

# Relationships as Environment

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November, 2012



*“All learning comes to us through relationships which mean something to us personally.”* Mister Rogers



## Key finding:

Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development.

--Harvard Center on the Developing Child

# Evolution of Engaged Scholarship and the Role of a Knowledge Broker

- National Academy of Sciences Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development (*From Neurons to Neighborhoods*)
- MacArthur Research Network on Early Experience and Brain Development
- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child



**[www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)**

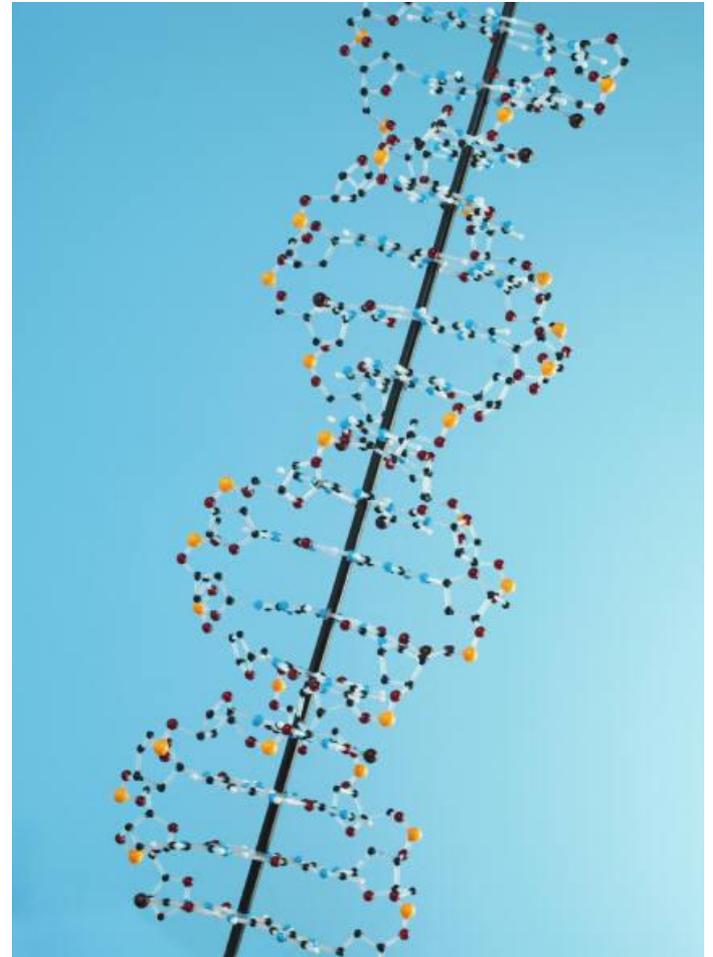
## **Urie Bronfenbrenner:**

*“In order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. Somebody’s got to be crazy about that kid. That’s number one. First, last, and always.”*



# In the mother-infant relationship,

gene expression is influenced in areas of the brain that regulate social and emotional function and can even lead to changes in brain structure.



# “Serve and return” interactions:



*Young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions, and gestures, and adults respond with the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back.*

# “Serve and return” interactions...

build and strengthen brain architecture and create a relationship in which the baby’s experiences are affirmed and new abilities are nurtured.



# A Toddler in Child Care

Damian is sitting at a table in his day-care center slowly moving his jaw and mouth while staring into space. “What are you chewing, Damian?” asks his caregiver. “I’m chewing mommy,” replies Damian.

