

Overcoming Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)



“

I was so lost. It seemed the only way to end my pain. I didn't think anyone really cared.”

- Will Strength

By any measure, Will Strength lived a childhood of adversity. From what he recalls of his earliest years, he often went hungry. He endured turmoil and violence, watching his parents battle each other as well as addiction and mental health issues. When he was six, they split up. And he spent the rest of his childhood ricocheting from Alabama to Texas to Idaho, from parent to parent, experiencing physical, sexual and emotional abuse as well as economic hardship. Eventually, he developed his own struggles with drugs and depression. At 16, he tried to hang himself with his own belt in the bathroom stall at work.

But the stall's bar gave way.

“I was so lost,” says Strength, noting he was sober at the time. “It seemed the only way to end my pain. I didn't think anyone really cared.” Taking the broken bar as a sign, he resolved to live.

Since then, he has worked to overcome the fall-out from his childhood experiences.

With the right support, he has.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) range from sexual, physical and emotional abuse to physical and emotional neglect to a host of other hardships that children can face at home:

- Violence or threats against a mother or stepmother by a father or boyfriend
- A household or family member’s struggle with drug abuse or mental illness
- Separation from a parent, most typically by divorce or incarceration

The growing number of parents—and grandparents—dying from COVID is creating a new ACE for children under their care. In Idaho, this new group of COVID orphans is estimated to number at least 500. Before the COVID Delta surge arrived in Idaho, researchers estimated that about 497 children in the state had lost their primary caregivers due to the virus.¹

“Like COVID-19, ACEs can affect all socio-economic groups,” says Dr. Dennis Woody, a pediatric neuropsychologist and senior clinical program consultant for Optum Idaho. When a family has limited resources and endures homelessness and hunger, the risks for negative impacts from these adverse experiences rises, he notes.

Will Strength’s childhood checks the box for every traumatic experience, plus the lack of resources and financial stability.

Potential Consequences of ACEs

The consequences of ACEs can be profound, harming a child’s immediate and long-term mental and physical wellbeing, studies show.

When children undergo such trauma on a chronic basis—and without the support of caring adult—they develop a toxic level of stress. Enduring racism and community violence worsens it. The toxic stress overloads the body’s normal stress responses, harming developing systems. Especially during early childhood, this dysfunction can affect the brain’s architecture, lessening neural connections for self-control, learning and planning and amplifying similar connections for fear, anxiety and impulsive responses.²

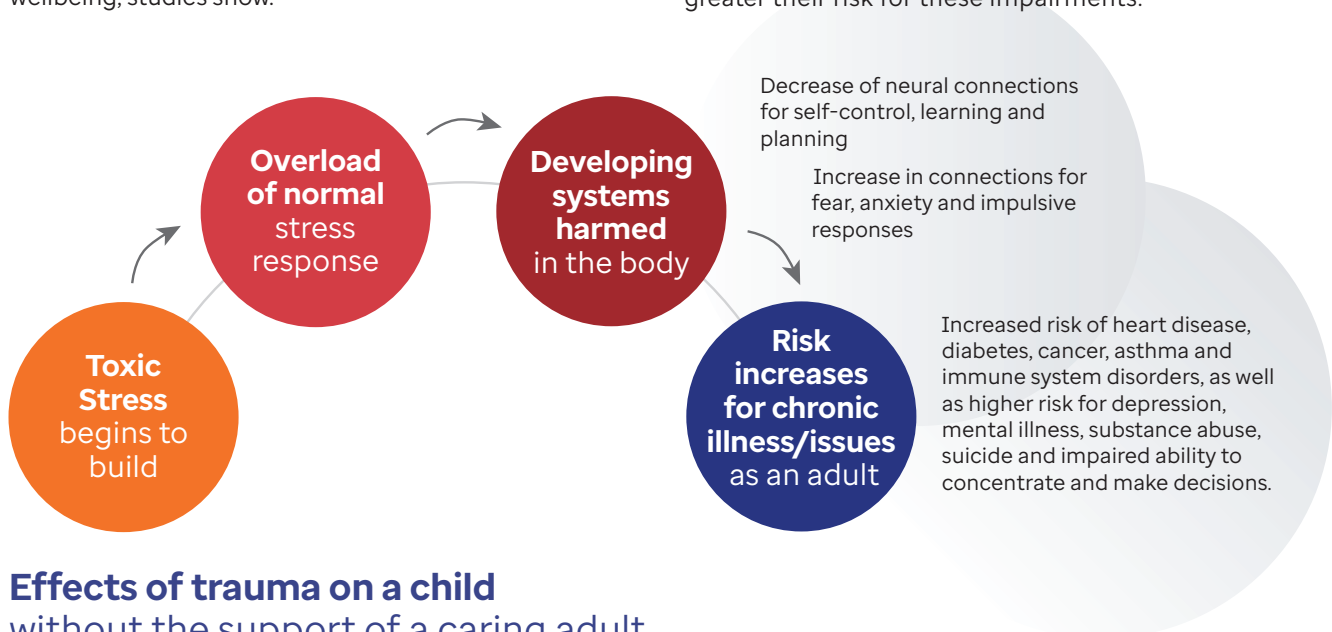
Toxic stress can lead to physical problems later in life. People with ACEs are at higher risk for chronic health problems—heart disease, diabetes, cancer, asthma and other immune system disorders. They also are more likely to experience mental illness, substance abuse, suicide and impaired ability to concentrate and make decisions.

