

Agencies work with families to break cycle of troubled childhoods

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Copyright 2014 Scripps Media, Inc. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten, or redistributed. Stacy Ashley talks to his son while they wait for a therapy visit for the 6-year-old boy. Ashley is a recovering drug addict whose methamphetamine use began when he was a teenager growing up in a dysfunctional, and sometimes abusive, household. Ashley and his girlfriend, Skie Landrum, are in parenting classes in an effort to provide a safer home for their children.

PICTURE BY ANDREAS FUHRMANN/RECORD SEARCHLIGHT

She'd always have time. That's what Redding mother Melissa Aguila used to think when she was strung out on methamphetamine and marijuana.

She'd always have time to get her three children back from the foster system. She'd always have time to repair her marriage. She'd always have time to kick her addiction.

She thought she had time, until she spent time in jail: two months for assault with a deadly weapon after striking a stranger with a hammer in 2012.

“That was one of my lowest points, where all I could think about was using,” Aguila said.

Aguila wasn't thinking about her children, but research shows her personal struggles were already beginning to harm them, setting them on a path to possibly have similar struggles later in life.

The scope of the problem extends far beyond Aguila. Some experts believe it lies at the roots of the North State's largest challenges, including drug abuse, crime and chronically low educational achievement.

Studies indicate children exposed to stress and neglect such as having a parent with a drug addiction or a parent in jail can contribute to debilitating health conditions, and Shasta County children are more likely to experience these kinds of trauma than children around the nation.

The national Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, conducted by Kaiser Permanente in San Diego and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, indicates that children who experience neglect, abuse or stresses in their homes are significantly more likely to have an unhealthy life as adults. About 60 percent of adults nationwide report having at least one such adverse childhood experience.

In 2012, a local version of the study found that about 25 percent more adults in Shasta County than the national average reported suffering one of the 10 types of childhood trauma. About 2.5 times more people reported having four or more adverse childhood experiences than people nationwide. Researchers say as the number of adverse experiences increases, so too does the risk for health problems in later life. The local study was conducted by the Shasta Strengthening Families Collaborative, which is made up of 30 social service organizations working to promote healthy families.

Joy Garcia, executive director of First 5 Shasta, compared the potential impact of reducing

Shasta County's adverse experience rate to sweeping health reform like vaccines or installing seat belts in all vehicles.

"We will rarely see that kind of public health change ever again," Garcia said.

Revolving door

Stacy Ashley's son needs help. He's aggressive around Ashley's girlfriend, Skie Landrum. He acts out around his teachers. His therapist says he shows clear signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, but Ashley wasn't with the boy early in his life to know why.

Ashley's son is 6.

Ashley, 35, and Landrum, 23, are also caring for Landrum's 3-year-old son and have another baby on the way.

Ashley and Landrum's parenting coach, Ginger Fox, called them a "family in crisis." Fox teaches Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) classes through a First 5 grant, and the family was referred to her after the boy became too much for teachers to handle at school.

For children like Ashley's son, stresses in early childhood can mean health problems in later life.

The national adverse childhood experience study outlines ten different experiences children can be exposed to in their homes: physical, emotional or sexual abuse, physical or emotional neglect, mental illness, an incarcerated family member, witnessing substance abuse or domestic violence, and divorce.

Nationwide, about 60 percent of children experience at least one type of adverse experience. In Shasta County, however, 84 percent experience at least one. About 40 percent have experienced four or more, compared to 15 percent nationwide.

Officials say children learn behavior early on and will often mimic their parents' patterns in later life. Children who experience any of these are at greater risk of developing a self-destructive behavior such as alcoholism or drug abuse, and are more likely to have physical or emotional health problems, often tied to a coping mechanism. Those who experience four or more are between 4 to 12 times more likely to develop alcoholism, substance abuse, depression or try to kill themselves.

Those experiences in turn result in unhappy homes for future generations, said Jean King,

executive director of One SAFE Place. Her organization, which works to protect victims of domestic or sexual violence, is among the members of the Coordinating Committee of the Shasta Strengthening Families Collaborative.

“We know that it’s a revolving door in the case that kids are learning so much in their homes,” King said.

Aguila’s family is among those caught in a revolving door of trauma.

Her father died of a heroin overdose when she was 17, and her mother has struggled with an addiction to pain pills for years. A family member of Melissa’s also has children in foster care due to drug use.

Aguila thinks their drug use contributed to her own addiction.

“My parents never taught us about what drugs do,” Aguila said. “So when we did drugs it contributed to our struggle in parenting our kids.”

It’s difficult to pinpoint exactly why Shasta County lags so far behind when it comes to safe children, but local social service organizations focused on the issue have theories. These reinforce the image of a vicious cycle: struggling economy, the low college-going culture of Shasta County compared to other areas, and high rates of drug-related offenses make the list.

