



Positive Childhood Experiences

WHAT ARE POSITIVE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES?

Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) * are foundational experiences occurring in the first 18 years of life that foster a sense of belonging and connection. These experiences, nurtured within the context of supportive relationships, benefit children in both the short- and long-term (Daines et al., 2021; Narayan et al., 2018; Sege & Browne, 2017). They are heavily dependent on contextual or community factors, in addition to family factors, and therefore, necessitate active engagement of their families, neighborhoods, and communities (Narayan et al., 2018; Sege & Browne, 2017).

* Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) are also known as Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCEs), Protective and Compensatory Childhood Experiences (PACES) and advantageous childhood experiences or counter-ACEs.

The Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) Scale

- Felt able to talk to their family about feelings
- Felt understood by their family during difficult times
- Enjoyed participating in community traditions
- Felt a sense of belonging in high school
- Felt supported by friends
- Had at least two non-parent adults who took genuine interest in them
- Felt safe and protected by an adult in their home

Bethell, Jones, et al. (2019)

The Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCEs) Scale

- Had at least one safe caregiver
- Had at least one good friend
- Had beliefs that gave comfort
- Enjoyed school
- Had at least one teacher who cared
- Had good neighbors
- Had opportunities to have a good time
- Liked themselves or felt comfortable with themselves
- Had a predictable home routine(s)

Narayan et al. (2018)

Note: These lists provide the contents of each scale for comparison. They are not presented in their measurement form.

WHY DO PCEs MATTER?

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Over the past several decades, we have gained a robust understanding of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and their resounding detrimental influence on later health and socioeconomic outcomes. However, further reflection within the field identified that this represented an imbalanced perspective. Academics and practitioners alike have critiqued this singular focus on adversity which negates a vital side of the story and leaves our knowledge of childhood experiences and their impact incomplete (Merrick & Narayan, 2020; Sege & Browne, 2017). To optimally support children and families and elevate outcomes across lifespans and generations, it is essential to look at the full spectrum of and relationship between adverse and positive experience childhood.

Burgeoning research on PCEs has rapidly expanded what is known about these positive experiences and why they are important. Like ACEs, PCEs are associated with a range of childhood and adult outcomes, but unlike ACEs, (Felitti et al., 1998), these associations point to positive outcomes. PCEs are thought to work in two distinct ways (Sege & Burstein, 2021).

Promotive Effect:

- PCEs appear to promote and build resilience, facilitating positive outcomes regardless of where someone might fall on the spectrum of risk for adverse experiences (Doom et al., 2021).
- People with higher and lower risks both reap benefits when PCEs occur (Crandall et al., 2020; Doom et al., 2021).
- The relationship between PCEs and positive outcomes remains steady even when ACEs are considered (Crandall et al., 2019; Narayan et al., 2022).

Protective Effect:

- PCEs also appear to protect and buffer against the negative influence of ACEs (Lee et al., 2020; Narayan et al., 2018).
- The relationship between ACEs and negative outcomes is changed for the better when PCEs are introduced (Narayan et al., 2018, 2022).

In sum, PCEs seem to serve an independent function in supporting favorable outcomes, but also coexist and interact with ACEs to influence future outcomes (Bethell et al., 2019; Doom et al., 2021; Merrick & Narayan, 2020). With these dual roles of building resilience and mitigating risk, some posit that PCEs may even play a more pivotal role than ACEs in determining later outcomes.

**Recommendations:**

Although the research on PCEs is still in early stages, the findings are very promising and warrant intentional efforts designed to disseminate understanding of the role of PCEs as well as specific efforts to support the actual development of PCEs among children and youth.

- Because PCEs are relatively new and lesser known than ACEs, it is essential to expand general awareness of the benefits of these specific types of experiences.
- Parents and practitioners need to be educated about specific ways to support positive childhood experiences for children and youth.
- Funding should be allocated to support family resource centers and other programs that provide services which promote PCEs.

While these types of inventories provide information on individual childhood experiences and their accumulation, it's important to note that in their basic form, there are limitations as to what they can tell us about the onset, duration, magnitude, or impact of those experiences.

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