

DIVERSITY AND MARGINALISATION IN CHILDHOOD

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DIVERSITY AND MARGINALISATION IN CHILDHOOD

A GUIDE FOR INCLUSIVE THINKING 0-11

PAULA HAMILTON



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I would like to dedicate this book in memory of my mother – Shirley Scott

CONTENTS

<i>About the Author</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
Introduction: Understanding Marginalisation	1
1 Critical Inclusion: Concepts, Theories, Challenges and Practice	5
2 Mass Media, Social Bias and the Representation of Minority and Marginalised Groups	27
3 Child Poverty and Low-Income Families	45
4 Stigma of Mental Ill-Health in Childhood	63
5 Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities	83
6 Children in Care, Fostering and Adoption	103
7 Gender Development and Identities: Intersex and Transgender Children	121
8 Religion, Antisemitism and Islamophobia	139
9 Asylum Seeker and Refugee Children (and Children Who Have English as an Additional Language)	159
10 Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Children	179
11 Supporting 'Most-Able' Children	197
Conclusion: Final Thoughts on Critical Inclusion	215
<i>References</i>	219
<i>Index</i>	251

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3

CHILD POVERTY AND LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

CONTENTS

The picture of poverty: definitions and statistics	46
Legislation and policy	50
Theories and discourses of poverty	52
Health and social disparities	55
Educational disparities and support strategies.....	58
Key points	61
Further reading.....	61
Useful websites.....	62



CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter examines what it means to be living in poverty in the UK: the impact it has on children and families in terms of health and educational outcomes and life opportunities. Consideration is given to the scale of the problem and to individuals who are vulnerable to poverty. Theories and discourses of poverty, which underpin the legislative and policy context, are explored and attention is placed on ways in which practitioners can support children and families from low-income households in school and early years settings.

This chapter considers:

- 1 Definitions and statistics relating to child poverty.
- 2 A historical overview of legislation and policy relating to child poverty.
- 3 Theories and discourses of poverty.
- 4 Health and social disparities for children living in poverty and on low incomes.
- 5 Educational disparities for children living in poverty and on low incomes.
- 6 Strategies for supporting children and families in poverty and on low incomes.

THE PICTURE OF POVERTY: DEFINITIONS AND STATISTICS

Despite being the sixth largest economy in the world (NASDAQ 2020), the UK experiences high levels of poverty. Out of 28 EU member states, the UK had the 12th highest poverty rate in 2017 (Office for National Statistics [ONS] 2019). During the last 20 years, the UK has made significant progress at reducing poverty among individuals who had traditionally been most at risk – pensioners and children (Joseph Rowntree Foundation [JRF] 2020). However, progress has stalled, with 14.2 million people in the UK estimated to be in poverty (22% of the population), which includes over 4.2 million children (JRF 2020) – that is, 30% of children, or around 9 in a classroom of 30 (Child Poverty Action Group [CPAG] 2019).

There is evidence to suggest that poverty is rising, with more children now facing severe poverty. In 2017, over 1.5 million people were destitute in the UK, including more than a third of a million children (JRF 2020), and 7.8% of the population were in persistent poverty (ONS 2019). Rising living costs, low wages and inadequate social security benefits are resulting in increasing numbers of families living on the cusp of the poverty line (Children's Society 2020a). CPAG (2019) expect 5.2 million children to be living in poverty in the UK by 2022. The current coronavirus crisis could push disadvantaged families into poverty if parents face job losses and falls in earnings as a result of the pandemic (Children's Society 2020b).

Who is in poverty?

Poverty creates a spiral of disadvantage that often accumulates across the lifespan to trap individuals in a generational cycle of poverty (Knowles 2013a). Although individuals can move in and out of poverty over the course of their lives, households at increased risk of poverty include: families with three or more children; lone-parent families; families from certain ethnic minority groups; families with a disabled member; families who live in privately rented accommodation; families with children under the age of five; families where parents work in low-paid sectors; and families who live in certain regions of the UK.

One of the major changes in UK poverty over the last 15 years has been the fall in poverty among children living in lone-parent families. Children living in couple families now form an increasingly larger proportion of children in poverty (Social Metrics Commission [SMC] 2018). The deterioration of the terms of employment for the lowest paid 20% of workers – low wages and insecure hours and incomes – together with the high cost of childcare, have been a major cause of poverty (CPAG 2020a). Other trends regarding children and families experiencing poverty in the UK are presented below.

