



Infant Mental Health

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**A TRADITION OF
INDEPENDENT
THINKING**



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Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

What is Infant Mental Health

the developing capacity of the infant (from birth to 3 years of age) to experience, express, and regulate emotions; form close and secure relationships; and explore the environment and learn (Zero to Three, 2012).

In simple terms;
Healthy social and emotional development

Building health brains

- Social and emotional development occurs as part of the complex process of early brain development
- Epigenetics teaches us that the environmental influences – children’s experiences have an impact on how their genetic make-up is expressed – particularly in the early years.
- Early nurturing relationships are key to brain development
- <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/experiences-build-brain-architecture/>

Serve and Return

- Connectedness between parent and baby
- Gazing
- Mimicking expressions
- Baby serves – tries out new expressions
- Parents response – ‘motherese’ – universal high pitched tone
- Attachment and attunement
- Emotional regulation - child develops the ability to regulate own emotions and sense of self, based on caregiver responses and actions
- Child learns to separate the emotion from action – e.g.can feel angry without hitting out



Children with poor caregiver relationships:

- Become stressed and irritable
- May present as feeding problems
- Have disorganised relationships with their caregiver
- Experience difficulties at school and with relating to peers
- Effectuated cognitive and language development

Toxic Stress

- Stress response - fight or flight - increased heart rate, blood pressure, and stress hormones, such as cortisol.
- **Positive stress** - Coping with adversity is an important part of health development. A child becomes upset, a caregiver responds – the child learns to deal with negative emotions.
- **Tolerable stress** – Adverse event such as loss of a parent – if buffered by the support of a caring adult there will be no lasting impact and the child's body will recover from the stress response
- **Toxic stress** – strong, frequent or prolonged adversity - prolonged activation of stress response. Increased risk of lifelong impact on mental and physical health. Altering brain development and immune and hormonal systems.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)

- Chronic stressful experience in childhood have a lifelong impact on mental and physical ill-health.
- Study of ACE in Wales in 2015 – sample of 2028 adults aged 18 to 69
- Questionnaires on adverse childhood experience and health harming behaviours

Welsh ACE Study - 4 Infographics © 2015 Public Health Wales NHS Trust
www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/

How many adults in Wales have been exposed to each ACE?

