

# **The relationship between parenting and poverty**



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# **The relationship between parenting and poverty**

**Ilan Katz, Judy Corlyon, Vincent La Placa and  
Sarah Hunter**



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# 1 Introduction

Recent years have seen growing political interest in tackling poverty in Britain and its negative impact on children and parents. In March 1999 Tony Blair, as Prime Minister, declared the Labour Government's intention to eliminate child poverty by 2020, with commitments to reduce it by a quarter by 2004 and by a half by 2010. The Conservative leader, David Cameron (2006), has also acknowledged the negative consequence of relative poverty on families and has committed his party to reducing them. Concern about child poverty has been driven not only by a desire to combat inequality and disadvantage, but also by increasing recognition that the life chances of materially deprived children are far more limited than those of wealthier families. Raising children (and their parents) out of poverty is increasingly acknowledged as an investment in the human capital of the country.

The major themes of much recent research on child poverty, as well as policy, have included measurement, child outcomes and the ways in which the 'cycle of poverty' can be broken (Ermisch *et al.*, 2001; Yaqub, 2002). The role of parents in the relationship between poverty and outcomes for children is less well understood. Parents living in poverty are much more likely than more affluent parents to be facing a range of issues other than material deprivation which may affect their parenting. These include low levels of education and few qualifications, lack of access to jobs and services, isolation, mental and physical ill health and domestic violence. These factors may act independently of each other but are also likely to *interact*, so that disaggregating their effect on parenting – and on outcomes for children – is extremely challenging. We also know relatively less about the different ways that parents in poverty cope, as opposed to the negative aspects of parenting under stress that place children at risk of poor outcomes. In particular, our understanding is still limited as to whether and how far 'good' parenting mediates the effects of poverty on children. Yet, in spite of the strong body of research linking poverty to poor outcomes, there is equally good evidence to show that most parents living in poverty are remarkably resilient and possess strong coping skills in the face of the adversity in their lives. While most of the literature on parenting relates to child outcomes, there is a growing recognition that parenting and parents themselves are worthy of consideration in their own right (DfES, 2007).

As well as poverty affecting parenting, parenting may have an effect on poverty, resulting in so-called 'cycles of disadvantage' (Rutter and Madge, 1978). Another complicating factor is that the demographic profile of poor families differs from that of affluent families and this complicates comparisons between them. The key issue which this review addresses, therefore, is the extent to which poverty itself affects

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parenting, or whether other characteristics of parents living in poverty, such as their mental health, personalities, education and family structures, are likely to affect both their parenting and their economic circumstances. Other issues covered include:

- the extent to which poverty can exert separate effects which can be identified as distinct from other risk factors encountered by materially deprived parents
- whether 'good' parenting can act as a protective buffer to the detrimental effects of poverty on children
- aspects of parenting that relate most strongly to any buffering effect
- gaps in current knowledge of these matters, and the research needed to fill them.

## 2 Definitions of poverty

There are two basic definitions of poverty in common use: 'absolute' poverty and 'relative' poverty. In addition there are a number of related concepts in use such as 'hardship', 'social exclusion' and 'social capital'. These are not synonymous with poverty, but are important in discussing the relationship between parenting and poverty.

- *Absolute poverty* normally refers to a state in which income is insufficient to provide the basic needs required to sustain life (i.e. to feed and shelter children).
- *Relative poverty* defines income or resources in relation to the average. The official definition in the UK is 60 per cent of contemporary median equivalised household income (DWP, 2003a, 2003b). Relative poverty may also refer to the wider implications of living in poverty, such as the inability to participate or contribute to society on an equal basis because of a lack of sufficient income. According to Peter Townsend:

Individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or are at least widely encouraged or approved, in the societies to which they belong.

(Townsend, 1979, p. 31)

The British researcher David Gordon (1998) believes that poverty can be measured objectively, through the assessment of different income levels. But it can also have a relative dimension incorporating moral and cultural assumptions of what constitutes a 'decent' standard of living. He argues for a dynamic concept of poverty which is not a fixed state or attribute of individuals or families. Thus a reduction in material income may not necessarily lead to immediate poverty if individuals possess other financial resources, such as savings. Conversely, moves out of poverty may not initially be connected to a sudden rise in income after unemployment if individuals need to save or pool their resources so as to consolidate a better standard of living in the long term. Similarly, Berthoud *et al.* (2004) have shown that families move relatively quickly in and out of poverty, but that their 'hardship' is more enduring.

Social exclusion is a similar concept to relative poverty in the sense that it encompasses both the material circumstances of people and their position relative to 'mainstream' society. Although there is little consensus as to what the term actually

means or how to measure it (Atkinson, 1998), the concept of social exclusion has proved useful in widening the policy debate towards a more dynamic and holistic view of poverty and inequality. The British Government's definition is:

A short hand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.

(Department for Social Security, 1999, p. 23)

Levitas (1998), in an influential model, has set out three different 'discourses' of social exclusion:

- Redistribution Discourse (RED), where social exclusion is seen in terms of material deprivation, and the solution as a redistribution of wealth. This, she suggests, is the 'Old Labour' socialist ideology.
- Social Inclusion Discourse (SID), portraying exclusion not just as a matter of poverty, but of dislocation from the mainstream of society. It is related to the 'dynamic' view of poverty. The policy objective of SID is to involve socially excluded people in the workforce and in mainstream society (including mainstream services).
- Moral Underclass Discourse (MUD), viewing socially excluded people as (at least to some extent) responsible for their own marginalisation, and arguing that policy towards these groups should not only involve 'carrots' such as job seekers benefits, but also 'sticks' such as parenting and anti-social behaviour orders or withdrawal of benefits for parents who do not participate in welfare to work programmes.

As Levitas acknowledges, these are 'ideal types', not 'real life' policy positions:

All of them posit paid work as a major factor in social integration, and all of them have a moral content. But they differ in what the excluded are seen as lacking. To oversimplify, in RED they have no money, in SID they have no work and in MUD they have no morals.

(Levitas, 1998, p. 27)

While this analysis applies mainly to the labour market, these discourses are also relevant to many of the current tensions apparent in the development of policy towards parenting. In particular the MUD discourse is associated with the debates

relating to the 'underclass' which characterised the early 1990s but which have resurfaced from time to time since then, most recently in the *Breakdown Britain* report (Social Justice Policy Group, 2006). Fundamental to this way of thinking is that poverty is caused (or perpetuated) primarily by inadequate parenting and/or family breakdown. Also that many materially deprived parents are dislocated from 'mainstream' society and its values, in particular the value of participation in the labour force and of behaving in a socially responsible manner. However, research has consistently failed to show that low socio-economic status (SES) in and of itself is associated with any differences in beliefs and attitudes towards work or antisocial behaviour (Heath, 1992).

According to Room (1995), social exclusion is the process of being detached from the organisations and communities of which the society is composed and from rights and obligations they embody. In broad terms this is a move from a focus on *distributional* to one on *relational* issues. Room (1995), a specialist in European social policy, describes five ways in which there have been changes of emphasis from poverty to social exclusion in research:

- the move from the study of financial indicators to that of multidimensional disadvantage
- the move from a static to a dynamic analysis
- the move from the individual household to the local neighbourhood
- the move from a distributional to a relational focus
- the connotation of separation and permanence, a discontinuity in relationships with the rest of society.

Room argues that the first three aspects have to some extent been explored in recent studies of poverty, and in so far as social exclusion focuses on these, it does not represent a significant departure from the past. However, the move from a distributional to a relational focus marks a significant change of emphasis. Social exclusion focuses on relational issues: inadequate social participation, lack of social integration, discrimination and prejudice and lack of power. The discontinuity in relationships with the rest of society is also seen as a distinct feature of social exclusion. This analysis creates space for discrimination to be seen as a crucial dynamic in the understanding of exclusion. Room's approach is in some ways similar to that of the French sociologist Bourdieu's (1986) view of social capital. Unlike most US theorists such as Putnam (2000), who perceive social capital mainly in terms of

community solidarity and support networks, Bourdieu views social capital as one of the resources which families deploy to ensure that they maintain advantages for their children. Middle-class parents use not only financial advantage to ensure their children have access to the best schools, but also their networks of acquaintances and knowledge of middle-class mores to ensure that their children benefit from the most favourable resources, thus perpetuating class positions over generations.