Poverty trends

- Wales has a higher poverty rate (24%) than England (22%), Scotland (20%) and Northern Ireland (18%) (CPAG 2020b).
- 47% of children living in lone-parent families are in poverty (CPAG 2020b).
- 70% of children in poverty live in a household where at least one person works (CPAG 2019).
- Households of Bangladeshi and Pakistani background face high rates of poverty (nearly 50%), people living in households of Indian background face poverty rates of 23% (JRF 2020); 28% of people in non-British white households are in poverty, compared with 19% of people in white British households (JRF 2020).
- Nearly half of the 14.2 million people in poverty are affected by disability. Poverty is particularly high among families where there is either a parent or a child who is disabled (JRF 2020).
- 43% of children in poverty live in families with three or more children (CPAG 2019).
- 37.9% of children in poverty live in a family where the youngest child is under the age of five (SMC 2018).
- 75% of children in poverty live in families in social or private rented accommodation (SMC 2018).

Measuring and defining poverty

There are different ways to measure poverty, but poverty is generally discussed in terms of absolute poverty and relative poverty, and is largely based on the ability to purchase items seen as essential for survival, such as food, shelter, heat and clothing.

Absolute poverty

In 1995 the United Nations defined absolute poverty as the severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information (United Nations 1995). In 2015, in an attempt to compare poverty across countries, the United Nations set the international absolute poverty figure as being an income of \$1.90 a day (United Nations 2020). Cases of absolute poverty as described in this way are unusual in the UK. However, Buttle UK (2019) reports rising numbers of homeless families in the UK falling into extreme cases of poverty. Figures published by Shelter (2019) show that 135,000 children in Britain are homeless, living in temporary accommodation. In some London boroughs, 1 in 12 children are homeless and in Manchester, in the northwest of the UK, 1 in 47 children are homeless (Shelter 2019).



CASE STUDY

Prioritising household income

Jen and Alice have three children – Dai, 9 years old; Haf, 5 years old; and Rhys, 12 months old. They both work, and live in privately rented housing. They are on a low-income, living just above the poverty line.

After paying rent, food and household utilities, identify some of the other household/family costs that you would expect in order to keep them living in a similar standard to most families with young children in the UK. Think about the different needs of the children who represent different age groups. As money is tight, select and justify five key items. The section which follows might give you some ideas.

Relative poverty

When poverty is discussed in the UK, it usually refers to the notion of relative poverty. Relative poverty is where an individual's income and living standards are

significantly worse than the general standard of living that is experienced or encouraged by others in their community or country. Living standards, which are based on contemporary norms and thus change over time, are not exclusively about income but also refer to the household's access to goods, services and recreational activities that allow an individual to comfortably live and participate in the societies to which they belong (Benoist 2018). There are issues with the concept of relative poverty as it does not take into account housing costs, debt repayments or changes in the cost of living. Childcare and housing are two of the costs that take the biggest toll on families' budgets (CPAG 2020b).

Each year, the UK Government publishes a survey of income poverty called Households Below Average Income (HBAI). This sets the poverty line at 60% of the median UK household income. Median income accounts for the total income, including all benefits but minus direct taxes. So, if a household's income is less than 60% of this average, HBAI considers them to be living in *relative* poverty (CPAG 2020c). In 2018–19, the median household income in the UK was approximately £29,400 per year. Therefore, households falling below 60% of this income (£17,640) in this year would be in relative poverty. *Absolute* poverty is where a household's income is less than 60% of the median as it stood in 2011 (adjusted with inflation) (CPAG 2020c). Living on an income of less than 60% of the median means that many families struggle to meet essentials such as food, housing costs, heating, transport, clothing and the extra costs of schooling (Wickham et al. 2016). Therefore, CPAG (2020c) assert that calculating poverty as an income below 60% of the median, *after* housing costs (the measure agreed by the Social Metrics Commission), gives a more accurate measure of how much families have to live on. The actual poverty line a family faces is also dependent on the size and composition of the household (JRF 2020). Thirty per cent of children live in families below the poverty line (after housing costs), which is almost double the poverty rate (16%) for pensioners (CPAG 2020c). Being in receipt of income-related welfare benefits has also been used as a measure of poverty. In the UK, this can include being the recipient of universal credit or income support, job seeker's allowance, housing benefits, council tax benefits or working tax credit and child tax credit. Free school meal eligibility is a statutory benefit available to school-aged children from families who receive other qualifying benefits and is often used in education as a measure of childhood disadvantage related to poverty (CPAG 2020b).