Susan Wilson, executive director of the Youth Violence Prevention Council, said as long as those problems persist, families will struggle to keep children healthy and happy.

“Part of it is generational,” Wilson said “We have high poverty in this area. We have lower education levels, lower than many places. We don’t ever teach parents to be parents.”

Increasing numbers

In addition to the high rate of adverse childhood experiences, Shasta County has one of the highest death rates in the state of California, according to the California Department of Public Health.

The county comes in at 53 among the state’s 58 counties. The county also places in the bottom 10 for deaths due to cancer, stroke, suicide and drug use.

Though it’s difficult to determine how many deaths or chronic illnesses are connected to previous childhood trauma, members of the Shasta Strengthening Families Collaborative say

childhood trauma could be among the largest health concerns affecting the nation.

“The reason it’s important in Shasta County is we absolutely know that early experiences impact quality of life later on,” said Kathey Kakiuchi, a public health program manager with Shasta County Public Health. “Those early adverse childhood experiences actually do impact the quality of life that a person has ... it could decrease life expectancy.”

The original researchers behind the Adverse Childhood Experience study noticed a peculiar trend in an ongoing obesity program at Kaiser Permanente: A majority of those who dropped out of the program were successfully losing weight, said Dr. Vincent Felitti, one of the co-investigators of the study.

When prodded, the people who dropped out related a high rate of childhood abuse, and said they used food and obesity to hide from the pain that followed them through life. Participants became anxious and stressed as they continued to lose weight. They had nowhere left to hide and no coping mechanism of overeating to help them.

“If you need to desexualize yourself, it’s an effective approach,” Felitti said. “If you need to look bigger than life, it’s an effective approach. If you need to reduce social expectations, it’s an effective approach.”

Data from local preschool agencies also indicate children are experiencing emotional stress in their homes. Of 1,147 families with children up to 5 years of age in Head Start programs, 242 received assistance for emergency crisis intervention for basic needs like food and shelter, 32 were referred for domestic violence and 30 child abuse reports were filed. Other families were referred for substance abuse treatment or had at least one incarcerated family member.

Head Start Executive Director Carla Clark, however, said many of those parents are working to improve their lifestyles, with 715 Head Start families receiving some form of parenting education.

The number of children being referred to the Bridges to Success program, an early childhood intervention program for children acting out in class, is also steadily on the rise. For the 2013-14 school year, 144 children were referred to the program, up from 101 the year prior. Each

year, about 40 percent of the children referred have met diagnostic criteria for behavioral health problems.

Early Childhood Services Superintendent Kathy Thompson said teachers in state preschools believe the increase traces to more children experiencing adverse childhood experiences.

“Kids will tell you what’s happening in their home,” Thompson said. “We have more kids with serious behavior issues than we’ve ever had.”

Breaking the cycle

However, members of the Strengthening Families Collaborative are working to slow the patterns stopping many Shasta County children from succeeding.

“We have to remember that youth are resilient and what we do as the community and as parents does change how they turn out,” Wilson said.

Though initially skeptical of Fox and the Triple P parenting classes, Ashley recognizes that the time helps him become a better father and that the classes help him find better ways to handle his son’s outbursts.

Ashley is a recovering drug addict whose methamphetamine use began when he was a teenager growing up in a dysfunctional, and sometimes abusive, household. Landrum left home as a teenager and hasn’t had a strong parental figure in her home for many years.

“You’ve got to break the cycle somehow,” Ashley said about the classes.

Members of the Strengthening Families Collaborative provide resources across Shasta County for all parents, including the Triple P parenting classes. Members of the organization are promoting protective factors in homes. Children raised in homes where they have positive connections with other children and adults, support in times of need, and where families are knowledgeable about parenting and able to handle everyday stress are less likely to suffer abuse and neglect and more likely to develop in healthy ways.

“If we want our community to be healthy and thriving, we have to do something about (adverse childhood experiences) now,” said Ruth Atkins, coordinator for the collaborative.

Among the services provided by collaborative partners are:

Shasta County Health and Human Services has programs targeted on reducing prenatal substance abuse and postpartum depression, director Kakiuchi said. According to Mercy Medical Center, 16 to 17 percent of pregnant patients at the hospital test positive for illicit drugs or alcohol sometime during their pregnancy. Most test positive for marijuana.

The Youth Violence Prevention Council runs the Shasta County Youth/Peer Court for first-time juvenile offenders. First-time offenders often do several hours of community service and are matched with mentors to guide them through the system, rather than sending them to detention centers.

The Shasta County Child Abuse Prevention Coordinating Council runs programs helping guide parents through their cases with Child Protective Services. The organization also runs the Parent Leadership Advisory Group, which helps match parents with children in foster care to parents who have already been through the program for guidance and advice.

