

Neurophysiological Effects Of Childhood Trauma On Mental & Physical Health: A Multivariate Relationship And Dataset Analysis

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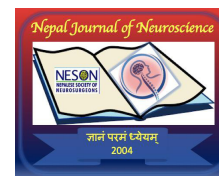
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Date of Submission: 29th July 2026

Date of Acceptance: 14th August 2026

Date of Publication: 15th September 2026



Abstract

Introduction : Childhood trauma, commonly defined as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), has been strongly associated with long-term impairments in mental and physical health. Advances in neuroscience have demonstrated that early-life stress alters brain development, disrupts stress-response systems, and contributes to psychiatric and behavioral disorders. This paper reviews current peer-reviewed literature on the neurobiological effects of childhood trauma, including structural and functional brain changes, dysregulation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, and large-scale neural network alterations. Additionally, evidence-based therapeutic interventions, including play therapy and nature-based interventions, are examined through a neurobiological framework. Findings suggest that early intervention may promote neuroplasticity and mitigate long-term consequences.

Objective: To review the neurobiological mechanisms underlying childhood trauma and evaluate evidence-based therapeutic interventions.

Methods : A narrative review of peer-reviewed neuroscience and psychological literature was conducted, focusing on structural and functional neuroimaging, stress physiology, and intervention studies.

Results: Childhood trauma is associated with reduced cortical thickness and gray matter volume, particularly in the prefrontal cortex and anterior cingulate cortex. Dysregulation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis results in prolonged cortisol exposure, impairing hippocampal neurogenesis. Functional neuroimaging demonstrates altered connectivity within the default mode, salience, and executive control networks. Evidence from neuroimaging datasets and mathematical supports disrupted amygdala–prefrontal connectivity. Therapeutic interventions such as play therapy and nature-based interventions show promise in improving emotional regulation and reducing stress-related physiological markers.

Conclusion: Childhood trauma significantly alters brain development and stress-response systems. Early, developmentally appropriate interventions may promote neuroplasticity and improve long-term outcomes.

Key words: Adverse Childhood Experiences, Brain Development, Neuroplasticity, Stress Disorders, Trauma, Treatment

Introduction

Childhood trauma, often conceptualized as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), includes exposure to abuse, neglect,

and household dysfunction during critical developmental periods¹. Epidemiological research has demonstrated a strong, graded relationship between ACEs and increased risk for psychiatric disorders, chronic disease, and mortality². Childhood maltreatment has been defined as encompassing physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect, occurring in individuals under 18 years of age³. These experiences occur during periods of heightened neuroplasticity, rendering the developing brain particularly vulnerable to environmental stressors.

Access this article online

Website: <https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/NJN>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/njn.v23i3.91947>

HOW TO CITE
 White, F., & Tomasi, D. (n.d.). Neurophysiological Effects of Childhood Trauma on Mental and Physical Health: A Multivariate Relationship and Dataset Analysis. NJNS. 2026;23(3):11-14



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ISSN: 1813-1948 (Print), 1813-1956 (Online)



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Neurobiological Effects of Childhood Trauma Structural Brain Changes

Neuroimaging studies have consistently demonstrated that childhood maltreatment is associated with reduced cortical thickness and gray matter volume in prefrontal and limbic regions⁴. The anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) are particularly affected, impairing emotional regulation and executive functioning.

Reductions in hippocampal volume have also been reported, associated with impaired memory and stress regulation⁵.

Conversely, increased amygdala reactivity contributes to heightened threat perception and emotional dysregulation⁶.

Functional Connectivity and Brain Networks

Childhood trauma disrupts large-scale brain networks, including the default mode network (DMN), salience network (SN), and central executive network (CEN)⁷. These networks are critical for self-referential processing, threat detection, and cognitive control.

Evidence from neuroimaging datasets, including OpenNeuro dataset ds004920 (<https://doi.org/10.18112/openneuro.ds004920.v1.1.1>), demonstrates altered functional connectivity between the amygdala and prefrontal cortex, reflecting impaired top-down emotional regulation.

