

DISCUSSING THE PROBLEM WITH 'ACEs'

Responses to EY10039: Edwards et al.'s submission to the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee Inquiry into the evidence-base for early years intervention. (12 December 2017)

In December 2017, the UK House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee launched [an Inquiry](#) into the evidence-base for early years intervention, with a particular focus on programmes influenced by the concept of 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' or ACEs. Social policy specialists from a number of universities were concerned that the inquiry's remit was open to considering contributions that were more circumspect about the ACEs approach. [Professor Rosalind Edwards](#), University of Southampton; [Professor Val Gillies](#), University of Westminster; [Professor Ellie Lee](#) and [Dr Jan Macvarish](#), University of Kent; [Professor Susan White](#), University of Sheffield and [Professor David Wastell](#), University of Nottingham therefore collaborated to produce a submission which sets out some grounds on which the claims made about ACEs might be questioned. Their submission can be read in full [here](#). After the submission was [published](#) by the Committee it was circulated to fellow academics similarly concerned about the limitations of the ACEs approach. Their comments can be read below. Read longer comments from [Dimitra Hartas](#) and [Erica Burman](#).

Dr Sarah Bekaert, Senior Lecturer Child Health, Oxford Brookes University

<https://www.brookes.ac.uk/nursing/about/staff/?wid=nursing%20staff%20directory&op=full&uid=p0084564>

The written evidence within EY10039 draws attention to the lack of evidence for the notion of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and consequent long term negative outcomes. This, as the authors state, favours focus on 'solutions' at an individualised level rather than engaging with complex social issues.

Early intervention to mitigate ACE has been a political focus for twenty years and might be seen as part of longstanding, and successful, universal provision such as Health Visiting, School Nursing and family General Practitioner provision. What is troubling, in contemporary economically constrained times, is the movement to dumb down, or decommission, universal services in favour of targeted models. The Family Nurse Partnership is an example of targeted intervention which has, incidentally, been shown to offer no

added benefit in a UK setting, likely due to the established and non-stigmatising Health Visiting model. Targeted approaches, by contrast, tend to label and overscrutinise certain individuals and families.

Early intervention approaches perhaps have a place within a universal provision model – however the focus on early age, even in-utero intervention, and the increasing suggestion of a biological consequence to ACE ignores a significant body of evidence that shows the plasticity of the brain across the life cycle, and that which offers resilience within such circumstances. Unproven links between adverse experience and poor brain development may lead to suggestions of biological inferiority (Gillies et al 2017, p48) echoing eugenic thinking, with connotations of 'the undeserving poor' rather than countering broader social injustice.

Personal research interest has shown the importance of socio-economic factors in the escalation of Intimate Partner Violence for young mothers (Bekaert and SmithBattle 2016) and a decision for earlier motherhood (Bekaert 2017). The latter building on findings by Duncan et al (2007) and Arai (2007) in the UK. There is significant evidence for the 'redemptive' aspects of young motherhood – despite widespread stigma. It is understandable that governments look to what may seem appealing 'quick fix' (and therefore cheaper) solutions to health and social concerns. However, they should not be beguiled by false and self-perpetuating 'evidence' that suggest a sound foundation for such approaches and therefore persistently avoid tackling the social determinants of health (Marmot 2005) that are repeatedly shown to have a negative effect on health and well-being.'

Paul Bywaters, Emeritus Professor of Social Work, Coventry University

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Paul_Bywaters

'I agree that it is very important that the evidence for ACEs and the way the ACEs argument is constructed is subject to proper critical scrutiny. Too often invalid and over-deterministic conclusions are being drawn from partial evidence. I particularly endorse your highlighting of the exclusion of adverse family and environmental socio-economic conditions such as poverty and poor housing from many accounts of ACEs. For the large numbers of children living in poverty, who are homeless or living in sub-standard housing, it is not only that their families lack the resources to meet basic needs but that income and accommodation are so often insecure and fluctuating making day to day management much more stressful. This applies to families entitled to in work and out of work benefits: both employment income and benefit income have become much more insecure over the past decade.'

Dr. Robbie Duschinsky, Head of the Applied Social Science Group within the Primary Care Unit, and Director of Studies in Sociology at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.

<http://www.phpc.cam.ac.uk/people/pcu-group/pcu-senior-academic-staff/robbie-duschinsky/>

'The cautions raised by Edwards and colleagues are most welcome. The construct of Adverse Childhood Experiences has been valuable in helping attract attention to developmental processes. But in understanding these processes, and how they are situated within population-level and individual-level contexts, unless deployed carefully and with acknowledgement of its limitations the construct may also obscure matters of importance for science and policy. These include, as Edwards and colleagues rightfully highlight, the wider impact of inequalities and the role of interpretation and culture as we, as humans, work to make sense of our experiences. In our attempts to understand and intervene with families and children facing adversities, it is crucially important that we do not confuse the model of reality for the reality of the model.'

Professor David Gillborn, Director, Centre for Research in Race & Education, University of Birmingham

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/education/gillborn-david.aspx>

'I wholeheartedly support the views expressed in this submission. The authors are highly experienced and internationally respected scholars. The submission highlights the numerous dangers involved in uncritically accepting the claims of the advocates of individualistic and deficit-oriented interventions intended to address so-called 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACEs). As the authors note with clarity and precision, these claims are based on a series of dubious assumptions and represent a clear case of dangerous 'scientism', i.e. where the language and authority of 'science' is used to claim a spurious appearance of rigour and significance.'

Professor Dan Goodley, School of Education, University of Sheffield

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/education/staff/academic/goodleyd>

'I fully endorse the written evidence provided by Edwards et al. There is an urgent need to contest and challenge new policies and practices that continue to individualise and pathologise children when in many cases more social, cultural and community responses are required.'

