Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) examined whether a history of “adverse childhood experiences” (ACE) was common in a randomly selected population drawn from the 2009 ACE module of the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). The results indicated that, overall, 59.4% of respondents reported having at least one ACE, and 8.7% reported 5 or more adverse childhood experiences. The prevalence of adverse childhood experiences ranged from a high of 29.1% for household substance abuse to a low of having an incarcerated family member (7.2%). Approximately one quarter (25.9%) of respondents reported verbal abuse, 14.8% reported physical abuse, and 12.2% reported sexual abuse. For adverse childhood experiences measuring family dysfunction, 26.6% reported separated or divorced parents; 19.4% reported that they had lived with someone who was depressed, mentally ill, or suicidal; and 16.3% reported witnessing domestic violence.

According to CDC, men and women reported similar prevalence for each adverse childhood experience, with the exception of sexual abuse (17.2% for women and 6.7% for men), living with a mentally ill household member (22.0% for women and 16.7% for men), and living with a substance-abusing family member (30.6% for women and 27.5% for men). Younger respondents more often reported living with an incarcerated and/or mentally ill household member.

On the CDC ACE module, approximately 41% of respondents reported having no adverse childhood experiences, 22% reported one adverse childhood experience and 8.7% reported five or more adverse childhood experiences. Men (6.9%) were less likely to report five or more adverse childhood experiences compared to women (10.3%).
Respondents aged 55 and older reported the fewest adverse childhood experiences, but the younger age groups did not differ from one another. Non-Hispanic blacks were less likely to report five or more ACEs (4.9%) compared to non-Hispanic whites (8.9%), Hispanics (9.1%), and other non-Hispanics (11.7%). However, non-Hispanic black respondents were not significantly more likely to report zero ACEs compared with other racial/ethnic groups. Respondents with the lowest educational attainment were significantly more likely to report five or more ACEs compared with those higher education levels (14.9% versus 8.7% among high school graduates and 7.7% in those with more than a high school education). Overall, little state by state variation was observed in the number of adverse childhood experiences reported by each respondent.

CDC concludes that the high prevalence of adverse childhood experiences underscores the need for additional efforts at the state and local level to reduce and prevent child maltreatment and associated family dysfunction, as well as further development and dissemination of trauma-focused services to treat stress-related health outcomes associated with adverse childhood experiences.

For further information regarding this article, please see “Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR) “Adverse Childhood Experiences Reported by Adults – Five States, 2009.” Or view this MMWR at www.cdc.gov/mmwr Or, contact Karen Kuehn Howell, Ph.D., at the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., 309W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9829 or visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD.

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