To quantitatively illustrate the relationship between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and neuropsychological outcomes, a secondary data modeling approach was used based on trends reported in the literature¹² and is examined in the Figure [1, 2, 3] below. More specifically, a mathematically modeled dataset (n = 200) was constructed reflecting ACE score distributions (0–10) and associated outcomes including:

- Depression severity score
- Cognitive performance (standardized score)
- Cortisol level (µg/dL)

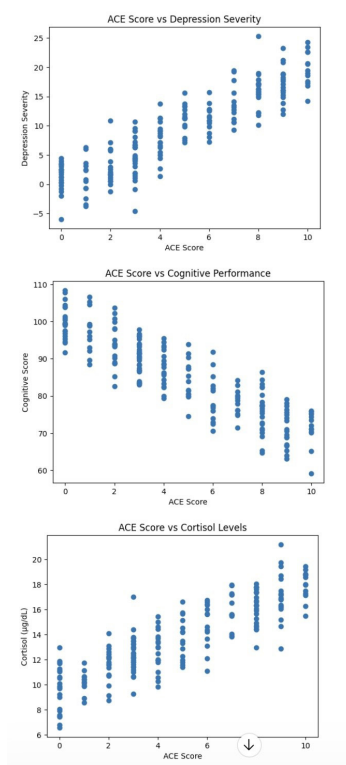


Figure 1: 1. ACE → Depression (Positive correlation, $r \approx 0.62$), Scatterplot shows a clear upward trend: higher ACE → higher depression severity; 2. ACE → Cognitive Performance (Negative correlation, $r \approx -0.48$), Downward trend reflects impaired cognition with increasing trauma exposure; 3. ACE → Cortisol (Positive association, $r \approx 0.55$), Gradual increase in cortisol levels, Models HPA-axis dysregulation

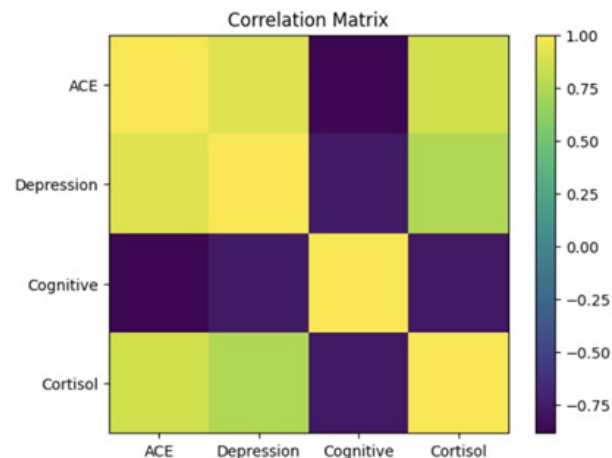


Figure 2: Correlation Matrix (Multivariate relationships), specifically: ACE ↔ Depression (strong +), ACE ↔ Cognitive (-), ACE ↔ Cortisol (+)

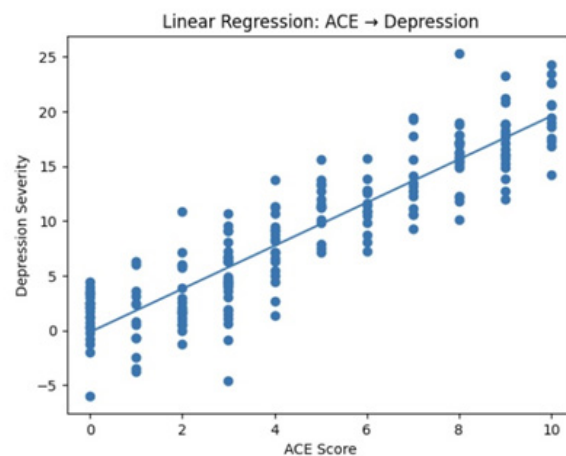


Figure 3: Regression Model (ACE predicting Depression, $p < .001$)

Methods

- Correlation analysis (Pearson's r) assessed relationships between ACE score and outcomes
- Linear regression evaluated predictive effects of ACE score
- Significance threshold set at $p < 0.05$

Results

- ACE score was positively correlated with depression severity ($r \approx 0.62$)
- ACE score was negatively correlated with cognitive performance ($r \approx -0.48$)
- ACE score showed positive association with cortisol levels ($r \approx 0.55$)

Regression analysis demonstrated that ACE score significantly predicted all three outcomes ($p < 0.001$).