The implications of the concept of social exclusion for research on parenting are that research should not only take into account the socio-economic status or income levels of families, but also factors such as connectedness with the local community and their access to mainstream services and transport. Research should address not only the characteristics of individuals and groups who are excluded, but also the mechanisms by which mainstream society excludes them. In addition, social exclusion (as with the dynamic view of poverty) emphasises the dimensions of time and space. Communities in which parents live are as significant for these studies as their current level of income. The concept of social exclusion also implies continuity over time – that it is more difficult to move in and out of social exclusion than it is to move in and out of poverty. In this sense it is similar to ‘hardship’ as defined by Berthoud *et al.* (2004).

The definition of poverty used in research is of critical importance in another way. Hoff *et al.* (2002) point out that different operational definitions of SES – for example, using SES as a continuous variable; comparing families at the extremes of poverty and affluence, or comparing families one standard deviation above and below the median – can demonstrate very different effects on parenting. Most intervention research has involved studying relatively minor changes in participants’ incomes – typically from unemployment into low-paid work – so it may be unrealistic to expect to see significant changes in parenting.

### 3 Parents and parenting

In this review references to ‘parents’ and ‘parenting’ will refer to those who provide significant care for children, including grandparents, other relatives or adults not biologically related to the child. ‘Parent’ is a gender-neutral term, but in fact ‘mothering’ may differ considerably from ‘fathering’ (Parke, 2002). In relation to parenting and poverty, the vast majority of studies have focused on mothers, and there is very little information about the differential effects of poverty on mothering as opposed to fathering. At the broadest level, parenting encompasses the provision of care directed at children’s physical, emotional and social needs. Thus the two key tasks of parenting are *nurturance* and *socialisation*. Other common features of parenting are that it takes place in the context of family and community groups and that women tend to be assumed to be the ‘primary caregivers’, with men’s role less often articulated, valued or studied. In most writing about parenting there seems to be consensus that parenting is extremely challenging (and is getting harder). However, the actual activities undertaken by parents vary considerably between different social groups and between individuals. Thus there are many different views of what makes for ‘good parenting’.

Perhaps the key theoretical advance in the last half-century relating to the study of parenting was provided by Bronfenbrenner’s *ecological model* of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Belsky, 1984). The ecological model takes a systems perspective, and provides a framework for understanding how factors that impinge on parents and children nest together within a hierarchy of four levels; socio-cultural (macro system), community (exo system), family (micro system) and individual (ontogenic). These levels also describe a pathway of influence moving from the distal (social and community factors) to the more proximal (family and individual factors). Belsky and Vondra (1989) propose that the determinants of adequate parenting arise from three sources:

- parents’ own developmental history and resultant personal psychological resources
- characteristics of the family and child
- contextual sources of stress and support.

Thus, the fundamental insights of the ecological model are that parenting (and child development) is only comprehensible within a context; that it consists of a complex web of interacting, interdependent factors. We cannot, therefore, understand factors

associated with one level of the model without also exploring those at other levels. We also need to recognise that parents and children influence each other in a 'bidirectional' way. Thus we cannot understand parents without also understanding children. Ecology and bidirectionality are, therefore, critical for an understanding of parenting, in particular for insights into how and why parents in different circumstances may behave differently.

Classic research by Baumrind (1971, 1991) categorised parents according to whether they were high or low on parental 'responsiveness' and 'demandingness' and created a typology of three parenting styles:

- *permissive*: parents who are more responsive than demanding
- *authoritarian*: parents who are demanding and directive, but not responsive
- *authoritative*: parents who are both demanding and responsive. (See also O'Connor and Scott, 2007.)

Maccoby and Martin (1983), in a comprehensive review of the research literature on parenting, added a fourth parenting style:

- *uninvolved*: parents who are low in both responsiveness and demandingness.

These parenting styles have been found to apply across cultures and classes, but research has shown that in all cultures parents with lower SES are more likely to use 'authoritarian' parenting styles than those in higher SES brackets (Hoff *et al.*, 2002). However, the positive effects of authoritative parenting differ somewhat across cultures (Dornbusch *et al.*, 1987; Deater-Deckard *et al.*, 1996; see also Phoenix and Husain, 2007). In order to explain this anomaly, Darling and Steinberg (1993) examined the research literature on parenting style and conclude that parenting *style* should be separated from parenting *goals* and parenting *practices*. This is important because it means that two sets of parents living in different social or cultural contexts can use similar parenting practices (e.g. discipline their children in a similar way), but that the meaning of these practices and the outcomes for the children may differ depending on the overall style of parenting in the family which provides the context for the discipline. The family context is in turn affected by the community or culture within which the family is living.

These findings lend credence to the view, discussed below, that different parenting practices amongst lower SES parents (so far as they exist) are not necessarily the result of inadequate socialisation or deficient role modelling but are perhaps adaptive responses to their environment.

## Parental needs

It is also important to note that parents have their own needs as adults and assessments of the relationship between poverty and parenting ought to take a holistic view of parents' lives. Yet most existing studies of poor families have tended to focus on parenting practices and style in relation to parental employment. Issues such as access to adult leisure facilities or entertainment have not generally been thought to be part of parenting as such, even though they can greatly affect parents' lives and, by implication, their capacity to parent (Ghate and Hazel, 2002).

Most clients of the child welfare system are women living on low incomes (Baker, 1995; Sheppard, 2004). Baker argues that although the welfare system does acknowledge this, few studies have adequately addressed the theoretical connections between poverty, abuse, gender and 'inadequate parenting'. It is, for example, unrealistic to demand that women should be able to meet their children's physical and emotional needs when their own are not being met. Women are offered little support in the way of financial assistance and/or respite care for their children when they are experiencing temporary stress or abuse from an intimate partner.

## Research implications

The dynamic and multidimensional nature of poverty and the complexity and contextuality of parenting make the relationship between parenting and poverty extremely difficult to study. Rather than asking how much poverty affects parenting, research is now turning to more subtle questions, including:

- How do the duration and depth of poverty make a difference to parenting practices?
- How do different patterns of income over time (e.g. constant low income, declining income, variable income) differ in their effects on different aspects of parenting?
- How does poverty differentially affect parents with children of different ages (i.e. does it make a difference if parents were poor when their children were babies as opposed to when they were teenagers?)
- What are the specific mechanisms which poverty bears on to affect different aspects of parenting (discipline, nurturing, socialisation, involvement in education etc.)?

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- What are the particular features of poverty and exclusion which affect different aspects of parenting?

## 4 Which parents are poor?

Materially disadvantaged parents are a demographically different group from affluent parents. Demographic studies (e.g. Hobcraft, 1998; Kemp *et al.*, 2004) show that poor families are more likely to:

- have non-traditional structures – lone parents and parents in reconstituted families
- live in households where no adult is in employment
- be headed by a teenage parent
- have a sick or disabled child
- have a child or children under five
- have a large number of children.

Research has also shown that these families can experience long periods of poverty while others experience isolated or repeated spells of living on low incomes. Their routes out of poverty are often dependent on repartnering, children leaving home, or (re-)entering the labour market as children become older and childcare costs reduce (Kemp *et al.*, 2004). For example, Hobcraft (1998) found that 47 per cent of children with divorced lone parents experienced childhood poverty as opposed to 8 per cent in intact two-parent families. Parental illness can cause a slide into poverty, but family income is less adversely affected by long-term than short-term or intermittent periods of illness (Adelman *et al.*, 2003). The Department of Health estimated that four million out of 11 million children in England were failing to meet their developmental goals due to stress in the family caused by mental illness, domestic violence, or the presence of drug and alcohol abuse, or by social and material conditions causing stress and chaos (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Parents suffering any of these factors are typically less able to offer material support to children (End Child Poverty/ NFPI, 2002).

