

SUPPORTING POOR FAMILIES – BRIEFING PAPER

Prepared by Carena Rogers, Policy Officer at the FPI and edited
by Mary McLeod, Chief Executive of FPI

December 2002

Background

The UK has the fourth largest economy in the world and yet we have one of the highest levels of child poverty of all industrialised countries.

Children born into poverty have a lower birth weight, higher infant mortality and poorer health. As they grow up they are less likely to stay on at school and will have fewer qualifications. In adulthood they will be lower paid, experience unemployment and are likely to die younger.

The Government have pledged to end child poverty within a generation, to halve it by 2010 and quarter child poverty by 2004.

Ending child poverty means addressing income poverty, but it also means tackling health inequalities, poor education outcomes, lack of employment, affordable housing and support for families. This briefing paper, published jointly by En Child Poverty and the National Family and Parenting Institute, is the third in a series to initiate debate and action to address these issues.

If you want to end child poverty then find out more at:

[End Child Poverty, 8 Wakely Street, LONDON, EC1V 7QE](#)

Tel 020 7843 1913/14 Email info@ecpc.org.uk www.ecpc.org.uk

The National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI) is an independent charity set up to support parents in bringing up their children, to promote the well-being of families and to make society more family friendly.

We think we can best promote knowledge-based, sound family policy by bringing together evidence and interests from across sectors, disciplines and professions. We also pilot new ways of providing support to families, provide information direct to families and run public campaigns. Examples of our work include the National Survey of Family Support Services in England and Wales, high-level family policy seminars, a biennial international conference on parent/child issues, new research into the support needs of disabled parents, Parents' Week, and a Parents' Panel to comment on policy initiatives.

To find out more about our work, contact

The National Family and Parenting Institute, 430 Highgate Studios, 53-79 Highgate Road, London, NW5 1TL

Tel: 020 7424 3460 Email: info@familyandparenting.org, www.nfpi.org and www.e-parents.org

This paper was prepared by Carena Rogers, Policy Officer at the NFPI and edited by Mary McLeod, Chief Executive of NFPI.

This paper outlines the impact of poverty on family relationships, describes what is meant by family support and what particular support poor families need. It summarises present progress on the strategic development of support for families, and makes recommendations for further action.

Financial support is the cornerstone of any policy to support families. Family finances and what still needs to be done to achieve the Government's ambitious goal to eradicate child poverty, have been discussed in a previous briefing paper.¹

What is family support?

Families are diverse. Each has its own strengths, resilience and challenges. Identifying the problems that put families under strain – disability, poverty, separation, bereavement, domestic violence, poor housing, racist harassment, alcohol misuse – does not indicate which family will need help. This makes planning and delivering family support difficult. A raft of support mechanisms and networks need to be in place that families can use when they need help, with easy access to more specialist provision. Family support can encompass:

Supporting poor families

- *family finances* – benefits, Social Fund, back-to-work initiatives, in-work tax credits;
- *family services* – advice and information services, parent/child leisure activities, childcare provision, parenting support;
- *universal services* – education, transport, health care, housing, community regeneration, work-life balance initiatives.

Why is poverty hard on relationships?

Parenting is harder if you are poor. Practical barriers - poor housing, inadequate local public transport, poor nutrition due to lack of finances lead to poor health, higher levels of depression and other mental health problems. Personal barriers - lack of self esteem, low educational attainment lead to low aspirations and expectations for both parents and children². As a result more poor children have emotional and behavioural difficulties, poor health and achieve less well at school and in work than those from better-off families. A large body of research testifies to the link between economic disadvantage and impoverished living conditions to the chances that children will fail to thrive.^{3 4 5}

The factors that bring people into poverty mean that poor families are more likely to live in workless households, to be lone parent families, to have either a parent or child with a disability, to be a large family, to live in a household headed by someone from an ethnic minority or to have a child under five years old.⁶

The degree of poverty under which families live is significant, but the duration of poverty⁷, whether poverty has been intergenerational in a family and the networks of relatives and friends they can call on also have an impact.

Parents in poor environments are resourceful. Disadvantaged parents are good parents; their children do grow, develop and achieve, in spite of financial and environmental factors. But the fact that people do survive adversity is not a reason to leave things as they are. A considerable proportion of poor families do not do well and they and their children suffer.

Whose services, users or providers?

Parents only use services if they need them. Developing services that are target led from the provider's or Government's agenda creates a danger of alienating the users by losing sight of the real needs of poor families and undervaluing or failing to use informal social support systems that many parents rely on, for example supporting grandparents in their role as childcare providers.^{8 9 10} How parents feel about the support they receive is critical. There is also evidence to suggest that poverty-related issues, such as a need for childcare, are not registering as priorities in service providers' assessments.⁷

Lack of clarity over whether family support is aimed at addressing the root causes of poverty, or simply alleviating some of the direct consequences of living on an inadequate income creates frustration in families. A family may urgently need childcare support but can only access community fun days. If the pledge to eradicate child poverty is serious, services and initiatives aimed at alleviating the consequences of poverty need to be short term and clearly identified as such by Government. Instead, policies should concentrate on key infrastructural developments that are essential to lifting more families out of poverty, such as developing the national childcare infrastructure.

