



Education and Skills Committee – Inquiry into the attainment and achievement of school aged children experiencing poverty

Evidence from Barnardo's Scotland

April 2018

“Our ambition is to enable Scotland’s children to arrive at the school gates ready to learn. We will achieve this by helping parents build strong and healthy relationships with their children which will in turn increase their educational attainment and life chances.”

Martin Crewe, Director, Barnardo's Scotland

Introduction

Barnardo's Scotland works with thousands of vulnerable children and families every year, many of whom live in poverty and areas of disadvantage. We see the impact of this poverty on a daily basis in both the homes and communities of these families. Every day vulnerable families are waking up to profound problems: how to keep a roof over their head and how to put food on their table. This in turn generates profound challenges for all those who provide services to children.

Schools are increasingly on the frontline of responding to the immediate effects of poverty for children who come through their school gates, and understanding these effects is crucial.¹ The longer term impacts of poverty are less visible, but extremely important for us to understand and tackle.

We now understand more than ever the impact that the stress caused by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma can have on a child's development, their ability to learn and their mental health and wellbeing. The day to day reality of living in poverty exacerbates the toxic stress that many children across Scotland live with, and which can have an impact for the rest of their lives. Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) findings confirm this; they show that it is not poverty per se, but poverty combined with other disadvantages or adversities, which are associated with the worst outcomes for children.² Our joint research with NSPCC Scotland 'Challenges from the frontline: Supporting families with multiple adversities in a

¹ <https://www.scotsman.com/news/education/teachers-are-buying-food-for-hungry-scots-pupils-warns-charity-1-4698457>

² <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2010/04/26095519/0>



time of austerity' found that many services working with families are increasingly needing to meet basic material needs and stabilise home conditions before intensive family support can begin.³

Our services work holistically with families to address all the issues that may be affecting families' ability to thrive, and importantly to support their children to thrive. Recent research we collaborated on through the Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland (CCPS) highlighted the important role that family support services play in actively mitigating against the impact of poverty. Our services and many others work to reduce financial barriers to engagement for families, and this was seen as extremely valuable and hugely appreciated by the families who participated in the research.⁴

Poverty and academic achievement/attainment

We understand that many of the children who face inequity in attainment are those who face the greatest challenges, often marked by poverty and multiple adversities.

Children living in poverty are likely to be delayed in terms of language acquisition, and have a higher incidence of behavioural problems than their more affluent peers.⁵ Responses and behaviours associated with early trauma and adversity can often manifest themselves in a school environment, and are too often misconstrued as bad behaviour requiring discipline rather than support. This behaviour can be challenging and confusing for teachers, but it is the outward expression of unmet needs. Positive attachment and trauma-informed responses from education professionals are key; when children feel safe, behaviour improves and children are better able to reach their full personal and academic potential.

We know that poverty, adversity and the many difficulties of living on a low income are at the root of the problems faced by these children and families. It is also true that for many of these children the challenges faced by their parents mean that they miss out on the vital, positive attachments they need to ensure the healthy brain development which is so crucial to their education.

Living on a low income is not just about the struggle to pay bills. We know that poverty prevents and inhibits good attachment; children in poverty often live in high stress environments, and as a result may also have experienced broken or disrupted attachment relationships. Families whose emotional resources are absorbed by managing the stress of not being able to afford necessities like housing, food and fuel can find their capacity to nurture family relationships diminished. Not having enough money can compromise any family's stability. The core of our work across Scotland is embedded in the Five to Thrive approach which

³ <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/challenges-frontline-scotland-multiple-adversities-report.pdf> (6)

⁴ <http://www.ccpsscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Family-support-research-project-Part-1.pdf> (25)

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2010/feb/15/poor-children-behind-sutton-trust>



supports and encourages strong, positive attachments between care givers and children.

Recent research by the University of Stirling found that families from lower income backgrounds were just as aspirational for their children as those from affluent backgrounds.⁶ This supports our own experience: families and parents want the best for their children but may lack resources and capacity and will often need intensive support.