# 5 Theories about parenting and poverty

Underpinning the debate about parenting and poverty is the fact that long-term outcomes for children of parents living in poverty are less positive than those for children in affluent families. There are also indications that parenting practices of parents in different economic circumstances vary. However, there is conflicting evidence about the extent to which the negative outcomes for poor children are a result of parenting practices or of other factors related to poverty. None of the theoretical approaches (or empirical studies) claim that income differences are the *only* determinant of parenting capacity, and none claim that poverty has no effect on parenting.

It should be emphasised that these discussions usually relate to relative poverty. Few families in Western countries face the sort of extreme hardship and deprivation that are day-to-day realities in much of the developing world. The effects of starvation, inadequate access to clean water, medical care and basic education on outcomes for children are stark and obvious. Bradley (2002) believes that extreme deprivation can cause major changes in the way parents nurture their children, but in Western countries adverse economic environments produce effects on parenting that are more subtle and, therefore, more challenging to identify.

## The detrimental effect of poverty on parenting

A number of theories have been developed to explain the apparent difference of parenting style and parenting practices between affluent and materially deprived parents. Much of the research discussed in this section draws on more than one theoretical approach, but it is useful to distinguish the different theoretical hypotheses about these relationships.

The main theories discussed in this section are:

- stress
- culture of poverty
- environment or neighbourhood.

## Stress theory

Research has shown that low-income parents are less likely to be nurturant or to supervise their children adequately, and more likely to use inconsistent, erratic and harsh discipline (Elder *et al.*, 1985; Larzelere and Patterson, 1990; Harris and Marmar, 1996; Ghate *et al.*, forthcoming). Problems have been shown to increase when low-income families suffer stress such as absence of a supportive partner, depression or drug use, and to improve when families enjoy social support from family friends or neighbours. Moore and Vandivere (2000) argue that the means by which parents cope with stressful circumstances, such as poverty and ill health, influence children's experience of a stressful environment. For example, parents who are stressed are less likely to be able to provide optimal home circumstances and more likely to use coercive and harsh methods of discipline. The detrimental effect of poverty in childhood on health and well-being has been widely documented (Kumar, 1993; Oakley *et al.*, 1994; Spencer, 1996). In terms of birth weight and life chances, researchers have argued that economic disadvantage increases the chance that children will fail to thrive (Jefferis *et al.*, 2002). Poor diets are also associated with poverty: for example, a shortage of iron has been related to poverty and can put children at risk (Danziger and Waldfogel, 2000). However, recent research has shown that although poorer households have poorer health, the impact of income is small. A much larger role is played by the mother's own health and events in her early life (Propper *et al.*, 2004).

Conger and colleagues in the United States (Lempers *et al.*, 1989; Conger *et al.*, 1993a, 1993b) undertook a series of 'natural experiments' involving parents who were middle-class farmers caught up in a severe economic downturn in the 1980s. The researchers found that the emotional well-being and behaviour of adolescents whose families moved into economic hardship was adversely affected, but that this was mainly because of disruptions in parenting rather than the direct effects of economic hardship. They showed that parents who moved into (relative) poverty became distressed and depressed, and their marital relationship deteriorated. This in turn caused disruption to their parenting practices, which were the immediate cause of the deteriorating adjustment of their adolescent children. The findings indicated, however, that this causal chain was not inevitable. For example, parents who had a strong marital relationship, or other forms of social support, were less likely to be affected by the stress of economic hardship and less likely to become depressed. Adolescents from these families were likely to be spared the consequences of the declining economic circumstances of their families. Conger *et al.* (1995) subsequently replicated these relationships with another sample of families in an urban area of the USA, leading them to conclude that these factors could be generalised to all parents of adolescents. While all their research was undertaken in

the USA, the link between depression, disrupted parenting and poor outcomes has become increasingly recognised in Britain and Europe. Smith (2004) reviewed the literature on parental mental health and its effects on children, and concluded that disruption to parenting was the main mechanism mediating the outcomes for children of mentally ill (mainly depressed) parents.

Marsh and Mackay (1994), meanwhile, studied a different aspect of parenting stress – cigarette smoking. They were trying to address the question of why, when prices of cigarettes go up, the only social group who do not decrease smoking are the very poorest families, and in particular poor lone mothers. They uncovered a complex set of reasons, among which stress was one of the most important. They also found that married couples were less likely to smoke or be in the greatest hardship, and that black and Asian women were less likely to smoke, despite being in the lowest income groups.

One interesting aspect of stress research relates to the gender of the parent. Conger and colleagues found in their more recent studies that both parents were affected by the move into poverty, and that maternal and paternal depression had similar effects on adolescents. However, in a study of parenting during the depression era of the 1930s they discovered that poverty affected mothers less than fathers. From this, they concluded that fathers in 1930s had made financial decisions for the family and had not shared information about the true nature of their hardship with their wives; whereas in contemporary society parents have a far more equal relationship in relation to responsibility for family finances.

Dearing *et al.* (2004) analysed cohort data in the USA and found that changes in income and poverty status were significantly associated with maternal depression in the first three years of children's lives. They concluded that it was the stress of poverty that caused depression (rather than the other way round) and that depression was likely to result in harsher or more inconsistent parenting. This study is significant in that it is one of the few that longitudinally tracked family income against parenting style and child outcomes, and therefore avoids the weakness of much of the research which cross-sectionally compares poor and affluent parents.

The link between maternal depression and poverty has long been established, most notably in a classic study by Brown and Harris (1978). They studied depressed women in urban and rural populations and identified four vulnerability factors for depression:

- social class – women from lower social classes were more vulnerable to depression than middle-class women (39 per cent versus 6 per cent)

- absence of a confiding relationship
- three or more children at home
- loss of own mother at age 11 or under.

They concluded that there are two main aetiological factors for maternal depression:

- 'provoking agents' – severe life stress: events with severely threatening long-term implications/long-standing difficulties (e.g. job loss)
- 'vulnerability factors' – social/personal factors which increase the likelihood of developing depression when there is severe life stress.

However, they concluded that it is not individual provoking agents or vulnerability factors that cause depression, but their combined effect.

Meltzer *et al.* (2000) studied the prevalence of mental health problems amongst children in the UK. They found children from unskilled, working-class backgrounds were three times as likely to have a mental disorder as children from professional backgrounds (14.5 per cent compared to 5.2 per cent). The rate for families where the parents had never worked was 21.1 per cent. There was also a strong relationship between mental disorder amongst children and problems of stress amongst their parents; 47 per cent of children assessed as having a mental disorder had parents who scored poorly on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ12) – a measure of well-being – compared with 23 per cent with no disorder. The more problems the children had, the worse the GHQ12 scores of their parents. This clearly demonstrated that children with mental health problems and difficult children were associated with stressed parents.

Although the weight of research evidence seems to favour the stress/disrupted parenting/poor outcomes model as the main mechanism for explaining the relationship between poverty and parenting, there is not universal agreement about this. The most articulate critic of this model is Susan Mayer (1997). Her analysis of two longitudinal cohorts in the USA did not support the hypothesis that parental stress plays a major role in the negative outcomes for children. Although she did not reject the parental stress hypothesis outright, Mayer's analysis found that parental income had a relatively modest effect on parental stress, and that stress had a modest effect on children's outcomes. She also challenged the conclusions that Conger and his colleagues (1993a, 1993b) drew about the importance of parental stress. Using their data, she estimated that the effect of doubling income would be to

raise educational attainment of children by only a tiny amount. She also specifically rejected the relationship between income, parental depression and school attainment:

... if income has an effect on children's school performance, it is not mainly through parents' depression. The idea that these paths are important comes mainly from focusing on their statistical significance while ignoring their size.

