

YOUR COMMUNITY RESOURCE FOR WHAT'S HAPPENING IN HEALTH CARE

CHESTER COUNTY

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Medicine

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The Art of Chester County

Presents

ABBE RESNICK

BY DR. BRUCE COLLEY

Hypertension: Treat or not to treat,
that is the question

“Be a Part of
Teen Health Week”

THE CHESTER COUNTY ACES COALITION

BY TRACY BEHRINGER

Baby boomers may remember their parents using the phrase, “you’re a product of your upbringing,” to explain common notions of that era. Today there is research and brain science behind the throwback expression, and a growing understanding of how early life experiences, especially childhood trauma, impact the lifelong health and wellbeing of most American adults.

The research began more than 20 years ago with the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study, which surveyed more than 17,000 adults about their experiences of childhood abuse, neglect, violence, and



Chelsea Buckley, Health and Supportive Housing Coordinator at Home of the Sparrow, and ACEs Coalition Coordinator

other stressful events. The results were groundbreaking, linking such serious adversity to an array of physical and mental health problems, including heart disease, diabetes, obesity, unintended pregnancy, alcoholism and depression. The impact is also cumulative; the more adverse experiences in one’s childhood, or the higher one’s ACEs score, the greater the possibility of disabilities and dysfunction as an adult.

In the years since the ACEs study, additional research has increased understanding about the science of brain development and trauma. Frequent or prolonged exposure to ACEs causes toxic stress, which damages developing brains and affects a child’s ability to learn and function in school.

Even with breadth of work in this area, many professionals in healthcare, education and social services are unfamiliar with the study or the far-reaching impact of ACEs. This information gap is closing, however, through the efforts of groups like Chester County’s ACEs Coalition. Formed in January 2017, the coalition includes representatives from local government, criminal justice, and social service agencies, as well as health professionals and educators. It is led by Home of the Sparrow, a non-profit organization providing housing and supportive services to homeless and low-income women. Chelsea Buckley, a Health and



WHAT
HAPPENED
TO YOU?

WE ALL HAVE SOMETHING.

Adverse Childhood Experiences Include:

- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional neglect
- Physical neglect
- Mother treated violently
- Household substance abuse
- Household mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member

Supportive Housing Coordinator at Home of the Sparrow, is also the ACEs Coalition Coordinator.

“About three years ago, we were finding that many of the women who graduated from our program continued to experience housing instability, food insecurity and domestic violence,” Buckley explained. “They were struggling with so many issues and crises, it was difficult for them to function, and we realized something else was going on. We were just putting on a Band-aid; we weren’t addressing the core problem.”

Looking for answers, Buckley said she and her supervisor attended a training about trauma at Millersville University. At that event they had their “aha moment.” Understanding the impact of ACEs helped them adopt the shift from the traditional question of “What’s wrong with you?” for their program participants to, “What happened to you?”

“The training addressed the trauma associated with poverty, and we realized that the women we worked with had also experienced trauma and toxic stress. It was something we needed to understand better, and incorporate in our program,” recalled Buckley, who has a B.S in Counseling and Clinical Psychology, and recently became a Certified Clinical Trauma Professional.

Buckley says the Chester County ACEs Coalition is working

on awareness, knowledge and prevention initiatives, as well as fostering hope to offset the cycle of trauma, and contribute to long-term health benefits throughout the county. The group’s broad focus is vital.

While the impact of ACEs is staggering, so is the prevalence. More than 60% of adults report at least one ACE, and if an individual has one, there is an 87% chance he or she has two or more. Chester County’s ACEs Coalition considered these high statistics when they developed a new awareness campaign recently. It uses the question, “What happened to you?” and follows with, “We all have something,” illustrating the point that trauma may be a very individual experience, but it is also a universal experience. We all have something in our past, positive or negative, that has helped to define who we are today.

Chester County’s coalition has also sponsored multiple public viewings of a 2015 documentary on an ACEs success story, directed and produced by James Redford. *Paper Tigers* follows a year in the life of an alternative high school in Walla Walla, Washington, and how they dramatically changed their approach to working with students who experienced poverty, violence, drugs and truancy. Through the stories of six students, film viewers can gain insight to the complex and layered issues such young people can face, and see how one school made a lasting and positive

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The Chester County ACEs Coalition

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difference in their lives with unconditional love and support.

“The film is inspirational, and it’s been very well-received. I had very positive feedback from Head Start staff who attended a viewing in Coatesville recently,” said Buckley.

ACEs Coalition member Brian McGinley is a licensed social worker and school counselor who has worked at the Chester County Intermediate Unit, which provides services to the 12 school districts in Chester County including Head Start programs for low income residents, for 22 years. He’s seen how ACEs can impact a child’s ability to learn and function in an academic setting, and he developed a training to help educators adapt their classrooms to improve student performance.

