

## How can early years practitioners support the care of young children living in poverty?

### Abstract

Evidence suggests that poverty poses risks to children's long-term health, education and social outcomes. The birth of a child brings additional costs and reduces parent and caregiver's participation in the labour market leaving families with young children particularly vulnerable to economic stress. This is currently exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis which has come close on the heels of the pandemic and its associated lockdowns. This paper reviews current evidence on the challenges of parenting and caring for young children in poverty and explores how practitioners can support parents to achieve good outcomes for their children. Practitioners can best support families by forming empathetic and non-judgemental parent-practitioner partnerships which are based on mutual recognition and respect for the contribution each makes towards the child.

*Keywords: child poverty, parenting in poverty, low-income families, early years, parent-practitioner partnerships*

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### Introduction

At the time the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the Covid-19 outbreak a public health emergency, 19.7% of children under five were in extreme poverty globally, compared to 7.9% of adults (World Bank & UNICEF, 2022). Extreme poverty means living below the international poverty line of \$2.15 per day. In the UK, using the broader measure of relative poverty (income which is below 60% of median household income), 31% of children and 36% of families with the youngest child under five were living in poverty at the start of the pandemic, compared with 22% of the wider population (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021). This includes 550,000 destitute children without adequate accommodation or reliable access to the essentials needed to eat and stay warm, clean and dry (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022). It is clear from these figures that families with young children are disproportionately affected by poverty.

As the public health crisis quickly became an economic crisis, many families experienced a significant deterioration in living standards with many pushed deeper into poverty and debt. In the UK this was for a number of reasons including being furloughed on less than full pay, reduction in working hours and redundancies. Families, who had previously had relatively high incomes found themselves suddenly reliant on benefits with spending commitments that were difficult to reduce quickly (Howes, Monk-Winstanley, Sefton, & Woudhuysen, 2020). Out-of-work families also fared badly, partly due to elements of the benefits system, such as the two-child limit in income related benefits, the benefits cap and the removal of the £20 Universal Credit uplift (Oppenheim & Milton, 2021).

Two years after the pandemic first struck the picture of poverty in the UK is shifting. A confounding variable is the rise in inflation which is affecting many countries at the time of writing. Wages are not increasing in line with the rising cost of living which is due to a combination of factors including the rapid rise in energy bills, high petrol and diesel prices, higher interest rates and high food prices. In part these things have been driven by the war in Ukraine which has pushed up the price of gas, oil and grain. The Bank of England has predicted that inflation will peak in the winter of 2022/23 and gradually decrease thereafter. However, low-income families are unlikely to have a savings buffer against rising costs meaning that more and more families are likely to be pushed into poverty.

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What are the implications of poverty for children's development and learning?

Evidence suggests that poverty in childhood can have both immediate and long-term effects. Those who experience poverty in the early years have less successful outcomes than those who experience poverty in later childhood or adulthood (Banovcinova, Mydlikova & Vodickovam, 2018). Inequalities appear from conception; maternal nutrition and infant diet affects health including birth weight, obesity levels and physical development (WHO, 2016). Infant mortality is almost twice as high in deprived areas of the UK than in affluent areas (ONS, 2020).

The experience of poverty is different for every child but often includes going hungry, being cold, being unable to join in activities with peers, and having reduced access to educational and cultural experiences (Rose & McAuley, 2019). A recent study by Beasley, Jespersen, Morris, Farra & Hays-Grudo (2022) found that children who live in deprived neighbourhoods are at greater risk of being exposed to violence, crime and prejudice if they are allowed to play outdoors in playgrounds and other spaces. This leads to parents limiting outdoor play which can affect young children's physical development and impact health and mental wellbeing. Although this study was limited to the urban context and those living in rural communities may well have different experiences, the qualitative approach taken by the researchers deepens our understanding of issues experienced by families in poverty. The study also found that economic stress can affect the emotional wellbeing and relationships of parents, and this can have adverse effects on parent-child relationships and children's development (see also Banovcinova et al., 2018; La Placa & Corlyon, 2015). For example, children might experience decreased parental responsiveness and sensitivity leading to insecure attachment relationships and difficulties forming relationships in later life.

There is evidence to suggest that children who live in poverty are more vulnerable to chronic stress caused by exposure to multiple adverse experiences such as abuse, neglect, domestic violence, parental mental ill health, and parental substance abuse which can ultimately lead to changes in neurodevelopment and gene expression resulting in poorer long-term health and cognitive outcomes (Lang, McKie, Smith, McLaughlin, Gillberg, Shiels & Minnis, 2020; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010). Children who experience these issues have an increased likelihood of going into local authority care; higher rates of behavioural disorders; and a greater likelihood of engagement in criminal activity and substance abuse as they grow older (Banovcinova et al, 2018). They may grow up with lower motivation, expectations and aspirations which can result in their own children learning behaviours that impede economic success, and thus the effects of poverty can extend across generations (Wray, 2015).

