



Researching Adverse Childhood Experiences in Northern Ireland



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Focus of Presentation

1. To highlight some local research informed by the US Adverse Childhood Experiences study (and lots of other ideas!)
2. To draw out some of the learning gained from this research over the past decade
3. To offer some reflections about how the ideas informing the ACE study could support policy, practice and research in Northern Ireland

Every Child's Right to a Good Childhood



“Children are the living messages we send to a time we will not see.”

Neil Postman, 1994: xi

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

- **Article 6 (1)** States Parties recognise that every child has the inherent right to life.
- **Article 6 (2)** States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.
- **Article 39** States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.

Devaney, J. and Spratt, T. (2009) Child abuse as a complex and wicked problem: Reflecting on policy developments in the United Kingdom in working with children and families with multiple problems. *Children & Youth Services Review* 31(6): 635-641.



Previous Research into Adversity in Childhood and Future Outcomes

Specific Populations and Specific Outcomes

Specific Populations and General Outcomes

General Populations and Specific Outcomes

Davidson, G., Devaney, J. and Spratt, T. (2010) The impact of adversity in childhood on outcomes in adulthood: research lessons and limitations. *Journal of Social Work* 10(4): 369-390.

The Multiple Childhood Adversities Research Programme

Theoretical Work



Empirical Work



Davidson, G., Bunting, L. and Webb, M. A. (2012) *Families experiencing multiple adversities: A review of the international literature*. Belfast, Barnardos.

Prevalence of ACEs in a university population

- 765 respondents
- Those with 4+ ACEs were over 23 times more likely than peers with 0 ACEs to have social services contact

Ace Score	Number	%
0	336	44
1	162	21
2	104	14
3	67	9
4+	95	12

McGavock, L. and Spratt, T. (2012). Prevalence of adverse childhood experiences in a university population: Associations with use of social services. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(3), 657-674.

Learning

Adversity in childhood is not necessarily deterministic – we need to better understand the pathways between adversity and later outcomes, and what factors may be protective.

Witnessing Domestic Violence and ACE scores

- Domestic violence is now recognized as an adversity for children, with both immediate and longer term consequences for the majority of children.
- Of the 68 (9%) students who reported witnessing domestic violence, 92% report at least two additional ACEs and 82% report at least three additional ACEs (score of 4 or more).
- 42% also reported contact with social services.
- In a study in England Stanley and colleagues found that in 83% of cases referred because of DV the family either received a letter only or no further action.

Devaney, J. (2008) Chronic Child Abuse and Domestic Violence – children and families with long-term and complex needs. *Child & Family Social Work* 13(4) 443-453

McGavock, L. and Spratt, T. (2016). Children exposed to domestic violence: using adverse childhood experience scores to inform service response. *British Journal of Social Work*, bcw073.



Learning

The presence of one form of adversity should automatically lead to a fuller assessment of the presence of other adversities, and the potential impact on the child and their carer(s).

A Deficit Approach to Parenting

- A biographical narrative approach exploring parents' experiences of multiple adversities at different times over the life-course.
- Key themes relating to the pattern and nature of adversities experienced by participants provide a more nuanced understanding of the lives of families experiencing multiple and complex problems.
- Highlights how multiple interpretations are often possible within the context of professional intervention.

