

ACEs & The Three Little Pigs

Changing How We Expect Someone with A Straw Foundation to Intuitively Know How to Build Brick Houses

Written by Master Inv. (ret.) Rachael Frost, of Frost ICED / Investigations, Consultation, Education & Development, www.frostICED.com

During the past several years, the 1995-1997 Centers for Disease Control and San Diego Kaiser Adverse Childhood Experiences study (ACEs) pioneered by Dr. Vincent Felitti¹ has become a growing topic among those who work with survivors of trauma and abuse. If you are not familiar with the study, ACEs measured different impacts that childhood exposure to trauma (such as divorce, parent/mentor substance abuse, witnessing or experiencing physical or sexual abuse, etc.), can have on adults' future health and response to societal pressures, showing a startling connection between childhood trauma and shorter life expectancy, addiction, violence, and more.² The ten-question survey³ documents a person's ACE score, which can help individuals understand the affect childhood trauma and development may have on their lives.

"Nick, there's been one thing that's been eating at me since I've been here. You know that Naughty or Nice list you've got? There's no naughty kids, Nick. They're all good kids. But some of them are scared. And some of them don't feel listened to. Some of them had some pretty tough breaks, too. But every kid deserves a present on Christmas,"

- Fred Claus, "Fred Claus" (Vince Vaughn)

Understanding the impact of a person's ACE score has many direct and applicable uses within the world of investigation, advocacy, threat assessment and management, behavioral engagement team resources and wellness plans, and more. Frost ICED strives to bring topics related to intimate partner violence, sexual and physical abuse, child abuse, and persons' crimes, to workplaces, agencies, and communities in ways they can easily comprehend and recall. Here, we offer readers the story of the Three Little Pigs as a metaphor for the impact ACEs has on individuals regarding trauma and how we can use that knowledge to create stronger communities through individual programs and therapies.

The Three Little Pigs

In the well-known fable, three little pigs build houses out of different materials to keep out the Big Bad Wolf. As the wolf attacks each home, the houses of straw and twigs easily fall, while the house of bricks holds up, steady and strong, under all attempts of the wolf to blow the house down. We keep this story in mind as we explore the three houses and how their construction relates to childhood trauma, societal expectations, and how we can help support positive growth.⁴

¹ Updated and currently titled the CDC-Kaiser Adverse Childhood Experiences study.

² [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\) \(cdc.gov\)](https://www.cdc.gov/ncjrs/ce4/ace/ace.html)

³ The ACE study has been updated and a 17-question version is available.

⁴ These examples are all absent diagnosable mental health conditions that may affect growth, coping, and capabilities.

A Foundation Made of Brick

As a child, if you are openly loved, nurtured, and supported, if your basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and imaginative playtime are met, and your contact and education with school is positive and intellectually challenging to stimulate learning, while your family and friend relationships are intact, engaging, and connective, all free from abuse and violence, then your childhood is being built upon a foundation of brick. With emotional support and parental and mentor figures who are readily available and encouraging, in a safe and nurturing environment, you thrive. Strong, able to weather storms and strife without great likelihood of breaking, designed to handle intricate problems and built each step of the way helping the child learn to model brick-building behavior.

Twigs

Childhood in a home of divorce can be complicated at best, but often it can be extremely painful, especially if one parent disappears from their child's life or there are frequent fights and arguments. Even in a two-parent household, if you are rarely told that you are loved or special and your accomplishments are brushed off or not celebrated by one or both parents, you may feel isolated and "not good enough." If you spend your hours alone playing video games or on electronics without structure or limitations, having only minimal interaction with others in and beyond school, that isolation will likely grow exponentially. In activities, you may be withdrawn and a loner, uncomfortable with socialization because it is not a learned behavior in your home. As you grow, your basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, and education may be met, perhaps all without being exposed to physical violence, but you experience emotional distance and a lack of structure and connection. This is an example of a childhood foundation built from twigs. It has a defined structure and looks like a complete foundation from certain angles, showing the child how to create a blueprint for strength, but it has gaps and weak spots that can break more easily during stress or difficult times, and there are cracks in the wood that cannot quickly be seen but which lurk and threaten the structure.

Straw

Growing up in a house where violence is a common occurrence, between parents, partners, or family members, where there may be obvious drug and/or alcohol abuse, when you do not know where your next meal may be coming from at times, where there may be yelling and anger rather than understanding and nurturing, where you may be abused, are all significant on-going trauma for a child. You may not have adequate clothing, or a real home, moving frequently or being homeless, perhaps torn from your parents for all these reasons above and then shuffled between foster homes every few months, always feeling unwanted and distant. This is a childhood foundation made of straw. There is very little in terms of structure, balance, development, or planning. It is disorganized, haphazard, often without strength or fortitude. You may have felt unloved and unwanted, abused, traumatized. Your foundation is built on possible chaos and without a blueprint for creating strength, rather just experiences that caused pain, isolation, and loss.