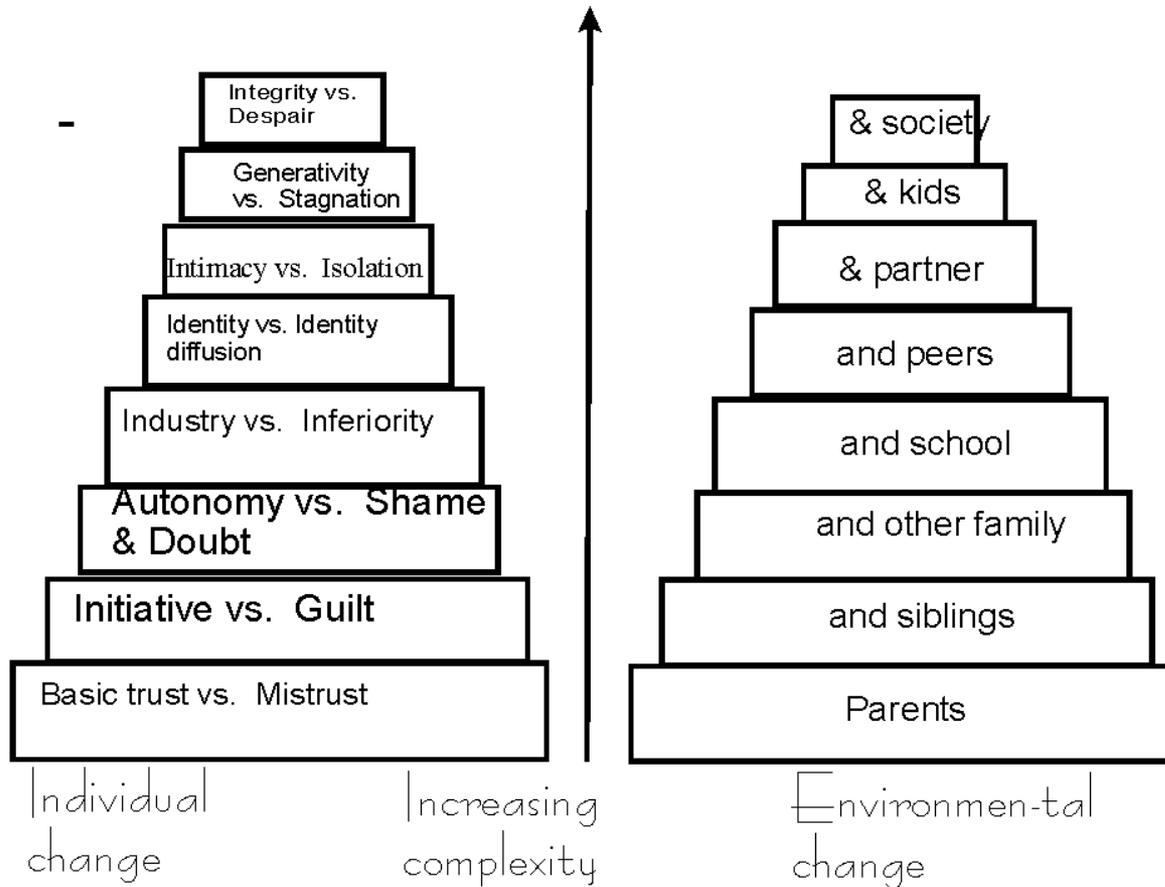
Alicia Lieberman, [The Emotional Life of the Toddler](#)

# Young children learn from each other



- how to share
- to engage in reciprocal interactions
- to take the needs and desires of others into account, and
- to manage their own impulses.

# Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development



# In a child care setting...



Warm and supportive caregiving promotes the development of greater social competence, fewer behavior problems, and enhanced thinking and reasoning skills at school age.

# Off to school

Children who develop warm, positive relationships with their kindergarten teachers are more excited about learning, more positive about coming to school, more self-confident, and achieve more in the classroom.



# Research finding:

*“Strong relationships between programs and program participants had a greater influence than use of resources on the program’s ability to engage parents.”*

Aimee Hilado, Leanne Kallemeyn, Christine Leow, Marta Lundy, & Marla Israel. “Supporting Child Welfare and Parent Involvement in Preschool Programs,” *Early Childhood Education Journal*, June 2011.

# Early Childhood Adversity Can Influence a Range of Lifelong Outcomes

Research on the biology of **stress** helps explain some of the underlying causal mechanisms for differences in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.

# Positive Stress

- Moderate, short-lived stress responses, such as brief increases in heart rate or mild changes in stress hormone levels.
- Precipitants include the challenges of meeting new people, dealing with frustration, getting an immunization, or adult limit-setting.
- An important and necessary aspect of healthy development that occurs in the context of stable and supportive relationships.