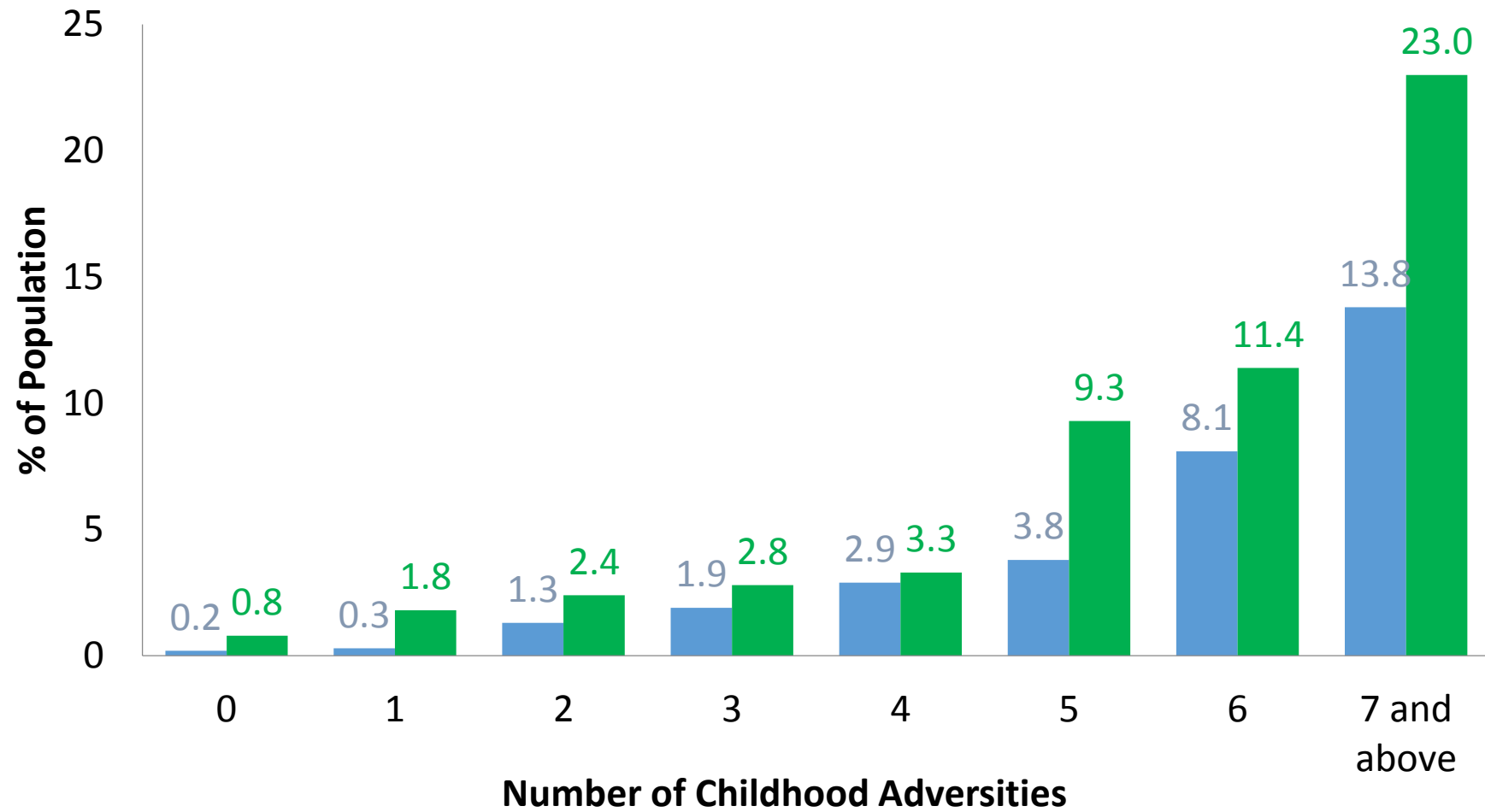
Bunting, L., Webb, M. A. and Shannon, R. (2017) Looking again at troubled families: parents' perspectives on multiple adversities. *Child & Family Social Work*, 22(S3), 31-40.



