Written evidence submitted by Peter Aylward (EYI0116)

‘ACE’ Paternity

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My ‘evidence’ represents part of a longitudinal experiential analysis following over 40 years of front line forensic experience and 25 years clinical working at the extreme end of human functioning.

I would like to draw attention to a remarkable parallel process about absent fathers. The written evidence to date and the oral evidence sessions of 20th February and 20th March 2018 illuminate the absence of any direct reference to fathers. In relation to ACE whilst there are complexities surrounding the genesis of all individual cases, nonetheless an all too common factor is the absence of a loving, supportive and generative father; one of the vital building blocks for healthy development. More prevalent is the malevolent father either in the form of an actively abusive presence in the home or alternatively as a passively absent one, away from the home. This malevolent aggression profoundly affects the development of the child(ren) and can all be compounded if colluded with by the mother.

The foregoing dysfunctional family profile (infused with ACE) is repeatedly exposed when we put a microscope onto a perpetrator’s personal history. In all forensic examinations of perpetrators, we see early victimhood particularly linked to a dysfunctional paternal relationship. Indeed, exploring ‘the victim in the perpetrator’ is a maxim representing a curiosity beyond ‘what have you done?’ towards ‘what has happened to you?’. This is particularly highlighted at the extreme end of criminality through acts of homicide, mass killings and terrorism, as it is with our current problems associated with the knife culture within gangs (40,000 recorded incidents between 2016-17).

In my exhaustive (published) ‘peer reviewed’ study on the Dunblane massacre I established that the prime motivation behind the perpetrator’s murderousness was his experience of an absent father. Any cursory study of the history of all mass killers and/or purported terrorists, reveals a similar picture with Anders Breivik (Norway 2011) being no exception. Moreover, I am constantly reminded in my current clinical work within the NHS about this paternal link and subsequent dysfunction where attacks upon others are as common place as attacks upon the self (anorexia and self-harm). Therefore, I am heartened that this parliamentary committee is devoting its time to the challenges posed by understanding the link between adverse childhood experiences and long term negative outcomes, given that insufficient traction with this thinking has prevented appropriate responses for many years.

The impact of an absent father (in contrast to a healthily interacting and interested father) induces anxiety and fear and provokes feelings of loss, alienation, emasculation and insecurity, contributing to additional problems with drugs/alcohol, obesity and other mental health related illnesses. Moreover, not feeling authenticated is humiliating and rejecting. To
compensate in the long term there is a drive towards feeling empowered and finally being recognised as a significant person with a sense of belonging (gangs, terror groups et al) albeit via negative activity and disastrous outcomes resulting in huge costs to the health and penal systems let alone the cost to human suffering.

If we are to seriously address one of the root causes of ACE we must face up to malevolent paternity. Whilst malevolent masculinity continues to be exposed and subject to challenge (me too campaign) and old patriarchal systems come under review (gender pay gaps etc.) the issue of adult male violence in families remains in the shadows. If we are also to view malevolent paternity as a perpetrator within families, we would need to consider what type of measure might prove most beneficial (and cost effective) over the long term to rehabilitate him. I have long since subscribed to the view that we needed to attack this issue in the following way.

Firstly, I applaud the direction of travel in the new measures currently out for consultation on RSE (relationship and sex education) in schools. This was an issue I raised with Michael Gove and others when he was the education secretary in 2010. Despite the valiant variety of intervening agencies to address adversity, it is sadly inevitable that as a society we will continue to experience individuals demonstrating the effects of adverse childhood experiences originating from the first tier of socialisation, the family. We desperately need to break this cycle. This emphasises the vital role to be played by the next tier of socialisation, namely education. Educating the next generation of mothers and fathers about relationships is crucial. However, I would suggest that this needs beefing up considerably to represent the 4th ‘R’ (Relationships) alongside the traditional 3 ‘R’s’ as a core lesson as opposed to it representing just another subject on the curriculum. If it achieved parity in priority (underpinned by ACE awareness) it would have the benefit of ‘tailgating’ on an existing format which would surely be an attractive budgetary consideration. Education in this way should start at the earliest phase of schooling and be an intrinsic part of the curriculum through to sixth form. Elevating relationship lessons as core to the educational and social needs of our future parents is paramount otherwise we will continue to exercise a wilful blindness to what is really important in our lives and in our relationships with one another. Inoculating future parents with insight, empathy and emotional awareness could provide a crucial prophylactic to malevolence and aggression in both its active and passive forms.

We also need to replicate the model of a healthy relationship between parents (in the service of children) at a political level by ensuring that government departments work creatively together as well as local councils with national government.

I am truly heartened that the relationship between ACE and future negative outcomes is being seriously examined. This mirrors the dedication in my book which reads “I dedicate my book to all victims, including those whose voice could only be heard through their crimes.”

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