Although social class is defined by more than one's profession, the UK Government utilises the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC), an occupationally based classification system, for research and statistics (ONS 2016).



ONS SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASSIFICATION 2010 (ONS 2016)

- 1 Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations
 - 1.1 Large employers and higher managerial and administrative occupations
 - 1.2 Higher professional occupations
- 2 Lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations
- 3 Intermediate occupations
- 4 Small employers and own account workers
- 5 Lower supervisory and technical occupations
- 6 Semi-routine occupations
- 7 Routine occupations
- 8 Never worked and long-term unemployed

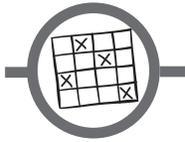
LEGISLATION AND POLICY

There has long been a concern for how best to provide for individuals who are living in poverty in the UK, with 'Poor Laws' first emerging in 1598 (Knowles and Lander 2011). However, histories of the welfare state usually begin after the end of the Second World War, when in 1945 the government started to rebuild Britain and address the poverty facing the country. Legislation which followed the 1942 Beveridge Report led to the establishment of the National Health Service and a system of benefits to provide social security to protect the well-being of the population (Knowles 2013a). The welfare provision introduced in the 1940s included free education, free health care, social housing, social security and other services for children. Public attitude towards supporting those experiencing poverty remained largely sympathetic until the late 1970s (Cronin 2017). In order to understand contemporary debates regarding supporting children and families in poverty, it is necessary to be aware of past measures aimed at tackling child poverty.

In 1999 the Labour government set targets to reduce child poverty by 2010 and eliminate child poverty by 2020. By doing so, the UK was the first European country to implement policies to combat child poverty. Although relative poverty fell substantially during this period, the 2010 targets to halve child poverty were missed (Wickham et al. 2016). Remaining committed to child poverty, the Coalition government passed the Child Poverty Act 2010 and a national Child Poverty Strategy. The scale of poverty during the decade that followed was not straightforward, with some decline, but also rising numbers of children from working households going into poverty. Changes to tax and benefits appear to have an explanatory

role, as increased investments in families' social security led to a notable reduction in child poverty (CPAG 2020d). In 2014, the Child Poverty Strategy 2014 to 2017 was introduced, based on two core aims: (1) to support families into work and to shift away from income benefits; and (2) to raise educational attainment to prevent poor children from becoming poor adults (Wickham et al. 2016). This was followed by the controversial Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, which abolished the Child Poverty Act 2010, the commitment to reduce child poverty and the measure of poverty based on family income. Instead, it placed a new focus on the 'root causes' of poverty such as unemployment, debt and family breakdown (Wickham et al. 2016). The 2016 Act, and its associated measures, have been heavily criticised, including concerns that the previous progress on the reduction of child poverty will be undermined. The freeze on support for children under universal credit, the two-child limit for universal credit and changes to tax credit are contentious, and critics argue that unprecedented numbers of families with young children are falling into poverty, with a serious impact on child health (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health [RCPCH] 2018a; CPAG 2020d).

Social mobility – the ability to move from one social class to another in an upwards direction – has featured quite heavily in social policy in the UK as this, along with the concept of meritocracy (where hardworking and talented individuals are enabled to climb the social ladder), have been popular strategies used to tackle poverty (Collett 2017). However, Collett points out how the UK has lower levels of social mobility than many other industrialised countries, and that meritocracy places the responsibility for success or failure on the individual and in so doing moves away from the wider societal structures which cause inequality and poverty. Analysis of child poverty policy suggests that, to have the greatest impact, policies should address three key areas within a framework of national economic and social policy: prioritising early childhood education and care; reducing the risk of poverty by increasing employment chances and wages of families in employment; and effective income support through the benefit and tax systems for those on very low incomes (Cheung 2018). Many commentators, including the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, are urging the UK Government to prioritise child health inequalities by urgently reviewing its policies. They are calling for each government across the UK to adopt a 'child health in all policies' approach, national targets to reduce child poverty to be reinstated, the scale of cuts to public health and child services to be reconsidered and for universal credit to be reversed (Iacobucci 2017; Mayor 2017; RCPCH 2018a; Children's Society 2020a). These measures are regarded as fundamental to prevent increased numbers of children being pushed into poverty and to ultimately protect the well-being of future generations.