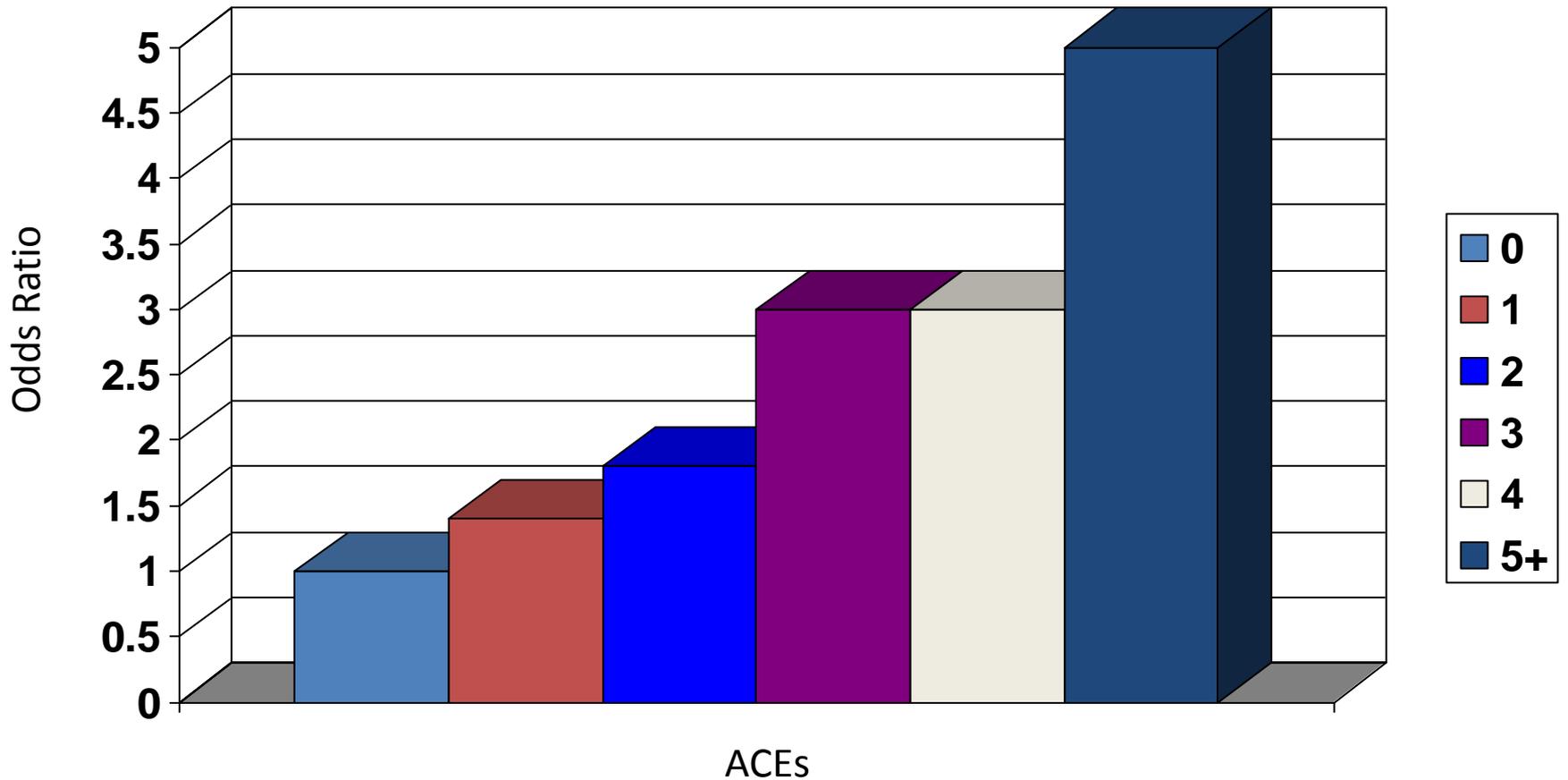
# Tolerable Stress

- Stress responses that could disrupt brain architecture, but are buffered by supportive relationships that facilitate adaptive coping.
- Precipitants include death or serious illness of a loved one, a frightening injury, parent divorce, a natural disaster, terrorism, or homelessness.
- Generally occurs within a time-limited period, which gives the brain an opportunity to recover from potentially damaging effects.