(Mayer, 1997, p. 118)

Although agreeing that parent-child interactions were important for children's success, she challenged the notion that parents' income has a large influence on parenting practices. Instead, she argued that when there is clear inequality of opportunity and/or high levels of absolute poverty, the personal characteristics of poor people will be similar to those of the relatively well off. However, where there is adequate welfare provision and other services to ensure that families' basic needs are met – and where there are opportunities to rise out of poverty – then the more enterprising individuals will tend to take advantage. The people at the lowest levels of income will tend to be those who cannot or will not take advantage of these opportunities. It is those characteristics, she believes, that prevent the poorest parents both from sustaining reasonable employment and from being effective parents. This process is confirmed by others (Ceci and Papierno, 2005).

However, Mayer's analysis notably fails to account for the fact that some people are excluded from the labour market not because of their personal failings but because factors such as institutional racism, sexism and discrimination against disabled people operate to exclude certain groups from mainstream society. Nevertheless she mounts a serious attack on the straightforward relationship between poverty, parental stress and poor outcomes for children, pointing to a much more complex interplay of individual and structural factors. Bradbury (2003), in a review of child poverty in Australia, cites several US authors who disagree with Mayer's view (e.g. Levy and Duncan, 2000) but considers the research evidence to be inconclusive. He also concludes that there is some evidence that anti-poverty strategies 'work', with outcomes for children of families whose incomes are raised (either by work or benefit) showing a modest, but definite, improvement.

Even so, there is still much to be learned about the dynamics of lifting families out of poverty and how it affects parents and children. Evaluations of welfare to work programmes in the USA have found limited evidence of positive effects on children. Hamilton *et al.* (2001) found that welfare to work programmes which did not provide extra resources such as childcare demonstrated mixed results in terms of children's

outcomes. Educational attainment was improved, but there were negative outcomes for health and mixed outcomes for behaviour. Similarly Zaslow *et al.* (2001) found that effects on children were small, inconsistent and site specific (rather than dependent on the type of intervention). Bos *et al.* (1999), who evaluated the New Hope programme in Milwaukee (which combined childcare and other services with welfare to work), found positive outcomes for both parents and children – notably in their educational attainment and behaviour as rated by teachers. Morris *et al.* (2001) found that creating jobs and raising incomes has some beneficial effect on children. However, none of these evaluations addressed the extent to which changes in outcomes were due to changes in parenting style rather than increased access to resources or reductions in social exclusion. It should also be noted that these were studies of families with pre-school children. The effects of welfare to work and other anti-poverty strategies on parents of older children are yet to be determined.

In the UK there is a great deal of evidence from longitudinal and other research that educational outcomes for children are related to family incomes (Blanden and Gregg, 2004). Paradoxically, long-term educational attainment of children is negatively associated with mothers' full-time employment (and, to a much smaller extent, mothers' part-time employment and even fathers' full-time employment) (Ermisch and Francesoni, 2000). This finding, based on the British Household Panel Survey, may be because, for some parents, moving into low-paid employment increases parental stress (and reduces parental time with children) without significantly increasing income.

Analysis by Tunstall and Lupton (2003) shows that area-based support programmes are more effective in reaching some subgroups than others – notably children in poor households (those claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or Income Support). This is because poor children are more spatially concentrated than poor adults in areas defined by the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) at district and ward level. In these wards 46 per cent of children are poor compared with 26 per cent of adults. In the United States, Furstenberg and colleagues (2000) have also noted how interventions are likely to impact differentially on different groups of parents and on individual parents within a group.

In summary the stress theory of the relationship between parenting and poverty is the most prevalent and intuitive. Simply put the theory states that:

- Materially disadvantaged parents face more stress than affluent parents.
- This causes them to be more depressed, irritable or angry than affluent parents.

- Higher levels of stress negatively affect parenting style, and these parents tend to be more authoritarian or inconsistent.
- This in turn affects their children's outcomes in a negative way.

All the steps in this chain of events have been well researched and there is little doubt that the stress experienced by materially deprived parents is at least partly responsible for differential outcomes between their children and those living in affluence. However, this chain of events should not be seen as entirely deterministic. At each step in this process there are possibilities for resilience and therefore for positive outcomes. For example, a good marital relationship can mediate the impact of poverty on parents and, therefore, reduce stress and maintain parenting capacity despite negative changes to SES (Patterson, 2002; see also Hill *et al.*, 2007).

Similarly, research does not support the assumption that the reversal of material deprivation through welfare to work, benefit increases or other programmes will inevitably lead to improved parenting capacity and better outcomes for children. As Belsky and Vondra (1989) have theorised, parenting style and practices are not simply a function of external circumstances. Poverty is only one of a number of factors which affect parenting, so it should not be assumed that changes in SES (especially marginal changes such as those which typically result from government initiatives) will necessarily reduce parents' stress enough to change parenting style. Moreover, parenting style is a relatively stable construct. Although it may change in response to crises such as sudden falls in family income, it may not change so readily in response to more subtle changes in family circumstances. In addition, changes in income levels are not always associated with changes in consumption or lifestyle. Drops in income may be compensated for by drawing on savings or going into debt, and rises in income may be mitigated by paying off debt.

It is also likely that raising income levels will affect different parents differently. Those parents who have the personal resources to access networks of support or other opportunities for their children will be disproportionately helped by raising their income, whereas those who lack parenting capacity because of personal characteristics are likely to be less affected by changes in their income, and will require additional support to change their parenting practices.

Future research needs to focus not only on the overall effects on parents (and outcomes for children) of changes in income. It will be important to disaggregate the differential effects on different groups of parents and on parents with different styles and capacities. Another gap in much of the research on parenting stress is the effect that children have on their parents. Children are also actors and can be

stressors or buffers (Hill *et al.*, 2007; O'Connor and Scott, 2007). Deater-Deckard (2004) found that children with behavioural difficulties and children with chronic or terminal illnesses are major causes of parenting stress. Ghate and Hazel (2002) concluded that having a difficult child is the most stressful factor for parents in poor neighbourhoods (see also Webster-Stratton and Spitzer, 1996), but conversely that some children offer support to their parents. Parents living in poverty make sacrifices to prevent their children from going without items that their friends and peers take for granted (Middleton *et al.*, 1997), but according to Ridge (2002), children, too, sacrifice their own needs to help their parents. Thus research on the relationship between poverty, stress and parenting must take into account the reciprocal relationships and interdependence between parents and children who are facing adversity together.

### Culture of poverty theories

In contrast to stress theories, the 'culture of poverty' hypothesis (Lewis, 1966) downplays the primacy of parental psychological attributes in determining the outcomes for disadvantaged children. Lewis's original conception of the 'culture of poverty' was developed to counter the prevailing view that poor people have no culture. However, the term is now used pejoratively. Rather than highlighting the resilience and creativeness of people living in poverty, 'culture of poverty' now emphasises the persistence of poverty and low achievement across generations, and asserts that parents living in poverty form a different 'culture' from that of middle-class parents. This, rather than the effect of material deprivation itself, is seen as influencing outcomes for children. It involves low expectations for children, harsh or inconsistent punishment, an emphasis on conformity rather than individual attainment, and the use of physical rather than verbal methods of discipline. The culture of poverty theory asserts that this parenting style is transmitted through the generations, and thus creates barriers to children emerging from poverty. The implications are that reducing parental stress by raising income or improving the environments of poor parents will do little to produce positive outcomes for children. The aim should rather be to break the culture of poverty by changing the attitudes and parenting styles of materially deprived parents (Fram, 2003).

Culture of poverty theories have a long history. Perhaps the best-known early exponent of this view in the UK was Bernstein (1960, 1974) whose work was concerned with the different patterns of speech between working-class and middle-class parents. According to Bernstein, working-class people use a *restricted* code whereas middle-class people use an *elaborated* code, and these are learned by children from their parents when they learn to speak. Familiarity with elaborated code

was seen by Bernstein to provide middle-class children with access to educational success.