ACTIVITY

Debating discourses of poverty

Read through the statements below and discuss each with a small group of peers. Please be professional during the discussion. Once you have done this, see if you can identify which theory or discourse the statement may apply to (Social Darwinism; culture of poverty; Marxism; functionalism; cultural capital).

- 1 Working-class children are at a disadvantage in school because they do not share the same language and values as their teachers.
- 2 It is natural in society to have certain individuals who are successful and wealthy and to have others who are disadvantaged, so we should not waste time by supporting those at the bottom.
- 3 Working-class people have little chance to pull themselves out of poverty because the wealthy and powerful keep them positioned there.
- 4 Society needs people to perform different roles (doctors and retail workers), so we should encourage and reward the professionally skilled through high salaries.
- 5 Education is free and can open opportunities but the working class don't help themselves – they don't see the point of studying and working hard.

THEORIES AND DISCOURSES OF POVERTY

The notion that the government has a duty to provide for the poor, along with the question of why certain children and families fall into poverty, are regularly contested (Knowles 2013a; Cronin 2017). Theoretical concepts and understandings of the causes of poverty are important as these perspectives influence government welfare policy towards poverty reduction. Various studies highlight the complex interplay between social, cultural and economic factors which lead to social inequalities and poverty. However, social theories are typically centred around three causal factors: individual, cultural and structural.

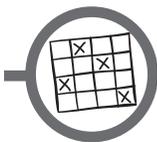
Individual factors

Social Darwinism is the extension of Darwin's ideas of natural selection and biological evolution and attempts to justify an individual's success or poverty status. According to Herbert Spencer and William Sumner, social existence is a competitive experience among individuals who have different abilities and traits (Sameti et al. 2012). Spencer and Sumner asserted that individuals with better abilities are capable of being economically productive within society and that the state should not

interfere with the natural course of social improvement because the social system is weakened when the poor are kept in society (Sameti et al. 2012). In line with this ideology, welfare expenditures and programmes would be kept at the minimum, provided to disadvantaged individuals only when other sources of help have been exhausted (Sameti et al. 2012).

Cultural factors and the ‘underclass’

The ‘culture of poverty’ theory focuses on factors which exist within people’s residential environment to determine either poverty or success. The theory asserts that poverty is intergenerational because working-class children are socialised into learning negative values, beliefs and psychological behaviours (not to study hard, not to plan for the future, to spend money unwisely) (Sameti et al. 2012). This ideology has been particularly used by scholars in the US (Wilson 1987, 1996; Herrnstein and Murray 1996) to study urban poverty, giving rise to the concept the ‘underclass’, a group that exists below the working class. Wilson argued that ‘ghetto-specific culture’ in inner-cities results in the ‘underclass’ accepting deviant behaviours, such as welfare dependence and crime, due to social isolation and the absence of economic opportunity (Sameti et al. 2012). Murray asserted that welfare systems created by the state between the 1940s and late 1970s had removed individual blame for poverty, positioning the poor as victims, which has led to the emergence of the ‘underclass’ who experience poverty because of a lifestyle choice that they are making (Murray cited in Cronin 2017). His work has influenced contemporary political and social attitudes, with a significant fall in empathy towards the poor since the 1990s (Cronin 2017). This ideology is criticised for focusing on the perceived character defects of individuals rather than on the wider structural and social forces associated with poverty.



ACTIVITY

Media coverage

Undertake a media search to examine the news items presented about children and families living in poverty or on low incomes. Are the messages mainly positive or mainly negative? Could these messages lead to misconceptions or stereotypical thinking? What impact might such messages have for these families?

Government and media rhetoric about the ‘underclass’ reinforce individual explanations of poverty and are particularly seized upon when resources are stretched (Collett 2017). Negative discourses position the poor working class as a significant social problem, suggesting distinct characteristics, such as a culture of dependency, intergenerational

unemployment, reckless or criminal behaviour and lone parenthood to be lifestyle choices (Collett 2017; Cronin 2017). Collett (2017: 71) asserts, 'In a climate of low-paid jobs, the distinction is no longer between non-working and working, it is between unemployed and hard-working.' The stigma often attached to low-income households frequently serves to stereotype and institutionalise the poor. Poorer families are often seen as inferior and their morals questioned (Benoist 2018). Media headlines skewed towards fraudulent claims have suggested benefit fraud is a widespread national problem leading to negativity towards claimants. For example, 'Benefit fraud in the UK hits record levels after false claims rose to £2.3 billion last year' (*Daily Mail*, 28 June 2019) and 'Disabled girl's mum from Reading in £60k benefit fraud' (BBC News, 17 January 2019). Cronin (2017) argues that the cost of benefit fraud is minimal in comparison to the money which is defrauded by tax evasion, largely committed by the wealthy, and how every year significantly more benefits remain unclaimed than are fraudulently claimed.

