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News Release

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Early life adversity affects two in three Scots children, study finds

Two thirds of children in Scotland experience an adverse life event – such as domestic violence or parental drug misuse – before the age of eight, research suggests.

One in 10 have experienced at least three such traumatic events in their lifetime, the study also found.

Boys are at the greatest risk, along with those from low income households and those with younger mothers, the findings reveal.

Researchers at the University of Edinburgh looked at the incidence of seven types of adverse experience among more than 3,000 children.

The most common negative experiences involved parents undergoing mental health problems or relationship break-ups, which each affected around one-third of children.

Almost one quarter of children had experienced frequent physical punishment. One in five felt unloved or emotionally neglected.

Some 14 per cent had been exposed to parental drug or alcohol misuse, while one in 10 had been exposed to domestic violence. One in 250 children had experienced a parent being sent to prison. Instances of sexual abuse were too few to be reported.

Boys were more likely to have had three or more traumatic experiences, as were those whose mothers had fewer educational qualifications and who lived in deprived areas.

The research is published in the journal *BMJ Paediatrics Open*. It was based on the Growing Up in Scotland study, which tracks the lives of children from birth through their teenage years and beyond.

Researchers interviewed the parents, and later the children, about a wide range of experiences every one to two years.

The Growing Up in Scotland study is funded by the Scottish Government and carried out by ScotCen Social Research.

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Dr Louise Marryat, Research Fellow in the Centre for Clinical Brain Sciences at the University of Edinburgh, said: “We know that adverse experiences in childhood are associated with physical and mental health problems in later life.

“This is the first study to assess the scale of the problem in a current population of young people in the UK. We hope the findings will help to explain the context of ACEs, and lead to increased support for the groups most at risk.”

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