

# Breaking the Cycle: A Qualitative Study on ACEs and Co-Parenting Dynamics

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## Background

Adverse Childhood experiences (ACEs) may result in trauma and are classified by a child or adolescent experiencing abuse, observing violence in their home, facing a death by suicide in the family, being exposed to substance abuse, or facing parental separation (Jones et al., 2020). Three out of four high school students report experiencing one or more ACEs, and one in five students report experiencing four or more ACEs (Center for Disease Control, 2026). There is evidence suggesting that prior adversity in childhood leads to a higher chance of this cycle continuing in the parenting of one's own child when they transition into the parenting role (Schickedanz et al., 2021). The intergenerational effects of ACEs have led to a growing interest in this topic (Rowell & Neal-Barnett, 2021). When studying parent-child dyads, it was discovered that parents' ACE score counts were positively correlated with their own child's ACE score count (Schickedanz et al., 2021). Intergenerational transmission of adversity may be a result of the parents' previous inconsistent caregiving, leading to unreliable internal working models regarding their own children (Rowell, & Neal-Barnett, 2021). This can result in negative impacts on the child including social and biological risks impacting child development and behavior (Lotto et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding the ACEs that affect coparenting relationships may be beneficial in ceasing this continuous intergenerational cycle, therefore improving the developmental aspect of childhood.

## Aim of the Research

The aim of the research was to understand how to better support families with high ACEs through trauma-informed co-parenting supports to break the cycle of trauma.

## Research Questions

How do individuals who have experienced adverse childhood experiences navigate co-parenting while attempting to break intergenerational cycles of trauma?

In what ways do co-parenting relationships support or challenge efforts to break intergenerational cycles of trauma?

How are parenting and decision-making influenced among co-parents who have experienced adverse childhood experiences?

## Research Methods & Analysis

Drawing from a larger mixed-methods study, we identified a subsample of participants ( $n = 16$ ) with an ACEs score of four or higher to participate in semi-structured interviews. These interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. The interviews were analyzed using a five-step inductive thematic process that moved from initial *In Vivo* coding to a comprehensive cross-case analysis. By balancing iterative reflexivity with a double hermeneutic approach, we ensured the final synthesis remained deeply rooted in the participants' lived experiences while maintaining high methodological rigor.

## Take Home Message

Adverse childhood experiences may impede on co-parenting dynamics, but can be overcome through effort, communication, and support. Parents with ACEs can reflect on their own experiences and use these to create a healthier environment to support their child's development.

## Participants

The participants were 8 Females and 8 Males who were parenting with another person and had a child under the age of 18.

- ACEs scores ranged from 0 – 10.
- Ages ranged from 18 – 54 years old.
- 69% identified as Black, 27% as White, 2% as American Indian, and 2% as Biracial.
- 2% were of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin.
- 44% were cohabitating with their coparent, 56% were not.
- Educational attainment ranged from a high school diploma to graduate or professional degrees.

## Preliminary Results

Themes:	Subthemes:
1. Intergenerational Cycle-Breaking	a. The "Opposite Approach"
	b. Redemptive Parenting
	c. Impact on Co-Parenting Relationship
2. Developmental Landscapes of Childhood	a. Participant/Self History
	b. Co-Parent History
	c. Traumatic Events
3. Residual Trauma Responses	a. Defensive Hyper-Independence
	b. Hyper-Vigilance for Safety
	c. Relational Distrust

### Intergenerational Cycle-Breaking

"And so, I think for the most part we have similar kind of instinctual reactions of... I just want to yell at you, I just want to smack you, I just want to do whatever type of thing, but I have to be intentional about doing the opposite. I have to control myself and slow that down and do something different."

### Developmental Landscapes of Childhood

"When I actually remember that he [co-parent] did not have to face what I actually faced as a child, there's this anger that boils up in me because he had a very good childhood. I mean, he... I actually always believed that he had the best childhood, while I had the... the worst childhood. And then he had fun as a child, I did not. That's what always causes problems. I mean, at times I feel like he does not understand what I'm always going through. To him. I mean, everything feels normal, the behaviors, everything feels normal, but to me, it does not, because every little thing triggers my anxiety and the memories I have always tried to bury."

### Residual Trauma Responses

"I had promised myself that I'm not going to face that or not let any guy put me in that situation. So... and then I actually noticed that he [co-parent] actually had started behaving like my dad, I mean, he... he was too commanding, he was too authoritative. And then I was like, No, I can't actually do this [shakes head]. Maybe I can actually just have your child, but being together with you, that's not actually really going to work. I mean, my childhood had actually shaped my life. I would call it um... it had actually shaped me in a very negative way that I do not want to be with any man. Not like I do not want to be with any man, but I do not want anybody to control my life. I just want to be."