



### **Child Labor, the Missing ACE that Hides Child Abusers**

I've always thought there were at least two missing ACEs (adverse child experiences) due to the fundamentally bourgeois experience of the people who think these things through. One of those missing ACEs was child labor, now visible for the moment in the lens of fresh New York Times reporting (<https://nyti.ms/3Ld1bdV>). It can be hard to define child labor, in part because the laws have kept the definitions ambiguous to protect agricultural sector interests, a few of whom represent actual smaller and middle-sized farm families who still do their own dirty work – but most of these interests are agribusiness.

I felt as though I had to blog about this issue now because it's near and dear to my own childhood experience – and the reason why I've spent my second career trying to make educational settings do less harm to children with ACEs, visible and invisible. Perhaps this time our field could rise above the embarrassing non-response that happened in the child separation policy under the Trump administration. Weren't those children in the cages "out of school?"

Since a big part of the New York Times story was about meat packing plants – and because those were many of the violations in my own state of Michigan – let's talk a bit about two types of work experience available to children in meat packing plants: Dangerous machines and brutality toward animals.

### **Traumatic Memory Lane**

I know these issues well, as the oldest child of a single-parent dairy farmer between 1968 and 1988, I spent roughly 20 years in compulsory labor that included lots of dangerous machines and the murder and torcher of animals on a regular basis.

The compulsory labor started at age 6 and included about 4 hours each day after school and then dawn to after dark on weekends and summers. Now, there are many kids who work to help their families, and there are conditions of family labor in which children are protected from the parts of work that are "too

much, too soon.” But that’s not what we’re talking about here. These are cases where children as young as 13 are being pressed into service by bosses, not parents.

First the machines: I can still remember standing over a late 1950’s Gehl silage wagon (google it) while blowing silage at age 13, a John Deere 3010 at full throttle right next to me running a blower fan strong enough to blow heavy chopped corn 65 feet up a tube to the top of the silo... and another tractor power take-off shaft running the wagon’s conveyor chains and beaters – all in a tight space where I had to stand to control the machines and help manage the load of silage as it met the beaters. My intrusive memory from this experience is always the same - standing on the front edge of the wagon with a long pitchfork trying to pull the top of the load down evenly so it didn’t clog the blower... and in this action I was within inches of many moving parts that were not going to stop if I got caught up in them. I was working alone. No one would have known.

This is a traumatic memory and, while many years of well-guided work has reduced its powerful emotional charge, the memory will never go away. Even at 56 years old, it reemerges every time I feel taken advantage of, every time I feel that someone is not caring about the risk they are asking me to take on for their advantage. Let’s be clear: The threats are no longer the same, now that I’m working in a collared shirt. Still, when a situation that fits comes up, I automatically project a composite of all of those “dangerous machine” days onto the present situation, including the physical and emotional experiences that the 13 year old was having then during those stressful and scary moments. If you’ve ever spent any time in a meat packing plant, it’s nothing but wicked dangerous machines with sharp edges that require cleaning with high heat and caustic chemicals.

But that wasn’t the worst. If you think that the terms murder and torcher are too strong:

- You’ve never seen a calf’s knees buckle and it’s aimless wandering after burning its budding horns back into its skull with a hot electric iron.
- You’ve never heard the desperate lowing of a young steer as you first cut both its horns off (crushed bone and blood squirting everywhere) and then castrate it, often falling to the ground in the process.
- You’ve never had to end the life of an animal that was down – or, worse, tried to get it on the sale-truck still alive with a loader and chains.

I could go on. This is just what it takes to make meat and milk – but children shouldn’t be involved. I specifically use the terms murder and torcher because I left my 20 years as a steward of 300+ dairy animals convinced that cows and pigs have emotions and memories. After those experiences, they never forget, just like me, and the kids at the plant. They don’t want it to happen, and the fear and pain in their eyes and voices is clear, just like for me, and it will be that way for the kids at the plant. Again, to this day, these memories are vivid, and when they come it can take days or weeks to get them suppressed again.

Do a little reading on the subject – going back to Upton Sinclair in the 1920s - and you will see that while regulated, these are industries where the protective shields (on the machines) are often disregarded for the sake of profit. By this, I mean very specifically that the machines are in disrepair, moving parts are not shielded and are open to the operator, and unnecessary brutality to animals is acceptable to make it all go faster. Even if you kept the kids away from the most dangerous machines and most egregious

experiences of animal death (which I doubt), do you want 13 year olds hanging around with non-family adults while those adults are having these experiences?

This is what the people who want children to work think is okay for children to experience in meat packing plants. These people are child abusers and should be in jail, not receiving fines to their companies with no personal accountability. If you think that's extreme, let's look at the science that says that the kinds of child labor I've been talking about have results similar to severe cases of sexual abuse. That's why, in the past, both child labor and child sexual abuse were both called trafficking. The people who want children to work in meat packing plants are like sexual abusers.

### **What the Science Says**

Unlike the anti-science gaslighting of conservative state legislators and corporate CEOs who believe that capitalism should exploit the vulnerable – there is science to guide us here. It can help sort out the causes and effects of traumatic experiences and where they specifically might occur in children's experience of work and the conditions around work.

Again, children's work in benevolent circumstances, under the protection of caregivers in conditions of family economy, is not necessarily a bad thing. I also learned a lot from my first career in childhood – but the "too much, too soon" stuff made it a bad trade.

