

# ACEs CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

## COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES that FAST TRACK POLICY CHANGE



### HIGHLIGHTS

**Issue** Millions of Americans are struggling with a lifetime of mental and physical health problems that have their roots in childhood trauma, such as violence, physical and sexual abuse, and growing up in dysfunctional homes. Despite a growing body of research on the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), this issue is largely unrecognized by policymakers and the public.

**Strategy** An issue-based news website for the public, legislators and other stakeholders, combined with a new social network of community practitioners that showcases successful place-based interventions.

**Who** The California Endowment and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF).

**How Much** \$104,000 from TCE for a journalistic series; \$395,000 from RWJF for creation of a national summit on the topic of ACEs and a second convening of the National Collaborative on Adversity and Resilience.

**Biggest Result** ACEs are beginning to appear on local and national agendas. A new social movement has been created around building resiliency in young people and creating trauma-informed environments in communities.



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# INTRODUCTION

The California Endowment, the state's largest health foundation, has a strategy aimed at reducing health disparities by combining deep sustained investment in communities with a focus on state policy change. A key idea behind the strategy is that grassroots concerns help develop a stronger policy agenda for the removal of roadblocks to health and opportunity for Californians.

As part of the foundation's philosophy that health journalism can serve as a catalyst for enduring policy change that benefits underserved communities, The California Endowment provided \$104,000 to support veteran journalist Jane Ellen Stevens and the websites she created to cover what communities, states, social service agencies, schools and the health care system are doing to reduce the impact of childhood trauma. The Endowment funded a 10-part series on how schools are adopting new approaches as they come to understand the connection between the overuse of school suspensions and exposure to violence, physical and sexual abuse, family dysfunction and other traumatic events. Stevens' websites are named for the Adverse Childhood Experiences study, known as ACE, that was the first to document the connection between childhood trauma and serious health problems later in life including obesity, depression and substance abuse. Scientific evidence has shown that repeated exposure to childhood trauma can impair the structure and function of a child's

brain, creating a form of PTSD that is similar to that experienced by veterans returning from war. According to studies from the Centers for Disease Control, 22.6% of adults have two or more ACEs, and childhood trauma is strongly correlated with income inequality.

Motivated by its belief that a national foundation can drive momentum through its convening power, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and the Institute for Safe Families (ISF) co-sponsored the first national summit on the topic. At the summit, Jane Stevens' series and her news website, ACEsTooHigh.com, were honored with "The Scattergood Award" for journalism by the Thomas Scattergood Foundation. The summit also provided a platform for the launch of an interactive map of place-based practitioners based on Stevens' community of practice and social networking website, ACEsConnection.com. The message was clear for participants: They were not alone in their work and there was significant opportunity to amplify the impact by sharing what they learn with other practitioners. RWJF and ISF then convened a smaller gathering of experts, The National Collaborative on Adversity and Resilience, to further develop the agenda and call to action.

As a result of the combined strategies — the summit, the creation of online spaces for quality reporting on ACEs and a network of practitioners — a new social movement is emerging. The hopeful message that "ACEs do not define your destiny" gained momentum with promising approaches being shared among practitioners. Continued coverage of how trauma-sensitive environments and interventions can build resiliency and change the outcomes for children and adults is now keeping policymakers and other stakeholders accountable.

The story of ACEsTooHigh resonates for all grantmakers who face an issue for which there is a body of complex scientific evidence that must be carefully translated for stakeholders. The combination of quality journalism and a social network of practitioners is a potential model for issues where policy change requires groups to work across silos at the local level to find programs that work in their communities.

# CREATION AND ACCELERATION OF A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

## IMPACTS

All of the energy and synergy created at the National Summit on Adverse Childhood Experiences in May 2013 resulted in increased media, practitioner and policymaker engagement. During the summit, membership in ACEsConnection, reporter Jane Ella Stevens' community of practice social network, reached critical mass — topping 1,000 people. One year later, the site has 2,400 members. Moreover, the public news site, ACEsTooHigh, had more than a million page views in its first two years. Stevens' solutions-oriented story on trauma-informed Lincoln High School in Washington went viral twice, exceeding 700,000 page views.