Joined-up services

Sets of stressors go together so support for families in poor environments needs to operate at the level of the individual, the family and the community simultaneously⁸.

Local areas need to design services to meet local needs but the range of services where outcomes need to be achieved should arguably include:

- *education-based* – Early Years centres; Children's Centres; community learning and family education service; educational psychology service.

Supporting poor families

- *health-based* – hospital paediatric services; health visiting services; parenting support; parent craft programme; Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services; counselling services.
- *social services* – childminding schemes (attached to Children's Centres); area social work teams; family centres; children with disabilities teams; child protection teams; adoption services.
- *voluntary & multi-sector* – parenting support groups/classes; drop-ins; playgroups; Sure Start; Home Start; Family Mediation Service; child contact centres; Family Welfare Association; Family Services Unit; child & family therapeutic services; NCH/NSPCC/Barnardo's/The Children's Society.

The challenge now is to encourage the different strands of family support to collaborate, without compromising the integrity of the services or the confidentiality of the families involved.

Recommendations

Quality of services for poor families

Services for poor families need to be protected against becoming poor services. The universal provision of family support would distance services from a perception of failure and increase the number of families in difficulty that are reached.

Universal versus targeted services

Some groups have been hard to reach through universal services - asylum seekers, traveller families, minority ethnic families and fathers. These families require additional specialised services.

Services need to enhance and draw parents and families into mainstream provision. Policy should promote the inclusive nature and effectiveness of mainstream support and the reduction of potential waste and duplication of fragmented services.

Access to support services

Semi-formal services need to extend or increase service hours. Formal services need to reduce waiting lists or waiting times and increase the number of staff.

A user led approach to the development and delivery of services is crucial to providing relevant, responsive facilities that parents will want to use - drop-in centres, networked Children's Centres offering meeting places for parents, information sessions and professional support facilities.

Collaborative working

Many families are subject to multiple risk factors. Statutory and community agencies need to work together to deliver a comprehensive package of services. This requires collaborative working between and within agencies.

Child or family poverty?

Children are not usually poor independently of their families or carers. Parents, especially mothers, on low incomes sometimes go without adequate meals or other basic necessities to ensure that children are provided for.¹¹ Children's well being is largely, though not wholly, dependent on parents' well being. Child poverty cannot be considered in a vacuum aside from the poverty of the whole family.

Benefits are safeguards against poverty and are essential in eradicating child poverty. Child Benefit is simple to administer and has very high take-up rates. How appropriate (or effective) is it to withdraw Child Benefit from poor parents whose children persistently truant? The Government needs to show convincing evidence that removing benefits will enable parents to rectify behaviour, without placing added stress on other vulnerable family members.

Policies on taxation, benefits, employment and housing provide a practical test of whether political rhetoric is matched by 'family-friendly' action.² Withdrawal of Child Benefit will penalise the poorest families most heavily and may make parenting even more difficult. It sits uncomfortably with the Government's pledge to eradicate child poverty within a generation.

End Child Poverty is opposed to Child Benefit sanctions and recommends providing more support for families whose children persistently truant. For example, the Family Welfare Association operates local schemes that collect children from their homes and ensures they get to school. Policy needs to address issues such as children missing school because of shame about being poor - fear of bullying because of appearance, use of free school meals¹² or academic underachievement brought about by poverty.

Family support - what is needed?

Families need better information about services. This is essential to normalise services and encourage uptake. Research suggests that services assumed to be universal - antenatal classes and health visiting (key components of many new policy initiatives like Sure Start), are not known about or not available to many parents in poor environments. Yet parents who get emotional support, information and practical action parent better¹³.

Many new Government area action programmes, such as Sure Start have only just begun to be evaluated. Although 47 per cent of family services have been established for over 10 years, 40 per cent have only been established within the last five years.¹⁴ The requirement on these initiatives to bid for funding leaves local strategists unable to plan comprehensively to ensure an equitable distribution of services. And many disadvantaged families outside the catchment areas are unable to access services.

Services need to be evaluated and consolidated to avoid further fragmentation. Despite an increase in provision, most services are not available to all families. Services designed to help families before they reach crisis point are in particularly short supply - child and adolescent mental health services, couple and family relationship services, services for families affected by drug and alcohol misuse and domestic violence, and parenting programmes for parents whose children display emotional or behavioural problems. There is also an identified lack of help for minority ethnic families and for fathers.¹⁵

Recommendations

Standards of services

Many family support services suffer from poor public image. Social services are viewed as threatening agents of social control, rather than valuable sources of help. These services need to address their poor public image.

Information about services for parents

Parents need information about services. Improved information routes about family services could be achieved through provision of universal information sessions for parents at key stages in their child's development.

Marketing services

New policy initiatives that accord central roles to the provision of universal services, for example, health visiting, need to work on information provision and marketing of services more effectively to parents. Gaps in awareness of services and low levels of use of organised services are not acceptable.

