

# THE TRUTH ABOUT ACEs

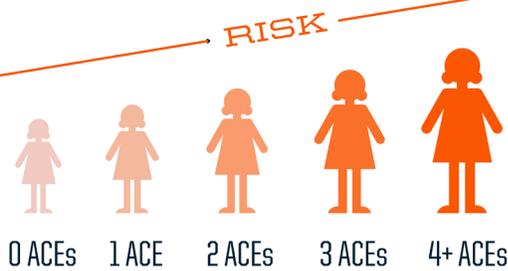
## WHAT ARE ACEs?

ACEs are ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

“The science of child development shows that the foundation for sound mental health is built early in life, as early experiences—which include children’s relationships with parents, caregivers, relatives, teachers, and peers—shape the architecture of the developing brain.”

## WHAT IMPACT DO ACEs HAVE?

As the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk for negative health outcomes



The three types of ACEs include

ABUSE	NEGLECT	HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION	
Physical	Physical	Mental Illness	Incarcerated Relative
Emotional	Emotional	Mother treated violently	Substance Abuse
Sexual		Divorce	

Possible Risk Outcomes:

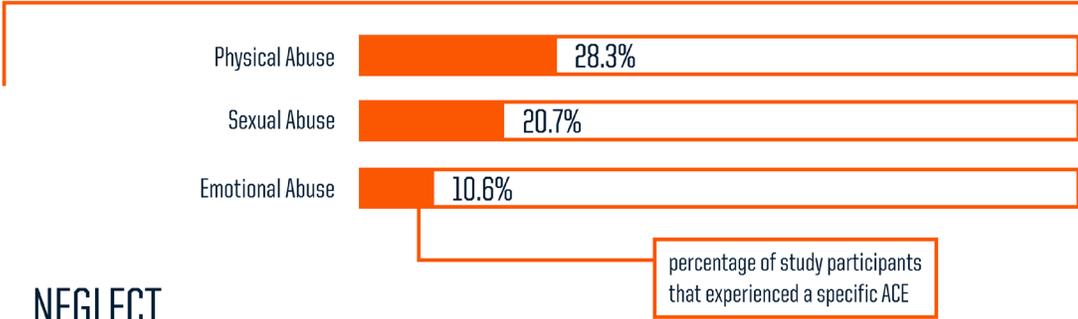
BEHAVIOR				
Lack of physical activity	Smoking	Alcoholism	Drug use	Missed work
PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH				
Severe obesity	Diabetes	Depression	Suicide attempts	STDs
Heart disease	Cancer	Stroke	COPD	Broken bones

- Mental health is not just about genetics – the environment can speed up or slow down genetic activity.
- Mental health impairments can result from the interaction between genetic predisposition and exposure to significant adversity in the environment.
- Life circumstances associated with family stress increase risk of serious mental health problems.
- Poverty, poor child care conditions, domestic violence, neglect, and parental substance abuse are all factors that could put children’s health at risk.
- Strong, frequent and/or prolonged biological responses to adversity can cause toxic stress.
- Toxic stress can damage the make-up of the developing brain and increase the likelihood of mental and physical health issues by impairing school readiness and academic achievement.
- Some mental health issues may emerge quickly in childhood or years later, during adulthood.

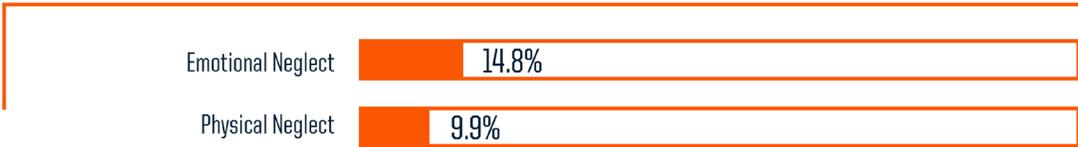
# HOW PREVALENT ARE ACEs?