5 of the top 10 leading causes of death are associated with ACEs³

(respiratory and heart disease, cancer, diabetes, suicide)

“Without intervention, children with ACEs tend to stall developmentally and are less likely to develop a sense of trust and hope, motivation or purpose, competence and even a sense of self,” says Dr. Chris Streeter, an adolescent and child psychiatrist who sees hundreds of young patients with ACEs annually at St. Luke’s Children’s Center for Neurobehavioral Medicine in Boise.

The greater the number of ACEs that people have, the greater their risk for these impairments.



Effects of trauma on a child without the support of a caring adult

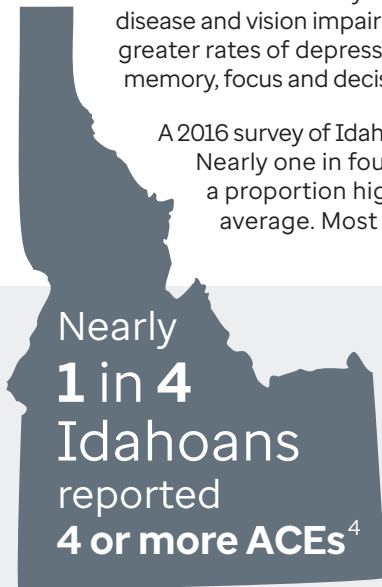
ACEs are preventable. And, even though early intervention is better, with support healing can occur even years later in life. “Everyone has the potential to recover and that’s not being Pollyanna,” says Streeeter.

ACEs in Idaho

Research shows that ACEs are far more prevalent in Idaho than in many other states, with troubling, far-reaching effects. Sponsored by Optum Idaho, the managed care contractor for the Idaho Behavioral Health Plan through the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare’s Division of Medicaid, a 2018 survey found that almost one in four Idaho adults reported four or more ACEs—a threshold amount for long-term physical and mental health impacts.

Follow-up research revealed that adults with four or more ACEs led far more difficult lives than their peers with no ACEs. They were more likely to have lower incomes, be unemployed and have dropped out of high school. They also were far more likely to have asthma, other lung disease and vision impairments. And they reported greater rates of depression and difficulties with memory, focus and decision-making.⁴

A 2016 survey of Idaho’s children is concerning. Nearly one in four had two or more ACEs—a proportion higher than the national average. Most striking—13.4 percent



⁴According to a 2018 survey sponsored by Optum Idaho.