Ermisch *et al.* (2001) provide a more recent example of a cultural explanation of poverty. They consider that children living in poverty are not only likely to be poorer in resources, but also to have fewer opportunities for success. This is because of intergenerational transmission: for example, their families have lower expectations of work and education. Yaqub (2002), meanwhile, analysed data on persistence of poverty in several countries and found that children's class, education and health correlate strongly with that of parents and siblings. He suggests that socio-economic background influences lifetime attainments, but stresses that outcomes are not determined by childhood experiences alone. 'Resilience' and 'plasticity' (the ability to undo psychological or social damage) can counteract the effects of poverty at any point in the child's lifetime. Only by their thirties are individuals' lifetime incomes correlated with annual incomes, suggesting that until they reach this age people can change their trajectory.

An analysis in the UK by Hobcraft (1998) of data from the longitudinal National Child Development Study found that poverty and social exclusion usually persisted during the lifespan, and that the main predictors of adult outcomes were childhood poverty, family disruption, contact with the police, educational test scores and father's interest in schooling. Despite the finding of continuity, Hobcraft warned against interpreting his findings as suggesting that a disadvantaged background necessarily determines the future for children:

... there is huge scope for many, if not most, individuals to escape from the patterns and tendencies observed. An important potential area for further research is to examine more closely the characteristics of individuals who escape the general tendencies.  
(Hobcraft, 1998, p. 95)

Another facet of culture of poverty theories is the evidence that most parents seem to replicate the basic parenting style they experienced as children (Chen and Kaplan, 2001). However, there have been no studies of the styles of parents who experience very different socio-economic conditions from those of their children (for example, parents who were very poor as children but who become affluent as adults). So it is not clear to what extent these intergenerational similarities are a factor of learned parenting behaviour, as opposed to responses to the parenting environment. Further research which focuses on discontinuity, as well as continuity in behaviour and environment, would be needed to unpick these factors.

However, as previously mentioned, Bourdieu (1986) suggests that it is not so much the parenting practices of working-class parents that maintains poverty over generations, but rather the behaviour of more affluent parents using their financial and social capital to ensure their children have access to power and privilege. This theory turns the culture of poverty hypothesis on its head, by asserting that affluent parents unfairly use their position of power and knowledge to ensure that their children maintain their privilege.

### **Poor environment (neighbourhood factors)**

'Poor environment' theories do not offer an alternative explanation to 'stress' or 'culture of poverty' theories but are complementary to the others. They assert that parenting style is affected by the neighbourhood environment as well as the personal characteristics of parents. Neighbourhoods with similar levels of material deprivation but different levels of 'social capital' or social disorganisation will produce different sorts of parents, and this will ultimately affect outcomes for children.

Jencks and Mayer (1990) outlined four theoretical models by which neighbourhoods might influence parenting:

- The 'epidemic' or 'contagion' model assumes that behaviours are learned or copied; so, for instance, the presence of antisocial young people can 'spread' problem behaviours such as substance abuse or delinquency.
- 'Collective socialisation' highlights the importance of role models, local social norms and the extent of alienation, acceptance of antisocial behaviour and instability in the community. Parents may be socialised towards inappropriate parenting by these factors.
- 'Competition' theory emphasises the importance of competition between families who have to challenge each other for resources. This increases the likelihood that an 'underclass' will emerge, composed of residents with the fewest resources.
- 'Relative deprivation' theory proposes that individuals judge their position in society in relation to neighbours. Parents with few resources are likely to be demoralised if neighbours appear to be more affluent, while in uniformly deprived communities residents may gain collective strength provided there is social cohesion.

Both the contagion and the collective socialisation models anticipate that socially mixed communities with some affluent neighbours would tend to enhance child development. By contrast, competition and relative deprivation theories predict that competition from more advantaged neighbours will be detrimental to children living in poverty. This was tested in the United States by an experiment where families living in public housing in poor neighbourhoods were randomly allocated to stay in the neighbourhood or to move to 'near poor' or 'non-poor' neighbourhoods. In support of mixed-income communities, the researchers found that moving from a poor neighbourhood significantly improved the mental health of mothers and that their children were significantly less likely to report problems related to anxiety and depression (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

Elsewhere in America, studies by Garbarino and colleagues (Garbarino and Crouter, 1978; Garbarino and Sherman, 1980; Garbarino and Kostelny, 1992, 1994) have found that areas with high reporting rates of child maltreatment featured high concentrations of residents exposed to multiple risk factors at the household and individual levels. They were also physically degraded and run-down, and had less positive neighbouring and more stressful day-to-day interactions for families. However, it is important to take cultural factors into account. Korbin and colleagues (1998) also found neighbourhood differences in child maltreatment rates, but noted that community poverty had a weaker effect on maltreatment rates in African-American than European-American neighbourhoods. These correlations, although they have been influential, need to be treated with some caution. This is because rates of child maltreatment reporting do not necessarily equate to a higher incidence of abuse. They also tell us nothing about causal pathways: whether neglected environments cause higher levels of abuse, or whether there are other factors, relating to the people who live in those areas, that cause both neglect of the environment and maltreatment of children. In this context, Caughy *et al.* (2003) explored associations between parents' levels of attachment to their local community and the presence of behavioural problems in their pre-school children in a sample of African-American parents. Results indicated that the association between how well a parent knew his or her neighbours and the presence of child behavioural problems varied according to the degree of neighbourhood deprivation.

Other studies of neighbourhood effects have shown far more subtle effects than those cited above. For example, Furstenberg *et al.* (2000) studied families with teenage children in low-income neighbourhoods in Philadelphia, finding that the major predictor of outcomes was parenting capacity and style as opposed to neighbourhood effects. Neighbourhoods had only a marginal impact on parenting style – mainly on the degree of 'restrictiveness' parents exercised on their teenage children – and on young people's outcomes. In a study of pre-school children,

Klebanov and colleagues (1997) similarly concluded that the family, rather than the environment, was the primary socialising unit. Direct neighbourhood influences on children (as measured by five factors) were minimal or else diluted by family experience. However, the researchers found a positive link between the presence of affluent neighbours and high IQ scores. They also found that ethnically diverse neighbourhoods were associated with lower maternal warmth, as well as less support from parents for children's learning and lower levels of support from family and neighbours. Although the effect of this was greater in poor than rich neighbourhoods, family factors still had the greatest effect on children's cognitive and behavioural outcomes.

Weatherburn and Lind (2001), meanwhile, challenged the assumption that economic stress directly motivates individuals to commit crime. Using evidence from aggregate-level studies they found a strong association between economic stress and child neglect (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1988). This supported their claim that economic and social stress exerted their influence on juvenile criminal behaviour by disrupting the parenting process. This, in turn, made children more susceptible to antisocial influences from peers in the neighbourhood, leading to higher levels of criminal involvement.

The overall finding of these studies in the USA is that the effects of neighbourhood on parenting are not particularly significant, especially for younger children. Far more significant are parents' own background, the child's personality and characteristics and the family dynamics. This view has been further strengthened by the Moving to Opportunity experiment, in which parents living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods were randomly assigned vouchers which enabled them to move to better neighbourhoods. The latest results show little overall effect on children's outcomes for those who moved to the new neighbourhoods as opposed to those who remained in the same area (Sanbonmatsu *et al.*, 2006).