For many of the families we work with, the parent's own experiences of education and of involvement with services is key. Parents may be reluctant to engage in the formal structures of education or school communities because of their own negative experiences. This can result in them being seen as 'hard to reach' and subsequently being isolated. It is crucial that support for these families is available, as poverty compounds many of these issues. Research very clearly shows the intergenerational problems associated with ACEs, and highlights the need to support parents to work through their own experiences in order to best support their children.

Family Support Workers – Attainment

Through the Attainment Challenge Fund (ACF) we have been able to provide Family Support Workers linked to primary and secondary schools in many local authorities across Scotland.

In order to address the issues highlighted above we take a proactive partnership approach with families and communities, working *with* them from before a child reaches school and throughout their journey through primary and secondary education. We focus on promoting secure attachment, recovery from toxic stress and trauma, and building resilient communities alongside families, schools and other partners.

Within schools we support staff to create safe, nurturing, trauma-informed environments which support children's mental health and wellbeing. We know that children, who are experiencing toxic stress at home, often related to poverty, will struggle to access the curriculum as we know that health and wellbeing underpins attainment. Something as small as offering a child a piece of toast or asking them how they are feeling when they get to school can have a huge impact.

Question 1

How has your work supported the educational attainment of children and young people? What has worked well and what barriers have there been to success?

⁶http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/education/16117385.Study_explodes_myth_that_poor_families_have_lower_ambitions_for_their_children/



Support

Our work is focused on increased early intervention with families facing adversity and we are seeing the real difference this work can make in preventing families getting to crisis point. Our Family Support Work linked to schools allows increased holistic working; not only linking school to home and vice versa but also creating a partnership where home and school can work together. Our work within the home with families helps to establish nurturing environments, as well as strategies and routines for children. Our Family Support Workers also carry out this work within schools to allow for continuity of support.

We are seeing an increased understanding within the schools where we work of why a child might be struggling to engage in learning. Our workers can advocate for the family, share assessment of need and directly link this to why the child may be struggling in terms of their attainment. This increased understanding supports teachers to be compassionate about what the child faces within the home environment and use more nurturing techniques within the school environment.

We deliver workshops for teaching staff on ACEs to build knowledge and understanding of the impact of these experiences on children's brain development and capacity to learn. Teachers can then adapt their teaching to suit the child's needs. We use attachment based approaches to build positive relationships, and our workers and school staff work together to develop a joint understanding of each other's roles and ways of working.

Barriers

Our experience is that there can be a lack of understanding from teaching staff about the impact of poverty and adversity, in particular the impact of in-work poverty for children and families. A lack of understanding around trauma-informed practice can also lead to poor practice such as conducting ACEs inquiry with children, or patting a child down to check for weapons as part of a risk assessment, without considering whether these things may be traumatising or upsetting for the child.

A 'traditional school ethos' is still present in some schools with examples of out-dated practice which does not place the health and wellbeing of the child at the centre, for example 'if you can't learn, engage or behave you are out of the class'. More often than not, what is going on in a child's home life is the reason they are unable to concentrate, take part or engage with their learning. We work to support schools to understand what lies behind a child's behaviour and put in place strategies and processes to support that child in a nurturing and trauma-informed way.



Question 3

If you work with schools/local authorities/others to address school attainment and wider achievement, what makes collaboration on this issue easy/difficult?

We work with many schools across Scotland and believe that the key to collaboration and successful joint working is a strong school-wide culture and ethos which is trauma-informed, nurturing, and rooted in attachment. A clear view from the school about desired outcomes for any work is also an important starting point.

At times we have found that there can be differing views about what is causing the attainment gap. Health and wellbeing is often not prioritised and if it is it tends to be physical health rather than wider wellbeing, including the impact of poverty and adversity. A recent survey of teachers by SAMH found that many were concerned that the imperative for schools is less on health and wellbeing, and more on literacy and numeracy.⁷

We work with lots of fantastic schools and staff, but our overall experience is that there can still be some resistance to constructive feedback from partner agencies and there may still be a professional hierarchy at play. Many schools and institutions are open to change and doing things differently, however others are not and in those cases it is sometimes easier to see the child in terms of 'bad behaviour' or 'poor parenting' than to bring about institutional change within an establishment.