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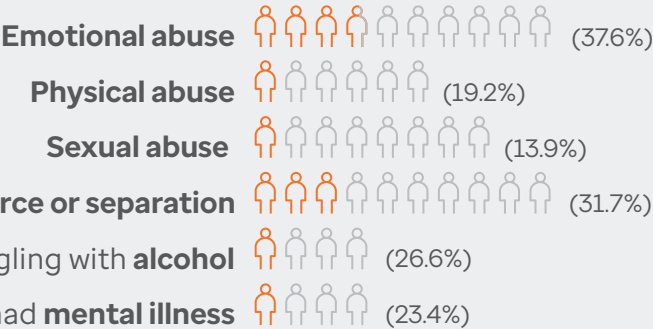


had lived with someone who was mentally ill, suicidal or severely depressed—versus the national average of 7.8 percent.⁵ The data hints at what social scientists already know—without intervention, ACEs can pass from generation to generation.

Recognizing the Impact, Spreading the Word

The research that Optum supported is part of its ongoing effort to help Idahoans, especially children, affected by

ACEs Idaho adults experienced in childhood⁴



23.4%

of children in Idaho had
two or more ACEs⁵
(higher than the national average)

⁵According to a 2016 survey.

Without intervention, ACEs can pass from generation to generation.

ACEs. “More than half of the people we work to serve and that our providers serve are children,” explains Executive Director of Optum Idaho Georganne Benjamin.

For the past several years, Optum Idaho has been helping train behavioral health care providers that work with young children and their parents to address these traumas. It also has partnered with schools to provide on-site clinicians to help students in need—most with multiple ACEs. Optum Idaho also has worked to create awareness about ACEs across the state. Several years ago, it brought the critically acclaimed documentary about ACEs, “Paper Tigers,” to communities throughout Idaho. The moving documentary shows how a Walla Walla, Washington, high school helped its students recover from childhood traumas.

Knowing that a documentary featuring Idahoans would resonate more deeply in the Gem State, Optum Idaho co-sponsored the recently released documentary “Resilient Idaho: Hope Lives Here” (www.idahoptv.org/shows/specials/resilience/) that tells the inspiring stories of individuals in Idaho who have overcome the ACEs in their lives.

Benjamin hopes “Resilient Idaho” sparks conversations among everyday Idahoans about childhood traumas and removes any stigma associated with getting help to heal from them. “A lot of people don’t really realize how they have been impacted,” she says. They need to hear a message of hope and help, observes Benjamin: “It’s OK. You didn’t do anything. There is help for you. We can work through this. You’re not alone.”

Determined to keep the conversation going, Optum Idaho partnered in May 2021 with the Idaho Resilience Project, a new network of organizations that address ACEs across a spectrum of family services, to deliver 7,000 “Kites for Hope” to communities across Idaho. The kites symbolized the power of positive experiences for children. The project is now working to shift how communities view children affected by ACEs, Benjamin says, from “what’s wrong with these kids to what happened to these kids.”

In Idaho, this change is critical. “Recognizing the impact of the ACES is so massively huge because it can change the way that people respond to those kids,” says Roger Sherman, executive director of Idaho Children’s Trust Fund, a

nonprofit working to prevent abuse and neglect among Idaho’s children and project member. He points to how understanding ACEs has transformed Idaho’s juvenile justice system over the past decade. (See *‘Juvenile Justice System’ story on page 8*).

“These kids can’t control what happened to them. But we sure can help and create a pathway for them to the future,” says the project’s leader, Jean Mutchie, community health manager at St. Luke’s Health System and a Nampa City Council Member.

Now, a movement to build that path forward is gaining traction across Idaho. The documentary is helping fuel interest in community-based solutions—from building resiliency to supporting preventive programs to creating new public policy. “This is our story now and it’s not somebody else’s story,” explains Sherman.

Solutions

Even though ACEs can have severe effects, research shows several factors can help mitigate them. Among those factors, helping children learn to regulate their emotions and form positive social connections can help, as can fostering parenting skills and resiliency among young, at-risk families.

Perhaps, most important of all is the influence of a stable, caring adult.

Helping Children Regulate Emotions and Form Connections

Other than home, school is where children spend most of their time, making it a prime platform to help students with ACEs as well as their families.

Before dropping out of high school, Will Strength attended 13 schools over 10 years, building a transcript of mediocre grades even as he acted out to get attention. Despite everything, school was his refuge. “As horribly as I did, school was my break, my escape. I had a hot meal and someone I could ask who wasn’t going to judge me.”

In Idaho, an effort to train teachers how to help students like Strength more effectively is rippling slowly across the state, from Coeur d’Alene, Nampa, Pocatello and districts in between.



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“

We want a self-regulated little individual who also can function later at work.”

– Heather Yarbrough

The training gives teachers a new lens to view students with chronic, disruptive behavior issues. “Honestly, we talk about ACEs so that adults say, ‘That is important and incredibly impactful and maybe that is why a student is struggling,’” says Keith Orchard, mental health specialist for the Coeur d’Alene district, who leads the effort. The training also shows teachers new techniques to connect

with students and to nudge their behavior in a positive direction. “Kids do better when they feel safe and are in a relationship,” he says.

At Endeavor Elementary school in Nampa, where most students qualify for free or reduced lunches, several years of training have wrought change—large and small.

As teachers reframed their notions of students with ACEs, they also shifted how they handled behaviors of all students—not just those with trauma. Now, along with reading and writing, children learn how to manage their emotions. When students become frustrated and emotional, they make a “flip my lid” gesture: thumb tucked in, fingers curled to resemble the human brain. In every classroom, comforting “chill out zones” have replaced time-out corners. The zones are equipped with coloring books, fidget toys and bright posters about common emotions. In these spaces, children practice calming exercises, counting to 10 and tracing the fingers on their hands, rebooting emotionally for their return to learning. Children can use the same skills outside the classroom and later in life, says Heather Yarbrough, Endeavor’s principal. “We want a self-regulated little individual who also can function later at work,” she says. For children who need more adult attention, teachers dispense it in two-minute conversations throughout the day.

Now, teachers feel more empowered, she says. They also feel calmer. “Before we were trying to own so much—you hear their circumstances, the bruises, the sleep deprived kiddo.” Now, teachers believe they have helped their students to have some control in their lives, she says. And children, with or without ACEs, become more socially and emotionally competent after practicing how to regulate emotions.



⤴ “Flip My Lid” gesture

⤵ “Chill Out Zone”



Fostering Parenting Skills and Resiliency

Quality preschool programs and home visitation programs that train parents of at-risk families and connect them to vital resources helps reduce ACEs.⁶ The Idaho Resilience Project and other ACEs experts are advocating for greater investment in Idaho's preschools and home visitation programs like Holly Whitworth's.

Whitworth, who works at Eastern Idaho Public Health providing the Parents as Teachers services, has spent 17 years visiting the homes of vulnerable families with young children. The parents tend to be young, unemployed and unable to put enough food on the table. Having multiple ACEs themselves, they are now facing the fall-out of substance abuse, depression and anxiety. And they all share the same wish: "I want it to be better for my child than it was for me," says Whitworth.

To break the cycle, Whitworth teaches her clients how to parent, showing them simple activities to help bond and

At 21, he was at a crossroads. Married and father of a three-year-old, Strength was unemployed, living in public-assisted housing and still battling bad habits. His wife, the family's breadwinner, was threatening to leave him. Then, they enrolled their daughter into Head Start, and their life began to change. A family advocate coaxed Strength with free pizza into a father's program. That course soon led to others there. "I learned fathering skills and took parenting classes and counseling," says Strength. The biggest step was building trust in the counseling process, he says. Head Start also provided other practical support: fuel vouchers that enabled Strength to secure a part-time job, which soon became a full-time job. With Head Start's help, Strength earned his high school equivalency degree. Strength's life improved. "I was actually able to hold down a job, stopped going to jail, stopped drinking, stopped smoking weed and getting into fights," he says. His family's life improved, too. With the agency's

Will Strength's grade school photo.



She did her best. I don't know if she remembers what she represented in my life." One day he hopes to tell her: "You saved my life."

- Will Strength

build trust with their children. "It's games. It's down on the floor. It's talking. It's singing," she says. She also works with parents to help regulate their own emotions—a skill they can pass along to their children.

Whitworth supports parents in other ways—pursuing job opportunities, finding food banks, referring their children with developmental delays for early intervention services and connecting them to other key supports. The goal is to help the parents build resiliency—the capacity internally and externally—to weather life's storms.

For Will Strength, a Head Start preschool program for his daughter in Pocatello helped break the generational chain. It also helped heal him.

guidance, his wife who already had a college degree, forged a new path at college, enabling her to teach at Head Start.