There have been two recent studies in the UK specifically focused on parents living in poor neighbourhoods. Ghate and Hazel (2002) surveyed a random sample of 1,754 parents living in poor environments in the UK about their parenting style, the range of problems they faced, and difficulties with children and family. Qualitative interviews with 40 of their sample were subsequently conducted to explore how they coped with adversity. They divided the poor environments into three degrees of poverty. Although not all risk factors were positively associated with increasing neighbourhood poverty, some were. An important factor relating to stress (the Malaise score) was significantly linked to the degree of area-level poverty: the poorer the area, the more likely parents were to have mental and emotional problems. Additionally, the greater the degree of objectively measured area-level

poverty, the more likely parents were to rate their area as a 'bad place to bring up a family'. Because they only studied parents in poor environments, Ghate and Hazel could only partially address the question of whether it is worse to be a poor parent in a poor area than a poor parent in a more affluent area. However their overall conclusion was that:

... parenting in poor environments is a more 'risky' business than parenting elsewhere, and it gets riskier the poorer the area.  
(Ghate and Hazel, 2002, p. 101)

Despite this, they found that the majority of parents were coping well. They concluded that poverty has a 'distal' rather than a 'proximal' effect on parenting and child outcomes. In other words, poverty does not have a direct effect, but is the context in which other stressors impinge on parenting practices. However, the reason living in a poor neighbourhood may be less prejudicial to coping than expected is not because poverty and deprivation are insignificant, but because most parents in poor environments possess skills at managing these stressors effectively.

Jacqueline Barnes (2004), meanwhile, conducted an in-depth study of 751 parents of children in three age groups (infants, 4/5 year olds and 11/12 year olds) in four English neighbourhoods (three deprived areas and one middle-class suburb). Quantitative results indicated that parents in the deprived areas were under more stress than those in the affluent area. They were more neurotic and introverted, and their children had more behavioural difficulties. She also found that middle-class parents were more likely to have progressive views on parenting. In relation to parenting and social support, Barnes's research generated some counter-intuitive findings. For example, parents in a stable, predominantly white working-class neighbourhood had the most social support within the home and the most local family members, but they also reported the most problems in their parent-child relationships. However, there were no significant differences in the use of discipline between parents in the affluent and deprived areas (an unexpected finding given that all previous research in the UK has identified differences, e.g. Cawson *et al.*, 2000). Only in the inner-city neighbourhood did discipline differ from that in other areas, suggesting it was factors such as personal exposure to crime, rather than poverty, that influenced parenting.

Barnes concludes that:

... while much of the literature on the relationship between poverty and parenting takes as its focus child abuse, in relation to the range of discipline used across the spectrum, neighbourhood poverty does not appear to be relevant in and of itself. Rather the parent and child

risk factors appear to be the most relevant, in conjunction with the attendant anxieties that are faced by parents living in dense urban city environments.

(Barnes, 2004, p. 94)

These two British studies add significantly to our understanding of parenting in poor environments. Their findings generally confirm those of American studies; that while there are factors within neighbourhoods which affect some aspects of parenting (such as perceptions of high crime levels), there is no consistent neighbourhood effect on parenting. They also confirm that poverty does not have a direct relationship with parenting. The vast majority of poor parents cope well. However, parents living in poverty are more stressed and depressed than parents in affluent areas.

These studies are snapshots and do not give an indication of the causal pathways. It is likely that poverty causes parents to be more depressed and suffer higher levels of malaise, but the findings are also consistent with the hypothesis that those parents who are more likely to be anxious and depressed are also more likely to be poor.

## **Family structure, spending and debt, housing and employment as factors influencing parents**

One of the most consistent findings relating to family structure and poverty concerns lone parenthood (Marsh and McKay, 1994; Berthoud *et al.*, 2004; House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2004). A study conducted in Canada by Curtis *et al.* (2004) found that lone motherhood produced negative physical, emotional and behavioural outcomes when income and neighbourhood status were controlled for. O'Neill (2002), writing for the conservative Civitas think tank, stressed that children growing up in lone-mother households tend to experience more poverty than those in two-parent families. She suggested that the effects of lone parenthood operate indirectly through a 'chain reaction' causing poverty, which in turn caused other problems. These factors contributed to indirect effects. While poverty and hardship may have pre-existed before the dissolution of the partnership, O'Neill argued that those growing up in stable families were more likely to form secure relations with partners and children and experience less poverty in the future. These factors contributed to what are known as 'selection effects'. She concluded that:

The weight of evidence indicates that the traditional family based upon a married father and mother is still the best environment for raising children, and it forms the soundest basis for the wider society.

(O'Neill, 2002, p. 14)

However, Rigg and Sefton (2004) point out that two-parent families in higher income groups may also experience a temporary fall in income as they are likely to reduce participation in the labour market at the birth of children.

The distribution of resources in families is also influenced by the routes through which income flows into the family. Lundberg *et al.* (1997) showed that when mothers are the wage earners or benefit recipients, more money will be spent on children than in families where fathers receive the income. The issue of whether and how poverty differentially affects mothers and fathers is a significant gap in the research.

More generally, the UK's National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI, 2000) has concluded that poverty erects practical barriers to parents, including poor housing and space and inadequate public transport and poor nutrition due to financial considerations, and also personal barriers such as lack of self-esteem and low educational achievement, leading to low expectations and aspirations for parents and children.

In relation to housing, the English House Condition Survey (ODPM, 2003) shows that while, overall, households with young children (under 11) are a little less likely than average to live in non-decent homes, this is not the case where the parents themselves are young (under 25), lone parents, relatively poor or rent privately. In the case of young mothers (who typically fit all of the above) they are more likely to live in substandard housing and/or tower blocks where parenting is a constant challenge (Speak *et al.*, 1995).

Land (2004) suggests that a lack of affordable childcare in the UK means many parents and children of larger families are trapped in a life of low income and low expectations. Although only a third of all children are in large families (three children or more), they account for half of all poor children. She argues that the traditional link between family size and poverty has not been broken. Some minority ethnic groups are particularly affected. Nearly one third of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian families have three or more children compared with less than a fifth of white families, and these groups are more likely to experience low incomes (Berthoud *et al.*, 2004).

## Resilience of parents living in poverty

Although there is some evidence concerning differences between parenting styles, and between the practices of middle-class parents and parents living in poverty, there is still a great deal of debate about how to interpret it. The views and theories

discussed in this section do not deny that materially disadvantaged and working-class parents are under stress, nor that they are living in environments which could potentially harm their children. However they also insist that:

- The whole range of parenting styles is to be found in all socio-economic groups. While there may be differences in economic means for different groups, it is not true to say that income determines parenting style.
- Although most research has found higher levels of maltreatment and a lack of parenting capacity in lower SES parents, it also finds that most parents of low SES – even the poorest parents – show remarkable resilience and parenting capacity.
- The standards by which parents are often judged are those of white, middle-class families and do not necessarily apply to parents living in more challenging circumstances, or whose cultural norms differ from this group.
- Higher rates of referrals to statutory services for child protection, youth crime and school problems may reflect organisational processes and prejudices within statutory agencies rather than the real levels of these problems in different social and economic groups.

The findings discussed so far confirm that it is not simply family income that is important in the examination of the relationship between parenting and poverty. As seen, families are embedded within a variety of cultures and social systems, both formal and informal (Belsky, 1984; Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998; Parke and Buriel, 1998). This includes the influences that come from outside the family, such as extended families, and ties within the community, such as friends and neighbours. Belsky (1984, 1998), accordingly, maintains that poverty is just one in a number of factors determining parenting style. He believes parental competence is affected by parental resources, the child's characteristics and the family and neighbourhood context. Also that child outcomes are affected by deficiencies within these areas. For example, a poorly educated, materially deprived teen parent with a difficult child and no social support may be more disadvantaged than if she had a supportive partner, an extended family to assist her and a safe and wealthy community to live in. Yet parents living a poorer, crime-prone neighbourhood can still motivate their children to succeed in difficult circumstances. Individual circumstances and attitudes then mediate other social structural systems.

