

# Supporting Parents and Families in GAMH



## Children and Young People's Rights

The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** sets out that every child has basic fundamental rights, including the right to:

- Life, survival and development
- Protection from violence abuse or neglect
- Education that enables them to fulfil their potential
- Be raised by, or have a relationship with, their parents
- Express their opinions and be listened to

On feeding back to the UNCRC Concluding Observations our children and young people highlighted

*“Mental health issues must be highlighted in Scotland”;*

*“People need to feel as if someone cares about them and loves them”;*

*“Professionals must listen to us and not treat us all the same – don't assume you know what is best for me or what I am able to achieve”;*

*“We need more support with home life ...”*

*“The government must be responsible for providing additional support and information to young people and families experiencing mental ill-health issues”.*

## Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), or stressful events occur during childhood. ACEs include, but not exclusively, physical, emotional abuse or neglect, sexual abuse, parental mental illness, household violence, parental separation and substance abuse. In a recent survey conducted, the most common ACE was found to be parental separation and parental mental health.

ACEs can affect the development of the brain, impacting on the child's ability to learn, regulate emotions, and form relationships, and may result in unhelpful behaviours. These can affect the child's chances in life later on, such as in education and employment - what has been called an “educational attainment gap”.

ACEs affect brain biology by creating dangerous levels of stress, or “toxic stress”. However, positive relationships in a child's life, such as with parents, carers, teachers or any available good adult can reduce the effects of toxic stress. Being in a nurturing environment is essential for children not just to feel safe and protected to be able to develop trust in new relationship but to develop healthy opinions of themselves and positive ways of responding to challenges in life. This is called resilience.

(Overview of ACEs - <http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/1517/tackling-the-attainment-gap-by-preventing-and-responding-to-adverse-childhood-experiences.pdf>)

The effect of ACEs goes against the fundamental rights of the child. The Scottish Government's Getting it Right For Every Child policy provides guidelines for supporting children and young people, promoting approaches that are:

- Child-focused
- Is based on an understanding of the wellbeing of a child in their current situation
- Is based on tackling needs early
- Multiagency cooperation

## **Supporting Families & Communities Affected by Mental Ill Health**

GAMH has been promoting the mental health, wellbeing and recovery of the people and communities of Glasgow for the last 40 years. At GAMH, we value equality and diversity. We recognise that social inequalities, stigma and discrimination can affect a person's wellbeing and take a holistic approach to counter these effects.

Over the years, we have developed and improved our services to support the needs of children and young people at GAMH, promote their wellbeing and help them achieve their best potential. Taking a holistic approach, this includes supporting the wellbeing of parents and cohesiveness of the family unit.



## Getting It Right for Mental Health Young Carers

The Mental Health Young Carers Project aims to promote the mental health, resilience and wellbeing of young carers (aged 12-21) affected by parental mental illness by providing 'time out', building confidence, resilience and positive wellbeing in a safe and supportive environment. The project is based on UNCRC conventions on the child's right to family life. We place the child at the centre of what we do using the GIRFEC indicators to ensure that the activities we provide enables them to be: Safe, Healthy, Nurtured, Active, Achieving, Respected, Responsible and Included.



[Glasgow City Centre Getting It Right for Every Child:

<https://www.glasgow.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=16594&p=0>]

Developmentally relevant and age appropriate activities have been provided for 100s of children and young people across the city. For younger children, fun activities serve as a platform for interacting with peers and building friendships and confidence. For older children the focus is on personal development, education and transitions into adult life.

## GAMH Parents Support Group

Over the last few years we have been supporting the parents and families affected by mental health by running Parents Peer Support Groups. This is a safe space for parents, families, guardians, including grandparents to come together and share concerns and discuss areas they would like more information and support with. This has included; Teen Triple P, Mellow Parenting, Seasons For Growth, Scottish Mental Health First Aid (for adults and young people), Financial Inclusion Programmes, Human Rights and Equalities, ACEs, Mindfulness, Creative Arts, Creative Writing, Healthy Cooking and promoting positive mental health during national events such as *Mental Health Awareness Days*, *Time to Talk*, *Curry and Chaat*, *Yellow Ribbon*, *Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival*.

## Building Resilience in Families: 'Sharing the Science' on Child Development

2019 has been an enriching year for GAMH as we seek to improve our practice and introduce innovative ways of supporting parents and improving family life. To this end we have been learning together about the challenges faced by parents and families and trialling new initiatives.