Here are a couple of important definitions from the United Nations Children's Fund:

*Child Labor. Includes work by children too young to perform it and/or work that is likely to harm a child's health, safety or morals. Excludes permitted light work by children of a specific age range.*

*Hazardous Work. Work that is likely to harm a child's health, safety or morals. Each country creates their own hazardous work list. This typically involves activities that expose children to abuse; to work underground, underwater, at dangerous heights, or in confined spaces; and/or to heavy loads or an unhealthy environment. It also includes work in difficult conditions (e.g., long hours).*

Although national statistics on prevalence (like police homicides) conveniently do not exist for the United States, the more general categories of child exploitation and child trafficking typically include both sexual and labor abuses, and many older studies put them in the same category. For some purposes that works, but here is the more nuanced story: Sex abuse survivors have more messed up family situations and more prior experience in out-of-home care, child protective services, courts, etc. – approximately four times as high (Hopper and Gonzalez, 2018). They are also a bit more frequently girls. One thing this means is that messed up families are a risk factor for sexual abuse. Family dysregulation makes children more vulnerable, less protected.

But child labor is often an intensive form of mistreatment too and, like sexual exploitation, is a source of the more severe form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and its endemic mental and physical symptoms. Rather than "event trauma," we're talking about "complex trauma" that comes from long-term repeated exposure to too much, too soon. While children who experience event trauma (e.g., a single episode of sexual abuse from a non-caregiver, a climate disaster, witnessing an act of violence) can have high rates of recovery, the same is not true for complex trauma (also called complex PTSD – see Pete Walker). Here is what the corporate CEOs and state legislators around the country are committing these children to:

Hopper and Gonzalez reported high rates of depression and PTSD among participants with a history of labor trafficking (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). The majority of individuals fulfilled the DSM criteria for depression (72%) and PTSD (54%), and specific symptoms commonly assessed in a review of systems were endorsed; for example, sleep disturbance (85%), fatigue (71%), weight changes (54%), suicidal ideation (43%), and nightmares (57%). Other symptoms of emotional distress that may be assessed during medical and mental health visits include intrusive thoughts (80%), avoidance of thoughts/memories (77%), hypervigilance (63%), concentration problems (45%), and somatic dysregulation (38%).

The story here is that even if “hazardous” child labor causes symptoms of complex PTSD, the sequence of exposure differs: In sexual abuse cases, prior family history of dysregulation makes sexual abuse more likely. In child labor, it is the initial child labor situation itself that makes the child more likely to experience additional abuses of different types, often including being under paid (no irony here for the bosses, kids are cheap labor).

Child labor co-occurs with all of the other types of mistreatment. Making or allowing children to work makes them more vulnerable to other forms of mistreatment and atypical patterns of child development. Because child labor, often rural, can be invisible to the upper-middle class and urbane folks who do child advocacy and developmental science, most of the good science here is brand new:

- *Koegler et al. (2020) documented threats, as well as physical and sexual abuse, as co-occurring exposures during the labor-trafficking experience.*
- *Hopper and Gonzales (2012) reported significant rates of sexual violence and physical assault co-occurring with child labor.*
- *Zhang (2012) reported 15% of those involved in labor trafficking endured threats to their physical integrity.*
- *Marquez et al. (2020) highlighted a youth involved in labor and sex trafficking that met criteria for PTSD due in part to pre- and peri-traumatic exposures during both events.*
- *Macias-Konstantopoulos (2017) noted in the non-scientific literature that the medical needs of labor trafficking survivors may result from violence exposure, hazardous working conditions, and lack of healthcare access (suggesting the labor-trafficking experience may include barriers to self-agency and self-protection).*

### **Protect Children or Be an Abuser**

Under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), it is considered child trafficking when force, fraud, or coercion is used to compel a minor to labor (United States Government, 2000). Doesn't this seem a bit weak? What happens when a caregiver adult encourages a child to work? Does that make it better? The answer to this question goes back to the too much, too soon point. It may be okay if a caregiver agrees with the decision to have a child do labor, if that labor is explicitly of the non-hazardous kind, and if it happens in the context of family economy where a family labors together. Everyone learns from work. However, it's funny how it's okay for poor rural kids to work (in non-hazardous conditions), but the children of the people who write about ACEs, and all of their children's friends, spend their time studying and skill building, often never experiencing real labor with back and hands in their whole lifetime. Hence a missing ACE.

It comes down this, the New York Times and the current science says that a significant number of our children are being exposed to hazardous working conditions that will hurt them badly, often throughout their lifetime. It's pretty simple for us in the child development field. We need to decide which side we are on. Just saying that we use a developmental method when we've got the children in our setting is not enough. Like the kids who were separated from their parents at the border, these children are being set up with powerful and self-destructive memories that will last a lifetime. What will the out-of-school time field do? Because we are all "developmentalists," shouldn't we be using our privileged knowledge of psychology to take a position? Shouldn't we be speaking truth to the men and women in power who are abusing our children? What should we ask our philanthropic and agency leaders to do?

Please feel free to share this blog with legislators in your state. From a non-exhaustive review, the legislatures in the states of Iowa, Minnesota, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Arkansas, Georgia, South Dakota, New Jersey, New Hampshire, and Illinois have all recently introduced or passed legislation making it easier to exploit children, see: [Republicans in Some States Want to Ease Child Labor Laws to Fill Jobs \(businessinsider.com\)](#); [States Look to Ease Some Child-Labor Laws Amid Tight Market - WSJ](#).