

Trauma-Informed Co-Parenting: Identifying Barriers and Building Strengths

Teagan Murphy & Emily Baris
Research Mentor: Dylann Lowery

Background

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are widespread, with many adults reporting exposure to at least one form of childhood adversity and a significant portion experiencing multiple forms of trauma. Research shows that ACEs are associated with long-term impacts on emotional regulation, relationship functioning, and communication patterns in adulthood. These effects can influence how individuals navigate intimate relationships and parenting responsibilities, particularly within co-parenting partnerships. Trauma histories may contribute to increased conflict, difficulty with trust, and challenges in maintaining consistent communication between co-parents. At the same time, many individuals develop resilience and adaptive strategies that support collaboration and mutual understanding in their parenting relationships. A trauma-informed perspective emphasizes recognizing both the barriers and strengths that emerge from these experiences. Understanding how parents with trauma histories communicate, manage disagreements, and work toward shared parenting goals is essential for promoting healthier family dynamics. By identifying both the relational challenges and strengths present in trauma-informed co-parenting, researchers and practitioners can better support families in building stable and supportive environments for children.

Aim of the Research

The aim of the research was to better understand the potential downfalls or positive attributes in co-parenting in which one or more co-parent experienced adverse or traumatic childhood effects.

Research Questions

How do individuals who have experienced adverse childhood experiences describe the impact of these experiences on their ability to communicate effectively with their co-parent?

How do individuals who co-parent with someone who has experienced adverse childhood experiences resolve and restore their relationships after conflict?

How do co-parents identify and align their priorities in a co-parenting relationship where one partner has 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

These findings highlight the urgent need for family policies to prioritize trauma-informed co-parenting support. When we help parents build healthier dynamics today, we help break the cycle of trauma for future generations to come.

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

Theme: Relational Strengths and Barriers

The preliminary findings show how survivors of childhood trauma identify both the assets and obstacles in their parenting journeys. This research provides a clear roadmap for clinicians to improve family assessments.

Subthemes:

Consistency and Compromise

"Now, personally, one way to fight any kind of barrier is understanding. And most times, you don't have to always win the fight. You don't have to always win the disagreement. You don't have to always look out to-to-to be the one who's decisions are being taken. Most times you-you-you let go, not because you feel like- letting go doesn't mean you're a loser. It doesn't mean that that person is more superior than you. It just means that you-you-you want peace, you want unity."

Third-Party "Dividers"

"Um, it made it look as if you are really ready, not knowing that you are actually willing to make a difference, to make a great impact, just for the kids. So, having the third party involved made it much more difficult. So, it was just as if we couldn't just get along."

Nonverbal Communication

"I think if you have healthy communication, that will go a long way. Making your co-parent know that they are safe emotionally when it comes to you, that's very important as well. Always try to build, should I say... Um, maybe a support network. Be ready to support each other. Have that great understanding. It might be financially... just be able to reach out and support in any way."

Evolving Relationship Dynamics

"And why not make the changes in the right direction? Why not try and do things differently and keep growing and keep changing? Why? Why should we stay in the same spot, in the same position, in the same perception, because we know we can't and that's just not going to happen."

Communication Tonality

"You know, having this clear and constant communication helps a lot, I would say um. In as much as when we have, we choose as much as, to be very calm, respectful of each other, and we mind what we say and all. And we stick to certain um, words and make sure that the kids accept our schedule, and everything is being done right. The right conversations are being said in front of them."