14 parents attended a session on 13 May 2019 organised by the NSPCC. The session described brain development using metaphors portrayed in animated videos. These metaphors were first developed by a research institute in Harvard, Massachusetts, and previously piloted in London. The 6 metaphors discussed with parents included:

1. Brain Architecture
2. Serve and Return
3. Toxic Stress
4. Brain Overload
5. Brains Air Traffic Control
6. Tipping the Scales

The metaphors were used to describe how early experiences shape the **brain architecture**, the foundation of the brain that affects how a child responds and learns from difficult experiences later in life. The foundation of the brain can be disrupted from adverse childhood experiences such as abuse, neglect, parental mental ill health, poverty etc. In these situations the child's brain feels **overloaded** to the point of breaking down. However, not all kinds of stress are harmful or **toxic**, some kinds of stress can be positive such as taking on a new challenge, meeting new people. Other kinds of stress can be unpleasant but controllable, such as facing a school exam. The child's ability to cope is like the **air traffic control system**. There is only so much they can cope with so they need practise and support and manage their mental airspace. Helping them to manage, coordinate, prioritise tasks and goals is called executive function. **Serve and return** interactions between parent/care giver and child, like hitting a tennis ball between each other, are one of the factors influencing brain development early in life as the child learns how their actions lead to responses of another person. While negative experiences can affect brain development, their effects are not unchangeable – it is possible to **tip the scales** and build **resilience**

The metaphors were relatable to parents who identified adverse experiences in their life that they felt could affect brain architecture. They also brought new insight into what hinders successful serve and return interactions between parents and children. For example, parents noticed that the rise in technology has resulted in phones becoming a source of interaction for children, but more from their own experiences, they felt that during adolescence there could be changes in family dynamics and children could prefer to confide in friends. Additionally, work and family responsibilities can lead to stress, that affects the quality of their interactions.

While the metaphors were focused on child development, one of the metaphors talked about being **overloaded**. This may not just happen to children as they try to cope with the many demands of life, but also to parents. The parents who attended the session recognised that they were overloaded at times and felt that they did not know where and when to seek help.

Overall the session allowed GAMH and parents to learn about childhood brain development and also served as a starting point for more discussion about parents' experiences and challenges in supporting healthy brain development in childhood. We will use these learnings to improve the way we support young people and their families.

## **Promoting Potential in Families: Positive Parenting and Attachments**

In the last 6 months we have been running a series of workshop for families where parents have come with their children. These workshops and coaching sessions have been facilitated by Potential in Me. As the name of the workshop suggests, it was aimed at bringing out the potential in families through greater understanding of oneself, the family unit and learning strategies to communicate better.

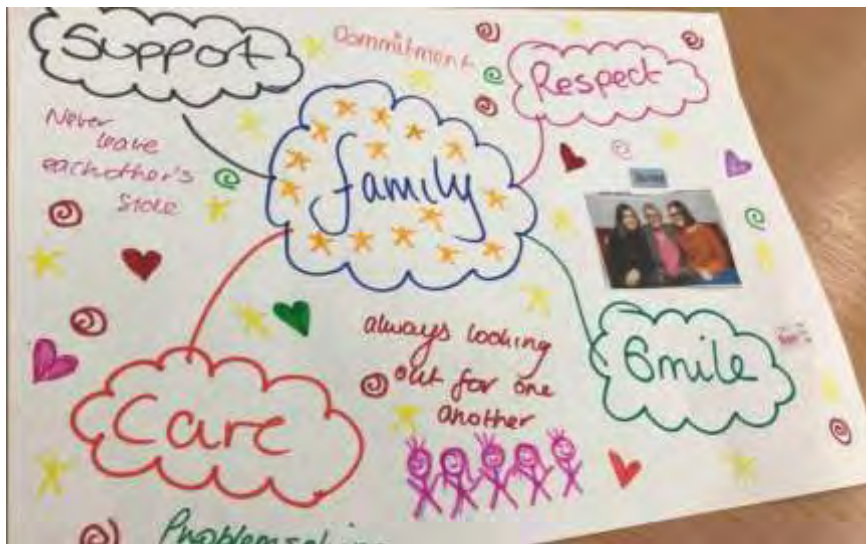
The facilitator engaged each one of the family to reflect on their identity ("Who am I?") including their personality, interests and what makes you irritated. From first understanding oneself, families can then understand each other better and recognise that **each individual is different** and as a result, the need to understand **different perspective**

Families were also asked to think about what they hope to see in their family and what makes families work well together. Togetherness, supportive, respect were some of the **values** that were identified, along day-to-day moments that the participants felt kept the family together - such as laughing together!

Another section of the workshop focused on communication. First, the facilitator introduced participants to different communication styles and asked them to think about examples in their life. All these were put together in an exercise to recognise any tendency to a communication style. Certain communication styles may lead to negative emotions or misunderstandings and the facilitator highlighted **open and honest** communication as a way to a win-win situation, by being willing to listen to another's point of view despite the uncomfortable feelings that might arise, and seeking mutually beneficial outcomes. Families were also introduced to the **traffic light system** to manage emotions that get in the way of positive communication.

It was certainly heart-warming to see participants draw out their sincere hopes for the families and to see their growth during the session – sharing what they have learnt about themselves, and how they can communicate better to bring out the potential in families.

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Over the upcoming year we will continue to support the diverse needs of families affected by mental ill health using a coproduction approach.

***“Seek first to understand... and then be understood”***

Stephen Covey