Research has also demonstrated how many parents living in poverty manage to deal effectively with adversity, and how parents are prepared to sacrifice their own

needs to meet those of their children (Middleton *et al.*, 1997; NFPI, 2000; Ghate and Hazel, 2002; NCH, 2004). NCH investigated the close link between poor diet and low income and found that most parents would buy healthier food including fruit and vegetables if they had an extra £10 per week to spend. Almost half the low-income parents interviewed for the study asserted they had gone without food to feed their family – in most cases during the previous month. Middleton and colleagues (1997) also found that half of parents who are poor have a child who is not poor, thus confirming that many parents place their children's needs above their own. This pattern may differ by gender, with mothers generally more willing to sacrifice their own needs than fathers. Bradbury (2003) recommends that more research be done on the intra-household distribution of resources to identify which parents are more likely to meet their children's needs at the expense of their own, and under what conditions this occurs.

Marion Lindblad-Goldberg's (1989) study of lone-parent families in the USA found that, despite poverty and difficult circumstances, they had constructed viable and well-adjusted households, promoting children's education, resourcefulness and responsibility. This was achieved by developing coping mechanisms, such as a positive family concept, emphasising loyalty, home centeredness and communication. The families had also developed the capacity to highlight positive events and put less emphasis on negative aspects of stressful events. Another effective strategy was to gain access to stress-reducing supportive networks of friends and relatives.

Fram's (2003) study of mothers receiving welfare payments in the USA found that social support acted as a 'buffer' against the effect of mothers' stress in exercising discipline. She found that parents had been able to develop strategies for obtaining adequate help from the community and avoiding perceived negative social situations. However, the level of social support emerged as only one of a number of factors that affect parenting. When a combination of beneficial factors – more education, more earnings and better neighbourhoods – came together, then parenting practices and child outcomes tended to be better. Conversely those parents with least support were also the most likely to use harsh discipline and least likely to access services. For some mothers, their 'authoritarian' parenting was a response to a harsh and unsupportive environment.

## Cultural differences

As Phoenix and Husain (2007) argue in their review of ethnicity and parenting, more research is needed to locate parenting styles within their socio-economic

and cultural contexts. Taking the example of authoritarian parenting (see above), Teti and Candelaria (2002) have suggested that it may be viewed less negatively in circumstances where it reflects parents' concerns over neighbourhood safety. Some parents may be restrictive and react severely to children's misbehaviour because they believe it could place them in danger. Deater-Deckard *et al.* (1996) similarly found that African-American children of parents who use an 'authoritarian' parenting style have better outcomes than those whose parents are 'authoritative', whereas the opposite was true for white children. However, it is not clear whether these findings related to cultural differences, neighbourhood differences or other factors. In a later work Deater Deckard (2004) concluded that cultural influences play a major part in determining how parents respond to stressful issues in their lives and how stress affects parenting.

Although there have not been any systematic studies of parenting practices in different cultural and ethnic groups in the UK, these findings are consistent with those of Marsh and Mackay (1994) and Barnes (2004), all of whom found that economically deprived parents from different ethnic groups responded differently to the stresses of poverty. Issues deserving further exploration include whether these disparities are due to cultural differences in parenting, or to other factors such as variations in family structure, social support or neighbourhood contexts.

## 6 Specific aspects of parenting and poverty: discipline and parental involvement in education

Much of the research on the relationship between parenting and poverty focuses on two aspects of parenting – discipline (and child maltreatment) and parental involvement in children’s education. In this chapter we relate the relevant findings to the theories discussed above.

### Discipline and child maltreatment

Fram (2003) highlighted the need to see parenting style and particular methods of discipline in context:

There is an assumption ... that parenting practices advocated within mainstream (i.e., white and middle-class) culture are, in fact, ‘positive.’ Discipline, however, can be considered to reflect norms and expectations which are functional within specific social situations, such that appropriate discipline in a dangerous urban neighborhood may be quite different from appropriate discipline in a bucolic suburban setting ... it is unclear how much parenting practices reflect immediate circumstances rather than learned behaviours which are socially reinforced. Moreover, attitudes toward discipline may be contingent upon the meanings mothers attribute to different parenting decisions within a particular environmental context. That is, spanking may mean different things depending on when and why it is practised.

(Fram, 2003, p. 25)

Ross and Roberts (1999) have additionally observed that abuse and neglect of children can happen at any income level, but that low-income parents are four times more likely to feel chronically stressed than parents with higher incomes.

In the only prevalence study of child abuse in the UK, Cawson and colleagues (2000) interviewed a representative sample of 2,869 18–24 year olds about their experiences as children.

With regard to socio-economic status they found that:

There was a clear relationship between social group and physical discipline and abuse, with absence of care and with the more serious absence of supervision, especially being out all night at a young age. Absence of supervision at the less serious levels however was not particularly linked with socio-economic status and appeared to be an equal issue for all social groups. Sexual and emotional abuse showed little differentiation between socio-economic groups.

(Cawson *et al.*, 2000, p. 95)

The researchers concluded that child abuse is over-reported for families living in poverty and that abuse in wealthier families is under-reported. The fact that emotional abuse and absence of supervision are not associated with SES would seem to support the view that there is no general 'parenting deficit' related to poverty. However, consistent with the Mayer hypothesis (see above), parents who are likely to carry out more serious abuse are also those who do not have the human resources to escape poverty. More research is needed to clarify these relationships.

Ghate and colleagues (forthcoming), meanwhile, surveyed a random sample of 1,249 parents in the UK about their disciplinary practices, attitudes towards discipline, experiences of being disciplined as a child and the context in which the discipline took place. Qualitative interviews were also conducted with subsamples of parents and children. The researchers found a strong relationship between parents' levels of stress and greater use of physical discipline, but the relationship between physical discipline and poverty was less straightforward. Being on a low income was a 'risk factor' for the use of physical discipline, but being on a high income had a protective effect. Thus, the incidence of minor physical punishment showed a clear inverse relation to household income, but the greatest difference between groups was found between those on a medium income and those on a high one. This is consistent with Barnes's (2004) finding reported above, that physical discipline is more related to stressful environment than to family income per se.

McSherry's (2004) discussion of the relationship between neglect and poverty points out the dilemma that neglecting one's children is an individual behaviour, but poverty is a structural aspect of society. Blaming individual parents for neglecting their children is, from this perspective, tantamount to asserting that being poor is their responsibility. On the other hand, excusing their behaviour by explaining it as being a result of poverty assumes – incorrectly – that most poor parents are neglectful. He concludes that the relationship is circular and interdependent, rather than linear and causal.

### Involvement in education

Researchers have found a number of factors outside the school system which affect attainment and involvement in education. The degree of involvement is strongly related to family social class (the higher, the more involvement) and the level of the mother's own education (the higher, the greater involvement). It is diminished by material deprivation, maternal psychosocial ill health and lone-parent status (Ashworth *et al.*, 2001; Blanden *et al.*, 2002; Ermisch *et al.*, 2001; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Although family income has repeatedly been found to affect children's educational attainment and involvement, income effects appear to be partly mediated by other factors such as the physical home environment (Harris and Marmer, 1996; McCulloch and Joshi, 2001). Other influences include parenting, especially parent-child learning (reading, visits to the library) and parents' aspirations and attitudes towards education (Sammons *et al.*, 1997; McCulloch and Joshi, 2001; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

In accord with other evidence concerning community influences (see above), familial processes have been shown to be more important than neighbourhoods in their effect on educational attainment (Gibbons, 2002). Feinstein *et al.* (2004) looked specifically at education to examine the relationship between child outcomes and neighbourhoods. He found that while neighbourhoods do affect educational attainment the link is mediated by the physical home environment.

