



PRESS RELEASE

Government must “break the cycle of trauma” to tackle children’s mental health crisis - YoungMinds

The mental health charity YoungMinds is calling for a Government strategy to ensure that there is far better support for children who have lived through traumatic experiences. The charity's new report, *Addressing Adversity*, argues that young people displaying ‘difficult’ behaviour due to trauma are too often misunderstood by the services that should support them, stopping them from getting the help they need.

Dr Marc Bush, Head of Policy at YoungMinds, said: “Children who grow up in difficult and complex circumstances are the most likely to develop mental health problems, more likely to become suicidal, and more likely to die young. This simply isn’t acceptable, and if it’s not addressed, it will create an ongoing cycle of trauma. If the government is serious about tackling the mental health crisis, it must make sure that support is available to those who need it most.”

Addressing Adversity, which was funded by Health Education England, brings together essays by 47 leading academics, experts and health professionals and demonstrates how traumatic experiences at a young age can have a profound impact on a child’s brain development, on their understanding of the world and on how they interact with those around them. It shows that:

- One in three lifetime mental health problems are directly linked to Adverse Childhood Experiences - including abuse, domestic violence, prejudice or bereavement. [1]
- Young people who have experienced four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences are four times more likely to have low levels of mental wellbeing and life satisfaction. [2]
- Too often children with the most complex and difficult upbringings are judged on their behaviour, which, while challenging, may be a normal response to what they’ve been through. This means they are more likely to be criminalised or excluded from school, and less likely to receive the support they need – which can have a lifelong effect on their mental health.

YoungMinds is calling for the government to make childhood adversity and trauma a public health priority. All professionals who work with children – including NHS workers, teachers, social workers and police – should have training about the effects of trauma on behaviour and clear guidance about how and when to ask about traumatic experiences.

The charity is also calling for local health commissioners to introduce trauma-informed models of care, so that services give effective support to young people who might have been through traumatic experiences without re-traumatising them or making them feel in danger.

Dr Marc Bush says: “As a society, we need to get much better at identifying when seemingly ‘difficult’ behaviour may be a reaction to a traumatic event or a sign of emotional distress. Professionals need a framework so they know how to look at what’s causing different behaviours and feel confident identifying when a young person may be reacting to trauma.

“If a child becomes aggressive with a school nurse who is trying to give them an injection, that could be a response to violence or drug misuse in their family – but the nurse needs clear guidance on how to identify this.

“If a teenager whose father has just died is caught shoplifting, treating them as a criminal without looking at the circumstances is unlikely to help them in the long-term.

“Trauma-informed care involves listening to young people and understanding their situation and their needs. That could mean working with gang members on the street rather than expecting them to come to a counselling appointment at the GP surgery. It could mean that if a child who witnesses violence at home starts self-harming, they are able to go to a quiet drop-in centre rather than sit for hours in a potentially triggering environment like A&E.

“Many professionals are already doing excellent work, but we urgently need a consistent new approach across the country. If the government means what it says about prioritising mental health, it needs to face up to the fact that children in the most difficult and complex situations need far better support.”

For more information or interviews contact: Nick Harrop:
nick.harrop@youngminds.org.uk; 0207 089 5066

Download an embargoed copy of the report: <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/2142/ym-addressing-adversity-book-web.pdf>

NOTES

YoungMinds is the UK's leading children's mental health charity committed to improving the mental health and emotional well-being of children and empowering their parents and carers. For further information please visit www.youngminds.org.uk

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For free advice and support for parents, call our helpline on 0808 802 5544

Addressing Adversity brings together contributions from leading academics, clinicians, commissioners and frontline professionals who all share a passion for ensuring that services and support for children and young people in England is both adversity and trauma-informed. It includes essays about the effect of Adverse Childhood Experiences on mental health, on trauma-informed care, and on examples of good practice around the country.

The report defines Adverse Childhood Experiences as “highly stressful and potentially traumatic events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence. It can be a single event, or prolonged threats to, and breaches of, a young person’s safety, security, trust or bodily integrity. These experiences directly affect the young person and their environment, and require significant social, emotional, neurobiological, psychological or behavioural adaptation”. These experiences can include maltreatment, violence, prejudice, bereavement and assuming adult responsibilities.

1. Kessler, R. (2010) 'Childhood adversities and adult psychopathology in the WHO World Mental Health Surveys' *British Journal of Psychiatry* 197(5): 378–385.
2. Hughes, K., Lowey, H., Quigg, Z, and Bellis, M.A. (2016) 'Relationships between adverse childhood experiences and adult mental well-being: research from an English national household survey', *BMC Public Health* 16:222