

March 2019

Article for Superintendent's Blog

By Lil Cronin, LICSW, Milton Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition

Traumatic Childhood Experiences and Their Connection to Later Substance Use:

Children and young adults confront many of the usual stressors as they transition into adult life: Adjustment in school and work situations; interactions with peers as well as peer pressure; ever changing family dynamics; day to day life experiences, etc. However, some youths encounter extreme adverse, or traumatic, life experiences that may impede their healthy functioning as adults.

Adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, have been found to be a significant risk factor for substance abuse disorder. The federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration describes ACEs as traumatic events during childhood, which may include abuse and neglect or even a difficult family event such as divorce or illness. They may also include dysfunction within the household, such as witnessing domestic violence, or growing up with family members experiencing substance-abuse disorders. Trauma can be experienced both physically or emotionally, or both.

SAMSHA reports that when children are exposed to chronic stressful events, their neurodevelopment may become disrupted. Consequently, the child's cognitive functioning and coping abilities may be impaired. Over time and especially during adolescence, the child may adopt unhealthy coping mechanisms, such as self-harm or substance use. Eventually, these poor coping mechanisms may contribute to social problems, illness and disability, and even premature death. Studies have found that adverse childhood experiences are common, regardless of social or economic background. The more ACEs a child has experienced in their lives, the greater are their chances that they will suffer behavioral health problems later on.

Underage drinking and substance abuse prevention programs may not be effective unless they help youth recognize and cope with the stressors of abuse, household dysfunction, and other adverse experiences.

If your child has experienced one or more adverse childhood, or traumatic experiences, you may want to have a professional assessment done to determine if treatment is warranted. Here are some resources:

For crisis mental health assistance call: Aspire Health Alliance in Quincy (formerly South Shore Mental Health) at 617-774-6036

For psychological assessments and referrals: Interface Referral Service (free for Milton residents) 888-244-6843 Monday-Friday 9am-5pm