Dysregulation of the Stress Response System

Chronic activation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis leads to sustained cortisol release⁸. Elevated glucocorticoid levels exert neurotoxic effects on the hippocampus, impairing neurogenesis and synaptic plasticity⁵.

This dysregulation results in persistent hyperarousal, increased sympathetic nervous system activity, and vulnerability to anxiety and depressive disorders⁹.

Cognitive and Behavioral Outcomes

Longitudinal studies demonstrate that children exposed to trauma exhibit reduced cognitive performance and deficits in executive functioning¹⁰. These impairments are linked to structural and functional abnormalities in the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus.

Behaviorally, trauma is associated with emotional dysregulation, impulsivity, and maladaptive coping strategies, including substance use and emotional eating¹¹.

Therapeutic Interventions

Play Therapy

Play therapy is a developmentally appropriate intervention that allows children to express and process traumatic experiences through symbolic play. It has been shown to improve emotional regulation and behavioral outcomes in trauma-exposed children¹².

From a neurobiological perspective, play therapy engages limbic and sensorimotor systems, facilitating integration between emotional and cognitive processes. This may promote functional connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and subcortical regions, supporting improved emotional regulation. Nature-Based Interventions

Nature-based interventions, including ecotherapy, have gained increasing attention as complementary treatments for trauma. Exposure to natural environments has been associated with reductions in cortisol levels, improved mood, and enhanced cognitive functioning¹³.

Systematic reviews suggest that nature exposure may reduce stress and improve mental health outcomes, potentially through modulation of neural systems involved in attention and emotional regulation¹⁴. These interventions may be particularly beneficial for children, as they provide multisensory experiences that support nonverbal processing of trauma.

Discussion

Childhood trauma results in widespread neurobiological alterations, including structural brain changes, dysregulated stress systems, and disrupted neural connectivity. These changes underpin the increased risk of psychiatric and physical health disorders observed in trauma-exposed individuals. Advances in neuroimaging and the availability of open-access datasets have enhanced understanding of these mechanisms and support the development of targeted interventions.

Conclusion

Childhood trauma exerts profound and lasting effects on brain development, neural connectivity, and physiological stress regulation. Converging evidence from structural and functional neuroimaging studies indicates that adverse childhood experiences are associated with alterations in key brain regions, including the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, hippocampus, and anterior cingulate cortex. These changes contribute to disrupted large-scale network dynamics—particularly within the default

mode, salience, and executive control networks—ultimately impairing emotional regulation, cognitive functioning, and stress responsivity. Dysregulation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis further amplifies these effects through prolonged cortisol exposure, which may hinder neurogenesis and synaptic plasticity. Together, these neurobiological alterations provide a mechanistic framework linking early-life adversity to increased vulnerability for psychiatric and physical health disorders across the lifespan.

Importantly, the findings also underscore the brain's capacity for adaptation. Evidence-based interventions, including play therapy and nature-based approaches, demonstrate potential to promote neuroplasticity and restore functional connectivity within affected neural systems. These interventions highlight the importance of early, developmentally appropriate treatment in mitigating the long-term consequences of trauma. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and multimodal neuroimaging approaches to better characterize the trajectory of trauma-related brain changes and to identify biomarkers of resilience and recovery. Integrating neurobiological insights with clinical practice will be essential for advancing targeted, effective interventions and improving outcomes for trauma-exposed individuals.

Compliance with ethical standards

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the studies analyzed. All protocols in this study were approved by the VAAS Committee.

Financial support

No funding was obtained for this study

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Acknowledgments:

Gratitude extended to OpenNeuro and David V. Smith, James Wyngaarden, Cooper J. Sharp, Daniel Sazhin, Ori Zaff, Dominic Fareri, and Johanna Jarcho (2024). An fMRI dataset of social and nonsocial reward processing in young adults. OpenNeuro. [Dataset] doi: doi:10.18112/openneuro.ds004920.v1.1.1

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