Structural factors

The functionalist theory is based on the belief that there are certain positions and functions in society that require special skills and knowledge, and that individuals who undergo training to hone their skills should be motivated and repaid with higher wages and privileges, otherwise society will suffer. Thus, the wage of labour is regarded as proportional to the cost of training and the individual's sacrifice, and consequently economic inequality and poverty are justified (Sameti et al. 2012).

Marx utilised the concept of capitalist exploitation to explain the cause of poverty and poor quality of life among workers during the Industrial Revolution. Social conflict perspectives argue that the privileged and powerful groups maintain their place in society through the education system. In state schools, where there is more of a social mix, this can be seen through the concentration of middle-class children in the higher academic groups, while working-class children tend to be placed in lower teaching sets (Bartlett and Burton 2007). As time progresses, any gap in ability will widen due to the impact of children being taught differently and presented with different opportunities, and teachers holding different expectations. Children come to view their positions within school as 'normal' and later replicate their order of position in society (Bartlett and Burton 2007).

Bourdieu (1984) asserted that differences in educational attainment (thus success or poverty) can be explained in relation to three forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. 'Economic capital' means wealthier parents can afford housing in catchment areas with good schools and the extra costs of education (additional tutoring, equipment) (Benoist 2018). 'Social capital' refers to relationships that individuals

develop to progress in education and employment. Children living in poverty could be at a social capital disadvantage if their parents have unsociable working hours, leaving them little time to support their children with school activities (Benoist 2018). 'Cultural capital' represents the characteristics and behaviours that are associated with one's socio-cultural background. Middle-class children are often at an advantage over working-class children as education policy within the state sector is determined by politicians and civil servants, most of whom are middle class (Collett 2017). Therefore, because they are designed by individuals who hold similar beliefs and values, middle-class children have a style of language which helps them more easily access the curriculum; they know how to interact with teachers and use books; and they are aware of the importance of success at school for their future (Benoist 2018). The deficit theory often positions working-class children's cultural and linguistic differences and their work ethic and parental involvement as deficiencies in need of being 'fixed' in line with middle-class expectations.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL DISPARITIES

The importance of health and well-being in early childhood on outcomes in adult life is well established (Cheung 2018), as is the link between poor health and low income. A systematic review of the literature shows how infants, children and young people living in poverty, or on low incomes, have significantly worse physical, mental, emotional and behavioural health outcomes than children from more affluent backgrounds. Poor health in childhood has direct economic consequences for nations, due to the increased need for acute health care and greater risk of later educational failure and unemployment in adulthood (Cheung 2018).

Before the National Health Service was established in 1948, approximately 1 in 20 children died before their first birthday (Cheung 2018). Despite significant progress both in the reduction of stillbirths and neonatal, infant and child deaths, and in vaccination programmes (reducing the number of children contracting preventable illnesses such as polio, tuberculosis and measles), the poverty gap which exists in the UK means that children and young people in deprived groups experience some of the worse health outcomes in the developed world (Cheung 2018). The advance in child health has stalled; the UK now lags behind many other high-income countries when it comes to breastfeeding and reducing infant mortality, childhood obesity and rates of smoking during pregnancy (Mayor 2017; Cheung 2018). Reductions to social security have led to an increase in child poverty and cuts to welfare services (children's centres, parenting guidance, speech and language therapy, services for disabled children) have left families struggling with less support; these services are pivotal to the early identification of need and intervention (RCPC 2018b; Save the Children 2019a).



CASE STUDY

Supporting the health and well-being of children living in low-income households

Becky lives with her boyfriend, Darnell, and two young children. Kordell, Darnell's 10-year-old son from a former relationship, also stays with them three days a week. Most days she attends the Children's Centre with Jake (2 years old) and Jaz (7 months old). Becky is struggling. She is lonely and is finding it difficult to cover the household bills. Darnell is always out working, trying to provide for the family; all he wants to do when he gets home is to unwind with a few drinks. The stress of living in poverty is causing the couple to argue on a regular basis, often in front of the children. Becky is feeling anxious as she has heard that the Children's Centre is likely to close.