The ACE study\* revealed the following estimates:

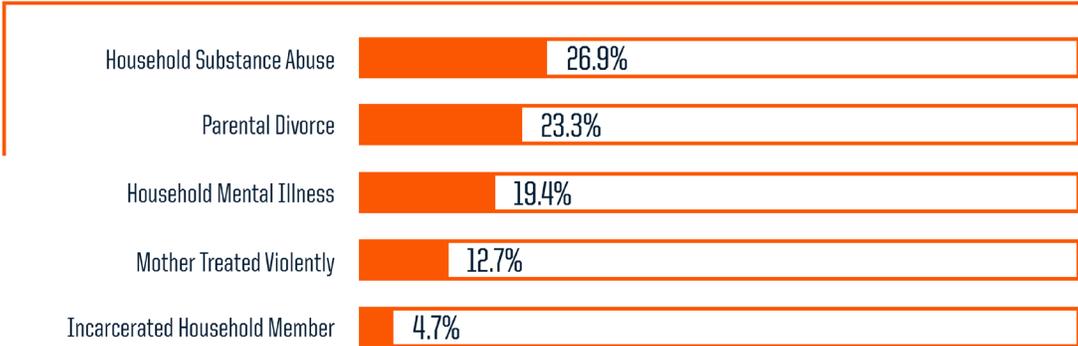
## ABUSE



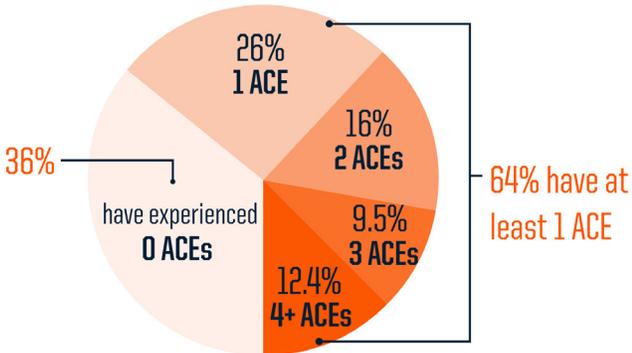
## NEGLECT



## HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION



# WHY ARE ACEs IMPORTANT?



Some individuals demonstrate remarkable capacities to overcome the severe challenges of early, persistent maltreatment, trauma, and emotional harm, yet there are limits to the ability of young children to recover psychologically from such adversity. Even when children have been removed from traumatizing circumstances and placed in exceptionally nurturing homes with supportive adults, they can continue to experience problems in self-regulation, emotional adaptability, relating to others, and self-understanding.

**These findings underscore the importance of prevention and timely intervention in circumstances that put young children at serious psychological risk.**

Over 17,000 Health Maintenance Organization members from Southern California receiving physical exams completed confidential surveys regarding their childhood experiences and current health status and behaviors.\*\*

\*Source: <http://www.cdc.gov/ace/prevalence.htm>  
 \*\*<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>

# INFORMATION ON 5 KEY PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR FAMILY STRENGTHENING

[including conversation starters to help illustrate and assess these factors]



## SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Parents need support from family members, friends, and their communities. Social networks play a significant role in parent's abilities to deal with the challenges of parenting.

- Who assists you with being a good parent and how do they do it?
- When and how are we stronger together than alone?
- What makes you feel safe and respected in a relationship?

## RESILIENCE

Resilience is the ability to thrive, bounce back, and adapt when adversities, challenges, trauma or significant sources of stress arise. Parents can learn and develop resilience skills.

- What are some important life lessons you've learned that have made you a better parent?
- Think of someone who loves you. What would they say your strengths are?
- How can you turn a problem into an opportunity?



## KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTING AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

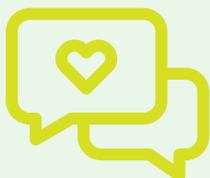
Parents can benefit from having accurate information about how their child develops. Understanding what is expected for each developmental stage will make it easier for parents to deal with challenging behaviors and practice positive disciplinary practices.

- What are some of the things you've had to learn as a parent?
- How do you know what your child needs as s/he grows?
- How do you keep your expectations for your children reasonable?

## CONCRETE SUPPORT IN TIMES OF NEED

All parents face uncertainty at times. The experience of needing extra help with basic necessities or an emergency situation can be very stressful. Sometimes, parents struggle asking for help; it is important for parents to know they have resources and organizations that can assist them.

- In your experience, what are some good things that have come out of a crisis?
- What makes a service provider really, really good?
- When you find a "good help" how do you make sure other parents know about it?



## SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE OF CHILDREN

It is important for children to develop skills that allow them to interact and communicate their needs with peers, parents, and other adults as well as deal with conflict. Parents can model these skills to their child and it is important parents understand children's feelings/actions.

- How do you teach your child to deal with his or her feelings?
- How do you support your children in solving their own problems?
- How do you express your sadness and anger around your children?

Source: [strengtheningfamilies.net](http://strengtheningfamilies.net) ▪ [ccsp.org](http://ccsp.org) ▪ [beststrongfamilies.net](http://beststrongfamilies.net)

# PROMOTING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL HEALTH IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Social-emotional health refers to a child's ability to recognize and develop control over their emotions, to form healthy and strong relationships with others, and to explore and learn about their world. Parents and other connected adults are key to helping children develop from birth and throughout childhood.

While there is no easy guidebook about how to perfectly develop a child's social-emotional health, there are some tips and resources available.

## Tip 1 Provide Children with Responsive Care

- As children interact with the world, initially through cries and body language and then through words and actions, they need consistent responses that help them develop a sense of self as an active agent in the world.
- Encourage this behavior by observing the child, considering what their behaviors might mean, and then respond.

## Tip 2 Be Affectionate and Nurturing

- By providing lots of hugs and cuddles, rocking and holding, touches and kisses, little children learn that they are loved for who they are. This is especially important when children are experiencing "big" or "negative" emotions so they learn they are loved no matter what.
- Learning that they are loved will help the child learn to love others.

## Tip 3 Help your Child Learn to Resolve Conflicts in a Healthy Way

- When children experience conflict with other children or with adults, parents and caregivers can help by labeling their emotions (e.g., "I see you are sad that John took away your toy.") and helping find a solution (e.g., "Why don't you take turns playing with it for two minutes.>").
- Encouraging progressive steps in developing skills to resolve conflicts will help the child throughout their life.

Parents can also encourage social-emotional development by engaging in what are referred to as the PRIDE skills:

- P Praise:** Provide children with praise whenever they behave in ways you want to encourage
- R Reflect:** Think about what your children are doing and saying
- I Imitate:** Engage in play with children by imitating them and encouraging them to imitate you
- D Describe:** Talk with children about their experiences and their emotions
- E Enjoyment:** Find time and activities to enjoy together with your children.

# Talk About Depression and Anxiety During Pregnancy and After Birth

## Ways You Can Help

Pregnancy and a new baby can bring a mix of emotions—excitement and joy, but also sadness and feeling overwhelmed. When these feelings get in the way of your loved one taking care of herself or the baby—that could be a sign that she’s dealing with deeper feelings of depression or anxiety, feelings that many pregnant women and new moms experience.



### LISTEN

Open the line of communication.

- ◆ “I know everyone is focused on the baby, but I want to hear about you.”
- ◆ “I notice you are having trouble sleeping, even when the baby sleeps. What’s on your mind?”
- ◆ “I know a new baby is stressful, but I’m worried about you. You don’t seem like yourself. Tell me how you are feeling.”
- ◆ “I really want to know how you’re feeling, and I will listen to you.”



### OFFER SUPPORT

Let her know that she’s not alone and you are here to help.

- ◆ “Can I watch the baby while you get some rest or go see your friends?”
- ◆ “How can I help? I can take on more around the house like making meals, cleaning, or going grocery shopping.”
- ◆ “I am here for you no matter what. Let’s schedule some alone time together, just you and me.”



### OFFER TO HELP

Ask her to let you help her reach out for assistance.

- ◆ “Let’s go online and see what kind of information we can find out about this.” Visit [nichd.nih.gov/MaternalMentalHealth](https://www.nichd.nih.gov/MaternalMentalHealth) to learn more.
- ◆ “Would you like me to make an appointment so you can talk with someone?” Call her health care provider or the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s National Helpline at **1-800-662-HELP (4357)** for 24-hour free and confidential mental health information, treatment, and recovery services referral in English and Spanish.
- ◆ “I’m very concerned about you.” Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK (8255)** for free and confidential emotional support—they talk about more than suicide.

# During Pregnancy and After Birth: Learn the Signs of Depression and Anxiety

You may be the first to see signs of depression and anxiety in your loved one while she is pregnant and after she has had the baby. Learn to recognize the signs and, if you do see them, urge her to talk with her health care provider.

