Why should physicians be interested in learning about childhood trauma, frequently thought of only has a mental health issue? Physicians are often the frontline responders for both children and adults. And, research such as the Adverse Childhood Experience Study (ACES) indicates a strong correlation between childhood adversity and later negative health outcomes. Trauma is not only a mental health issue, but a physical health issue too.

“Adverse childhood experiences are the most basic and long-lasting cause of health risk behaviors, mental illness, social malfunction, disease, disability, death and healthcare costs.” Vincent Felitti, MD, Co-Principal Investigator of Adverse Childhood Experience Study, Partnership of Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente.

The ACE Study began in the mid-90s, when Dr. Felitti, an internist at Kaiser Permanente in San Diego, CA, was treating obesity in patients. He noticed a trend in his patients; many had initial success in losing weight, but would often regain the weight or drop out of his program. He queried his patients about the reason for regaining the weight. Many shared with him a history of childhood abuse, often sexual abuse—the weight was a protective barrier for them, both physically and emotionally. Losing weight increased anxiety and caused some patients to have overwhelming feelings of vulnerability and fear—his patients felt safer when they were bigger. Some patients also relayed that eating, for them, was a way of coping with painful feelings and thoughts of the past. So, Dr. Felitti began to wonder if he was treating a symptom of a larger issue, obesity, rather than the root of the problem – untreated childhood adversity and trauma.

Dr. Felitti partnered with Robert Anda, MD, an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control, to study the impact of childhood trauma and health outcomes. Together, they created the ACE Study. Over a period of two decades, Drs. Felitti and Anda surveyed over 17,000 adults on ten childhood adversities. These include: sexual & physical abuse; incarceration of a parent; parental mental illness, divorce/separation; parental substance abuse; physical neglect; emotional abuse & neglect and domestic violence. Most of the participants in the study are white and all have health insurance. Additionally, most participants have some college education or have a college degree.

The results of the study are monumental. Nearly 65% of respondents have experience one or more ACE. Over 12% reported experiencing four or more ACEs. Twenty-one percent of respondents endorsed a history of sexual abuse, 28% had a history of physical abuse and 27% had one or more parent who abused substances. ACEs are associated with health risk behaviors including smoking, substance abuse, and living a sedentary lifestyle. Additionally, the ACE Study uncovered a strong correction between
childhood adversity and increased risk for cancer, fetal death, liver disease, COPD and IHD and for some, early death. Drs. Felitti and Anda postulate that adverse childhood experiences can cause disrupted neurodevelopment, manifesting in social, emotional and cognitive impairment and leading to the adoption of health-risk behaviors. These health-risk behaviors can lead to disease, disability, social problems and for some, early death.

The ACE Study reveals the need to address and screen for childhood trauma, early on. So, that kids and adults can gain awareness about how trauma can impact physical health and can be referred to counseling and other support services. Physicians are a big part of the solution, as most children as well as adults will see their doctor annually. And, physicians are often the first to refer families to mental health services.


Austin Child Guidance Center (ACGC), the oldest children’s mental health agency in Austin, is hosting the 2017 Cross-Discipline Trauma Conference of Central Texas on May 11 and 12. The conference will take place at UT’s AT&T Conference Center. Keynote speaking will be Dan Siegel, MD, Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, UCLA School of Medicine, Center for Culture, Brain, and Development Co-Founder, Mindful Awareness Research Center. Additionally, breakout sessions will include topics salient to those in the medical field. For more information and to register: www.traumatexas.com.

“Austin Child Guidance Center is at the forefront of trauma-informed care, and is a trailblazer in central Texas through creating awareness, convening the community, and training child-serving institutions about trauma and its effects. I am excited to be part of this second Cross Discipline Trauma Conference to increase awareness of trauma and its effects on the brain.” Dan Siegel, MD