

Early Life Experiences and Their Impact

The experiences we have early in life, especially in childhood, significantly influence our growth, development, physical and mental health, as well as our thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. Two crucial factors to consider for mental wellbeing are the quality of our attachment relationships and our experience of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

Understanding Attachment

What is Attachment? Attachment refers to the pattern of relationships we form with our parents or carers early in life. It is the emotional bond that develops from birth and profoundly impacts our development. The way a parent or carer responds to a child shapes the child's attachment style, which serves as a template for future relationships and self-perception. Positive early attachments lead to healthy relationships and self-esteem. Conversely, negative early attachments can result in difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships, managing emotions, and feeling positive about oneself and others. These challenges are often referred to as attachment difficulties.

Understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

What are ACEs? Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are highly stressful, potentially traumatic events or situations that occur during childhood or adolescence. They can be isolated incidents or prolonged threats to a young person's safety, security, trust, or bodily integrity.

Examples of ACEs:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Emotional abuse
- Living with someone who abuses drugs or alcohol
- Exposure to domestic violence
- Living with someone who has been imprisoned
- Living with someone with a serious mental illness
- Losing a parent through divorce, death, or abandonment

Prevalence of ACEs: A 2014 UK study found that 47% of people experienced at least one ACE, with 9% having experienced four or more (Bellis et al., 2014).

Impact of ACEs: ACEs, like attachment issues, can profoundly affect physical and mental health. They often impede healthy attachment relationships for children and can lead to:

- Increased risk of health problems such as cancer and heart disease
- Higher likelihood of mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and PTSD
- Increased susceptibility to violence and victimization
- Difficulty in recognizing and managing emotions
- Challenges in forming and maintaining healthy relationships

- Behavioural issues in school settings
- Unsafe coping mechanisms for emotions

Tackling ACEs: Our Work at TAMHI

TAMHI operates in North Belfast, encompassing areas like New Lodge, Duncairn, Waterworks, Cliftonville, and Ardoyne, which rank among the most deprived in Northern Ireland. This region has the highest suicide rates and the second-highest level of prescriptions for depression and anxiety.

Our Approach: We support young people through a social prescribing model, where they join or are referred by local mental health services or schools to our Resilient Active Youth Programme. This program helps young people develop crucial skills based on the CASEL 5 Framework:

- Social Awareness
- Self-Awareness
- Responsible Decision Making
- Self-Management
- Relationship Skills

These skills are essential for overcoming the ACEs that many of these young people face. In our evening program, we work directly with those who have experienced physical and emotional abuse, domestic violence, parental suicide, parental mental illness, incarceration, and loss due to cancer. Our aim is to provide direction, support, and purpose.

Our Impact: 70% of young people in our primary and post-primary schools receive free school meals, indicating high levels of low-income families. Our programs inspire positive mindset changes and choices in the community, where negative choices are often more accessible. We shape change and save lives through our dedicated efforts.