

VIEWPOINTS

We survived some rocky childhood moments. Now, we're trying to help other Californians | Opinion

BY SETAREH HARSAMIZADEH TEHRANI AND DIANA RAMOS *SPECIAL TO THE SACRAMENTO BEE*

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I, Setareh Harsamizadeh Tehrani, remember the sound of my parents fighting when I was a child, glasses shattering. I was experiencing something known as an adverse childhood experience, but I didn't know it at the time. Now, I am a youth advisor trying to explain this trauma to others.

I, Dr. Diana Ramos, grew up in a single-parent household in South Central Los Angeles. My mother worked three jobs, so my aunt tried to help in the house. It was a challenging childhood. Now, I am California's Surgeon General.

While our beginnings were different, we both experienced adverse childhood experiences (also called ACE) in childhood — which are more common than many may realize.

We are leveraging those experiences and our understanding of them to make a difference for others. It is no coincidence that the surgeon general has a public awareness campaign to highlight the importance of overcoming difficult chapters in young lives.

We met some time ago serving on an advisory board and shared our personal stories. The caring nature of a mother, even one who isn't home much due to work, still comes through. A father's grief and anger, which can seem confusing and scary at the time, can make more sense years later.

OPINION

Adverse childhood experiences are stressful (and potentially traumatic) experiences, such as witnessing violence, experiencing abuse or neglect, growing up in a household with substance abuse, divorce or mental illness, that occur before the age of 18. When these experiences are prolonged, intense or occur repeatedly, they can cause toxic stress.

Toxic stress can negatively impact a child's development and emotional well-being, as well as increase negative social, physical and mental health outcomes in adulthood. Without adequate support, toxic stress from adverse childhood experiences can impact a person in ways that they may not even realize, causing trust issues, anxiety or chronic pain, for example.

That is why the critical role of our youth advisors — with diverse life experiences and perspectives — have been key to shaping the campaign. By illuminating research-backed pathways to healing, we hope to empower young people dealing with the impacts of toxic stress to pave the way for the next generation.

But even those without toxic stress have a part to play here. We urge all Californians to support the children and teens around them by reaching out and providing a listening ear, being a stable presence in their life and sharing stress-reduction strategies, such as mindfulness, improved sleep quality and time spent outdoors. While these strategies may seem simple, they are scientifically proven to encourage healing and support overall well being.

You may also encourage a child or teen in your life to seek an adverse childhood experience screening through a primary care provider and learn about available mental health supports in your local community.

The first step for any adult still suffering from anguish that originated in childhood is to be aware of what is happening. That is why the surgeon general's office's "Live Beyond" [campaign](#) is so important.

This new campaign is part of the [Children and Youth Behavioral Health Initiative](#), which aims to ensure that all young people and families can find support for their emotional, mental and behavioral health needs.

In addition to youth input, the guidance of subject matter experts, market research and a strong grounding in science, the campaign will also include a special focus on outreach and accessible solutions targeted at economically disadvantaged groups. This is especially vital because adverse childhood experiences are disproportionately prevalent among under-resourced communities, which are often less likely to have the resources and information necessary to buffer the impacts of toxic stress.

We want people to understand that healing from adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress is attainable, and it's never too late to start. Our personal journeys provide a small glimpse into what "Live Beyond" can truly mean for young people with adverse childhood experiences.