## DOES SHE:

Seem to get extremely anxious, sad, or angry without warning?

Seem foggy and have trouble completing tasks?

Show little interest in things she used to enjoy?

Seem "robotic," like she is just going through the motions?

## DO YOU:

Notice she has trouble sleeping?

Notice she checks things and performs tasks repeatedly?

Get concerned she cannot care for herself or the baby?

Think she might hurt herself or the baby?

## Depression and Anxiety Happen. **Getting Help Matters.**

To learn more, visit [nichd.nih.gov/MaternalMentalHealth](http://nichd.nih.gov/MaternalMentalHealth).  
To find a mental health provider in your area, call **1-800-662-HELP (4357)**.



Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute  
of Child Health and Human Development



# Age-Related Reactions to a Traumatic or Stressful Event

A fundamental goal of parenting is to help children grow and thrive to the best of their potential. Part of parenting is trying to predict and prevent children's exposure to particularly stressful or dangerous experiences. However, sometimes parents need to help children cope with stressful situations that occur. It is important that parents understand all children will be different in terms of what stresses them and in how they respond. By understanding how children experience stressful events and how these children express their lingering distress over the experience, parents, physicians, communities, and schools can respond to their children and help them through challenging times.

## How Children May React and How to Help

How children experience traumatic events and how they express their lingering distress depends, in large part, on the children's age and level of development. While children may not respond in the same ways, below are some common behaviors based on age and ways to help.

### Preschool and young school-age children may exhibit...

- Lack of language to describe emotions
- Feelings of helplessness and uncertainty about continued danger
- Generalized fear
- Regression in developmental skills including speech and toileting
- Trouble sleeping
- Separation anxiety
- Repetitive and fixated play that often reenacts the traumatic event

**How to Help:** Provide comfort, rest and opportunities to play and draw, and reassurance that the traumatic event is over and the child is safe. Help children verbalize their feelings, provide consistent and reliable caretaking, and be patient and understanding over temporary regressions in behaviors (such as bed wetting restarting after having been dry at nights).

### School-age children may exhibit...

- Hypervigilance over personal safety and the safety of others
- Ongoing guilt and shame
- Re-experiencing through retelling of the traumatic event
- Overwhelming feeling of sadness or fear
- Developmental regression including trouble sleeping and difficulty concentrating and learning
- Somatic symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches
- Reckless or aggressive behavior

**How to Help:** Encourage children to discuss emotions, acknowledge the normalcy of emotions, and provide a supportive environment to express fears, sadness and anger. Correct any distortions of the traumatic event children may have and communicate with teachers when children are having trouble concentrating and learning.

### Adolescents may exhibit...

- Self-consciousness about emotional response to trauma
- Withdrawal from family and friends
- Feelings of shame, guilt and hopelessness
- Fantasies about revenge or retribution
- Radical shift in worldview
- Self-destructive or reckless behavior

**How to Help:** Channel anger and shame away from self-destructive behavior and thoughts of revenge and instead toward constructive alternatives. Encourage discussion about the traumatic event and what could have been done to prevent the event, and discuss the expectable strain on relationships with family and friends. By offering consistent support and guidance, adults can help adolescents navigate the intense emotions and reactions that come with trauma in a healthy way.

It is also important for adults to recognize the different effects stressful events can have on themselves and their family. When children experience a traumatic event, the entire family is affected. Often, family members have different experiences around the event and different emotional responses to the event. Recognizing each others' experience of the event, and helping each other cope with possible feelings of fear, helplessness, anger, or even guilt in not being able to protect children from a traumatic experience, is an important component of a family's emotional recovery.

