

COMFORTING CHILDREN'S DISTRESS IS CENTRAL TO TACKLING THE IMPACT OF POVERTY IN OUR COUNTRY



Gerry McLaughlin is Chief Executive of NHS Health Scotland, the national Health Board responsible for improving health and reducing inequalities.

NHS Health Scotland hosts a group called the Scottish ACEs Hub which works to raise awareness and improve policy and practice to prevent Adverse Childhood Experiences and mitigate their negative impacts.

Here, Gerry explains why he feels so strongly that a public health approach to childhood distress is crucial to raising the next generation of Scottish children – and to helping adults heal.

I started my career many years ago as a social worker. As a student in Glasgow, I learned about childhood development and attachment, partly through the work of John Bowlby, the psychoanalyst who investigated the relationship between what happens to us in childhood and its impact in later life.

I can clearly remember first hearing about the damage to a child if they didn't form attachments to adults around them. As a first year student, it was a shocking discovery. That work later influenced the now landmark study on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which found that specific traumatic events in childhood have a profound and lasting effect on children and the adults they will become.

That shocking discovery, and the desire to do something about it, has led me to a career in public health, now as Chief Executive of NHS Health Scotland. As a special Health Board, our organisation works at a national level to promote and protect health and wellbeing and prevent ill health by reducing inequalities. That means looking at the things that have the biggest impact on health: a decent income, good work, a decent home and the environment. But what do these things have to do with ACEs?

Well, we know that although Adverse Childhood Experiences have been found across the population, it's more common in poorer areas. Analysis of Scottish data found

that ACEs were clustered in poorer areas, with 1 in 2 children in the wealthiest areas having no ACEs, compared to 1 in 10 in the poorest.

We need to find out why some groups, such as children in poorer areas, are at greater risk than others. That's why we're advocating for a public health approach to childhood adversity.

A public health approach means focusing on reducing poverty and inequalities, upholding children's rights and creating the conditions for them to do well. We need to look at the lived experience of families and use the best available evidence to respond to the devastating challenge of growing up in poverty and its relationship to childhood adversity.

We know we can't take on this challenge alone. That's why our Scottish ACEs Hub is working across public services to raise awareness about ACEs and develop actions to address them. There's a groundswell of Scottish action being built around ACEs. Let's use this opportunity to make a real difference to both children and adults in Scotland.



Gerry McLaughlin is Chief Executive of NHS Health Scotland.

