

Handout

Poverty and Inequality

“Historically, children’s safeguarding policy and practice in the UK have focused on individual and family-level explanations of abuse and neglect, with relatively little attention given to children’s overall well-being or the role played by neighbourhood conditions in shaping it” (Jack and Gill 2009:1).

Arguably, more focus is now being directed to this theme. Policy initiatives and guidance introducing assessment frameworks have sought to highlight the need to see children’s wellbeing in the context of wider socio-economic circumstances and for assessment of children’s need to take an holistic approach drawing on ecological theory (Department of Children Schools and Families 2006 and 2007; Department of Health et al. 2000; HM Treasury 2003), Drawing on the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Jack (2000) a systems approach is proposed in order to highlight the role that wider level factors, interacting with the characteristics of individuals and families, play in shaping the well-being of children. Current frameworks for assessment thus involve not only consideration of the needs of the child and the ability of parents/ carers to meet the identified needs, but a thorough consideration of wider aspects of the child and family’s lives - Family and Environmental Factors – the third side of the triangle.

Jack and Gill (2003) link into the dimensions of this domain and demonstrate the important influence of family history and functioning on the ability of parents/carers to meet the needs of children and analyse the part played by wider family and social support systems in meeting the developmental needs of children. The influence of communities and neighbourhoods on parenting capacity and the development of children is analysed before then considering the significant impact of socio-economic factors such as income and employment on the lived experience of children and families. It is this exploration of the impact of poverty and inequality on family life and the developing child that sets the assessment in the context of the wider issues.

The United Kingdom is a society with significant inequalities in health outcomes as detailed in the Marmot Review (Department of Health 2010); the distribution of income and wealth and in the distribution of resources (Howarth et al. 1999). The Unicef Innocenti Report (2007) found that the UK was in the bottom third of ranking for five out of six dimensions on children’s wellbeing compared to 21 OECD countries. It is this inequality, defined as the difference in income between the top 20% and the bottom 20% of population which, according to Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), accounts for a whole range of social dysfunctions. Unequal societies, they contend, are associated with high rates of obesity, teenage birth, mental illness, homicide, low levels of trust, low social capital, hostility, racism, poor educational performance amongst school children, imprisonment, drug overdose mortality and low social mobility.

Studies of public welfare decision making have consistently shown that many of the children have backgrounds of social and economic disadvantage (Packman and Hall 1998; Department of Health 1995; McGee and Waterhouse 2002) with lone parenting, dependence on state benefit and local authority housing being common features. There are strong associations between child welfare referrals and measures of deprivation (Coulton et al 1999) especially in relation to child protection referrals related to neglect (Drake and Pandy 1996).

There is a strong correlation between poverty and neglect (Tuck 2000). Thorburn et al (2000 cited in Dyson 2008) found that 98% of families whose children were at risk of emotional maltreatment or neglect were characterised by the extreme poverty of their material environment – reflected in the fact that 59% lived in overcrowded housing conditions, with 56% of parents reporting high levels of emotional stress.

**Structural factors affecting
children and families**

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