

# Parenting on a low income



About families: gathering evidence, informing action • Briefing 3 • March 2012

## Informing service provision

The research summarised in this briefing will be used by voluntary and public sector agencies to assess what action needs to be taken based on the evidence presented. *About Families* will work with these agencies to develop, implement and evaluate action plans based on the needs they identify.

*About Families* supports voluntary and statutory sector organisations to develop evidence-based services to meet the changing needs of parents and families, including those with disabilities.

*About Families* evidence reports and briefings can be downloaded free from [www.aboutfamilies.org.uk](http://www.aboutfamilies.org.uk).

**If you use any of the evidence in our reports to inform your services, we would like to know about it. Please contact [karen.mountney@ed.ac.uk](mailto:karen.mountney@ed.ac.uk).**

If you think *About Families* could support you to use these research findings in your service planning, please contact Katrina Reid on 0131 651 1941 or [Katrina.reid@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Katrina.reid@ed.ac.uk).

*About Families* is a partnership between the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, Parenting across Scotland and Capability Scotland.

## Acknowledgements

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# Parenting on a low income

Given the negative effects of financial hardship, and the current economic climate, *About Families* asked what research could tell us about parenting on a low income. The full report (with references) is available at [www.aboutfamilies.org.uk](http://www.aboutfamilies.org.uk).

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## Key points

- **Doing without:** Parents experiencing financial hardship 'do without' everyday necessities, social activities and holidays, all of which put a strain on parenting and family relationships. Families affected by disability can face additional costs and pressures.
- **Living without:** Living on a low income can bring multiple stresses such as food and fuel poverty, debt, dispossession, homelessness and restricted social opportunities which can affect family relationships, health and well-being, and contribute to feelings of stigma, isolation and exclusion.
- **Managing:** Parents use a range of creative and skilful strategies to manage resources. However, this can be stressful and time consuming and women are more likely to bear the responsibility.
- **Debt:** Attempts to budget can be undermined by life events, benefit changes and employment conditions which can lead to debt.
- **Support:** Parents in low-income areas tend to have low levels of social support and are least likely to access formal services. While support from family and friends is important, it can be variable, undermined by life events and lack of resources and is not always seen positively in terms of independence and ability to cope.
- **Benefits system:** The benefits system is often a significant source of confusion and stress for families, including those affected by disability, and many families do not receive all the benefits to which they are entitled.
- **Barriers to work:** Low-paid and part-time workers can shuttle in and out of work in a 'low pay – no pay' cycle and face a range of barriers to entering or remaining in paid employment. Parents in families affected by disability face particular barriers to employment including inflexible employers, discrimination and lack of affordable and appropriate childcare.
- **Work/care balance:** Sustaining work and family care is difficult and stressful, and involves managing a variety of competing tensions, usually by women.
- **Low-income neighbourhoods:** People on low incomes are increasingly likely to live alongside others who are materially disadvantaged. Deprived neighbourhoods have inadequate housing and a lack of basic amenities and services, all of which can contribute to stress. However, while levels of poverty are higher in deprived areas, there are more families on low incomes living outside these areas than in them meaning that localised policies alone will not tackle poverty.
- **Recession:** The recent recession has generated additional burdens for some people already living on low incomes. This is combined with decreased income for charities and voluntary sector organisations which must attempt to meet increasing demand for services with fewer resources.
- **What do we know about life on a low income?:** A wealth of available statistics on poverty can tell us who is most at risk of experiencing poverty and under what circumstances. However, we know much less about what life is like for people living on low incomes, how their experiences change over time, and how parents manage. We know little about differences in the impact of poverty on mothers and fathers or different types of families, including families affected by disability, step-families, ethnic-minority families and those with kinship care arrangements.

### Key trends and statistics

Relative poverty: a household with an annual income that is 60% or less of the current average (median) British household income is considered to be living in relative poverty. This is the most commonly used threshold of low income, and is used to define 'low income' in this briefing.

In the UK:

- Household income is forecast to be 7% lower in 2012-13 than it was in 2009-10, and to remain below its 2009-10 level until at least 2015-16. Living standards are therefore forecast to fall generally, due to high inflation and weak earnings growth over this period.
- Some 50% of lone parent families are living on low income, more than twice the rate for couples with children.
- More than half of all the children in low-income households have someone in their family in paid work.

In Scotland:

- In 2009/10, 29% of people in deprived areas were in relative poverty before they had to pay housing costs, compared with 15% in the rest of Scotland. However, most people in relative poverty do not live in deprived areas.
- In 2009/10, 19% of individuals in households affected by disability were in relative poverty, compared to 16% for households not affected by disability.

### Material impact

Parents experiencing financial hardship 'do without' everyday necessities, social activities and holidays, all of which put a strain on parenting. School holidays and special cultural occasions generate extra costs, alongside other seasonal costs such as heating, which pressurise budgets. Families affected by disability face additional costs including utility bills, adaptations to housing, transport, clothing, specialist equipment and care services. The cost of suitable accommodation can make holidays unaffordable for many families affected by disability.

### Non-material impact

Limited finances can result in feelings of monotony in everyday life, lack of choice, and little opportunity for a break from daily pressures. Not being able to afford to participate in leisure activities, to socialise, not having the 'right' material things, and being perceived as somehow

different to other people in society can all contribute to feelings of stigma, isolation and exclusion.

