwell on the past and those things we cannot change. My “mantra” is to always leave a client in a better place than where I found them. This methodology is good to consider for each and every one of us practicing in this field when we work with clients. While we cannot control every aspect of our clients’ lives, we can certainly work on minimizing the stigmas associated with needing help, and we can guide and connect our clients to appropriate resources to ease the emotional, physical, and financial toll divorce can take on a parent and their children. In doing so, we take an active role in this global effort to combat ACEs.

Endnotes

1 See *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)*, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/> (last visited Jan. 15, 2020).

2 *Id.*

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Caryn spent over 12 years working in the mental health and counseling fields, as a mental health counselor in private practice, as a counselor for the Department of Children & Families, and later as an Elementary School Guidance Counselor. Caryn is a graduate of Florida State University, where she earned her Bachelors degree in Psychology, and her Masters and Specialist Degrees in Counseling & Human Services. Caryn received her Juris Doctorate from Nova Southeastern University, and received pro bono honors for her volunteer legal work. In her prior work as a mental health counselor, Caryn has had the unique opportunity to assist thousands of children, families and couples through difficult life circumstances, which allow her to bring a unique and compassionate perspective to the clients she represents currently. Caryn is a current member of the Florida Bar Family Law Section, where she serves on the Children's Issues Committee and the Domestic Violence Committee. Caryn also serves as the Treasurer of the Susan Greenberg Family Law Inn of Court of the Palm Beaches, and is a graduate of the Leadership Palm Beach County Class of 2019. Caryn is a native South Floridian, and currently lives in Palm Beach County with her Husband, and their adorable Mini Aussie.