We Build What We Know

With exposure to each of these foundations, we learn how to build outside of our home during and beyond childhood. Children and adults with Brick foundations have many examples and a firm structure upon which to base their decision making. They have seen brick-building in action, experienced it directly. With each additional brick, they weather storms and difficult times often more effectively, because they have been shown how to adjust their building to withstand tough weather as effectively as possible.

Those with Twigs and Straw foundations have their own references, their own experiences. They also rely upon the past direction from their foundational construction crew (parents, family members, teachers/mentors, friends) to help them build their houses. But their examples are often far less sturdy based on their developmental history. Rocky weather is more difficult for them to overcome without strong examples in building techniques.

■ We build what we know.
■ We construct what our project engineers have shown us how to construct.

We Share What We Know and Grow

All these growing builders share what they know along the way with their behaviors, sometimes through subtle isolation and with other more overt actions, whether positive or negative. Those with a Brick, Twig, or Straw foundation may be acutely aware that there are other types of construction crews and different ways to build houses, but without being directly exposed to how those foundations are designed, without being intimately taught different ways to build, we cannot expect sweeping changes in housing structure.

Anywhere along the building of a life, our house construction can shift in either direction. Someone with a Brick foundation can suffer a great loss or trauma and abuse and without support from a solid crew, they can be left with only Twigs and Straw to help them keep constructing their house moving forward. Someone with a Twigs or Straw foundation can also be exposed to mentors, positive patterns or changes in their learning and/or living environment, and through this they can begin building with bricks, creating stronger, more intricate abilities to survive and thrive.

One thing is certain: Our foundations will always be with us. They are the root upon which we are built. We can do a lot of work with the help of our construction crews to build stronger platforms, to reinforce shaky ground, to structure our Twigs and Straw. But we must not ignore our past as we build forward because without examining cracks and structure, engaging stronger foundations, any house we build has the chance of coming crashing down in any size storm.

We Expect Brick Houses

Society wants everyone to build a house of Brick. Brick buildings are stronger, need less maintenance to keep them sturdy, often do not need specialized engineers to figure out how to shore up foundational issues. They last a lifetime. Society gets frustrated with people who have Straw foundations, demanding that they become confident, able, productive members of the community, without behavior problems, criminality, negative coping mechanisms, trauma, extensive emotional needs, telling them all, “Just build a house of Brick!” Our entire justice system is set up to tell people just that; “Get it right next time. Build a house of Brick.”

But children and adults with Straw foundations do not know how to build a house of Brick; all of their past building materials in life have been Straw. They toss their Straw up in the air and say, “Well, I don’t know how to build a house of Brick, but I can build a house of Straw! I have plenty of Straw to go around.”

Building Neighborhoods

Our expectations for everyone to build strong, well-engineered houses when all they may have experienced are haphazard lean-to’s is unrealistic and a construct for failure. We share stories of “rags to riches” success, of those who came from difficult lives and transcended everything standing in their way to become successful, all to encourage and illustrate how nothing about our history can stand in the way of desire and dedication. Much of that is true, but we often look past the reality that many such people have someone or a community along the way who helped them learn how to mix mortar and stack Bricks, regardless of their initial foundation.⁵ That person could be a mentor, parent, educator, friend, programs, helpers, and more.

The response to addressing ACEs is a collective discussion and includes many components, agencies, and partners for programs designed to develop positive growth. Beginning with understanding how childhood trauma affects the potential course of our lives is how we start drawing new blueprints for support. Helping to build strong and lasting houses is a process held together by the strength of caring, trauma-informed communication, and understanding specialized needs developed by those across communities. Knowing how our foundations help form our response to challenges can leverage many different construction teams and engineers to help mix mortar, find Bricks, and build together.

Understanding ACEs not only helps us create change through addressing trauma at its root, but it also helps us develop communication styles and empathy for experiences that can improve how we engage and connect within our professions as investigators, threat assessors, advocates, and all who deal with those building houses.

Through our Frost ICED ACTION Academy, a series of basic training classes constructed to help any investigator or violence response and recognition specialist build the strongest foundation for success, we train how to utilize ACEs to build trust and engagement with those we serve through, “*The Art of the Interview*.”

⁵ “Outliers,” a novel by Malcolm Gladwell, explores the idea that people of immense success do not just rise to greatness through a special “grit and determination” mentality, although many have an extremely sturdy work ethic. Rather, there were situations and people who helped construct the circumstances ripe for capitalization.