CHILD MALTREATMENT



Verbal abuse
23%



Physical abuse
17%



Sexual abuse
10%

CHILDHOOD HOUSEHOLD INCLUDED



Parental separation
20%



Domestic violence
16%



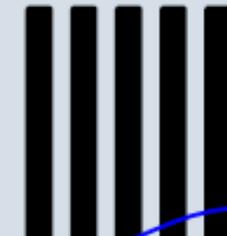
Mental illness
14%



Alcohol abuse
14%

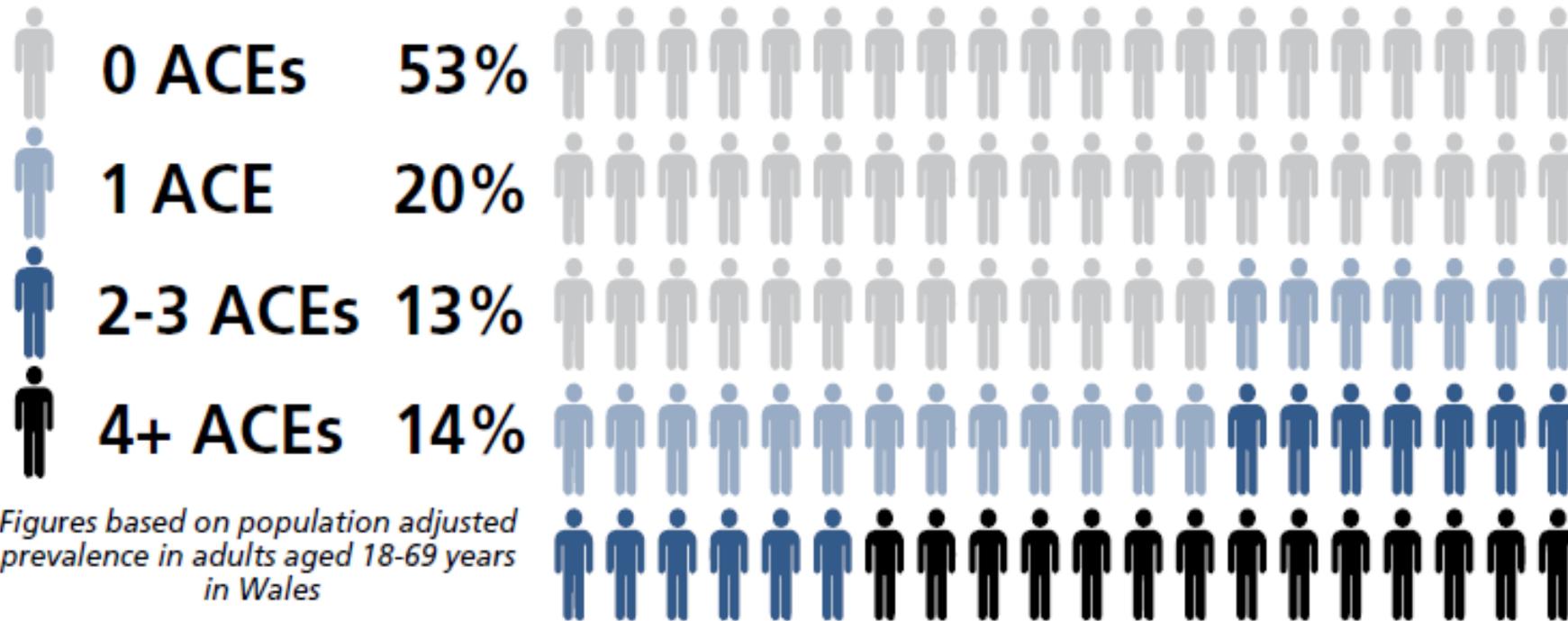


Drug use
5%



Incarceration
5%

Prevalence of ACE



ACEs increase individuals' risks of developing health-harming behaviours

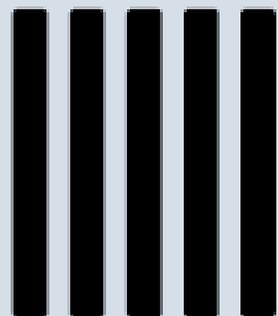
Compared with people with no ACEs, those with 4+ ACEs are:

- 4** times more likely to be a high-risk drinker
- 6** times more likely to have had or caused unintended teenage pregnancy
- 6** times more likely to smoke e-cigarettes or tobacco
- 6** times more likely to have had sex under the age of 16 years
- 11** times more likely to have smoked cannabis
- 14** times more likely to have been a victim of violence over the last 12 months
- 15** times more likely to have committed violence against another person in the last 12 months
- 16** times more likely to have used crack cocaine or heroin
- 20** times more likely to have been incarcerated at any point in their lifetime

Preventing ACEs in future generations could reduce levels of:



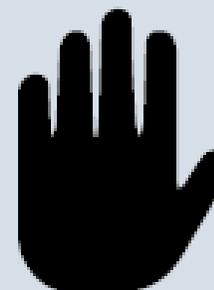
Heroin/crack cocaine use (lifetime)
by 66%



