

# The Register-Guard

## Climate change as ACE

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Childhood trauma, mass shootings and climate change might seem disconnected, but they are not. Adverse Childhood Experiences can produce mass shooters, and climate disasters can increase ACEs, generating more violence. Building a trauma-informed resilience-enhancing region can break this vicious cycle and promote safety, health and well-being.

Psychological trauma occurs when a single event or persistent overwhelming stresses shatter an individual's deeply-held and often unconscious beliefs about the world. This activates their instinctive "fight, flight, or freeze" mechanism so powerfully that they cannot make sense of, or cope with, the experience.

The constant distress felt by traumatized adults causes some to try to self-medicate with alcohol, drugs, overeating or other maladaptive behaviors. Others withdraw into a self-protective survival mode and disconnect from those around them. Still others turn their angst outward and become hostile, aggressive or violent.

All of these behaviors can traumatize children. Research has determined that physical, verbal, or sexual abuse, neglect, bullying, living with a caretaker who is an alcoholic or drug addict, and other ACEs cause children to feel fearful, unloved and helpless. ACEs constrain a child's brain development, which leads to poor decisions and behaviors.

If unresolved, when they become adults, people impacted by ACEs often repeat the same behaviors with their children. They also typically suffer from addictions. They have ongoing work and relationship problems. They experience recurring depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders. They have more physical health problems than most people including cancers and diabetes.

Even worse, as adults, children impacted by ACEs have a greater chance of committing violence. [A recent Los Angeles Times Op-Ed](#) by Jillian Peterson and James Densley described their research on the life history of mass shooters. They found that most “experienced significant early childhood trauma and exposure to violence at a young age.”

The Oregon Health Authority says that over 30% of youth statewide experience one or more ACEs. To protect our children and communities, all local residents should learn about the debilitating effects of ACEs, and how to spot the signs. Every adult and child should also learn personal and group resilience skills that can prevent ACEs.

Slashing greenhouse gas emissions, and conserving forests and other ecological systems that sequester carbon, are also vital to reducing ACEs and the violence that can result. That’s because a growing body of research has found that more frequent and extreme storms, floods, wildfires and other acute disasters caused by rising temperatures trigger severe anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, suicidal ideation and other psychological and psychosocial maladies.

Climate change-generated toxic stresses, such as heat waves, droughts — and hotter temperatures alone — are also producing more aggression and violence.

Any of these traumatic stresses can cause adults to traumatize their kids. It turns out that powerful feedback exists between mistreating

the natural environment, and the health, safety, and well-being of our children, families and communities.

Our region will find multiple benefits by responding to these interlinked crises by prioritizing personal and social resilience education and skills training. This will activate a virtuous cycle that prevents ACEs, increases everyone's security and welfare and motivates people to support aggressive actions to slash climate-damaging emissions and environmental damage.

*Bob Doppelt directs The Resource Innovation Group and writes a monthly column for the Register Guard on climate change-related issues.*