"Within five years of being at Head Start, we got off food stamps and public housing, and our life was on a serious uptick," he says.

A Stable, Caring Adult

Research shows that a caring adult—a mentor—can make all the difference for a child with ACEs. Typical mentors are teachers, coaches or counselors.

A fourth-grade teacher in Pocatello took Strength under her wing, giving him sandwiches and pizza after school. When she saw bruises on him, the authorities intervened. Strength relocated temporarily to a safer environment, but it was out of the school district and away from his caring teacher. “She did her best,” Strength recalls. Now working for the Pocatello school system, he sometimes spots her from afar. “I don’t know if she remembers what she represented in my life,” he says. One day, he hopes to tell her: “You saved my life.”

Sometimes, mentors appear in unexpected places, as Sean Blackwell, an instructor of criminal justice and sociology at the College of Idaho, found.

As a child, Blackwell survived a gauntlet of ACEs. Not surprisingly, he acted out at school and was even expelled. For years, he lacked a stable, caring mentor in his life. But when he was 14, a sympathetic relative from Texas invited him to spend summers there. He went to work for his relative’s friend, “Uncle Rich,” the owner of a power-washing business. Blackwell spent hours with him, driving the backroads, power-washing bank lanes and restriping parking lot lines in the Texas heat. “He saw me for all my humanity and brokenness and potential. Without any formal training, he saw who I could be,” recalls Blackwell. “He was one of the only people who could identify what I went through and say, ‘That’s messed up.’” Over time, Blackwell came to trust him, seeking his advice. “He would just say, ‘That’s stupid. You shouldn’t do that.’ And I would listen to him. He’s the reason I have a relationship with my mother.” Now, Blackwell is married, a father of four and a college instructor pursuing his Ph.D. at the University of Leicester (UK), a complement to his Master’s degree from the prestigious London School of Economics. Blackwell is ever grateful to Uncle Rich and his compassionate relative. “I think mentors are everything,” he says.

The power of mentors can be long-lasting. Shannon McGuire overcame multiple ACEs to become a successful, community-minded entrepreneur in Idaho. She credits caring teachers for providing vital inspiration later in life. A gifted student, McGuire had dropped out of high school to get a job. At 17, she became pregnant and unable to support herself. She fell back on the words of her teachers. “They reinforced the power of education,” she says. Inspired, she earned her high school diploma at 20 and enrolled in college. “Those conversations still stay with me.”

Adults with ACEs also Benefit From Mentors

At the Head Start program in Pocatello, Will Strength’s family advocate encouraged him every step of his journey. Eventually, she became like a second mom to him. “I could spill all my worries and insecurities to her,” he says, wondering today at 39 how to express his gratitude to her.



Shannon McGuire

Facing ACEs

Strength finally learned about ACEs at age 36. He took a test, asking how many of the listed adverse childhood experiences he had undergone. All, he answered. His score was a revelation and a relief. “I bawled like a baby. It opened up my eyes about how far I have come and how far I have to go.” On occasion, he still struggles, but serving others keeps him moving forward.

Now, he is a mentor to other young adults, many working through the impact of their own difficult childhoods. He founded Dad Speak, an organization that counsels and encourages fathers to become fully involved with their children and in their communities.

As head mechanic in the Pocatello school district’s grounds department, Strength is close to earning his college degree in political science and social work. To help families on a broader level, he dreams of running for political office. Meanwhile, he finds joy in his family and their achievements. His wife is a special education teacher; his oldest daughter, a college student; his youngest, editor-in-chief of her high school newspaper. He and his wife also recently adopted two young sons of a relative who was in and out of prison. Each night, Strength reads “Harry Potter” books to them, determined to give them the stability and love that he lacked as a child.

“I am very happy with my life,” he says. ■

Juvenile Justice System

Over the years, thousands of troubled adolescents and children appeared before Magistrate Judge Mark Ingram in Idaho's Fifth Judicial District to account for their actions. "I would ask, 'Why did you do that?'" he recalls. "They would legitimately say, 'I don't know.' They just have these emotional outbursts that they can't control." Learning about ACEs and how they influence behavior helped answer Ingram's question. "It explains so much of what we encounter," says Ingram, who also chairs the Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee for the Idaho Supreme Court.

