

Debate – Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

MS Briefing – January 2022



Key messages

- Where children are exposed to persistent stress through the adverse experiences they have encountered, **they view the world as a threatening place.**
- This **toxic stress changes the architecture of their brains and affects their ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour.** This also results in overactivation of the stress response itself, creating a self-perpetuating cycle that can continue to have detrimental consequences over the course of a lifetime.
- To prevent and mitigate these effects, **it is necessary to develop a practice of trauma-informed care.** We need to improve professionals' recognition of and response to trauma-related difficulties.
- ACEs can include experiencing abuse, neglect, or experiencing parental domestic abuse, substance misuse, incarceration, and divorce or separation.
- **Recognising and responding to the impact of trauma and adversity is key** to improving outcomes for our most vulnerable children.
- **47% of adults in Wales have experienced 1 ACE.** 14% have experienced 4 or more.
- In a November 2021 survey of Barnardo's practitioners, 89% of 256 practitioners responded that there was an increase in the number of children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties since the pandemic.

We welcome the Welsh Government's progression to becoming trauma informed, as well as the publication of the [Plan for Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences](#). This includes funding for Barnardo's Cymru to develop a trauma-informed training package for use by community organisations.

Barnardo's Cymru is working with Welsh Government to develop a Trauma Framework for Wales that encompasses ACEs under the umbrella of developing trauma informed services. This covers ACE's but also many other traumas (e.g. intergenerational, cultural, racial, medical and more) and a trauma informed approach aims to provide environments that

minimise the risk of further harm and gives a positive experience to those accessing services, as well as staff of the service, partner agencies etc.

Studies suggest that people who have suffered trauma are four times more likely to be attracted to caring roles, so there is a need for prevention, access to appropriate support services, and providing safe environments. Applying a trauma informed lens to every aspect of the service (including physical environment, policies, inductions for staff, behavioural expectations etc) ensures we are building services that meet the needs of those who have suffered trauma, rather than provide services that people access despite it being outside of their comfort zone.

How is Barnardo's Cymru supporting families in Wales?

Every Barnardo's service ultimately seeks to prevent or reduce the impact of ACEs and / or trauma. Some examples of this work are:

The PATHS® [Programme for Schools \(UK Version\)](#) is a trauma-informed public health approach to education that Barnardo's facilitates in pre-school settings and primary schools in Pembrokeshire, and Vale of Glamorgan. The programme takes a whole-school approach to working with young children (aged 2–11) to develop resilience, and social and emotional skills. *The PATHS® Programme* was noted by Bangor University as an example of a schools-based approach that addresses the consequences of ACEs and improves social and emotional competency in young children.¹

Anglesey-based [Golau](#) is a mental health service for children and young people aged 8–18 which supports young people with issues related to mental health or emotional distress. The service is community-based and operates in a trauma-informed, child-centred way.

Barnardo's Better [Futures](#), based in Bridgend, was established to support children and young people with harmful sexual behaviour, those who are at risk of, or are being abused through child sexual exploitation. These were the first specialist services to be established to support the needs of affected children and young people in Wales. Barnardo's Cymru is also currently working in partnership with the South Wales Police as part of their Police Missing Advocacy Service, where our practitioners respond to children and young people who go missing and may be at risk of CSE.

At the same time as providing specialist assessment and support to children and young people at significant risk, already abused through CSE

¹ https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/files/23440237/RespondingToACEs_PHW2019_english.pdf

or already displaying harmful sexual behaviour, we continually work to promote the importance of education, early intervention and prevention to reduce risks and prevent abuse.

Barnardo's Cymru priorities for Welsh Government:

1. Becoming trauma informed

Barnardo's is committed to becoming a trauma informed organisation, and we are pleased to work with Welsh Government on their own development.

Welsh Government should support investment in a trauma informed approach for community groups and organisations across Wales, to ensure systems can work better to support children, young people and families.

2. Supporting the whole family

Trauma and/or ACEs can affect a person's entire lifetime, and many adults come to parenting or caring with their own history of trauma and the long-lasting effects of ACEs.

Parents/carers who have unresolved experiences of trauma can affect their adult/parenting function. Such trauma can be re-triggered with their children's experience or behaviour. However, our systems, while impressing the need for good parenting and understanding of such for future safeguarding, are not set up to respond to this. Barnardo's Cymru calls on Welsh Government to ensure that parents are supported in their own right, and that these approaches are trauma-informed, evidence-based and ensure parents/carers are able to process their own trauma whilst responding to their child's needs.

3. Introduce a specific fund aimed at providing training on evidence-based approaches to dealing with inter-parental conflict for children's sector social care staff and the voluntary sector, including approaches to support children and parents.

4. Continue to prioritise early intervention

For many children and young people, early intervention is key. This means ensuring that services providing mental and emotional wellbeing support are widely available, work within the community and offer a range of evidence-based interventions. Our services above are examples of how these operate in tackling trauma / ACEs at the earliest possible point in a child's life.

5. Ensure children and young people are a central part of the VAWDASV National Strategy to prevent trauma / ACEs connected to domestic and sexual abuse.

The Strategy does not currently name children and young people as victims of domestic abuse – either in terms of their own intimate relationships or by living in a household where domestic abuse takes place.

We would urge Welsh Government to recognise the impact of this trauma on children and young people and prioritise commissioning of specialist services to support child victims of domestic abuse. Without this, domestic abuse is more likely to become generational with children who experience ACEs more likely to suffer domestic abuse.²

6. The Educational Inequalities Review and subsequent strategy must take account of the challenges for children and young people facing ACEs and / or trauma and make specific provision for them.

About Barnardo's Cymru

Barnardo's Cymru has been working with children, young people, and families in Wales for over 100 years and is one of the largest children's charities working in the country. We provide more than 60 diverse services across Wales, working in partnership with local authorities. Last year we worked with over 10,000 children, young people, and family members.

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² <https://phw.nhs.wales/files/aces/aces-and-their-impact-on-health-harming-behaviours-in-the-welsh-adult-population-pdf/>