

# Relationship between Positive and Adverse Childhood Experiences and Resilience in Adulthood <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** Childhood experiences have a significant impact on the development of resilience, shaping an individual's capacity to cope with stress and adversity throughout their lifespan. This study aimed to analyze the relationship between positive childhood experiences (PCEs), adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and resilience in adulthood. The results revealed that emotional and physical abuse and emotional and physical neglect are negatively correlated with PCEs and resilience. PCEs protect individuals against ACEs and promote better health and resilience in adulthood. The findings emphasize the importance of reducing ACEs and increasing PCEs in childhood, preventing long-term impacts and mental health outcomes, and increasing resilience levels.

**Keywords:** childhood experiences; resilience; adults



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## 1. Introduction

Childhood experiences are important for an individual's development and well-being throughout their life [1,2]. While adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), such as abuse or neglect, can interfere with the development of resilience, decreasing one's levels of it [3,4], positive childhood experiences (PCEs), like having a stable routine, can promote it [5], enhancing mental and physical health in adulthood [6–10].

Resilience plays an important role during a child's development and corresponds to the ability to adapt to adversity and overcome difficulties [6,11]. ACEs can affect resilience through difficulties in establishing emotional bonds, lower self-esteem, and psychopathological symptoms [4], leading to an impaired capacity for developing resilience [12]. On the other hand, PCEs can contribute to healthy relationships and future social experiences [5], having a positive effect against adversity through an improvement in resilience and avoidance of adversity reoccurrence later in life [7,11]. Research suggests that the quality of parental care and support received during childhood can impact the development of resilience and an individual's ability to cope effectively with stressors later in life [13,14]. The present study aims to analyze the relationship between childhood experiences and resilience in adulthood.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Our sample comprised 76 Portuguese adults, 54 women (71.1%) and 22 men (28.9%), with ages between 18 and 70 ( $M = 35.59$ ,  $SD = 15.30$ ). Participants answered questions from sociodemographic questionnaires online, the Benevolent Childhood Experiences Scale [9],

the Childhood Adverse Experiences Questionnaire [15], and the Resilience Scale [16]. All participants granted their consent to participate in this study. The study followed the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki [17] and was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Egas Moniz School of Health and Science.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The results showed that emotional abuse is positively correlated with physical abuse ( $r = 0.696, p < 0.001$ ) and with emotional ( $r = 0.546, p < 0.001$ ) and physical neglect ( $r = 0.332, p = 0.003$ ). Physical abuse is positively correlated with both emotional ( $r = 0.416, p < 0.001$ ) and physical neglect ( $r = 0.256, p = 0.026$ ). There are also positive correlations between emotional and physical neglect ( $r = 0.432, p < 0.001$ ). Negative correlations were found between emotional neglect and self-determination ( $r = -0.343, p = 0.002$ ), adaptability ( $r = -0.281, p = 0.014$ ), resilience ( $r = -0.333, p = 0.003$ ), and PCEs ( $r = -0.600, p < 0.001$ ). Both physical ( $r = -0.251, p = 0.029$ ) and emotional abuse ( $r = -0.252, p = 0.028$ ), as well as physical neglect ( $r = -0.384, p < 0.001$ ), are negatively correlated with PCEs.

These findings are consistent with the existing literature, showing that multiple ACEs (e.g., emotional neglect) are susceptible to co-occurring [18] due to risk factors, such as dysfunctional family dynamics [19], and are associated with lower levels of PCEs (e.g., supportive family environment) [20,21] and resilience [21]. Research suggests that the tendency to experience several ACEs [19] can generate cumulative problems in an individual's life [22]. This can interfere with emotional support and a nurturing environment [23], contributing to fewer PCEs [20,21] and impairments in the development of resilience [21]. Later in life, exposure to ACEs can lead to impairments in the psychological and social functioning of an individual [4]. On the other hand, studies have also reported that the presence of at least six types of PCEs could mitigate the effects of ACEs [24,25], leading to better mental health [10] and the development of resilience through an adequate response to adversity [25].

The results also show that women experience more emotional negligence,  $t(74) = 11.252, p = 0.001$ , sexual abuse,  $t(74) = 11.594, p < 0.001$ , physical abuse,  $t(74) = 15.810, p < 0.001$ , and emotional abuse,  $t(74) = 4.366, p = 0.004$ , than men. Our results are in line with those of other research. The literature argues that women are more likely to experience ACEs due to gender-based violence (e.g., sexual abuse) [26].

Assessments of ACEs, resilience, and positive factors (PCEs) will allow a better understanding of an individual's needs and a better adjustment of the support needed for positive functioning and well-being [12]. The present study may be constrained by limitations, such as a non-representative sample, due to its insufficient size and lack of heterogeneity in gender representation, restricting the ability to accurately capture the diverse characteristics of the larger population. Our results show the importance of implementing preventive actions to promote childhood protection and foster close relationships for stable and healthy mental development.

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