

# Poor Parents, Poor Parenting?

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# The presentation

- **Children affected by poverty**
- **‘Good’ parenting**
- **Some research and theories about the negative effect of poverty on parenting:**
  - **Stress**
  - **Culture of poverty**
  - **Environment or neighbourhood**
- **What don’t we know**
- **What can we conclude**



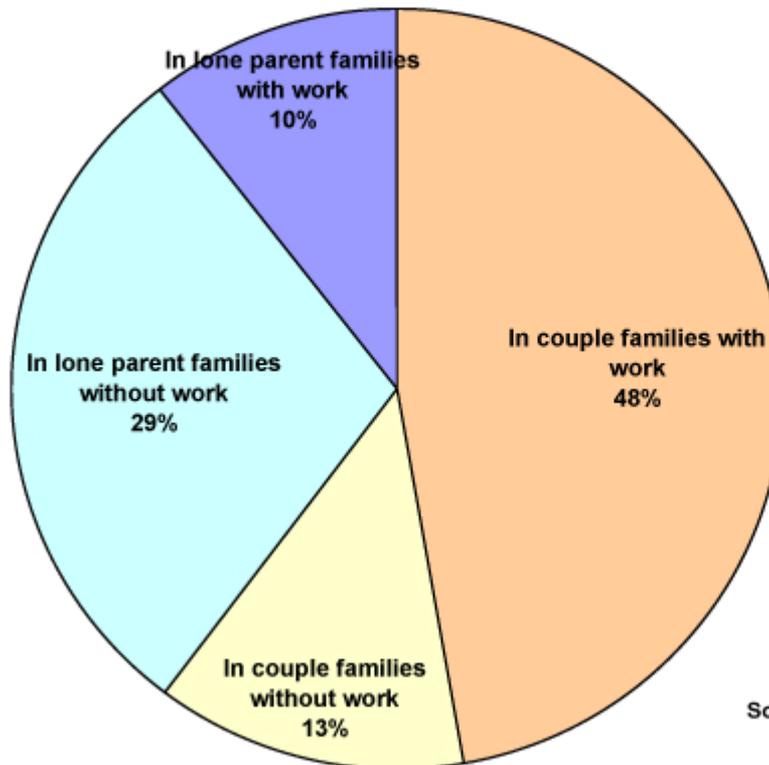
# How many?

- **In 2008/09: 2.8 million UK children in poverty before housing costs. After housing costs, nearly 4 million**
- **0.1m less than 2007/08**
- **Government's target: reduction to 1.7 million in 2010–11 (before housing costs)**



# Who are they?

**More than half of the children in low income households live in families where at least one of the adults is in paid work**



Source: Household Below Average Income  
2008/09, DWP; UK; updated Sep 2010



# What does it (not) mean for children?

- 1 week's holiday a year away from home with the family
- Swimming at least once a month
- A hobby or leisure activity
- Friends round for tea or a snack once a fortnight
- Not sharing a bedroom with a sibling of the opposite sex if 10+
- Leisure equipment (e.g. sports equipment or bicycle)
- Celebrations on special occasions such as birthdays, Christmas or other religious festivals
- Play group/nursery/toddler group at least once a week
- A school trip at least once a term



# What does it (not) mean for parents?

- Home adequately warm and in decent state of repair
- Two pairs of all-weather shoes for each adult
- Yearly 1-week holiday away, not with relatives
- Replacing worn out furniture
- A small amount of money to spend on self each week
- Regular savings (of £10 a month) for rainy days or retirement
- Home contents insurance
- Friends or family for a drink/meal at least once a month
- A hobby or leisure activity
- Replacing/repairing broken electrical goods



# What does extra money mean ?

- *Having a bit of money means I can do something extra with them (the children) – go to a farm or go swimming – at the end of the week when the money (from benefits) has run out.*
- *It's only £20 but it's a day out for myself and my son. We don't get treats otherwise.*



# But does it mean poor parenting?

- What is 'good' parenting? According to whom?
- Baumrind: = Authoritative parenting  
Parents are demanding but also responsive

VS

Permissive: more responsive than demanding

Authoritarian: demanding, directive, not responsive

In all cultures, parents with lower incomes tend to use authoritarian.