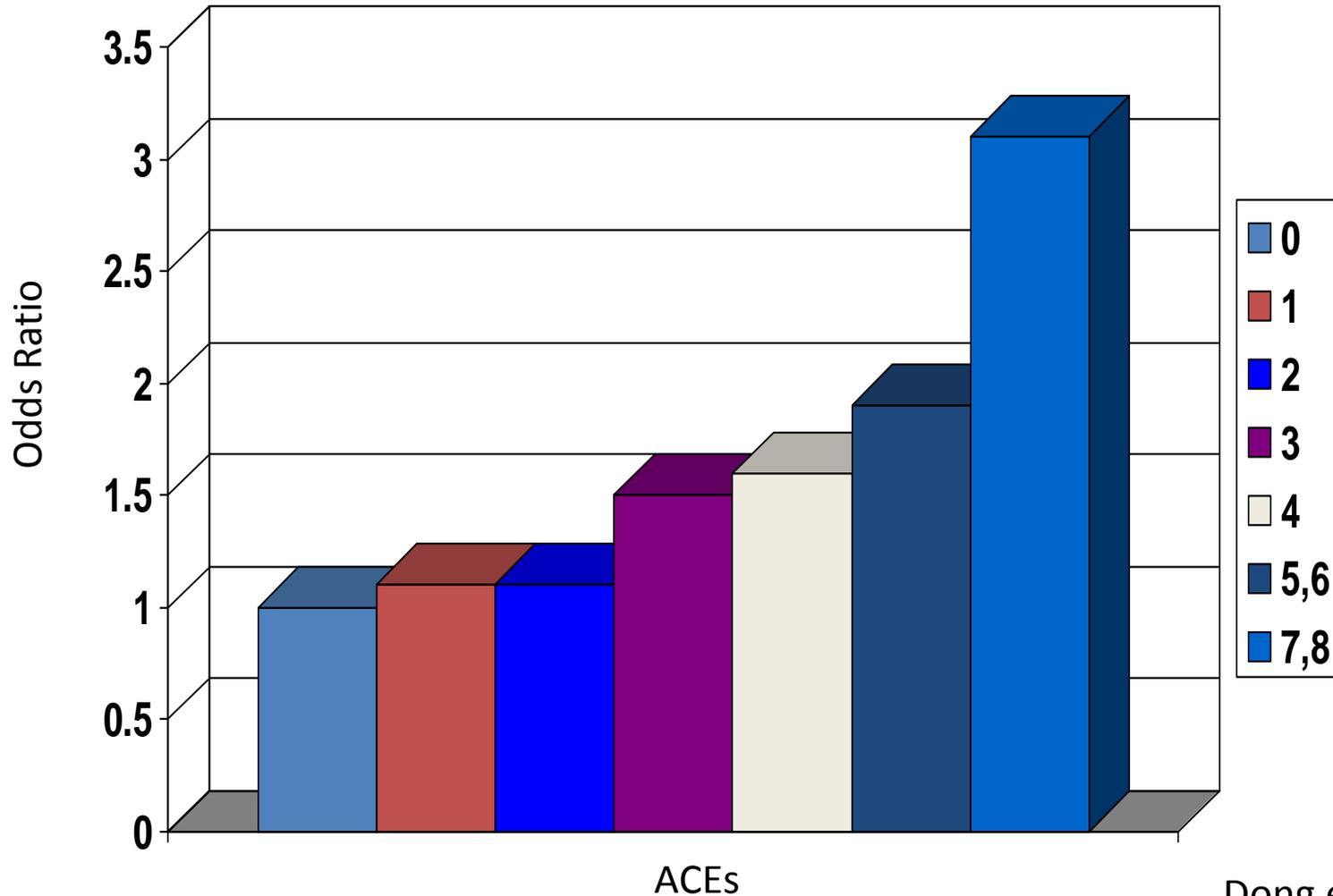
# Toxic Stress

- Strong and prolonged activation of the body's stress management systems in the absence of the buffering protection of adult support.
- Precipitants include extreme poverty, physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, severe maternal depression, substance abuse, or family violence.
- Disrupts brain architecture and leads to stress management systems that respond at relatively lower thresholds, thereby increasing the risk of stress-related physical and mental illness.