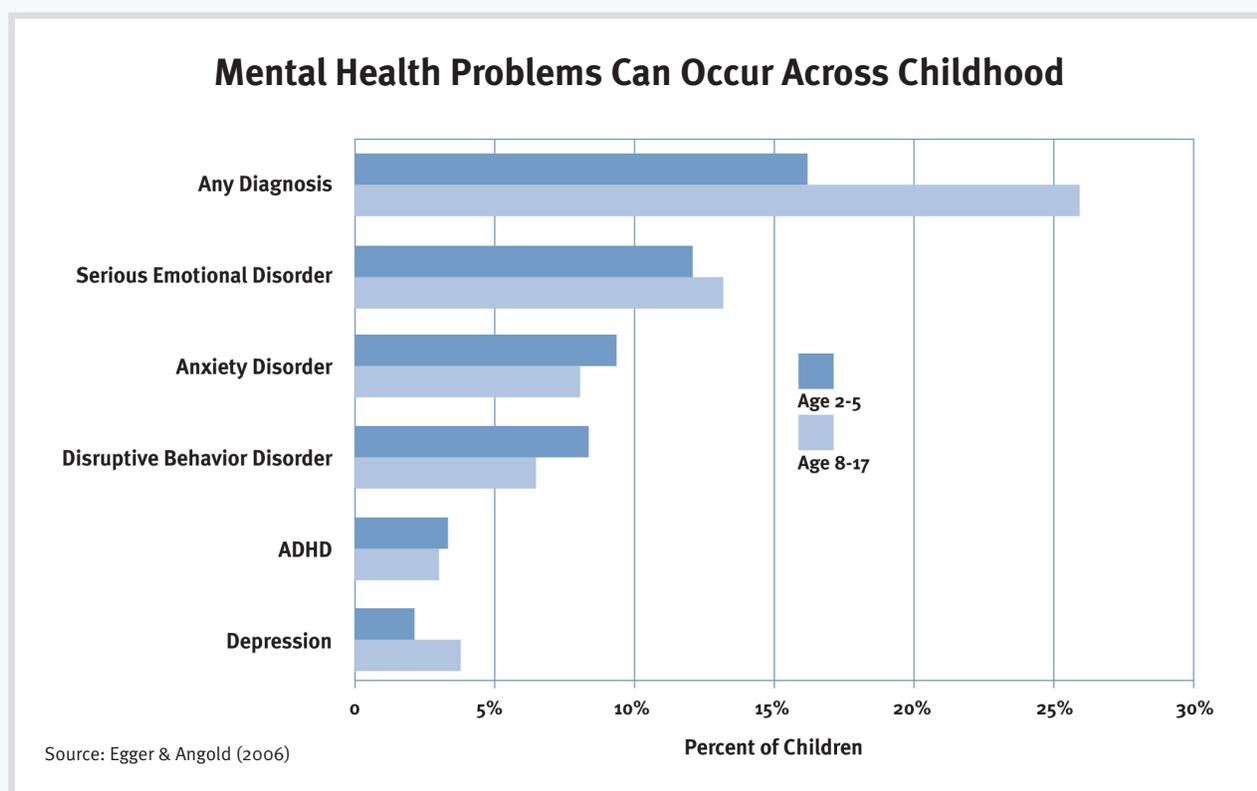
## Mental Health and Young Children

**Significant mental health problems can and do occur in young children.** In some cases, these problems can have serious consequences for early learning, social competence, and lifelong physical health. Children can show clear characteristics of the following at an early age:

- Anxiety disorders
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder
- Conduct disorder
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Depression
- Neurodevelopmental disabilities

Young children respond to and process emotional experiences and traumatic events in ways that are very different from older children and adults. Consequently, diagnosis in early childhood can be even more difficult than it is in adults.

(Source: [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu))



### Additional resources for more information:

- [NCTSN.org](http://NCTSN.org)
- [Echoparenting.org](http://Echoparenting.org)
- [Samsha.gov](http://Samsha.gov)
- [Sesamestreet.org/toolkits](http://Sesamestreet.org/toolkits)
- [Piploproductions.com](http://Piploproductions.com)

# SELF-HELP TIPS FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS

## MAINTAIN A SECURE AND HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

In order for you and your child to have a secure relationship, your child needs the following “ingredients.”

### RICE

#### REDO

My child loves it when she knows I will sing the same song each time I change her diaper. She likes to know what is going to happen next!

#### INTERACT

I can talk to my child when I take care of him, letting him know what we are doing using words. I can wait for him to smile, coo, or talk back to me.

#### CONNECT

When my child needs me, I can always be there for her. She will learn that I will help her even if she is being fussy or upset. This is how she learns trust.

#### EXPECT

I can find out what is reasonable to expect of my child for his age or ability. He might know what he should be doing but cannot yet stop himself. I can help him stop negative behaviors with love and effort. I don't want him to think he is a bad person.