“I always say that if you have kids, you’re at risk,” executive director Rachelle Modena said. “We talk about the at-risk families but raising kids is hard, no matter who you are.”

Moving on

Aguila doesn’t resent the months she spent with her children in foster care. The mother of three is now the chair of the Parent Leadership Advisory Group.

What’s more, Aguila has stayed close to her children’s foster family. She and her children often go camping and swimming with Lakehead residents Cyndie and Ed Milazzo. Photos on Aguila’s Facebook show her and her husband, the Milazzos and their children grinning at Six Flags amusement park.

It wasn’t always that way, Cyndie Milazzo said. For the first six months that she and her husband cared for Aguila’s three children, Aguila was distant and argumentative. Everyone, it seemed, was responsible for her losing her children — except herself.

“She was defiant and had this ‘screw you’ attitude and she finally realized that wasn’t going to

get her anywhere,” Milazzo said.

Within a few months, Aguila’s attitude changed. She stopped using drugs. She ended her relationships with her friends who were still using. She used every resource available to her to help prove to Child Protective Services that she was ready to be a mother.

“When I got out of jail, I hit the ground running,” Aguila said. “I had anger management, drug and alcohol classes, parenting classes. It was (a case of) everything I could do, I did do.”

After 13 months, Aguila had her children back, but they missed the family that had cared for them when life was at its lowest. Six months after they went home, Aguila’s daughter told her she wanted Aunt Cyndie at her birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese’s.

“We went to the birthday party and the three kids went nuts when they saw us,” Milazzo said. “There was no separating the kids from us.”

The families have been close ever since.

There are ways for families to move on from turmoil and provide a healthy life for their children. But Aguila said in order to reach that point, she had change herself.

“You’re angry with CPS, not with yourself,” Aguila said, “because you haven’t learned that it’s yourself that caused this problem.”

Adverse childhood experiences

The Adverse Childhood Experiences study identified 10 types of neglect, abuse or stress children can be exposed to that can lead to health problems in later life. Organizations such as the Shasta Strengthening Families Collaborative work to promote “Protective Factors,” qualities of healthy homes identified by the Center for the Study of Social Policy.

- Adverse childhood experiences
- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional neglect

- Physical neglect
- Mother treated violently
- Household substance abuse
- Household mental illness
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member

Possible health and behavior risk outcomes of experiencing an adverse childhood experience

- Lack of physical activity
- Smoking
- Alcoholism
- Drug use
- Missed work
- Severe obesity
- Diabetes
- Depression
- Suicide attempts
- Sexually transmitted diseases and infections
- Heart disease
- Cancer
- Stroke
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- Broken bones

Protective factors

- Parental resilience: Parents are able to handle stress and recover from the occasional crisis.
- Social connections: Trusted and caring family and friends who provide support for parents in facing the challenges of raising a family.
- Concrete support in times of need: Basic needs such as housing, food, clothing, transportation, healthcare and access to essential services.
- Knowledge of parenting and child development: Accurate information about how to raise children and appropriate expectations for their behavior.
- Social and emotional competence of children: A child can positively interact with others and

control their behavior.

RESOURCES

The Shasta Strengthening Families Collaborative is made up of about 30 organizations promoting healthy families in the community, with nine making up the Coordinating Committee. For more information on these organizations and what resources they offer, visit their websites. Ruth Atkins is the coordinator for the collaborative. She can be reached at ratkins@co.shasta.ca.us. (<mailto:ratkins@co.shasta.ca.us>.)

Child Abuse Prevention Coordinating Council of Shasta County (CAPCC)

- shastacapc.org
- Runs the Pathway Parent Partner and Community Parent Partner Programs. The Parent Partner program, funded by First 5 Shasta, matches families with children enrolled in preschool with professionals who provide parent education. Community Parents Partners, funded by the California Department of Social Services, works with parents at risk of having their kids placed in foster care to deliver parenting education. The organization also runs the Parent Leadership Advisory Group, which helps guides parents new to the foster care system to the resources they need.

First 5 Shasta

- first5shasta.org
- Funds programs promoting healthy, happy children throughout the region. Provides resources for new parents on how to prepare children for kindergarten with regards to literacy, health and emotional wellbeing.

Northern Valley Catholic Social Service (NVCSS)

- www.nvcss.org (<http://www.nvcss.org>)
- Manages the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program, which matches foster children with adult representatives to help them through the court system.

One SAFE Place

- www.ospshasta.org (<http://www.ospshasta.org>)
- Provides emergency shelter for victims of domestic violence. Operates Camp Hope for children of domestic violence.

Shasta County Health and Human Services Agency

- www.shastahhsa.net (<http://www.shastahhsa.net>)
- Has programs targeted on reducing prenatal substance abuse and postpartum depression. According to Mercy Medical Center, 16 to 17 percent of pregnant patients at the hospital test positive for illicit drugs or alcohol sometime during their pregnancy. Most test positive for marijuana.

