

# Poverty and the child's world: assessing children's needs

**Poverty in a child's life is the result of specific social and economic circumstances, which are always interrelated and complex. However, frontline workers are often unaware of the causes and consequences of poverty.** Owen Gill and Gordon Jack **argue the case for exploring children's living environments to articulate more holistic approaches to the fight against poverty.**



## Introduction

Child welfare professionals, are faced daily with the consequences of poverty in children's lives. Whilst the vast majority of the children they work with come from poor families and live in poor neighbourhoods, it is striking how little the analysis of poverty features in the assessments that many professionals make.<sup>1</sup> One reason for this may be that they have not been presented with adequate models.

It is now some years since central government's guidance on the assessment of 'children in need' and their families was published.<sup>2</sup> This national framework requires that a comprehensive range of factors within three domains (child's developmental needs, parent's capacity to meet those needs, and wider family and environmental factors), and the connections between them, are fully taken into account. However, whilst a number of assessment tools were provided by the Government, none of them focused on issues relevant to the impact of environmental factors, including income deprivation, unemployment, inadequate community resources and poor quality housing, on the lives of individual children.<sup>3</sup>

The subsequent development of the *Every Child Matters* agenda and the Children Act 2004, which place a duty on local authorities to safe-

guard and promote the well-being of all children living in their area, as well as the introduction of the Common Assessment Framework<sup>4</sup> for the early identification of children and young people with additional needs, have done little to remedy the lack of guidance for professionals on how to assess the impact of poverty on individual children.

## Ecological perspectives on child poverty

Starting with the work of Bronfenbrenner,<sup>5</sup> 'ecological' approaches to understanding the development of children and young people have become increasingly important in both research and theory.<sup>6</sup>

Ecological theory proposes that the development of children and young people can only be fully understood by viewing it within the context of a number of interacting social systems or 'domains'. These include the child's immediate and extended family network, formal institutions such as schools, the local community and society as a whole. The influences and experiences that result from the interactions between these different systems play a key role in determining the extent to which children and young people either thrive and reach their full potential, or experience difficulties in their development which can have lasting detrimental effects on their well-being and future life chances.

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In terms of the 'Five Outcomes' for children identified in *Every Child Matters* (being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being), the ecological approach to understanding the complexity and totality of children's lives can be represented diagrammatically as illustrated at the bottom of the page.

In relation to child poverty, the diagram assists practitioners to consider how lack of resources (of all kinds), within different domains of the child's life, can impact on their well-being. The model also encourages practitioners to consider the way in which deficits in one domain interact with those in another, to compound the disadvantage of individual children.

Some of the inter-related factors that child assessments need to cover are indicated below.

### The family

Assessments need to take account, at the very least, of overall household income, including whether families are receiving their full entitlement to tax credits and welfare benefits, and their levels of debt. They should also show an awareness of how that money is being shared, with a particular emphasis on gender differentials, as well as recognizing the particular circumstances of the family. For instance, a family that includes a disabled child is more likely to be experiencing financial hardship, and poor quality or inappropriate housing may be compounding their difficulties.

### The wider family

Research on child welfare stresses the importance of networks of support in the child's life. Nowhere is this more important than in relation to poverty. Grandparents, for instance, may be making a significant difference to the child's experience of poverty. Even in lone parent families where the father is absent, paternal grandparents may be actively supporting the child, providing presents and treats that make a real difference to the child's life. Conversely, a child in a transient, income-deprived family, or one in which relations with the wider family have broken down, may be experiencing poverty in a particularly harsh form.

### Formal institutions

Formal institutions – particularly schools – may also be making a difference to the child's experience of poverty. For instance, some schools may expect parents to contribute towards the costs of projects and outings, and 'letters home' about such activities put particular stresses on low-income families. Conversely, schools may be making a positive difference to the individual child's experiences through such activities as free breakfast and homework clubs.