However, there is also evidence that childhood poverty does not automatically have negative effects. There are a complex mix of other factors, such as parental mental health, which intersect to influence outcomes (La Placa & Corlyon, 2015). Higher levels of parental education, strong parenting skills, a higher maternal age and breastfeeding have been shown to mitigate the effects of poverty (Oppenheim & Milton, 2021). Certain parenting behaviours are also associated with good outcomes. For example, parents who seek out social support networks have higher rates of attachment security in their infants (Wray, 2015). Cognitive outcomes can be supported by facilitating play opportunities for young children and reading to them; discipline and structure provided by routines, supervision and monitoring of the environment can mitigate poor physical development and health outcomes; and warm, responsive and authoritative parent-child relationships correlate positively with good social and emotional outcomes (Cooper, 2021).

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What are the challenges of parenting in poverty?

Historically, there has been a tendency to blame those living in poverty for their own unfortunate circumstances (La Placa & Corlyon, 2015). Low-income parents have been demonised and stigmatised by politicians, professional classes and the media, with working class families viewed as damaging their children's life-chances (Cooper, 2020). However, there is often a lack of understanding by policy makers about the reality of living in poverty and the voices of families are often absent in policy making. Living in poverty can erode the confidence and self-worth of new parents leaving them feeling powerless and without the means to bring about change. This can result in anxiety and depression, particularly when compounded by the stigma associated with being in poverty. Parents may be acutely aware that they are sometimes perceived by others as irresponsible and criticised for habits such as smoking or having expensive mobile phones. This can lead to feelings of guilt, shame and humiliation. The 'othering' of parents living in poverty supports dominant notions of an underclass who are not capable of being 'good' parents and works to hide structural inequalities (Rose & McAuley, 2019).

Parents who live in poverty have their own individual stories, however, many must make difficult choices in order to provide the basic necessities of food, warmth and clothing for their children and often make sacrifices to protect their children such as skipping meals so their children can eat (Rose & McAuley, 2019; Banovcinova et al., 2018). Parents may experience deterioration in their physical or mental health due to worries about money and not being able to meet their family's basic needs (Howes et al, 2020). Managing on a very limited budget can result in parents feeling that they lack agency because all of their money has to be spent on essentials and there are few choices to be made. This can affect mental wellbeing and increase interparental conflict putting children at higher risk of developing behavioural, social and mental health issues (Acquah, Sellars, Stock & Harold, 2017).

Ideas about what constitutes 'good' parenting are complex and contested. In western countries, authoritative and attentive parenting behaviours are likely to be perceived as ideal alongside providing educational and cultural activities such as museum trips and music lessons. However, within the context of economic disadvantage, it is difficult for families to meet their children's basic needs let alone provide activities which might increase their social and cultural capital. Parenting in poverty is often associated with differences such as a lack of routine, watching more television, being read to less frequently and harsher parenting practices. Cooper (2021) studied the parenting behaviours of low, middle and high-income parents and found that, broadly speaking, low-income parents do not parent differently from other groups. Differences were reported on some measures; however, these were both positive and negative. For example, low-income parents were more likely to report 'poor' parenting behaviours in relation to physical health measures such as providing breakfast and fruit for their children daily but were also more likely to play, read and paint with their children and have family time such as watching television together. Some of this is possibly due to differences in work hours but this is unlikely to be the whole story as many parents in low-income families are working.

A number of other studies have also sought to understand the challenges of parenting in poverty. Banovcinova et al. (2018) compared 188 families living below the poverty line with a control group of 188 families on a standard income. They found that there were no significant differences between the groups in terms of positive involvement with their children and the use of positive discipline but there were significant differences between the groups in consistency, supervision and monitoring of the environment. Beasley et al. (2022) found that parenting in poverty is linked to a number of challenges including food insecurity and child safety issues such as parental substance abuse,

domestic violence, mental health problems and child maltreatment. Rose & McAuley (2019) synthesised the results of four previous studies of the experiences of parents living in poverty. Their findings highlight the cumulative and compounding effects of disadvantage, the stigma and shame experienced by those living in poverty and the consequences for physical and mental health. Each of these studies has its limitations; findings are context specific and not necessarily representative of all experiences of parenting in poverty, however, collectively they indicate that living in poverty makes parenting more difficult and influences parenting behaviours.