- 1 How might the family's situation affect the children's health and well-being?
- 2 How can Becky and Darnell be supported?
- 3 What agencies do you think might be able to support the family? Alongside statutory services, identify any voluntary organisations (national and local) which may be able to assist families in poverty.
- 4 What might be the barriers for early years practitioners trying to support the family?

Poor health outcomes can be a consequence of cumulative exposure to deprivation or exposure during critical periods of childhood, with longer durations of poverty having more adverse effects on children's outcomes than short-term experiences (Wickham et al. 2016). As children's lives unfold, the poor physical and mental health associated with poverty often limits their development across a range of domains, leading to reduced life chances in adulthood (Wickham et al. 2016). Individuals living in poverty often have a shorter life expectancy (Mayor 2017) and experience greater illness and disability throughout life. In the most deprived areas, boys typically live 19 fewer years of their lives in good health, and girls 20 fewer years, than children in the least deprived areas (CPAG 2020e).

Since 1990, the UK has dropped several positions in the European Union rankings of child mortality (ONS 2017). In 2015, out of 28 countries, the UK ranked 20th for both neonatal deaths (2.7 deaths per 1,000 births) and under-five mortality (4.5 deaths per 1,000 births) (ONS 2017). Countries with the least amount of child deaths were Luxembourg and Finland (ONS 2017). Mortality in UK infants under age one in the lowest socio-economic group has been found to be more than twice as high as those in the highest income group, with deaths commonly associated with conditions related to preterm birth (Mayor 2017). The declining trend in infant mortality in the UK appears to have reversed, with the number of infant deaths rising since 2014. A study

conducted by Taylor-Robinson et al. (2019) shows how this rise has not been experienced evenly across the population, with the gap between the most and the least deprived local authority areas in England widening by 52 deaths per 100,000 births. The rise in infant mortality has disproportionately affected the poorest areas, leaving the most affluent areas unaffected. Taylor-Robinson and colleagues assert that a third of the increases in infant mortality from 2014 to 2017 are likely to be attributed to increases in child poverty, largely due to the cuts that have been made to welfare benefits available to families.

In addition to greater mortality rates, children living in low-income families face other health inequalities, including higher rates of obesity, tooth decay, non-intentional injury, respiratory problems, mental health conditions and emergency hospital admissions for asthma or diabetes (Wickham et al. 2016; Iacobucci 2017; Mayor 2017; Cheung 2018). Physical health in infancy, such as low birth weight, whether a baby is breastfed or not, and being overweight, can have lasting effects on the risk of developing physical illness (Cheung 2018). Smoking during pregnancy is one of the most important modifiable risk factors for improving infant health. Despite reductions over the past decade, women in lower socio-economic groups are much more likely to smoke during pregnancy (Mayor 2017).

Families in poverty tend to be located in communities that have substandard housing, which is often insecure and overcrowded, with poor access to safe open play spaces (Mental Health Foundation 2018; RCPCH 2018b). Children living in overcrowded, cold and damp housing are more likely to experience respiratory difficulties and contract meningitis (CPAG 2020e). There is also evidence of escalating food poverty, with children missing out on decent meals (Children's Society 2020a) and doctors making increased foodbank referrals (RCPCH 2018b). The prices of essentials like food and fuel increasing has a significant impact on the UK's poorest families. Some parents skip meals so they can afford to feed their children, and in winter many families have to make a choice of either feeding their children or heating their homes (Children's Society 2020a). In a study conducted by the RCPCH (2018b) doctors reported a worsening of parents' and children's mental health, with the following stressors impacting on well-being: food insecurity (60%), housing problems or homelessness (60%) and financial stress (50%) (Iacobucci 2017; RCPCH 2018b). The RCPCH (2018a) also notes how poverty may prevent parents from attending appointments for sick or disabled children due a lack of transport or for fear of losing their job or money when taking time off work.

Mental health issues can lead to a series of detrimental effects on people's life chances. Even when not born into disadvantage, children who experience mental health problems are more likely to be workless and to live on benefits in adulthood (Mental Health Foundation 2018). The prevalence of mental ill-health maps closely to areas of deprivation,

with children and young people living in poorer households two to four times more likely to develop a mental health problem by the age of 11 (Mental Health Foundation 2018; CPAG 2020e). The impact of poverty on mental well-being is multifaceted, with a range of environmental, social, cultural and economic factors affecting mental health.