Question 4

What else could be done to support the attainment/achievement of children and young people from families affected by poverty?

We would like to see more emphasis in teacher training and CPD on health and wellbeing, the impact of trauma and adversity and the importance of creating strong resilience factors for all children and young people.

The Trauma Knowledge and Skills Framework⁸ developed by NHS Education Scotland is a critical document for the entire workforce, particularly those working with children and young people. We understand NHS Education Scotland is currently developing Scottish Trauma Informed Leadership Training. We would like to see this training form part of the new Head Teacher qualification and be a central focus in the development of the proposed Head Teachers' Charter.

When our children feel happy, safe and secure they are better able to learn and senior leadership is essential in ensuring that trauma-informed practice is embedded in all schools across Scotland.

⁷ <https://www.samh.org.uk/documents/welltrained.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/media/3971582/nationaltraumatrainningframework.pdf>



Learning from our Family Support Work has also highlighted that areas of support for children should link with adult support services – for example breakfast and supper clubs in school for children only feed the children, if there is a need for this work in the family then chances are the parent may be hungry too.

Conclusion

The impact of poverty on children's attainment and achievement is something everyone should be concerned about. As we have evidenced above, it's not just the financial strain but all the other compounding issues which build up and can have a huge impact on a child's ability to learn and engage with their education. Schools must take trauma-informed approaches to supporting children and young people, especially those who have experienced poverty and adversity.

Our experience highlights a real need to ensure greater investment in children before and beyond the school gates so that they all have the chance to reach their full potential. Central to this is providing the right support to families at the right time.

You can read more about our work to close the poverty related attainment gap here:

http://www.barnardos.org.uk/19823_barnardos_gap_brochure_2018.pdf

We have included a case study from our Family Support Work at the end of this briefing – Annex A.

For any queries or further information, please contact:

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Annex A

Case Study

A request for assistance was received for Holly due to her low school attendance which was 53%; this low attendance was due to anxiety. On engaging with the family the Family Support Worker found that Holly's mum Sue had poor mental health which was having an impact on Holly's wellbeing. The family had very little support, had experienced historic domestic abuse perpetrated by Holly's father and social work involvement was at an early stage.

Sue had negative memories of her own time at school and therefore found it difficult to engage with the school in order to ensure that they were aware of Holly's unique needs. She was also anxious about how Holly was coping when at school. The Family Support Worker arranged informal meetings with Holly's guidance teacher and home-link worker to discuss her anxieties and what support was required. This also allowed the school staff to reassure Sue that Holly was managing well and appears happy and settled when at school. After meeting with the school, Sue felt more confident to contact Holly's guidance teacher when she had any concerns and felt they now had a better understanding of her difficulties.

Sue is also a carer for her elderly mother. This was impacting on the time she had available to spend with Holly and Holly was finding this difficult.

Through discussions with social work and the family it was agreed that the social worker would focus on supporting Sue to access carers support for herself and additional help, while the Barnardo's worker focused on supporting Holly and working with Sue on how to support Holly with her anxiety. The Family Support Worker also made a request for assistance to CAMHS.

Financial difficulties were exacerbating Sue's mental health condition. Christmas was a strain and huge concern, the Family Support Worker supported Sue to apply to the Salvation Army toy bank as well as apply to the foodbank for a Christmas hamper.

The Family Support Worker enlisted the help of a local financial inclusion project and supported Sue to engage. Sue has reported that this has reduced her financial worries and she has engaged well with the service. The Family Support Worker has also regularly passed on information to the financial inclusion project, with Sue's consent, as she can tend to ignore any letters regarding financial issues such as bills. The worker has supported Sue to seek help from the project when these situations arise.