Learning

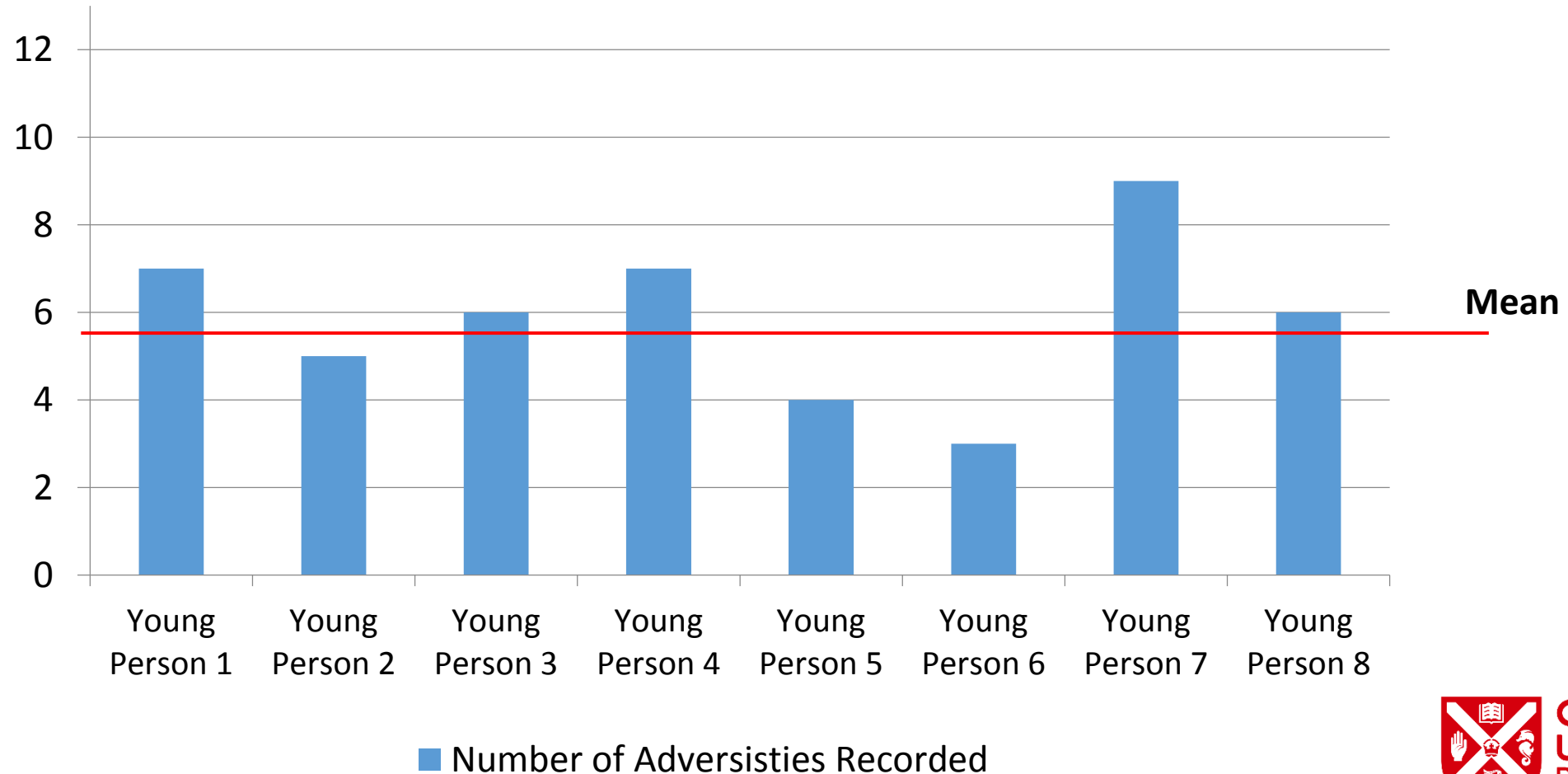
- Parents own experiences of being parented is an important element in discussions of how they parent their own children.
- Parent's generally respond positively to this concern for their wellbeing alongside that of their children.
- Has been used to inform social work practice with parents and children in one part of the South Eastern HSC Trust with promising feedback from staff.

Number of Childhood Adversities and Subsequent Suicide Attempts in Childhood/Adolescence and Adulthood