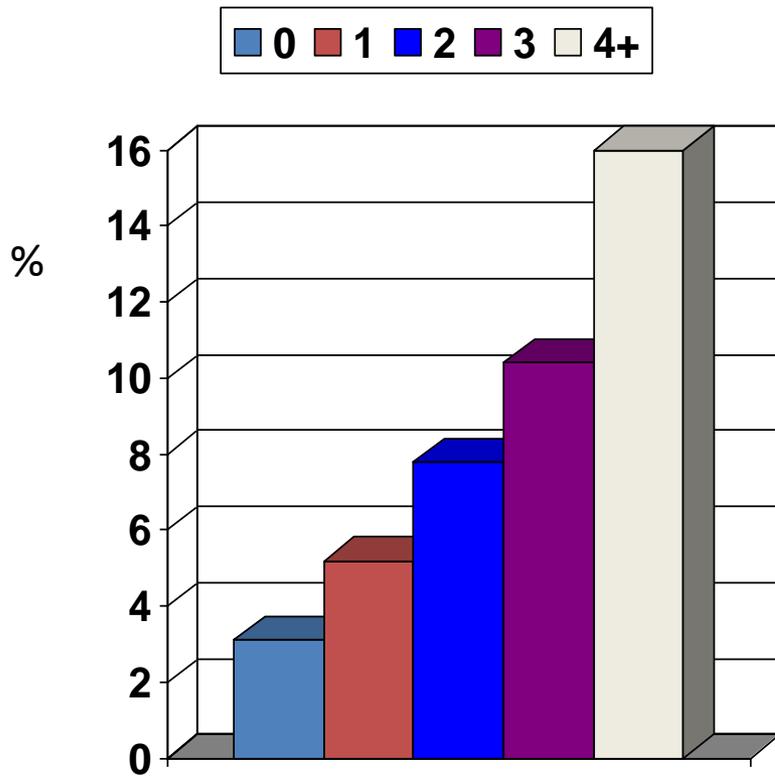
# Adverse Childhood Events and Adult Depression



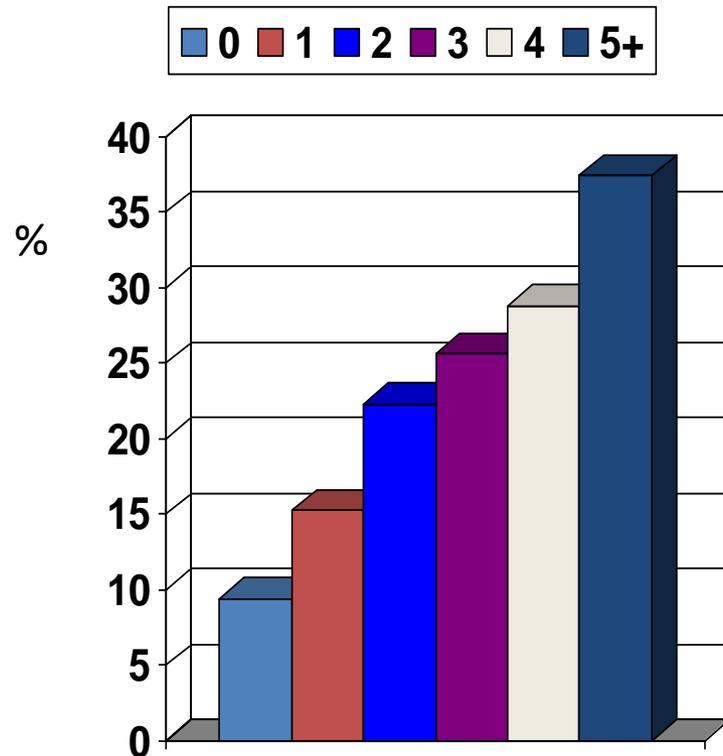
# Adverse Childhood Events and Adult Ischemic Heart Disease