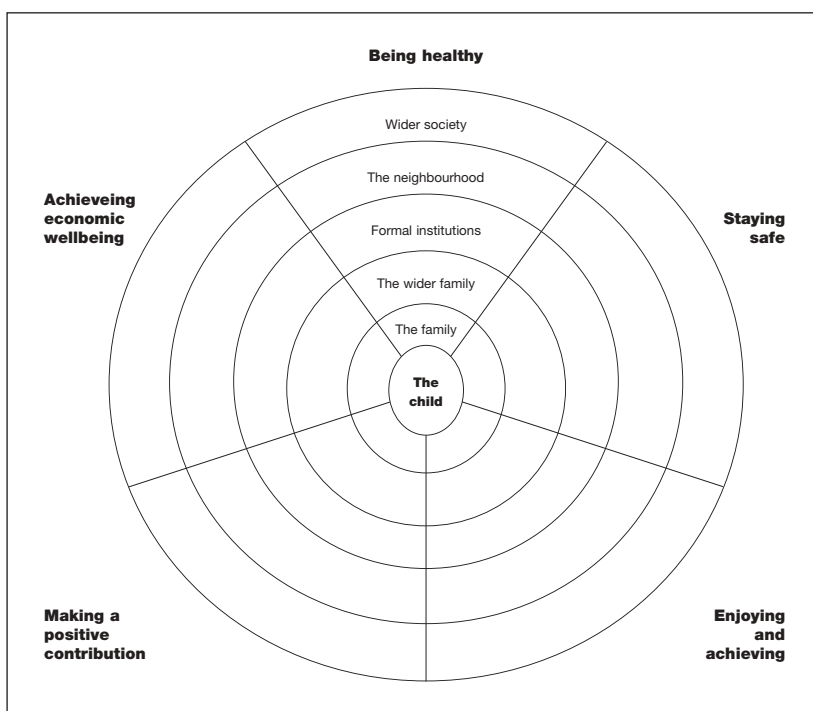
### The neighbourhood or community

An increasingly important message from research is the importance of location for the child's experience of poverty. Although being poor in a deprived area generally carries extra risks for children's well-being, additional community resources may be available to partially mitigate these risks. Credit Unions, furniture and clothing exchanges, food co-ops, advice centres and access to free trips and activities may all be making a difference to the child's experience of poverty. On the other hand, being poor in a more affluent area may mean that the family has no access to such community resources. Recent research<sup>7</sup> has, for instance, suggested that such children are likely to be involved in fewer activities and be more aware of differences between themselves and other children.

Assessments therefore need to capture the impacts of the local context on particular children and families.

### Wider society

Finally, it is important that assessments take into account the expectations that society places on children and families. For instance, the child may be in a class where it is expected that children will be invited into one another's home to play or for birthday parties. There may



even be competition as to the lavishness or novelty of these parties. A child in an income-deprived family is likely to feel particularly left out in such a local culture. At a wider level, there may be expectations on children to own expensive branded goods and the latest mobile phones. Research<sup>8</sup> has alerted us to the importance of these pressures in the lives of poor children. In some situations, the lack of these goods may also be leading to children being bullied.

### Narratives that make connections

To support practitioners in making assessments that fully incorporate poverty dimensions into their understanding of the child's world, it is also important that researchers and others develop holistic narratives about the impact of child poverty on individual children. Research, for instance, has tended to focus on separate aspects of child poverty, such as income deprivation, poor housing, or inadequate community resources, often without highlighting the connections and interactions between these different influences in the real lives of children.

The box above contains a case study from Barnardo's work with Bristol's low-income Somali families, and illustrates some of these connections between the different domains of children's lives.

### Conclusion

Despite the development of more holistic assessment frameworks and policy initiatives, both practice experience and research indicate that child welfare agencies and workers continue to focus most of their attention on internal family issues, failing to adequately incorporate anti-poverty approaches.<sup>9</sup>

Embedding an anti-poverty perspective into assessments is an important requirement if practice is to reflect the reality of many children's lives adequately. We argue that models which apply ecological theory, helping to connect the internal and external worlds of the child, coupled with more holistic accounts of the impact of poverty on individual children, need to be made more widely available to child welfare practitioners.

Assessments of the kind that we advocate here are, of course, only the beginning of the process of improving the lives of children and young people living in poverty. Nonetheless, they are an important first step if anti-poverty perspectives are to become more central to the work of child welfare professionals and practi-

Yasmine is a lone Somali mother who has four children, aged eleven, nine, four and eighteen months respectively. They live on the tenth floor of a high rise block in a two-bedroom flat.

She says that their accommodation is totally unsuitable to their needs:

*It affects a lot. When they're in the house, they don't have space to run. In school they're running. They're doing everything. The teachers say they are very naughty.*

Listening to Yasmine, a picture emerges of a family trapped by lack of resources and a sometimes hostile community:

*Because now all of us, we live in flats. When we go down they're fighting. When we go to the park there's some people coming. Teenagers fighting. Swearing at you. Telling you bad things.*

Eleven-year-old Liban talks about the lack of play facilities close to the block of flats in which the family live:

*Outside there's space to run around but every time a car comes we have to stand somewhere. Sometimes there are a lot of cars.*

And nine-year-old Sulman talks about the violence and intimidation that he is exposed to:

*Some people fight and take it out on you in the park. There are lots of fights there. People swearing and hitting people for no reason.*

In the context of a generally hostile social environment, Yasmine's lone parent status further compounds the family's difficulties. For instance, if the two older children want to go outside to play, she accompanies them to ensure that they are safe. This means that she also has to get the two younger children ready to go out. The simple business of allowing her two older children to play out involves a major family expedition.

tioners, enabling them to become more active and powerful advocates for the users of their services. ■

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