Along with Stevens' posting of in-depth stories on the ACEsTooHigh website, she also occasionally pens articles for the nationally distributed *Huffington Post*. The topic of ACEs and childhood trauma received more national attention in a series of three of David Bornstein's "Fixes" columns in *The New York Times*. In the series, Bornstein directly credited ACEsTooHigh.com as a comprehensive resource for information on the topic.

More than 20 states are now collecting data on ACEs and the dialogue is engaging champions for policy change at the state and local levels. Vermont legislator Dr. George W. Till (D-Jericho) introduced H762 — the first bill in any state in the U.S., that calls for integrative screening for ACEs in services and for integrating the science of ACEs into mental and health education.

In Massachusetts, many schools are already using a framework and a self-assessment tool to assist schools in creating safe and supportive environments that are trauma-sensitive. House sponsor Ruth Balser and Senate sponsor Katherine M. Clark have, respectively, sponsored bills H520 and S210 in the state legislature that would help all schools across the Commonwealth become safe and supportive schools.

Another example of a champion is Douglas County, Georgia, Juvenile Court Judge Peggy Walker. She is conducting a series of conferences discussing changes in policies and practices to prevent and treat childhood trauma. Walker also plans to make childhood trauma a key tenet of her upcoming national platform as president of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

And in April 2014, California State Assemblymember Roger Dickinson (D-Sacramento) held a hearing of the Assembly Select Committee on Delinquency Prevention and Youth Development on trauma-informed care. ACEsTooHigh.com was prominently featured there as an expert resource for stakeholders and policymakers.

These efforts are part of an emerging national movement building on the passage of House Resolution 191 — which declared youth violence a public health epidemic and supported the establishment of trauma-informed education in Pennsylvania last spring and 2011 legislation in the state of Washington to identify and promote innovative strategies for reducing ACEs and develop a public-private partnership in support. ACEsTooHigh and ACEsConnection serve as an important hub for news, information and collaboration.

## HOW IT HAPPENED

Targeted, yet integrated, websites for distributing news and successful interventions among practitioners created a more powerful and efficient virtual space that fueled the development of a movement. These sites promoted learning and collaboration among a geographically and issue-diverse group of stakeholders from education, health care, juvenile justice policy and practice.

### Information follows function

Stevens leveraged her career as a longtime health, science and technology journalist and her previous experience demonstrating proof of concept for a local social journalism health news site called WellCommons. Stevens explains, "If you look at the origin of the Internet — you ask a question and you expect an answer." Aligning her solutions-oriented approach to journalism with the nature of the Internet made sense both in news coverage and for creating a community of practice for ACEs. Stevens reports a direct correlation between articles that offered solutions and the number of people who shared them with friends, colleagues and policymakers. Articles about schools with trauma-informed practices were shared more often than those that described ACEs problems alone. "People will write me and say 'I'm forwarding this to my school board,'" reports Stevens.

## All about groups

Thought leaders in the field agree: Change needs to occur at the community level. On ACEsConnection.com, place-based and professional interest “groups” allow users to remain focused on their work, yet instantly expose them to peer best and worst practices when efforts stagnate or plateau. Stevens explains: “[groups] educate people, light a fire, spread information ... make the movement move faster. What it enabled people to do was instead of hitting a stopping point in their community, they can point to someone else in another part of the country or connect with people who could offer advice. That moves things exponentially faster.” ACEsConnection has three types of groups: state-level, local/town-based level, and professional interest. Stevens and her team play a facilitator role among and between groups to aid in sharing best practices across the groups.

## A faster drumbeat

During its first two years of existence, ACESTooHigh consistently published a steady stream of articles and blog posts. However, the new two-year grant by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation will enable Stevens to expand her team for managing the two sites. Approximately 60 of Stevens’ existing story ideas waiting to be explored will now be targeted for posting at a rate of one per week.

## Fixes – A focus on solutions

As previously mentioned, Stevens’ work on ACESTooHigh and for the *Huffington Post* inspired Solutions Journalism Network founder and *The New York Times* writer David Bornstein to write three articles on the topic over a six-month period. Coverage of successful intervention programs such as Head Start, Trauma Smart in Kansas City positively frames a national dialogue around building resiliency in children. It also avoids the potential misuse of ACEs scores as negatively defining a child’s destiny, as might be the case for media coverage that takes a less solutions-oriented approach.