92.2%

of teens in Idaho detention facilities have ACEs⁷

(54% of Idaho teens in the general population have ACEs)

Girls in detention have a **higher** ACE count than male peers⁷

 **5.19** vs  **2.88**

Data shows that adolescents in Idaho's detention centers have far more ACEs than their peers in the general population.

Ingram says recognition of ACEs and their impact on youths in the justice system has grown substantially among his colleagues, prosecutors, probation officers and other related staff. The collective understanding is that the youths' traumas need to be treated to help shift their behavior. That knowledge has created remarkable change. In lieu of punitive programs, about half of youthful offenders are now referred to behavioral health resources in their communities, following a standard risk assessment. In some counties, probation employees monitor their progress; in others, community boards staffed by volunteers keep tabs. Though mentoring programs are offered in some areas, counseling, substance abuse treatment and meaningful community service are the staples.

Over the past several years, the number of youths in residential detention centers also has decreased significantly.

On a personal level, Ingram says learning about ACEs has changed how he interacts with families in his courtroom. He is more attuned to their parents' needs. "They lived through their own series of abuses and bad experiences," he says. As for the youth, his essential question has evolved, too.

Now, he asks "How do you feel?" ■



Stock photo of posed models.



“

I remember starting to cry. It was the first time in a long time that somebody made me feel kind of human—made me feel like I was still a person.”

– Luis Granados

The Power of Mentors

As a young child, Luis Granados did not feel safe nor protected. He saw his father assault his mother. And, Luis was beaten, too. Emotionally abused, he also was left alone with his siblings for hours as their parents labored, six days a week at a meat-packing plant. School provided little respite. As a Mexican-American, he endured bullying and racism. Growing hypervigilant and aggressive, he eventually joined a gang. At 17, he dropped out of high school.

For a time, he found acceptance and support through a community program, the Original Gangsters Basic Academy of Development (OGBAD) in Nampa, Idaho. Academy mentors helped him. They celebrated his GED, assisted with his resume and drove him to his job at the city’s parks department where he never missed a day of work. Still, he connected with his gang again. Unwittingly, he sold a gun to a gang member, who then used it in a robbery. That sale landed Granados in prison, horrified and terrified at where life had taken him. Just 19, he was now facing 15 years behind bars.

In court, Granados listened to the prosecutor’s grim assessment of him and his future. “I was just a gang member, pretty much a lost cause,” he recalls. He was devastated: “Is that what the community really thinks about me? Is that who I really am?”

For six months, he waited for his sentencing in a small cell, sometimes contemplating suicide. As his sentencing date neared, a hardened cellmate warned Granados not

to share his childhood experiences with a presentencing investigator. But when the investigator was kind to him, expressing surprise at his youth, Granados did. “I remember starting to cry. It was the first time in a long time that somebody made me feel kind of human—made me feel like I was still a person.”

The investigator noted his GED, work experience and support system of mentors and other academy resources. And at his sentencing, he took ownership for what he did. He addressed the judge: “I told her that I wasn’t a lost cause. I had dreams and goals. My dreams were to work.” He described his strong work ethic and his pride in maintaining Nampa’s parks and contributing to the community.

(Story continued on page 10.)



The Power of Mentors *(continued)*

The judge gave him a second chance—six more months in prison, followed by seven years of probation. During that time, he worked hard to satisfy his probation requirements. Seven years later, appearing before the same judge for his final time, change was evident. Dressed nicely and with a positive attitude, Granados was now employed at OGBAD's successor—the nonprofit Breaking Chains Academy of Development (www.breakingchainsacademy.com) teaching and mentoring other youth in need. “I remember her smiling and looking over to the prosecutor and asking if there were any objections. There were none.”

Now the academy's executive director, Granados credits the mentors for his turnaround. “They were the one trusted adult in my life. I am still in contact with them.” At Breaking Chains, he has found a deeper redemption. “Working with the kids has taught me to love myself and forgive myself for things that have I done.”