“Thirty years ago, we were talking about PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder), but today there seems to be a growing awareness about ACEs,” McGinley said. “Schools are recognizing how students can be affected socially, emotionally and academically.”

ACEs can lead to difficulties with language and communication skills, attention, memory and recall, problem solving and organization, the ability to develop a plan and carry out goals, among other concerns. Students with high ACEs scores have lower standardized test scores, are more likely to be suspended from school and are more likely to fail a grade. Students as young as preschool age who are struggling with these or other challenges may be eligible for educational services provided by the Chester County Intermediate Unit.

Sometimes simple adjustments can be implemented to make a classroom more conducive for learning, McGinley noted. Lowering lights or playing soft music are two things that may create a more soothing atmosphere for children who have experienced toxic stress or trauma. This recognition benefits students, and helps teachers manage their classrooms, avoiding vicarious trauma.

“When we make inroads to change behaviors, we can help students learn,” he said.

Chester County’s Department of Human Services has joined the efforts to educate the community about the impact of trauma. For the past year the department has been offering a series of free trauma classes through Drexel University. The classes, held in different locations throughout the county, cover a range of trauma topics. One series of classes is open to the public, and more advanced classes are offered to professionals working in related fields, with continuing education credits available. Since 2014, the county has also been offering Mental Health First Aid, a public education course that is provided throughout the county at no cost to participants. Mental Health First Aid also includes information on trauma. To find out about Department of Human Services



trauma class offerings in 2018, contact the county’s offices through the class schedule site, chescodhstrainings.com.

Kevin Olivo is the Clinical Director at Child Guidance Resource Centers in Coatesville and a member of Chester County’s ACEs Coalition. A licensed social worker and a clinician, Olivo has worked with children for almost 20 years. He first learned about the ACEs study in 2009 when he and four colleagues attended a training on the Sanctuary Model, created by Sandra Bloom, MD, and a team of Philadelphia clinicians. Designed as a blueprint for clinical and organizational change to promote safety and recovery from adversity, the model focuses equally on the people who seek, and the systems who provide, treatment.

“The Sanctuary training gave us at Child Guidance the tools to implement a number of [trauma-informed] changes at our site that are still happening today,” Olivo said. “We begin discussing trauma and ACEs with all staff during their orientation, because this awareness is the first step in treating trauma.”

The approach has helped Child Guidance create a healthier atmosphere and better outcomes for both clients and staff. One example is having community meetings as an opportunity for staff to share feelings and support one another. Giving these individuals an open forum to communicate their thoughts and feelings has made a difference, said Olivo.

“Staff can support each other when they know what someone is dealing with. This builds community, with a more energized staff and less turnover. It creates a more nurturing environment. All of these things, in turn, help our clients,” Olivo said. “Being trauma informed means understanding that trauma exists all around us, and to help the clients we have to help the staff.”

Child Guidance Resource Centers is one of four core mental health treatment providers for children contracted by Chester County’s Department of Mental Health/Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (MH/IDD). These providers are part of the county’s trauma-informed system of care, which includes adult mental health services providers and drug and alcohol services. All providers are listed at Chester County’s MH/IDD or

Drug and Alcohol Services websites. (www.chesco.org/mhidd and www.chesco.org/drugandalcohol).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identifies ACEs as an important public health issue. That is not to say the issue is insurmountable. With more research, there is now more understanding of the neuroplasticity of the human brain, which has the ability to reorganize itself with new neural connections throughout the lifespan. Even serious adversity and childhood trauma can be offset by practices that build resilience and promote overall health. Given the right tools and support, children and adults can survive and thrive, despite ACEs. Understanding ACEs and knowing how common they are, will help to build resiliency and foster hope.

Local efforts to create a trauma-informed community are promoted through Chester County's ACEs Coalition. In addition to on-going awareness campaigns and targeted outreach, the group plans to sponsor more film viewings, including an upcoming companion to *Paper Tigers*. The new documentary, titled *Resilience*, delves into the neuroscience research and includes portraits of practitioners putting that science into action.

Find out more about ACEs and Chester County's ACEs Coalition at the website, www.acescoalition.com, or contact Chelsea Buckley at cbuckley@homeofthesparrow.org.

In Phoenixville, an ACEs Committee also focuses efforts in that geographic area. Contact them through Louis J. Beccaria, Ph.D., President/CEO of the Phoenixville Community Health Foundation at ljbccaria@pchfl.org. ■

Tracy Behringer is a consultant for community outreach and education for Chester County's Department of Mental Health/Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. She is an instructor for Mental Health First Aid and suicide prevention, as well as a member of Chester County's ACEs Coalition and Chester County's Suicide Prevention Task Force.

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The Chester County Medical Society works collaboratively with the Pennsylvania Medical Society, but our focus is on our local community. The Society's role in Chester County is to support, protect, and advocate for our physicians and our patients. We look forward to growing an important healthcare service for our community that will benefit us all, and we look forward to hearing from you.

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