Shasta County Office of Education

- www.shastacoe.org (<http://www.shastacoe.org>)
- Runs free state preschools to low-income families.

Shasta County Probation

- www.co.shasta.ca.us/index/probation_index.aspx (http://www.co.shasta.ca.us/index/probation_index.aspx)
- Assists with rehabilitative programs for juveniles in custody, including Boys Council and Girls Circle, as well as individual counseling.

Shasta Head Start

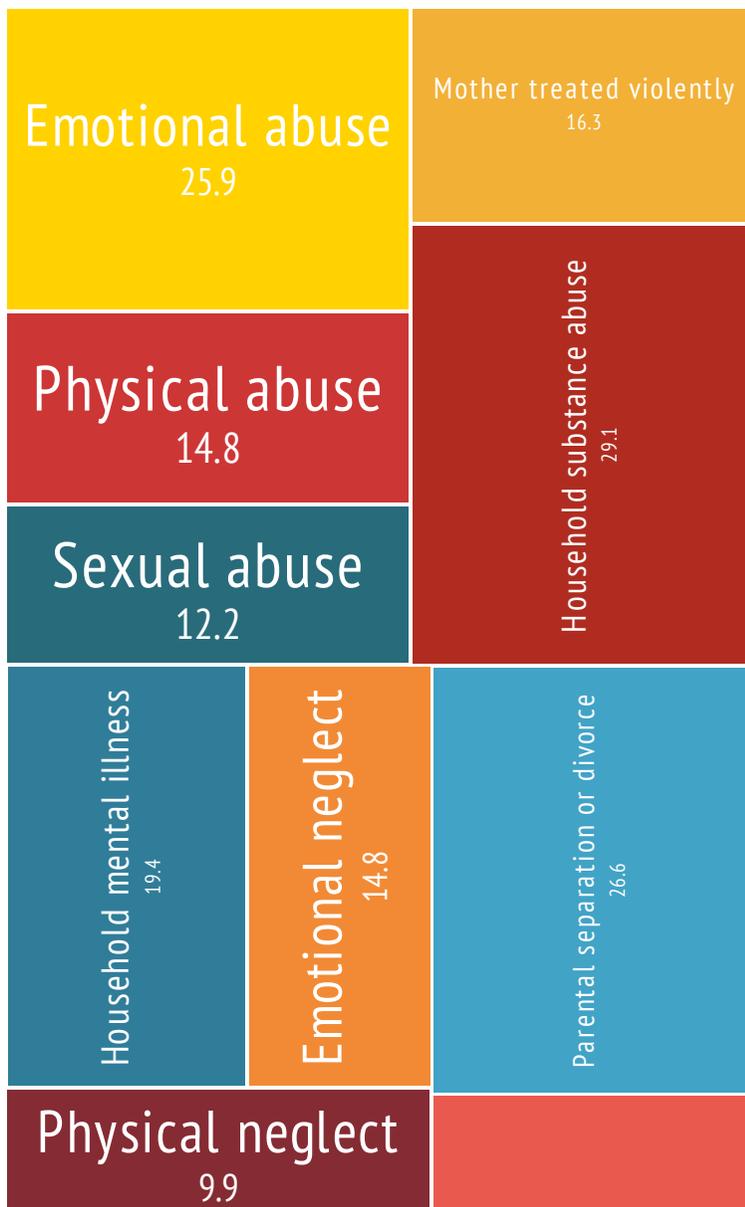
- www.shastaheadstart.org (<http://www.shastaheadstart.org>)
- A federal program providing free preschool to low-income families. Gives referrals to family health programs. Also provides parenting coaching and health intervention through Early Head Start programs.

Youth Violence Prevention Council of Shasta County

- yvpc.org
- Runs the Shasta County Youth/Peer Court for first time juvenile offenders. Rather than sending teenagers to juvenile detention facilities, peer court emphasizes “restorative justice.” First-time offenders often do several hours of community service and are matched with mentors to guide them through the system.

Types of adverse childhood experiences U.S. v Shasta County





Local children are more likely to experience each type of Adverse Childhood Experience than their national peers. (Numbers presented as percentages.)

Source: Shasta Strengthening Families Collaborative



Types of adverse childhood experiences U.S. v Shasta County ([//infogr.am/types-of-adverse-childhood-experiences-us-v-shasta-county](http://infogr.am/types-of-adverse-childhood-experiences-us-v-shasta-county)) |

Create Infographics ([//infogr.am](http://infogr.am))

Mobile users can find an interactive graphic on adverse childhood experiences [here](http://bit.ly/X58qt3). (<http://bit.ly/X58qt3>)

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