### ...and PEAS!

#### PLAN A ROUTINE

I can try to keep the same daily routine for my child, giving her meals, naps, and bedtimes at the same time every day. My child will learn to treasure special routines before bedtime, like a bath and a book read to her specially. My child feels relaxed when she knows routine.

#### EXCITE

My child loves when I play with him and get him excited by playing “peek-a-boo” or “I'm gonna get you!” He will need to learn from me how to calm down after our games too.

#### AFFECTION

I can always pick up my child and hold her close to me when I can, to let her know how much I love her. This can never spoil her. It comforts and calms her so that she will know she always has me to count on.

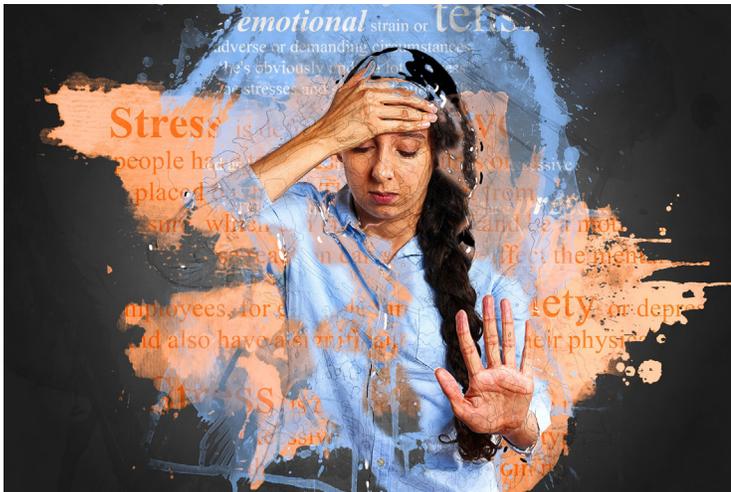
#### SENSITIVE

I can speak to my child in a calm voice and use gentle hands when I dress him and when I lift him, even if I am feeling anxious and irritable. I know that yelling, angry gestures, and spanking only make all of us anxious and sad. Chronic anger hurts everyone.



**Your child needs  
“RICE” and “PEAS”  
for a secure and healthy  
relationship.**

# SELF-HELP TIPS FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS



## YOUR HEALTH MATTERS

Taking care of young children can be very demanding and stressful. All families struggle with difficulty at different points in time. Research has shown that when you are feeling worried or depressed, it can impact your child's behavior and development. Taking care of yourself is one of the most important ways you can help take proper care of your child.



## RECOGNIZE THE SYMPTOMS OF STRESS

- Trouble sleeping and waking up in the night.
- Feeling tired all the time.
- Feeling nervous or restless.
- Losing your temper and getting upset easily.
- Lack of interest or energy to do anything.
- Problems with memory.
- Eating changes and weight gain or loss.
- Feeling sad and hopeless about the future.
- Experience headaches and stomach pain.
- Thoughts of suicide or bodily harm.



## TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

**REACH OUT** to close family and friends who can listen or lend a helping hand.

**GET MOVING** by going for a walk.

**HAVE FUN** with your child through activities like playing games, singing and reading books together.

**ESTABLISH A DAILY ROUTINE** of going to sleep at the same time and eating small, healthy meals every three hours or so.

**TRY MINDFULNESS TECHNIQUES** that focus on positive thoughts.

**ASK FOR SUPPORT** from trusted behavioral health professionals.

## HELPFUL RESOURCES

**UPMC Resolve Crisis 24-hour Hot-line**  
(888) 7-YOU-CAN (796-8226)

**Allegheny County Peer Support Warmline Service**  
(866) 661-WARM (9276)  
[www.peer-support.org](http://www.peer-support.org)

**The Allegheny Link to Home Visiting**  
(866) 730-2368

**Alliance for Infants and Toddlers**  
(412) 885-6000  
[www.ait.org](http://www.ait.org)

**Parent to Parent Pennsylvania**  
(888) 727-2706  
[www.parenttoparent.org](http://www.parenttoparent.org)

**Postpartum Pittsburgh**  
[www.pppgh.pitt.edu](http://www.pppgh.pitt.edu)

**Zero to Three**  
[www.Zerotothree.org](http://www.Zerotothree.org)

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**  
1-800-273-8255  
[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)