Financial difficulty causes multiple stresses including food and fuel poverty, an inability to make ends meet, debt, dispossession, homelessness, restricted social life for both parents and children, concerns that children will miss out at school, and worry for the future, all of which can be detrimental to parents' physical and mental health and well-being as well as affecting family relationships.

### Managing

Parents use a range of creative and skilful strategies to manage resources and protect children from the impacts of low income. However, this can be stressful and time consuming and women are more likely to bear the responsibility. Children often understand the challenges arising from low income and develop strategies to help such as taking on caring duties so parents can work, and not telling parents about school trips or other activities.

### Debt

Attempts to budget can be undermined by life events (such as illness or separation), benefit changes and employment conditions which can lead to debt. What was a tolerable commitment (e.g. mortgage, loan) on a higher income can become crippling when income is reduced. For some, lack of access to mainstream financial services can mean resorting to high-interest home credit service loans.

### Support

Families and close friends are a valued source of financial, material and emotional support, especially for women. However, support can be variable and undermined by life events (e.g. illness, separation) and lack of resources (e.g. lack of transport). Receiving support is not always seen positively. Parents can have concerns over loss of privacy or independence, potential interference in private matters, obligations to return favours, and worry that requesting help too often would be interpreted as a failure to cope. A reliance on help from family can lead to strained relationships between generations. Parents in lower income households, in social housing, or living in areas of high deprivation tend to have low levels of social support, particularly ethnic minority and lone mothers, who are also least likely to access formal services.

### Benefits system

The benefits system is often a significant source of confusion and stress for families, including those affected by disability. Interruptions, delays or deductions in payments can be extremely destabilising. Many families do not receive all the benefits to which they are entitled which increases financial pressures and, in turn, stress for parents.

### Barriers to work

Poverty is a dynamic, not static, state. Low-paid and part-time workers can shuttle in and out of work in a 'low pay – no pay' cycle and face a range of barriers to entering or remaining in paid employment, including family health issues, low qualifications, lack of confidence or self-esteem, the benefits system and lack of suitable childcare, education, training and transport. Jobs in this cycle usually have worse employment conditions than stable jobs.

Lone mothers of children of all ages are more likely to experience employment barriers, particularly lack of suitable childcare. Parents of disabled children face particular barriers to employment including inflexible employers, and especially, lack of affordable and appropriate childcare. Barriers to employment for disabled adults include lack of opportunity for education and training, lack of support, inflexible employers, fear of losing benefits, the low-paid nature of much employment and discrimination and prejudice from others.

Multiple barriers, together with the extra costs generated by entering employment (such as transport, clothes and childcare), can make transition to work difficult or even unviable for parents.

### Work / care balance

Employment is highly valued for a range of reasons and parents aspire for work-life balance. However, balancing work and family care is difficult and involves managing a variety of intersecting and competing tensions, usually by women. Informal caring arrangements are common, but can be complex, variable and difficult to arrange, requiring negotiation and reciprocity to keep it going.

### Low-income neighbourhoods

Due to recent housing policies, people on low incomes are increasingly likely to live alongside others who are materially disadvantaged. Deprived neighbourhoods have inadequate housing and a lack of basic amenities and services, all of which can contribute to stress. However, while levels of poverty are higher in deprived areas, there are more families on low incomes living outside these areas than in them meaning that localised policies alone will not tackle poverty.

Low-income communities can be labelled as 'bad' and become stigmatised by outsiders based on the behaviour of individuals, overlooking their positive aspects. Residents can also isolate individuals by labelling them as from 'bad' areas within their own neighbourhoods.

Parents identify tangible physical, behavioural and health risks associated with their local environments for their children (such as being exposed to anti-social

behaviour or being drawn into problematic lifestyles). Efforts to balance safety and risk for children, such as accessing supervised activities, cost money and time. Also, managing perceived risks impacts on the development of children's independence, and ability to look after themselves, and limits their social life and access to leisure facilities.

### Recession and welfare reform

The recent recession has generated additional burdens for people already living on low incomes, including increased time pressures, concerns about job security, decline in nutrition and higher stress levels. This is combined with decreased income for charities and voluntary sector organisations which must attempt to meet increasing demand for services with fewer resources.

While the Universal Credit welfare reform is claimed to reduce relative poverty – if implemented successfully – any reduction would be more than offset by the poverty-increasing impact of the UK government's other changes to personal taxes and state benefits. Proposed changes to disability-related benefits may also increase poverty levels.

**What would help?** A range of improvements would help parents on low incomes to manage resources, balance work and care and access services, including: affordable and appropriate childcare; holistic and family-oriented services; accessible and affordable facilities; co-ordinated and flexible support; support in accessing benefits; help with employability skills; job flexibility; and more involvement of parents in service planning.

### Research on parenting on a low income

This briefing is based on a longer report. A range of publications were drawn on, including literature reviews of existing research, qualitative and quantitative research findings, Scottish and UK Government reports, research and reports by the third sector, as well as statistical data. Also, a survey and interviews were conducted with disabled parents and parents of disabled children.

A breakdown of the research used, and references, are available in the full report. Download it free at [www.aboutfamilies.org.uk](http://www.aboutfamilies.org.uk).