

HOW

ACTION FOR CHILDREN

WORKS

The impact of poverty and inequality on children

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Professor Daniel is part of a project identifying and Understanding Inequalities in Child Welfare Intervention Rates: comparative studies in four UK countries' led by Paul Bywaters, Coventry, with G. Brady, Coventry University; L. Bunting, Queen's University, Belfast; B Daniel, University of Stirling; B. Featherstone, Open University, K.Morris, University of Nottingham and J. Scourfield, University of Cardiff. This work is funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Before considering the impact of poverty and inequality on families it might first be helpful to think about what role access to adequate material resources plays in supporting good child development in the early years and positive outcomes in early life. If you can afford nice toys and books you can provide your child with an enriched experience. If you can afford for at least one parent to be employed for fewer hours in the early years of your child's life you can spend time playing with those toys with your child and reading to him or her, thus providing a strong attachment base for later life. And, if you have adequate financial and personal resources, you will be able to navigate your way through the complex array of early years provision and ensure that you purchase the highest quality alternative care while you are working. If you have enough money for basic family needs you can focus all your energies on family life rather than on trying to juggle sparse resources. If you have a comfortable, warm and stable home your child is more likely to remain physical healthy. If you have enough money to buy food your child is more likely to grow and develop in a healthy way. You can have family holidays to enrich the child's experiences. With all this your child is more likely to start school ready to learn. Later on, if your child is struggling with a particular subject at school, or has a weak teacher, then you can buy a bit of extra tutoring. If your child is showing signs of anxiety, you can purchase some preventive private counselling. And so the advantages continue. All of this is so obvious that it makes one wonder why a think piece on the impact of poverty on families is

necessary. Is it not obvious that children, rewarding though they may be, are expensive and that their development will be affected if they miss out on the basics to support development? So, the fact that there are so many children living in poverty in the UK today suggests that either people are not aware of the extent of the problem or do not care about the extent of the problem. As has been observed

...economic decisions very rarely take into account the interests of the child, or the impact on them. Indeed children do not merit even a mention in most economic textbooks.¹

In reality child poverty is certainly a real and growing problem: there are estimated to be 3.5 million children living in poverty in the UK, with a predicted further million falling into poverty by 2020 unless something changes for the better.² And poverty is bad for children. As well as the direct effect of living in poverty, there is also a compelling body of evidence to indicate that, whilst poverty in itself is bad for children's health and development, the existence of inequality in a society between rich and poor has a range of negative social and health consequences for all members of society, including children.³ The level of deprivation is key to child wellbeing, but the rate of relative income poverty



But what does it actually feel like for parents and children to live in poverty? Parents who were interviewed in research on child neglect described their struggles:

It's really hard to manage on the money even if you're working. If you're a single parent with one child you are better off working, but if you have more than one child you're not.

The parks are often shut or have signs saying 'no ball games' on the green bits – children have to play in the road.⁶

And in the same study a very perceptive young person made the plea:

Please don't judge my parents, just because they are struggling doesn't mean they are bad...

It is all too easy to observe that there are many poor people who are perfectly good parents, and thereby dismiss the impact of poverty and inequality.

And of course not all poor people are poor parents, but parenting is demanding at the best of times, and to parent effectively whilst living in poor housing with a meagre or no income, lack of community resources and limited educational and employment prospects requires super-human organisational skills and emotional resilience over a sustained period of time⁷. Another study into family life in the context of poverty found that children would hide their needs to protect their parents from further stress. The study found that living in poverty:

...undermined people's ability to live up to their own aspirations as parents, leaving them often feeling guilty and inadequate... Even going to the park could cost too much when the expectation of an ice cream was included...⁸

So it is not surprising that in some circumstances poverty can undermine parenting to the extent that it tips into maltreatment – which can have devastating effects on children's development in the short, medium and longer term. Statistical analyses show that there is an association between both poverty and inequality and children being referred to child

is the next most crucial factor.⁴ It is well documented that poor children perform less well in school and are far more likely to suffer poor physical and mental health than their more affluent peers. Comparative research indicates that children in the UK are more likely to grow up in poverty than their counterparts in countries with similar economic resources and the levels of inequality are also higher. These factors have been implicated in the fact that mortality rates for children up to the age of four are twice as high in the UK as they are in countries such as Iceland and Sweden:

Poverty kills children. Equity saves lives. Social protection is life-saving medicine for the population. It is a grave injustice that British children do not enjoy the highest standards of health, wellbeing, and of chances to fulfil their individual potential in life. That children in the UK may die unnecessarily should be a matter of national shame.⁵

protection services.^{9 10} In the UK it has been shown that children living in the poorest neighbourhoods have a greater chance of being on a child protection plan or being taken into care.¹¹

Given the range of ways in which poverty compromises child development it could be assumed that Governments would do all in their power to eradicate child poverty in the long and in the short term to make sure that the effects of poverty on children are minimised. But it would be difficult to think up fiscal policies more damaging to children than current Westminster approaches. Changes to the tax and benefit systems have disproportionately hit the most vulnerable families, especially those in poor housing or with additional problems such as mental ill-health or disability.¹² Welfare reforms have affect those who are already reliant on state benefits, but have also affected families where parents are working, but earn low wages.^{13 14} For children this means that, not only are parents likely to be exhausted and preoccupied, they still don't get the positive experiences that should be expected when wages are being earned. This impact has been recognized in Scotland where Naomi Eisenstadt has been appointed as an independent advisor on poverty and inequality to the Scottish Government. Her report *Shifting the Curve*¹⁵ particularly highlights the impact of poverty and inequality on the life chances of young people aged 16-24, precisely those becoming the next generation of parents.

Despite the clear impact of upstream fiscal policies, the main responses appear to be on downstream attempts to provide a few sticking plasters in the form of support for families who are struggling. Family support and parenting programmes tend to be described as early intervention and, whilst access to support should be available to all who need it, it is misleading to describe such provision as 'early intervention' if we accept the force of the evidence for the profoundly corrosive impact of poverty on parenting, and if we accept that fiscal policy is provoking greater levels of poverty and inequality. Providing support after the fact is distinctly downstream. In effect, as a society we are saying, 'we'll make you poor, make your job as parents much harder, but we'll give you a bit of help to cope'.

But even the kinds of support services that families appreciate are being cut as local authority funding is squeezed ever tighter. It is hard to see why this state of affairs is not challenged more vociferously, members of the general public who responded to a survey in a study of neglect said that they thought that services should be available to support families before problems get worse, many agreed that it would be helpful to have health and education-based services and preventive services.¹⁶ But perhaps it depends on who you ask and how you ask the question. The problem with reducing inequality is that it entails some form of re-distribution and there are insufficient powerful and persuasive voices setting out the benefits to all of more equality:

There is no such thing as 'child-neutral' economic policies.... while the financial costs of creating a more child-friendly society are often small, the social and economic benefits of linking these interests are enormous. To invest in children is a win-win strategy: the individual child and society benefit as a whole.¹⁷



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