

Changing Lives: Tackling Adversity in Childhood in Northern Ireland

13 November 2017

Children who are routinely exposed to situations such as domestic violence, mental ill health, alcohol and other substance misuse problems in their homes experience a negative impact which can last well into adulthood.

These chronic stress situations are called Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and are often associated with poorer outcomes for children in educational attainment, employment, involvement in crime, family breakdown, and a range of health and wellbeing measures.

At a recent conference in Templepatrick, professionals and practitioners from across Northern Ireland were brought together with leading experts to learn more about the potential negative impact of ACEs on children, young people and adults.

Throughout the conference the importance of intervening early to respond to childhood adversities was emphasised. Intervention and support can occur at every age and stage of life. Participants at the conference heard about the importance of using a trauma informed approach to understand and respond to childhood adversities. Attendees have been encouraged to ensure that giving children the best start in life is at the forefront of all of our work.

Keynote speaker from the conference, Professor Mark Bellis, Public Health Wales said, “What happens during childhood changes the way individuals’ brains and bodies develop and can set them on a happy and prosperous life course or one that rapidly leads to anti-social behaviour and ill health. ACEs or Adverse Childhood Experiences, including suffering physical abuse as a child or growing up with domestic violence, have life-long impacts that can even result in developing cancer, diabetes and other diseases earlier in adult life. If public services work together we can prevent ACEs for many children and we can reduce the toxic impact on individuals who have already suffered traumatic childhoods. The more we invest in developing safe and well-adjusted children, the less it will cost health, social and criminal justice services to support them throughout the rest of their lives.”

An increasing body of international research identifies the long-term harms that can result from chronic stress during childhood. During the conference Queens University Belfast and University of Ulster shared the latest ACE research findings and its implications for Northern Ireland. Through recent research studies undertaken in Wales it has been evidenced that individuals who experience four or more ACEs are three times more likely to develop heart disease and four times more likely to develop Type 2 Diabetes than those with no ACEs by the age of 70.

Kieran Downey, Chair of the Association of Executive Directors of Social Work spoke from the conference and said “The conference highlights the impact that adversity can have on a child’s life in the later years. It has been a watershed for Northern Ireland bringing together many key stakeholders with associates from Public Health Wales, WAVE Trust and the Scottish Government. Furthermore, it will begin the journey of working closer together to understand and respond to childhood adversity and to learn from one another. Northern Ireland has the building blocks in place and the next step will be to reaffirm our commitment to a collaborative leadership approach to establish effective change and to build resilient communities together”.

The conference was organised by the Department of Health, Health and Social Care Trusts, Health and Social Care Board, Safeguarding Board NI and Public Health Agency. Those attending included a wide range of organisations in a position to take action on ACE’s from government, education, health and social care, safeguarding, policy, youth justice, policing, local government, universities and community and voluntary sectors organisations. The conference represented an important opportunity for all to agree how actions can be taken forward in Northern Ireland to contribute to improving outcomes for children and young people.

For more information and to download the presentations and recorded version of the conference visit the CYPSP website at www.cypsp.org

<Ends>

For further information or to arrange an interview with Health and Social Care colleagues supporting the Regional ACE model in Northern Ireland please contact Pamela Yeh, Communications, Health and Social Care Board on Tel: 028 9055 3740.

Notes to the Editors

For further information on ACE's see NHS Wales - Welsh Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (2016) -

<http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/documents/888/ACE%20Chronic%20Disease%20report%20%289%29%20%282%29.pdf>

Photograph Brief

1. ACE Conference NI 13112017 Image 1

Keynote speakers with leaders from across Northern Ireland at the Adverse Childhood Experiences Conference

Front row: Sara Dodds, Scottish Government, Katrina Godfrey, The Executive Office, Kieran Downey, Chair of the Association of Executive Directors of Social Work, Pete McNally, WAVE Trust

Back row: Sean Holland, Department of Health, Maurice Meehan, Public Health Agency, John Devaney, Queens University Belfast

2. ACE Conference NI 13112017 Image 2

Sharing research and practice at the Adverse Childhood Experiences Conference in Northern Ireland

Front row: Professor Mark Bellis, Public Health Wales, Kieran Downey, Chair of the Association of Executive Directors of Social Work, Mary Black, Public Health Agency, Bernie McNally, Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, George Hoskings, WAVE Trust

Back row: Sean Holland, Department of Health, Hugh McCaughey, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust and chair of Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP).