

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT *Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma*

By Kathleen M. Dormody

Everyone knows pivotal experiences shape our childhood. What everyone does not understand is how traumatic events impact our childhood. According to child psychologist Hilit Kletter, trauma is indicated by any combination of ten Adverse Childhood Experiences including (1) alcoholism or drug abuse, (2) a family member in prison, (3) divorced or separated parents, (4) mental illness or suicide attempts, (5) sexual molestation, assault, or rape, (6) an adult swearing at or degrading them, (7) making them fear or experience physical harm, (8) witnessing their mother being physically abused, (9) a feeling they are not loved or important to their family or their family showing no emotions toward one another, or (10) their parents were unable to care for them properly, so they often had to wear dirty clothes and didn't have enough to eat (https://www.naadac.org/assets/2416/michael_bricker_acesassessment_ac16_ho.pdf). Depending upon cultural or socio-economic background, or neighborhood demographics, exposure to traumatic events may vary. I, for example, experienced two of the ten ACEs, but believed my score would be higher, given my timid and fearful behavior around peers.

At age four, a pivotal experience shaped my childhood, one no one would wish on their worst enemy. My story of trauma began when I witnessed my friend's older brother orally, sexually assaulting her; it is a vivid memory as is the memory of a sleepover. I recall waking up screaming, Matilda's (*name changed to protect her identity*) mother rocking me in her arms until my parents arrived in the middle of the night to take me home. I have still not recalled whether he had assaulted me that night or I witnessed another of her assaults. The year before he passed away, my father told me my friend's brother had raped her when she was a child. It is possible I witnessed that event but was too traumatized to recall. It is insignificant to me at this time as I have come to understand that trauma forever effected how I interacted with the world.

I recollect my very first week in college. As I walked across campus, guys were hanging out of their dorm windows yelling "Hello" to me. I confided in my best girlfriend that I did not know how to react and was afraid. My first two years in college gave me great experiences and the meeting of several good young men. Unfortunately, fear froze me, and I missed dating those men, even my best male friend. I now understand predatory males targeting me and, subsequently, falling victim to future dating violence, rape, a relationship with a narcissist, and continual victimization.

Had my parents or school system known the signs and symptoms of trauma and implemented Social and Emotional Learning, the fabric of my life would have been different. Society must understand our responsibility to foster growth and development in children. Empowerment strategies help survivors of adverse childhood experiences move through their trauma and thrive. It can also teach them to identify and break patterns of future abuse.