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Strong parent-practitioner partnerships provide a solid foundation for supporting young children's outcomes

Early years practitioners are often trusted by parents as sources of information about child development and parents frequently seek advice from them on issues such as sleeping routines, behaviour management and meal times. Practitioners usually feel confident supporting parents in this way; however, they are often less confident in supporting parents who are dealing with significant stressors such as poverty (Murphy, Matthews, Clayton & Cann, 2021). Since the pandemic struck early years practitioners have had to cope with increasing demands in trying to alleviate the impact of poverty on the young children in their care (Early Education, 2022). They have responded to a wide and complex range of needs in ways which go beyond supporting learning and development such as providing washing facilities, food and clothing schemes; providing housing, debt management and immigration advice; supporting parents to make benefit claims; supporting families experiencing domestic abuse and mental health problems; and providing free classes and activities to support parents in providing a positive home environment. The current cost of living crisis means that this support is assuming even greater importance. However, paradoxically, many practitioners experience in-work poverty themselves due to the low pay and status associated with the highly gendered early years workforce (Lyndon, 2020). This has important implications for the way they are able to empathise and recognise the experiences of the families they work with and the support they can offer. Understanding the challenges and pressures experienced by families living in poverty is key to maximising the benefits of parental support and education.

Developing positive and supportive partnerships between parents and early years practitioners has long been seen as a powerful way to improve children's outcomes. Partnerships which are based on strong and trusting relationships provide a solid foundation for practitioners to share parenting advice, child development information and provide support to access early intervention services. Murphy et al. (2021) sought to understand parents and practitioners experiences of partnership in early years. They found that partnerships work best when parents feel that their knowledge about their child and their parenting practices are respected and valued by practitioners. This recognises the strengths of each party and sees them as equals in the partnership. It empowers both parent and practitioner as understanding each other's values and practices supports feelings of self-efficacy in both. The researchers also found that communication is most effective when part of an ongoing dialogue rather than a one-way flow of information from setting to parent. However, several barriers to dialogic communication were identified such as limited time for conversations at dropping off and picking up times; limited staff availability; lack of a private space for private conversations; and staff rotation. It is important to note that two thirds of parent participants in this study had a bachelor's degree or higher qualification indicating a probable underrepresentation of low-income parents. This may also be a reason why practitioner participants reported low confidence in working with families who are experiencing economic stress and poverty.

Kambouri, Wilson, Pieridou, Quinn & Liu (2021) build on the findings of Murphy et al. (2021) to suggest that both parents and practitioners need to be fully engaged for the partnership to work and place the onus both parties. However, it may be difficult to build genuine partnerships with parents who are experiencing a complex intersection of poverty related stressors and who might have had negative experiences with services in the past (Murphy et al, 2021). Practitioners may be keenly aware of the fragility of their relationships with some parents and it is vitally important to reflect on power imbalances and break down barriers to engagement by being non-judgemental, empathetic and genuinely interested in sharing information and values to develop a common pedagogy (Kambouri, et al, 2021). Creating strong partnerships with parents of very young children is a powerful tool in supporting positive parent-child relationships and promoting positive long-term outcomes for children.

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#### **How can practitioners best support families who are living in poverty?**

- Parents in poverty face a multitude of systemic issues that affect their ability to cope with the demands of parenting. Perhaps the most important thing practitioners can do to support parents is to challenge the negative rhetoric associated with living in poverty and listen to them about what would make a difference in their lives (Rose & McAuley, 2019). Although systemic changes to benefits and minimum wage policies are likely to be most effective in supporting parents, practitioners can help by providing advice on how to access the resources and services that are available to them (Beasley et al, 2022). This is likely to be particularly helpful for parents who have English as an additional language and might not be aware of the full range of material resources available to them.
- Parents who live in poverty may struggle, not only with basic needs such as for food and warmth, but also with higher level needs such as attachment, nurturing and fulfilment. Rose & McAuley (2019) highlight the importance of community as an influence on children's development in areas of deprivation. Communities provide parents with support from personal networks which can be the crucial difference in being able to cope with poverty related stress. Early years practitioners are in a good position to support the formation of social networks through involving parents in the setting and providing parenting groups, activities and classes. These are also a good vehicle for providing information and support for families on issues such as healthy relationships, child development and learning, creating a safe environment for children within the home and advice on accessing safe, high quality outdoor play spaces.
- Signposting parents to targeted support is important in supporting parenting and positive long-term outcomes for children. For example, making referrals to counselling and mental health services or providing support to access respite care for parents whose children have disabilities. Helping parents to identify local opportunities for education and training can support them in eventually accessing employment and this increases the agency of parents as education, employment and career progression bring material resources and choices. Ultimately, the most important thing early years practitioners can do to counter disadvantage and improve children's outcomes is to continue to provide knowledgeable, skilled, high-quality early childhood education and care which identifies and responds to each child's individual developmental needs.

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