Unifying funding

The voluntary sector provides 49 per cent of family support services, largely funded by local authorities. Voluntary sector child and family support needs to be revitalised through investment in capacity. Unifying the bidding processes for family support services would provide both more transparency in provision and open up possibilities for prioritising areas with no current provision.

Extend Sure Start

Sure Start provision should be extended nationwide. Universal provision would address the difficulty of providing much needed services to families in hitherto hard to reach areas, such as wide spread rural communities and pockets of deprivation.

Evaluation

It is imperative that the raft of new initiatives that have emerged over the last few years are now examined. On-going evaluation of services, including consultation with parents and children, is key to ensuring that provision is meeting the needs of families who need support and to highlighting existing gaps in services to aid the planning and development of new services.

Support for high need families

High need families are more likely to access formal social services than other sorts of support. They are more likely to have many difficulties – to live in poor accommodation, to have a disabled child, to be a lone parent, to have mental health difficulties, to have a child with problem behaviour, to be a family where there is concern about risk to the children. They are less likely to be part of the informal social support networks based on mutual support, or more community based services.¹⁶

Yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that staff are leaving formal services to work in the more innovative local initiatives where morale is high and support and training more available. This is creating an acute problem in social service provision.

Family stress can lead to children being at risk but providing appropriate and timely support can significantly reduce these risks. Statutory support is critical in safeguarding families with greatest need. Community based services and social services fulfil different but complementary functions and provide different levels of intervention. Without them more children will end up in care, needing protection, homeless, misusing drugs and alcohol and unable to parent their own children well. It is absolutely imperative that resources for the formal sector should not be squeezed out in the drive to increase community-based support services.

Looking forward

The over-riding message for policy and practice is that how parents *feel* about support is critical. Parents and children need to be listened to, surveyed on how they experience the support that is currently available and strategies put in place to ensure that parents feel in control of the support they receive and how it is delivered. External support that appears to undermine parents' autonomy can end up being experienced as 'interference', which adds to stress rather than relieves it.

Measures that help build social capital and promote the resilience of poor families are likely to be more effective if families are able to move out of poverty at the same time. Yet evidence shows that family support makes a difference to the quality of family relationships, parenting and the long-term outcomes for children. There has been progress in developing family support but more needs to be done and the haemorrhaging of staff from the statutory sector needs to be urgently addressed.

The Spending Review 2002 announcement that the new inter-departmental unit for child care, early years learning and Sure Start will provide finance to set up 58 Children's Centres

incorporating the provision of child care, family support and health services by March 2006 is welcome. Lack of localised, affordable child care and family support is often the missing link for both parents and children in poor environments. The longer term aim to establish a Children's Centre in every one of the 20 per cent most disadvantaged wards in Britain needs to be expanded to incorporate pockets of deprivation in hard to reach areas and to remain high on the Government agenda as crucial to tackling the persistent effects of poverty.

¹ End Child Poverty Coalition, *Tax and Benefits Briefing paper*, 2002.

² Eisenstadt N, Presentation on Sure Start at End Child Poverty/National Family & Parenting Institute seminar: Supporting Poor Families, London July 2002.

³ Utting D, *Family and parenthood: supporting families, preventing breakdown*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation Findings, 1995.

⁴ Jefferis B, Power C & Hertzman C, *Birth weight, childhood socio-economic environment, and cognitive development in the 1958 British birth cohort study*, British Medical Journal 10th August 2002.

⁵ Ermisch J, Francesconi M & Pevalin D J, *Outcomes for children of poverty*, Department for Work and Pensions Report 158, 2001.

⁶ Office for National Statistics, *Households Below Average income 1994/5 – 2000/01*, Department for Work and Pensions.

⁷ National Council for One Parent Families, *One-parent Families Today – The Facts*, 1999.

⁸ Henricson C (ed), Cragg A, Dickens S, Taylor C & Keep G, *Reaching parents: producing and delivering parent information resources. A qualitative research study and practice*, NFPI 2002.

⁹ Ghate D & Hazel N, *Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers for Policy Research Bureau, 2002.

¹⁰ Henricson C (ed), Moorman A & Ball M, *Understanding parents' needs – a review of parents' surveys*, NFPI 2001.

¹¹ Middleston S, Ashworth K & Braithwaite I, *Small Fortunes: spending on children, childhood poverty and parental sacrifice*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1987.

¹² Barnes M, *Blair's tough act is a diversion*, in Community Care, September 5th 2002.

¹³ Barlow J & Stewart-Brown S, *Understanding parenting programmes: the benefits for parents of a home-school linked parenting programme*, Health Services Research Unit – University of Oxford 2000.

¹⁴ Henricson C, *The Future for Family Services in England and Wales: Consultation Responses to the Mapping Report*, NFPI, 2002.

¹⁵ Henricson C, Katz I, Mesie J, Sandison M & Tunstill J, *ibid.*

¹⁶ Ghate D & Hazel N, *ibid.*