Living in poverty can lead to feelings of shame, fear, distrust, instability, insecurity and isolation and, ultimately, a sense of powerlessness (Psychologists Against Austerity 2015). Parents may become critical of their capacity to cope financially and feel that they have failed in their ability to care for their children (Benoist 2018). Research shows how influential maternal mental health is during a child's prenatal and early years because of its impact on the child's cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural development (Save the Children 2019a). The stresses parents in poverty face in struggling to make ends meet, on low wages and in poor housing increase the probability of relationship conflict, domestic abuse, drug and alcohol misuse and mental illness within the household (Children 1st 2018). Consequently, this increases the likelihood of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), with increased rates of depression among parents living in disadvantaged households also linked to higher rates of disorganised attachment in early childhood (Benoist 2018).

Children living in families struggling with debt are five times more likely to feel anxious, depressed, unsafe and negative about their future than children in families who do not face difficulties with debt (Children's Society 2020a). The UK's poorest children are also more likely to face repeated house moves, lack essential clothing and miss out on social events, such as school functions, holidays and family time (Mental Health Foundation 2018; CPAG 2020e; Children's Society 2020a). The cost of school life can have a significant impact on children living in deprived households. More than two-thirds of children in poverty said they had been embarrassed and felt isolated because their parents could not afford school uniform, trips and equipment. Some children go hungry at school and experience feelings of shame due to a lack of money and restricted food options for those on free school meals (Weale 2019; Children's Society 2020a). More than a quarter of children had encountered stigma and bullying at school for living in poverty (Mental Health Foundation 2018; Children's Society 2020a).

EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES AND SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Although various factors influence children's educational achievement, there has been a long-standing relationship between wealth and education, with the attainment gap between working-class children and their more affluent peers documented through a series of reports since the 1950s and 1960s (Bartlett and Burton 2007).

Experiencing poverty for even a few years can have a significant negative impact on young children's development, particularly the under-fives, as these early stages of a child's life are a critical period for cognitive, language and social development (Benoist 2018; Save the Children 2019a). Children from poorer backgrounds lag at all stages of education, with the socio-economic gap being far more influential than the gender or ethnic gap in children's educational attainment (Collett 2017; Beniost 2018). Although socio-economic disadvantage is damaging for children of both genders, boys are more likely to fall behind (Save the Children 2016). Educational inequalities, which start in the pre-school years, typically continue to grow through primary and secondary schooling. If a child does not enter 'school ready' with basic skills this reduces their ability to make the most of learning experiences, develop social skills and establish friendships. In the longer term, falling behind in the early years disadvantages the rest of a child's school career, employment opportunities and adult life chances (Save the Children 2016).

By age five, children from the poorest homes in the UK are over a year behind their more affluent peers in terms of development, and by the end of primary school, only 75% of the poorest children reach the government's Key Stage 2 levels compared with 97% of children from the wealthiest families (Wickham et al. 2016). In 2017/18, 43% of all pupils achieved grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSEs, compared to 25% of pupils from poorer families (Department for Work and Pensions 2019). Even the performance of more able children from poorer families, who begin school on a par with more able children facing the least deprivation, falls away by the age of 16 (CPAG 2020e).

The ability to use and understand language is a significant factor in educational attainment. The range of linguistic experience and vocabulary developed among children differs greatly, largely influenced by social background. Working-class children may not be accustomed to hearing or using the elaborate code of language that is typically used at school, and so can be disadvantaged when they enter early years and educational settings (Bartlett and Burton 2007). Living in poverty can put children at significant risk of experiencing a delay in their language development (Save the Children 2016). At age five, 2 in 5 (43%) children in poverty in England were struggling with basic skills (unable to speak in full sentences, follow simple instructions and express themselves) compared to 1 in 4 (26%) wealthier children (Save the Children 2018). This can have major consequences for the development of early reading skills. Being able to read well is vital for a child's prospects at school and in life in general. Yet every year, one-third of children growing up in poverty leave primary school unable to read well, preventing thousands of the UK's poorest children from fulfilling their potential (Save the Children 2015). Research suggests that in order to engage children in the reading process at school, they need to be presented with texts they are familiar with, which may include digital texts and comics, neither of which are routinely used by schools (Knowles and Lander 2011).