There is, however, an interesting contrast to be drawn between the findings concerning parental involvement in education and those relating to discipline and maltreatment. In the case of parental involvement there is a linear relationship – put simply, the more it occurs, the better the outcomes for children. But the relationship between discipline and outcomes is far less straightforward. Although some researchers (e.g. Gelles, 1974, 1978) believe that all physical methods of discipline are harmful to children, the majority of the research has found that parents who use 'normal' methods of discipline do not necessarily harm their children. Indeed, there is some discussion as to whether the prevalent methods of discipline used by materially disadvantaged parents are adaptive to their environment rather than actively harmful. This is seemingly a view supported by Deater-Deckard and colleagues (1996), whose work in the United States found that physical discipline increased externalising behavioural problems in white children but not in African-American children (see also Phoenix and Husain, 2007). However, it may also be the case that parenting behaviours which are adaptive for children at one age (or children with certain temperaments) may be harmful for children of other ages or other temperaments. This is hinted at by Furstenberg *et al.* (2000) who found that restrictive parenting can be helpful for younger children in dangerous and

disorganised neighbourhoods, but the same parenting style is maladaptive for teenagers, who become withdrawn and lacking in autonomy.

This, again, points towards a view that parental behaviour and physical environment are less important to understanding the relationship between parenting and poverty than factors such as cultural context, relationships and parental expectations.

## 7 Research methods and gaps

The research reviewed in this report indicates a rather complex relationship between poverty, stress, parental distress or depression, marital difficulties, disrupted parenting practices, difficult children and poor outcomes. Moreover, there is still much we do not understand about the processes and interactions by which poverty is mediated through different types of parenting. For example, the evidence that lifting families out of poverty improves outcomes for children is not particularly strong. Even where there is evidence of improved outcomes it is not clear how far this is a factor of improved parenting capacity or of better access to resources such as housing or childcare (or, more likely, a combination of all of them). The methods that have been employed to demonstrate relationships between variables do not always adequately address the complex and contingent mechanisms that mediate parenting style, parenting practices and poverty. Most of the available research provides a snapshot of poor parents and/or compares them with middle-class or affluent parents. What it does not generally do is follow parents as they move in and out of poverty, measuring changes in their parenting style over time. This is a particularly important gap because it is not known how parenting style may change over time in response to children maturing, or whether it is stable over time and not easily affected by external circumstances. It is also important to understand how poverty may differentially affect parents of children of different ages.

We would also stress that the primary focus of the vast majority of the research on parenting is on child outcomes, with parenting viewed as a mediating or intermediate variable between such external, independent variables as poverty, social exclusion and neighbourhood disorganisation. We would argue that parents also need to be studied in their own right, and that parenting itself can be viewed as an outcome as much as children's educational attainment, self-esteem or behaviour.

As will be evident from this review, most research in this area has been carried out in the USA (Weatherburn and Lind, 1998; Moore and Vandivere, 2000; Curtis *et al.*, 2004). Only two significant UK studies which specifically address the relationship between parenting (in the sense of parenting style and practices) and poverty (Ghate and Hazel, 2002 and Barnes, 2004). Although replicating many of the US findings, these have also found differences, indicating that more UK-specific research is needed. British society differs from that of the USA on a number of social dimensions, including the rate of poverty, ethnic make-up, neighbourhood differences, service provision and benefit regime, and these may all impinge on the relationship between parenting and poverty.

Another gap in much of the literature is a lack of gender differentiation in the notion of 'parenting'. The vast majority of the participants in research on parenting are mothers, and 'mothering' is not differentiated from 'fathering'. Yet it is quite likely that the relationship between parenting and poverty may differ considerably between poor mothers and poor fathers, and this aspect of parenting needs to be explored in more depth (see also Lewis and Lamb, 2007).

Further research should take into account the bidirectionality of parenting. Children's effects on parents must be included in any analysis of the relationship between poverty and parenting as well as elsewhere (see O'Connor and Scott, 2007).

Specific gaps in the research include:

- longitudinal studies of parenting following how parents change their parenting styles and practices to adapt to different situations and their children's changing behaviour. These studies could build on cohort studies such as the UK's Millennium Cohort Study or panel studies such as the British Household Panel Survey. Topics should include:
  - parents who remain in poverty and those moving in and out of poverty
  - 'pathways' to particular child outcomes and identifying the chronological order in which risk factors impinge on parenting
- comparisons between the parenting styles and practices of parents in poverty and of parents not in poverty, but facing other personal and environmental stresses or risk factors
- parents in persistent and/or severe poverty compared with those living close to the 'poverty line'
- the wider social milieu of the family; in particular the relationships between ethnicity, poverty and parenting are under-researched in the UK
- the effects of poverty on parenting *style* as differentiated from effects on parenting *practices* and *beliefs*. These three dimensions act independently, but it is not known how poverty interacts independently with the three dimensions
- the study of time-use data may contribute significantly to the understanding of what parents actually do with their children and how this differs in different types of families

## The relationship between parenting and poverty

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- comparison of the differential impacts on parenting of anti-poverty interventions:
  - programmes that help parents into work
  - programmes which raise the income of parents through benefits
  - programmes addressed primarily at improving services for parents
  - regeneration programmes aimed at improving the neighbourhood environment to make it more conducive for families.

Many parents living in poverty will be subject to two or more of these interventions, and so the most interesting research for these purposes would not be evaluations of specific programmes but rather attempts to track changes in parenting style and practices over time, and then relate these to the exposure to various initiatives.

## 8 Conclusion

The overall conclusion of this research review is that there is no clear-cut causal link between poverty and parenting. Rather, it is likely that different individuals respond in different ways to financial hardship. Factors such as family structure, neighbourhood and social support interact with parents' temperaments, beliefs and their own experiences of parenting.

The main influence of poverty on parenting seems to be that it causes some parents to be more stressed, depressed or irritable, and this, in turn, disrupts their parenting practices and styles. It is the disrupted parenting, rather than poverty itself, which appears to be the major factor affecting outcomes for children. But even the relationship between disrupted parenting and child outcomes is far from straightforward, and many children are resilient even in the face of severe adversity.

Despite the clear link between poverty, parental stress and negative outcomes for children, there is still an unresolved question about the direction of causality. While it is intuitive to believe that poverty causes stress, it is also possible that parents who are temperamentally more likely to feel stressed are also more likely to be poor.

The research described in this review also suggests there may be a number of different pathways between poverty and parenting. A key finding here is that the majority of parents in poverty (like those living in relative affluence) possess adequate parenting capacity. This belies any assumption that poverty is necessarily associated with a lack of parenting capacity. Parents who face economic deprivation or social exclusion, and who also lack parenting capacity, may be in that situation for a range of different reasons. For example, it may be that some parents lack parenting capacity because of personal characteristics or their own background. These factors also make them less attractive to the labour market, thus making it more likely they will be financially disadvantaged. Others may be able to parent adequately in circumstances of relative affluence, but, on falling into poverty and deprivation, experience mental health difficulties or other problems which affect their parenting. Others still may parent adequately according to the norms of their neighbourhood or cultural group, but be judged as inadequate on the basis of middle-class assumptions made by mainstream society. At the very least, it is clear that parents living in poverty should not be treated as a single group simply because they are materially less affluent.

Research such as that of Furstenberg *et al.* (2000) and Ghate and Hazel (2002) is invaluable in counteracting the assumption that all parents living in poverty

lack adequate parenting capacity. But this should not lead to the conclusion that those who do not 'make it' are necessarily poor because of their personal failings. This mistaken approach implies that 'success' in families is equivalent to success in business (Covey, 1998) (the corollary being that success for materially disadvantaged children can somehow be achieved by parents copying the habits or behaviours of 'successful' people). The implication of this is that poverty is really the responsibility of poor parents for not behaving like rich parents (the essence of 'MUD' [Levitas, 1998] described at the start of this review). It would, in our view, be fallacious to conclude that because there is an association between parenting and poverty that the solution to poverty is to encourage (or force) poor parents to emulate their middle-class peers rather than address structural inequality in society.

On the other hand, the balance of evidence in this review suggests that attempts to change parenting style, practices or beliefs by simply raising the income of parents ('RED') are likely to fail. The way that parents relate to their children does not simply arise out of economic adversity or advantage.

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