## Going to scale

The grant will also be used to build the member network for ACEsConnection to 8,000 members by targeting local groups with initiatives in place. Content generated by community managers is expected to grow exponentially with expansion of the social network. As Jane Isaacs Lowe, Senior Advisor for Program Development at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation explains, “We are really in the middle of a social movement. Now is the time to bring together the best thinkers around practice, policy and research ... align all the systems and programs. Building out the ACEs Connection platform will help us do that.”

## Accountability of the fourth estate

Stevens sees her role as a journalist to inform people, not influence a particular policy change. “The way I look at what I do,” she explains, “is the way a small-town publisher works for a community. A publisher facilitates communications on a lot of different levels – including being a part of a level of discussion among community leaders. A journalist should say: ‘If you take this approach, this will happen.’ Or ‘I know this town over here and they have had the same problems. You should look at what they are doing.’ Or the opportunity cost of not doing some policy is this amount of heartache.” In short, the responsibility and power that comes with the Fourth Estate is that it reports on the consequences of what policymakers do.

“We are going to change the world,” says Martha Davis, Senior Program Officer with the Vulnerable Populations Team at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “Together we are creating a revolution. It’s based in science, it’s founded in data, and it’s based on people’s joint commitments to doing something better for families.”



# LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ The Internet is a natural place for solutions journalism. It combines the best of journalists' research and communications skills with the search-based nature of the web: a place where questions are asked and solutions provided.
- ▶ Social networks can create a virtual community of practice that enables faster and deeper knowledge-sharing opportunities than traditional learning collaboratives.
- ▶ The marriage of a curated public media effort and a community of practice social network turbocharges the momentum of a social movement and supports practitioners on the ground.
- ▶ Having a knowledgeable central facilitator (or facilitation team) adds value to both media and community of practice efforts – linking local and regional resources.
- ▶ Solutions journalism holds policymakers and stakeholders accountable for their actions and inactions by covering outcomes.



## 10 Elements of Success

Among the Fast Track case studies, we've identified the following 10 insights. The most critical elements of success for each case appear as symbols throughout the series.



### 1 SOLUTIONS

The majority of these initiatives contained messages not just about the problem, but about a range of potential solutions. The net effect is to give the public hope and give policymakers a call to action. This approach also speaks directly to the nexus of the nature of the Internet and journalism: to both ask questions and answer them.



### 2 POLICYMAKERS

Identifying policymakers explicitly as a target audience and devoting appropriate resources to outreach is key. Whenever possible, explicitly making it a bi-partisan effort can be very effective.



### 3 AGILITY

While a communications strategy is important, so is building in flexibility. The ability to respond quickly with resources to a changing landscape is critical to overcoming unforeseen challenges and leveraging unexpected opportunities. Often these initiatives can be a bit messy mid-stream; flexibility and agility makes navigation easier.



### 4 REPETITION

Continuity of coverage has a multiplier effect on awareness-building. Journalistic series and paid-advertising campaigns keep issues top-of-mind during delays in the legislative process.



### 5 HUMANITY

Engaging community voices can be a powerful way to give an issue a human face. Emphasizing personal impact stories can also support journalistic efforts, assist with multi-media content, engage the constituents of lawmakers and provide testimonials for solutions.



### 6 PAID ADVERTISING

Having the ability to control the content and timing of messages through paid advertising can create awareness during key milestones. The ability to customize messages geographically or by target audience can also accelerate the speed of social change.



### 7 FOUNDATION BRANDING

Putting a foundation's name and "brand" on media or communications efforts lends credibility and gravitas to an issue, especially in smaller markets or rural areas. Stakeholders are more likely to take another look at an issue if it has become the priority of a philanthropic institution.



### 8 MEDIA START-UPS

Establishing digital outlets for in-depth coverage about an issue can be a cost-effective and efficient way of designating a "space" for the issue to live in. At their best, these sites also become media tools for expanded and sustained coverage over time.



### 9 PARTNER. PARTNER. PARTNER.

Whether it is funder partnerships or media partnerships, collaborative and in-kind efforts result in impact that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.



### 10 INTEGRATION FROM THE OUTSET

The combination of media, community and policymaker engagement from the beginning of a strategic communications effort is key to success. The catalytic effect of coordinating and integrating these strategies far outweighs any one as a siloed or solo effort.