Incarceration (lifetime)
by 65%



Violence perpetration (past year)
by 60%



Violence victimisation (past year)
by 57%



Cannabis use (lifetime)
by 42%



Unintended teen pregnancy
by 41%



High-risk drinking (current)
by 35%



Early sex (before age 16)
by 31%



Smoking tobacco or e-cigarettes (current)
by 24%

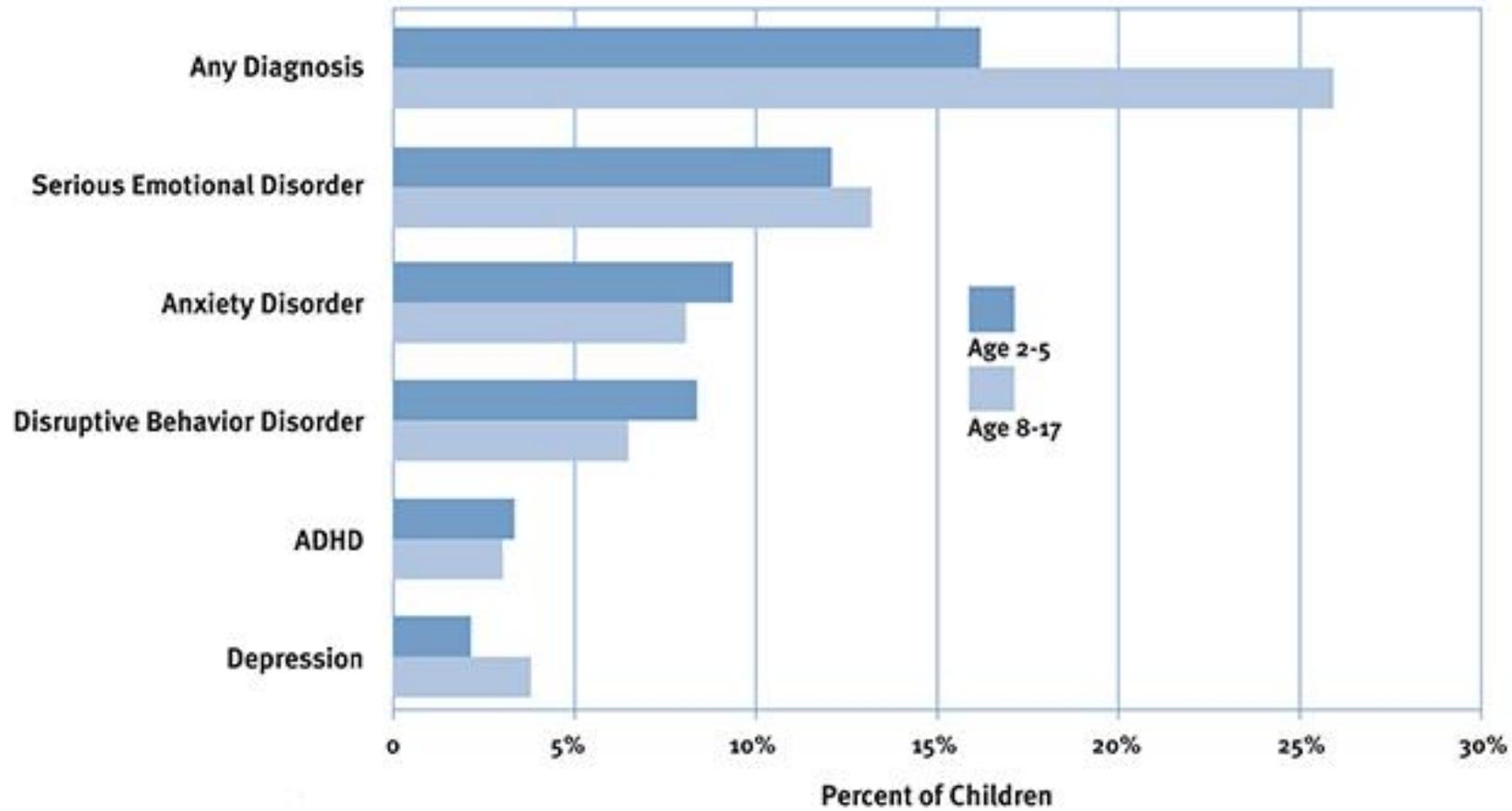


Poor diet (current; <2 fruit & veg portions daily)
by 16%

Can infants experience mental ill-health?

- Significant mental health problems can and do occur in young children
- Can result in serious consequences for early learning, social competence, and lifelong physical health
- The emotional well-being of young children is directly tied to the functioning of their caregivers and the families in which they live.
- Family stress resulting from, persistent poverty, threatening neighbourhoods, and very poor child care conditions increase the risk of serious mental health problems.
- Building healthy, supportive communities for children and families offer the best solutions

Mental Health Problems Can Occur Across Childhood



Source: Egger and Angold (2006), Harvard Centre on the Developing Child

Three principles for improving outcomes for children

1. Support responsive relationships for children and adults
 - one strong supportive relationship is key to build resilience.
2. Strengthen core life skills
 - Scaffolding to build executive function and self regulation
3. Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families
 - Break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and adversity
 - Build healthy communities

Investing in the early years

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbSp88PBe9E&feature=youtu.be>

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