Language skills develop best when children experience stimulating, language-rich environments. Simple activities such as talking, playing and reading have the potential to transform a child's life (Save the Children 2015). However, many low-income families have complex, challenging and stressful lives juggling work, managing the household budget and facilitating childcare. Some families have little choice but to prioritise work and income above their child's learning at home in order to meet the family's basic needs (Save the Children 2019b). Financial constraints can result in lower exposure to resources and activities which support learning; toys, books, computers and laptops may be second hand and there may be limited opportunity for extra-curricular activities (Save the Children 2019b). Furthermore, living a transient lifestyle or in temporary accommodation may mean toys and learning resources can be difficult to look after and may get mislaid (Argent 2017).

Promoting and supporting positive parental engagement in children's early learning is critical in mitigating the impact of poverty on children's life chances. However, parents who have grown up in poverty may not necessarily have experienced a nurturing parenting style themselves, or had positive experiences of school, which can leave them less ready to support their child's learning (Save the Children 2019a). It is therefore important to consider the impact of the increased closure of child and family centres, as these have been evidenced as playing a pivotal role in promoting parents' confidence in supporting children's learning in the early years (Save the Children 2019a). Supportive intervention in the early years and throughout primary education is paramount, as raising attainment among children from low-income households can help to prevent them from becoming the next generation of disadvantaged parents (Knowles 2013a).

Key to reducing child poverty are government measures which relate to the provision of appropriate welfare benefits for families with young children, narrowing the education gap at all stages, and the provision of high-quality, universal early childhood and family services. On a micro level, practitioners working with families experiencing poverty need to have a sensitive approach, be familiar with the importance of multi-agency working, signposting and providing emergency advice, and be aware of the setting's policies regarding supporting families who are unable to fund the extra costs of schooling. As practitioners it is essential to avoid making assumptions based on socio-economic status about differences in parenting, pre-school education and resources available to families (Collett 2017), and to remember that the effects of poverty are multiple and personal circumstances are different for everyone (Argent 2017). While the many ways in which low-income families can be excluded from early years settings and schools should be fully considered, inclusion policies must guard against singling out individual children and families, to prevent stigma (Collett 2017).



REFLECTION

Thinking critically about the potential impact of poverty

Now that you have reached the end of this chapter, consider the following:

- 1 What factors can impact a child's ability to reach their academic potential when living in poverty or within a low-income family?
- 2 What key factors are important in establishing an effective relationship with families facing severe deprivation?
- 3 What support could a school/early years setting be able to offer?

KEY POINTS

- Rising living costs, low wages and inadequate social security benefits are resulting in increasing numbers of families living on the cusp of the poverty line, with rising numbers of children living in poverty where at least one adult works.
- Poverty often accumulates across the lifespan to trap individuals in a generational cycle of poverty.
- To understand debates regarding supporting children and families, it is necessary to be aware of past measures aimed at tackling child poverty and the theoretical discourses that exist to explain why certain families fall into poverty.
- Government and media discourse frequently portrays the poor working class as 'deviants' who are making (damaging) lifestyle choices, which moves the focus away from wider societal structures that lead to social inequalities and poverty.
- The link between child poverty and poor health, well-being and educational outcomes are long established.
- Early years and primary school practitioners have an important role to play in supporting children and families from low socio-economic households, creating enabling environments which do not single out individuals, and also through multiagency working, signposting and providing emergency advice, where required.

FURTHER READING

Benoist, F. (2018) Supporting and including children from low-income families. In Knowles, G. (ed.) *Supporting Inclusive Practice and Ensuring Opportunity is Equal for All*. Third edition. pp. 153–68. Abingdon: Routledge.

Offers a sound theoretical overview of issues associated with poverty with an emphasis on an educational context, and some useful scenarios.

Cronin, M., Argent, K. and Collett, C. (2017) *Poverty and Inclusion in Early Years Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Presents a good theoretical overview of poverty as well as addressing practicalities of working with low-income children and families.

Wickham, S., Anwar, E., Barr, B., Law, C. and Taylor-Robinson, D. (2016) Poverty and child health in the UK: Using evidence for action. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 101 (8), 1–7.

Provides a critical overview of historical legislative and policy context for tackling poverty.

USEFUL WEBSITES

Child Poverty Action Group: www.cpag.org.uk

Children's Society: www.childrenssociety.org.uk

Joseph Rowntree Foundation: www.jrf.org.uk

Poverty and Social Exclusion: www.poverty.ac.uk

Save the Children: www.savethechildren.org.uk