Dr. Michael Lambert, Institute of Psychology, Health and Society, University of Liverpool

<https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/psychology-health-and-society/staff/michael-lambert/>

'The evidence submitted by Professors Ros Edwards, Val Gillies, Ellie Lee, Sue White and David Wastell, and Dr Jan Macvarish to the Lamb enquiry concerning 'evidence-based' early-years intervention should be read as an urgent and necessary warning about the dangers of crafting policies from flimsy evidence and taken-for-granted assumptions. The extensive academic record on related subjects from each authors including neuroscience, early intervention lobbying and policy-making, parenting programmes, and intensive family interventions shows the individual and collective weight of their concerns with the terms of reference of the Lamb enquiry. In their evidence, the authors show that the enquiry's commitment to framing its investigations around Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) legitimates an elastic, slippery and contested term which is far from being objective or neutral, and covers a multitude of experiences under a single umbrella label.

These, in turn, are used to justify punitive, individualising and performative policies which concentrate upon behaviour and choices rather than on the more complex social, economic, political and cultural problems which shape the lives of families and young children. Crucially, as the authors rightly point out: there is no 'magic bullet intervention'. Policies which claim that savings can be made 'down the line' from making more efficient and effective 'evidence-based' interventions are often spurious at best, and as the submission shows, have an undistinguished, unsuccessful and unenviable history stretching back more than 150 years. The combined voices of the authors in the submission need to be heard in both Whitehall and Westminster to prevent a short-sighted, evidentially questionable and potentially socially disastrous concept being embraced and rolled out by government.'

Professor Kate Morris, Head of Department of Social Work, University of Sheffield

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/socstudies/staff/staff-profiles/kate-morris>

'A robust, well-informed debate about the interpretations applied to the concepts underpinning ACEs and the translations into policy and practice is a pressing and necessary development. The evidence provided to the select committee in the submission offers an opportunity to avoid policy and practice developments based on underdeveloped knowledge. The evidence in respect of ACEs is far from settled, and there are grave risks in their current application. Critical, informed scrutiny is necessary to prevent policy development that, at best, is ineffective and at worst damaging. It is already possible to find worrying examples of misinformed policy application, reinforcing the importance of the submission to the Select Committee by Edwards et al.'

Dr Lindsay O'Dell, Senior Lecturer, Children & Young People, Faculty of Wellbeing, Education & Language Studies, The Open University

<http://www.open.ac.uk/people/lo8>

'The submission, written by experts in the field, substantiated by both empirical work and government reports, calls for a reconsideration of the current 'adverse childhood experiences' (ACE) policy. The expert group have provided an overview of the issues with the approach to ACE currently the focus of government policy. I fully endorse the views of this expert group. As a critical developmental psychologist my research over many years has examined how children develop through time, particularly where a child or family are seen in some way as 'non normative'. My research findings concur with the expert group. Their submission clearly identifies a number of significant methodological flaws evident in the ACE approach. Psychological- and neuro- scientists have themselves noted the difficulties in establishing causation, it is not the case that a link between early childhood difficulties and problems in later life is an established scientific fact. Neither, as the submission explains, is the scientific case for the efficacy of early intervention established.

The policy approach does not take into account research evidence (as discussed in the submission) that suggests the role of broader, mediating factors in the lives of many children (which are often unaccounted for in deterministic models of child trauma). Neither does the policy approach consider ways in which development is flexible, fluid and adaptive. Furthermore, the expert group, in their extensive research experience, and outlined in their submission, effectively challenge the current policy's focus on individualisation rather than on the complex interplay between children, families, community and social structures.'

Dr Jessica Pykett, Senior Lecturer in Human Geography, School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham

<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/staff/profiles/gees/pykett-jessica.aspx>

The written evidence provided by Professor Edwards and colleagues (EY10039) makes a sensible and reasoned case for approaching Early Years Interventions with both scientific modesty and acuity. It highlights the need to look beyond the natural sciences for a more diverse set of research perspectives on the evidence around the Adverse Childhood Experiences. The collective expertise of this group of social scientists should draw the Inquiry's attention to the political history of scientism, biologisation, healthism and behaviourism in policies which are targeted at people experiencing poverty. Not least, they

show how the way in which social problems have been framed has long shaped the effects and effectiveness of such policies.'

Professor Diane Reay, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

<https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/people/staff/reay/>

'This important and timely submission shines a forensic light on the morass of misunderstanding and misrecognition surrounding policy approaches to ACEs. Its carefully argued and balanced overview is a vital, much needed recognition that this is an immensely complex, under-researched area that defies any naive interventions. Of particular concern are simplistic 'solutions' that yet again pathologise the poor, and blame them for a condition - material deprivation - whose alleviation should be the responsibility of the whole of society, not those with the least power and resources to effect change.'

Professor Roger Smith, Department of Sociology, Durham

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/sociology/staff/profile/?id=10543>

'I'd like to echo the sentiments of this submission. The inquiry seems to be misconceived and ill-informed, which is not a good place to start addressing such an important subject. There are three key flaws in the thinking of those who take this kind of approach to the problems experienced by children in my view:

- 1. Bad things are bad things, and there's no need to consider the causal consequences to know we need to stop them happening.*
- 2. The 'victim blaming' approach betrayed by the inquiry unhelpfully excludes consideration of critical factors such as poverty, inequality, discrimination and rights abuses (all of which are clearly 'adverse' experiences).*
- 3. The association of 'prevention' with saving money seems to betray an unhealthy preoccupation with securing financial benefits rather than better lives for children, which is surely the priority here.*

So, the inquiry needs to have a radical rethink of its aims and objectives before it wastes a lot of time (and money) re-discovering and misinterpreting what we know already.'