

**Professor Erica Burman, Manchester Institute of Education, University of Manchester:
Response to 'The Problem with ACEs'. Edwards et al.'s submission to the House of
Commons Science and Technology Select Committee Inquiry into the evidence-base for
early years intervention (EY10039). 12 December 2017.**

I fully endorse the arguments put forward by Edwards et al., who also have a strong and highly esteemed track record of informed academic engagement with key policies on early intervention, child development and parenting.

The key points they make about the methodological problems in interpreting the available evidence - in particular about skewed interpretations of the available knowledge in relation to both retrospective identification of adverse experiences on the basis of populations already identified as somehow problematic, and spurious extrapolation across populations, are ones that are widely recognised. (Indeed I myself have made similar points, both generally, in Burman (2017) and specifically in relation to Government initiatives on resilience (in Burman, in press).

Edwards et al. have previously highlighted the problems with interpretation of neuroscience and what they call 'biologisation'. I concur with this view, and their interpretation of how this renders the contingent, and remediable, social and material aspects of adversity (such as poverty) out of the picture. A study that I and colleagues conducted on the impacts on children and families of the 'Bedroom Tax' came to very similar conclusions, especially in showing how a housing-related policy had profound wider educational and social impacts, including on hunger, living conditions and social participation, but also on children's educational engagements (see Bragg et al., 2015; Greenstein et al. 2016; Burman et al., 2017).

While experiences are clearly important, not only is the determinism accorded early years unmerited, but - as Edwards et al. point out - it overlooks the role of ongoing and later opportunities for support. The risk is of abstracting some particular aspects of childhood, deemed 'adverse', without situating them within the wider context of children's lives - that include material, economic, and socio-political conditions. Far from minimising or normalising the challenging conditions children face, attending to these conditions can rather indicate not only how children and families can and do deal resourcefully with these, but also what resources might be helpful to supporting them.

References

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