

Inner strength or outer armour? Lived experiences of what supports health and wellbeing in young people who have experienced childhood adversity

From Understanding Adversity to Empowering
Change: Driving Research Excellence

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Nearly 1 in 2 people in Wales report at least one ACE; 1 in 7 report four or more

ACEs linked to lifelong physical, emotional, and social consequences

Gaps remain in understanding how young people navigate adversity and build resilience

This research aimed to elevate lived experience as a tool for system change

WHY THIS RESEARCH MATTERS

- Explore lived experiences of young people affected by ACEs

- Identify factors that support health and wellbeing

- Integrate insights into trauma-informed, resilience-enhancing practice

- Challenge deterministic ACE narratives by recognising growth and agency

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES



**HERMENEUTIC
PHENOMENOLOGY:
VALUING MEANING AND
LIVED EXPERIENCE**



**MULTI-MODAL DATA
COLLECTION: INTERVIEWS,
FOCUS GROUPS,
PRACTITIONER SURVEYS**



**TRIANGULATION &
REFLEXIVITY: EMBEDDING
RIGOUR, INCLUSIVITY, AND
TRUSTWORTHINESS**



**PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT
THROUGHOUT, INCLUDING
EXPERT-BY-EXPERIENCE PPI**

METHODOLOGY FOR EXCELLENCE

Overarching Theme: 🛡️ Outer Armour or 🌱 Inner Strength?

Five Key Themes:

1. Untimely Responsibility
 2. Worthlessness and Rejection
 3. Coping and Control (“Rusty Cage”)
 4. Cohesion and Connection
 5. Growth and Development
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KEY FINDINGS – THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

- Revitalised biopsychosocial model to explain trauma impacts

- ACEs are not destiny: resilience, relationships, and community matter

- Systemic inequalities amplify adversity

- Effective interventions must go beyond behaviour to context, emotion, and meaning



Challenges reductionist use of ACE scores



Promotes co-designed, trauma-informed practice



Offers evidence for post-traumatic growth, not just harm



Emphasises strength-based approaches in youth services and public health

IMPACT AND INNOVATION

DRIVING CHANGE IN RESEARCH CULTURE

Research	To support research excellence, we must:
Embed	Embed lived experience across research design and dissemination
Value	Value qualitative, narrative-led approaches
Develop	Develop skills in trauma-informed epistemologies
Promote	Promote equity-driven, culturally sensitive methodologies



Policy: ACE-informed interventions across education, health, and social care



Practice: Develop trauma-aware, relationship-centred services



Research: Shift from deficit to strength-based models



Workforce: Train professionals in resilience frameworks and compassionate practice

RECOMMENDATIONS

"Trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body.

"Bessel van der kolk, M.D.*The body keeps the score: brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*

FINAL THOUGHTS

To drive change for research excellence, we must remember the stories, not just the scores.