Are these middle-class perceptions?



# Influencing factors

- **The ecological model – Parenting is a complex web of interacting factors**
- **Belsky and Vondra: adequate parenting stems from**
  - **Contextual sources of stress and support**
  - **Family and child characteristics**
  - **Parents' developmental history and own psychological resources**



# Research (1)

- **Waylen and Stewart Brown (2008): parents of young children in different social and cultural groups**
- **Cumulative effect on parenting of poor health, lack of social support and financial hardship**
- **Deterioration in finances led to *slight* reduction in parenting score**
- **But improvement did not increase it**
- **Nor did more social support**
  
- **Most influential was improvement in mothers' mental and physical health**



# Stress theory

- **Materially disadvantaged parents face more stress than affluent parents**
- **It causes them to be depressed and irritable**
- **This affects their parenting and they are more likely to be harsh and inconsistent**
- **Typically has negative effect on outcomes for children**
- **More money alone (especially small amounts in benefits) is not the solution. Other factors affect parenting**
- **And the effect of children on parents' levels of stress???**



# Research (2)

- **Ermisch et al (2001): growing up in poor families points to lower educational expectations, less likelihood of employment and propensity for early motherhood**
- **Yaqub (2002): people's class, education and health are similar to their parents'. But these can be counteracted (e.g. by resilience)**
- ***... there is huge scope for many, if not most, individuals to escape from the patterns and tendencies. An important area for further research is to examine more closely the characteristics of individuals who escape....***



**(Hobcraft, 1998)**

# Culture of Poverty

- **Inter-generational poverty creates barriers to upward mobility**
- **Because of low educational expectations, harsh parenting, conformity, no commitment to the labour force**
- **And parents replicate their own parenting experiences**
- **Reducing stress through more money and better environments will not work**
- **Changing attitudes/parenting styles is the answer**
- **But do affluent parents use their advantages to ensure power and privilege for their children?**



# Research (3)

- **Studies in the US:**
- **a) moving to a near-poor/non-poor area improved mothers' mental health + children less depressed and anxious (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2003) But**
- **b) little effect on children's outcomes (Sanbonmatsu 2006)**
  
- **UK study in 4 neighbourhoods (3 deprived):**
- **In deprived areas – mothers with stress, children with behavioural problems**
- **In affluent area – more progressive parental views**
- **Only difference in use of discipline was in inner-city area**
- **Most parents cope well**



# Environment

- **Complementary to other theories**
- **Neighbourhood *as well as* personal characteristics influence parenting**
- **But effect is not significant: parents' background, child's personality and family dynamics are more important**
- **Poverty does not have *direct* relationship with parenting. But parents are more stressed**

***...parenting in poor environments is a more risky business than parenting elsewhere. (Ghate and Hazel 2002)***



# Limits of research

- **Studies of parenting & poverty do not give a holistic view of parents' lives**
- **Usually confined to snap-shots, not the depth or movement in and out of poverty**
- **Not enough known about the differential effects between parents with children of different ages**
- **Parenting usually = mothering**



# Conclusions

- **No clear-cut, causal link between poverty and parenting**
- **Individual responses to hardship governed by family structure, neighbourhood and social support plus parents' temperaments, beliefs and own experiences to being parented**
- **Stress is major influence. Stress → depression → disrupted parenting → poorer outcomes for children**
- **Unclear if improved outcomes come from improved parenting or better access to resources (e.g. housing). Or both**
- **Most parents in poverty cope well with adversity**



# What can be done?

- **No strong evidence that tackling material deprivation through welfare to work, benefit increases etc. will improve parenting or outcomes for children**
- **Possible answer is promoting parents' (especially mothers') mental and physical health + improving parenting generally**



# Contact

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