

THE NATIONAL MOVEMENT THAT WILL RAISE A NEW GENERATION



In the first of our ACE Aware Nation exclusive features, Dr Suzanne Zeedyk explains the science of Adverse Childhood Experiences and why so many Scots are embracing this grassroots movement that could enrich the way we care for children across Scotland.

There's a movement sweeping Scotland. It has sprung up unexpectedly over the last year and is now engaging thousands of Scots. I think its origins are hope – hope that we can solve tenacious social challenges like domestic violence, high alcohol consumption, poor attainment at school, and high rates of Type 2 diabetes.

You wouldn't usually expect to find that mix within the same sentence. Nor would many people guess that the link drawing them together could possibly be childhood trauma. Yet that's what the science of Adverse Childhood Experiences is teaching us.

The ACEs Study was published in 1998 and has taken two decades to reach public attention. It has come to be regarded as a seminal discovery, in much the same way cholera was finally attributed to contaminated water in the wells of London. The study showed that the more emotional distress a person had suffered in childhood, the more likely they were to exhibit a range of health problems in adulthood, including heart disease, liver disease, depression, suicide attempts and drug use.

What counted as distress? The study highlighted ten traumas, including abuse, neglect, a parent in prison, a parent with mental illness and parental divorce. Subsequent studies have classified poverty, bereavement, neighbourhood violence, bullying and other stressors as ACEs.

The study, conducted with a sample of 17,000 middle class people, revealed that nearly half had experienced at least one of the named adversities. More than 10% had experienced four. That's three children in every Scottish classroom of 30 children.

The ACES Movement is waking us up to a better understanding of our own human biology. Children's physiological systems are immature. They are still developing the capacity to cope with strong emotions like fear, terror, anger, sadness, uncertainty. If they have to endure tough emotions without adult help, their biological



Dr Suzanne Zeedyk

self-regulatory systems develop in a fragile way. They are more likely to need external help to handle tough emotions, like smoking, drinking, drugs, eating, punching. Dependence on such coping techniques leads to the kinds of health challenges and 'behaviour problems' our hospitals, prisons and schools are full of.

We've been trying to tackle such problems for a long, long time. What's changed in the last year? Why are there suddenly new conversations taking place around family dinner tables and in police briefings? I think the public interest can

be attributed to a documentary film called *Resilience: The biology of stress and the science of hope*. The film had its Scottish premiere in the summer of 2017, hosted by two community organisations, ReAttachment and *connected baby*. Since then, viewers have returned to their organisations and local authorities, insisting the film be more widely screened. The film provides the kind of light-bulb moments that make the science of ACEs accessible to the general public, leaving viewers with a sense of hope that solutions are possible. The film has sparked a grassroots movement of people who not only want to push the Scottish Government to keep taking the brave steps they have been taking in regard to ACEs, but who are ready to take action themselves.

That's why my organisation, *connected baby*, has partnered with the organisation TIGERS, to host a unique national conference on 25th and 26th September in Glasgow. The leading global ACEs campaigner, paediatrician Dr Nadine Burke Harris, will join more than 1500 people to explore what we need to do to make Scotland the first ACE-Aware Nation in the world. Full details of how to attend are available on the website www.aceawarescotland.com. We welcome everyone who wants to be part of this conversation of hope.