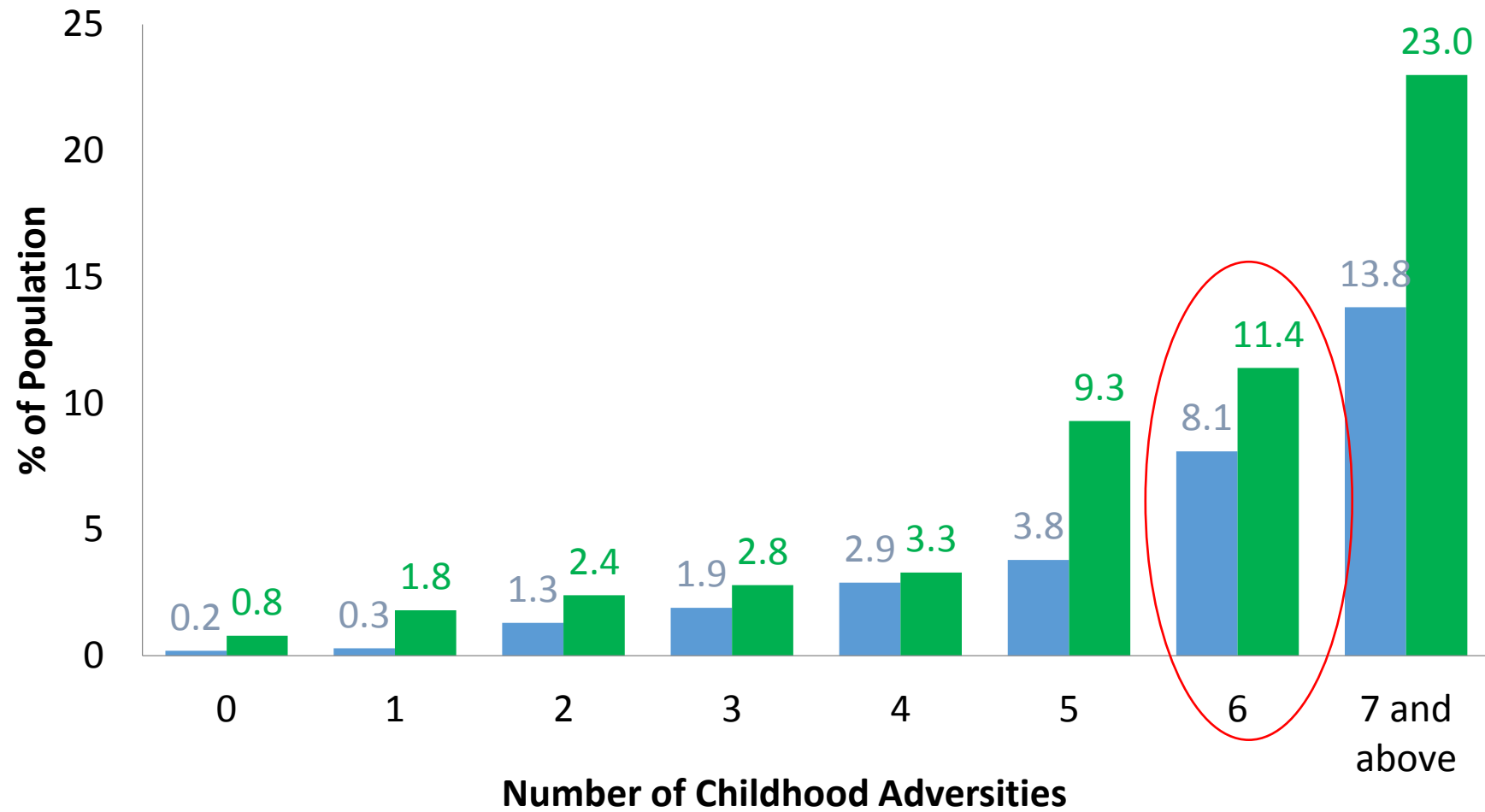


■ Childhood Suicide Attempts ■ Adult Suicide Attempts

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Learning

- Children are not born naturally resilient – it is a quality which develops and is nurtured.
- Even resilient children can become overwhelmed by the adversity they experience in both the immediate and longer term
- How many young adults die of the adversity they experience during their childhood years?
- How might we intervene to help children and young people get back on track after adversity?

Devaney, J., Lazenbatt, A., Bunting, L., Davidson, G., Hayes, D., and Spratt, T. (2014) The Relationship Between Cumulative Adversity in Childhood and Adolescent Suicide and Accidental Death. *Developing Practice* 38: 17-31



Reflections on Next Steps

1. Do numbers matter?
2. What do we define as an adversity in childhood?
3. The case for a Northern Ireland ACE study – is it a necessity?
4. How do we bolster children's internal and external worlds to better protect them from the impact and longer-term consequences of the adversity that they are likely to experience?
5. We need to better understand how the number of ACEs interacts with the both the dose of the ACEs and the sequencing of ACEs to have a greater understanding of WHEN to intervene alongside HOW to intervene.