Maintaining his mental health is an ongoing priority. “I see a therapist every week and have joined men's circles about healthy masculinity. It's done wonders for me,” he says, noting the loving relationship that he enjoys with his life partner and two daughters. Recognizing the fall-out from his ACEs has brought Granados a measure of peace. “I'm not crazy. I'm not alone.”

He hopes the Optum Idaho co-sponsored documentary, “Resilient Idaho: Hope Lives Here” (www.idahoptv.org/shows/specials/resilience) will spread awareness about ACEs—even in the school systems. Some days, when the turmoil in his life prevented him from sleeping, he fell asleep at his desk. “When I put my head down, instead of getting kicked out of class, they could have asked me what was wrong. That could have helped.” It is the question that he now asks each youth at Breaking Chains Academy.



Sources

- ¹ “COVID-19-Associated Orphanhood and Caregiver Death in the United States,” Susan D. Hillis, Alexandra Blenkinsop, Andrés Villaveces, Francis B. Annor, Leandris Liburd, Greta M. Massetti, Zewditu Demissie, James A. Mercy, Charles A. Nelson, Lucie Cluver, Seth Flaxman, Lorraine Sherr, Christl A. Donnelly, Oliver Ratmann and H. Juliette T. Unwin *Pediatrics* October 2021, e2021053760; DOI: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34620728/>
- ² National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2005/2014). *Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain: Working Paper 3. Updated Edition.* <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu> © 2005, 2009, 2014, National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University
- ³ <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/ACEs/>
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- ⁵ <https://www.childhealthdata.org/browse/survey>
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- ⁷ Lynch, S.M. & Weber, S. (February 4, 2020) *District VI 2016-2018 Detained Youth & ACEs: Preliminary Findings 2020.* Idaho State University https://isb.idaho.gov/blog/the-pandemic-of-adverse-childhood-experiences-courts-and-the-health-of-idaho-citizens/#_ednref3

Credits

With a background in national journalism and executive and corporate communications, Abigail Sullivan Moore is a writer specializing in behavioral health issues. She lives in Connecticut.

Bruce Tarbet is a Boise-based professional photographer specializing in travel, fine art and portraits of people in their natural settings.
BruceTarbetPhotography.com

Liz King is a Boise-based senior graphic designer and owner of Dreaming in Color Design.

Behavioral Health Resources

Resources Mentioned in This Case Study	
Idaho Children's Trust Fund	Help Now Line: 986-867-1073 (call or text)
Idaho Head Start Association	208-345-1182 or idahohsa.org
Idaho Resilience Project	www.idahoresilienceproject.org
"Resilient Idaho: Hope Lives Here" Documentary and Resources	www.idahoptv.org/shows/specials/resilience
Breaking Chains Academy of Development	208-250-7959 or breakingchainsacademy.com
Original Gangsters Basic Academy of Development (OGBAD) in Canyon County	https://isp.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/research/documents/OGBAD.pdf
Local and National Resources	
Optum Idaho Member Access & Crisis Line	1-855-202-0973, TDD/TTY: 711 or optumidaho.com and www.liveandworkwell.com
Idaho Resilience Project	www.idahoresilienceproject.org
Idaho 2-1-1 Care Line	2-1-1 or 1-800-926-2588 (TTY: 208-332-7205)
National & Idaho Suicide Prevention	Call or text 988 or chat at 988lifeline.org
National Alliance on Mental Illness	www.idahonami.org
SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) National Helpline	1-800-662-HELP (4357) or samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline
Idaho Department of Health & Welfare (IDHW)	www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov
Depression & Bipolar Support Alliance	www.dbsalliance.org
Idaho Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health	www.idahofederation.org
To Report Child Abuse	1-855-552-5437 (KIDS) or 2-1-1
Idaho Children's Trust Fund	Help Now Line: 986-867-1073 (call or text)
Youth Empowerment Services	1-833-644-8296 or yes.idaho.gov
Developmental Disabilities Services	1-877-333-9681
Teacher Resources to Help Students	
Resilience in the Classroom Resources	idahoptv.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/resilience-in-the-classroom
MentalHealth.gov Resources	mentalhealth.gov/talk/educators
Recognizing Mental Health Issues in Children	medlineplus.gov/childmentalhealth.html



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