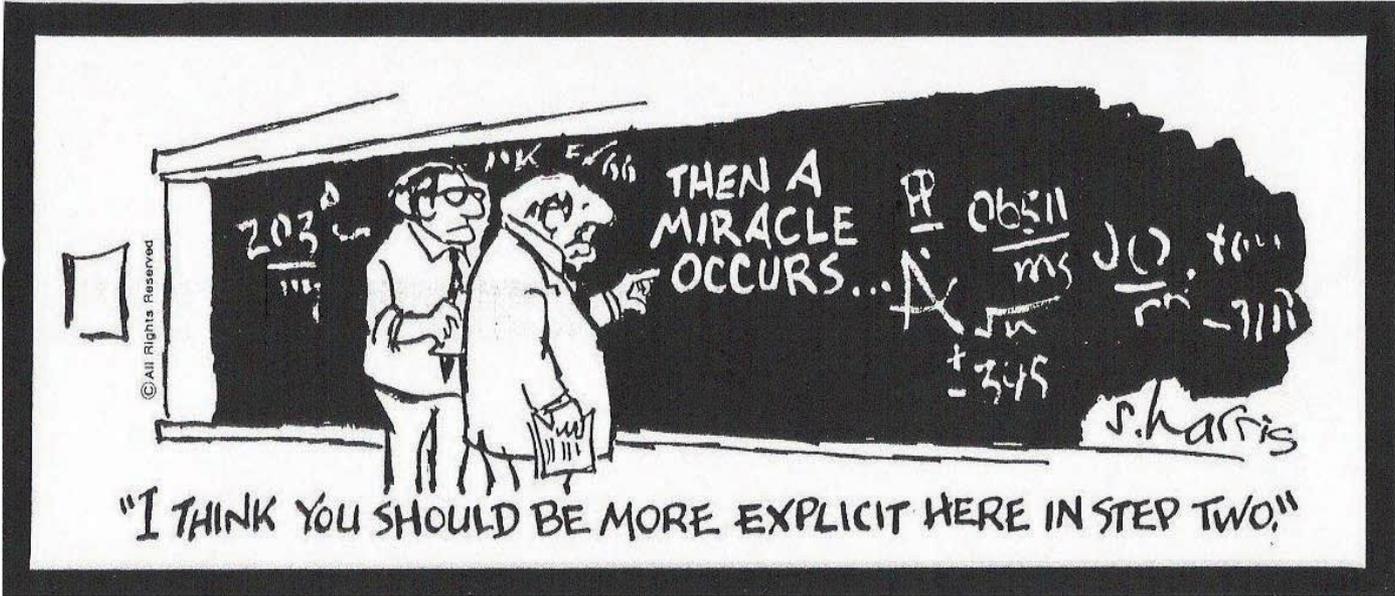
# Adverse Childhood Events and Adult Substance Abuse



Self-Report: Alcoholism  
Dube et al, 2002



Self-Report: Illicit Drugs  
Dube et al, 2005



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"I THINK YOU SHOULD BE MORE EXPLICIT HERE IN STEP TWO!"

The good news:  
A loving relationship with a primary caregiver  
neutralizes the effect of toxic stress.



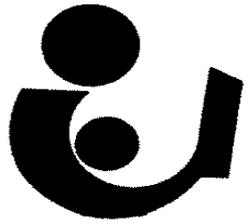
# Relationships are the “Active Ingredients” of Early Experience

- Nurturing and responsive interactions build healthy brain architecture that provides a strong foundation for later learning, behavior, and health.
- When protective relationships are not provided, persistent stress results in the activation of physiological systems (e.g. elevated cortisol secretion) that can disrupt brain architecture by impairing cell growth and interfering with the formation of healthy neural circuits.

# Brains, Skills and Health are Built Over Time

**The early years of life matter** because the interactive influences of both early experience and gene expression affect the architecture of the maturing brain and the function of the developing immune system.



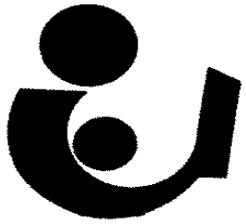


All parents  
have 2 critical questions:

1. How am I doing?

2. How is my child doing?





# Joining parents in the task of raising their children

- Listen for their story
- Set aside our agenda to respond to needs
- Recognize parents as experts on their own children
- Support parents' mastery
- Promote parent-child interaction
- “Hold families in our minds”



# Affiliation Listening Skills



Use OPERA listening

- O Use Open-ended questions
- P Pause
- E Make Eye Contact
- R Repeat
- A Avoid judgment, Ask opinion, Advice last

**Relationships matter.**

