

POVERTY AND CHILDREN'S PERSONAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

In the ongoing debate about how to measure and address poverty in the UK, it is crucial to understand how living with low income affects children. While the evidence base is fairly strong in areas like education and health, poverty's role in shaping relationships is less well understood. This research explored associations between poverty and children's relationships, using Millennium Cohort Study data.

Key points

- Overall, eleven-year-olds reported positive relationships with their peers, though one in six described being bullied on a weekly basis. Likewise, they presented a positive picture of family relationships, though more than one in five reported that siblings hurt or picked on them 'most days'.
- Poverty, especially persistent poverty, was associated with more problematic interaction with peers, on several measures. However, children with experience of poverty were just as likely to be happy with their friends, and typically spent more time with them outside school.
- Poverty was also associated with aspects of parent-child relationships. Those from less-well-off families reported slightly lower levels of communication and closeness and higher levels of conflict. However, children from low-income homes were just as likely as their peers to be happy with their families.
- After taking into account other factors, including child behaviour, maternal mental health and parental engagement, most links between poverty and children's relationships were no longer statistically significant. However, persistent poverty was still associated with greater interaction with friends outside school, and more frequent fights with, or bullying of, peers. In addition, once other factors were taken into account, persistent poverty was associated with higher levels of happiness with families.
- Poverty's effects on children's relationships appeared to be mostly indirect. A broad range of risk factors were more likely to affect those from low-income homes, including maternal mental health problems, low levels of parental education, lower cognitive ability and special educational needs.

The research

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BACKGROUND

Much of the published evidence on links between poverty and children's relationships has been qualitative. The release of data from the age 11 sweep of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) has enabled quantitative exploration of this area. The latest sweep explored the views and feelings of children and their mothers about their relationships.

This study analysed the data to address the question: What role, if any, does low income play in shaping the quality of children's relationships with parents, peers and siblings? The following findings are reported in two sections, covering peer and family relationships.

Poverty and peer relationships

Children generally described positive peer relationships, though around one in six reported being hurt or picked on, on a weekly basis. Before taking account of other factors, poverty – especially persistent poverty – was linked with more problematic peer relationships. Compared with children with no experience of poverty, those persistently experiencing poverty were:

- more likely to fall out with friends 'most days' (9.0 per cent of those in persistent poverty versus 2.6 per cent of those never in poverty);
- more likely to fight with or bully others (16.4 per cent versus 3.8 per cent);
- more likely to be bullied most days (11.6 per cent versus 4.6 per cent);
- more likely to play alone (35.7 per cent versus 26.2 per cent);
- less likely to have a good friend (83.9 per cent versus 91.4 per cent);
- less likely to be liked by others (79.0 per cent versus 88.3 per cent);
- less likely to talk to friends about their worries (34.1 per cent versus 42.5 per cent).

However, those with experience of poverty were just as likely as other children to be happy with their friends. Overall, they spent more time with them outside school. Further analyses demonstrated that, after taking other relevant factors into account, associations between poverty and peer relationships were weaker. However, persistent poverty was still associated with two outcomes: more frequent interaction with friends outside school, and more frequent fights with, or bullying of, peers.

The following child and family characteristics commonly emerged as significant predictors of less positive peer relationships: special educational needs; behavioural problems; higher body mass index (BMI); age (being younger than peers); having more siblings; maternal mental health problems; and white rather than black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds. In addition, children (and sometimes their parents) tended to report more positive peer relationships if they lived in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland rather than England.

Poverty and family relationships

Overall, children and their parents presented a positive picture of family relationships. Sibling bullying was relatively common, however, in line with previous research. More than one in five children reported that siblings hurt or picked on them 'most days'. Those with experience of poverty were just as likely as their peers to be happy with their families. However, there were significant, if modest,

associations between poverty and most other parent-child relationship outcomes. Compared with other children, those with experience of poverty were:

- less likely to talk to someone at home about their worries (66.8 per cent of those in persistent poverty versus 73.8 per cent of those never in poverty);
- less likely to talk to their mothers (almost) every day about things they cared about (57.5 per cent versus 67.3 per cent);
- more likely to have 'frequent battles of will' with their mothers (31.3 per cent versus 27.6 per cent);
- less likely to be (extremely) close to their mothers (54.4 per cent versus 59.2 per cent).

After taking other factors into account, these associations between poverty and parent-child relationships were no longer statistically significant. Notably, however, persistent poverty was associated with higher levels of happiness with families. Other factors associated with less positive family relationships included: behavioural problems; higher numbers of siblings; parental conflict; harsh discipline; maternal mental health problems; and overcrowding at home. Additional factors in parent-child relationships included:

- gender – mothers reported closer relationships and fewer conflicts with daughters than with sons;
- family structure – living with a single parent rather than both parents was associated with lower levels of happiness and communication, yet higher levels of closeness with mothers;
- BMI scores – higher scores were associated with closer relationships and less conflict between mother and child;
- parental educational attainment – higher attainment was associated with less close, but more communicative, mother-child relationships;
- parental engagement in early childhood – was associated with closer and more communicative mother-child relationships.

The factors associated with parent-child and sibling relationships overlapped substantially.

Conclusion

Overall, family poverty played a limited direct role in predicting the quality of children's relationships at age eleven. Initial analyses showed that poverty – particularly if persistent – had significant, largely negative associations for relationships. However, after adjusting for background factors through further analyses, few of these associations remained significant.

Mostly, a range of other factors mediated poverty's effects on relationships. Among those included in the analyses, poverty showed the strongest relationships with (lower) parental education, area deprivation and (fewer) parental working hours. However, there were also substantive associations with maternal mental health problems, family size (higher numbers of siblings), family structure (single parent or step-families), ethnicity (BME backgrounds), child behavioural problems and lower cognitive ability.

Particular factors reducing the strength of association between poverty and relationships included some relating to parents – low educational attainment, fewer working hours, parental conflict, maternal mental health problems and parenting style – and some concerning children – behavioural problems and low cognitive ability. Nevertheless, after controlling for other factors, three relationship outcomes were significantly, if weakly, associated with persistent poverty: more frequent interaction with friends outside school; greater propensity to fight with or bully peers; and higher levels of happiness with families.

These findings on interaction with friends may have positive or negative implications, depending on the reasons for, and consequences of, children in poverty spending more time with their peers. Elevated levels of conflict or bullying may partly reflect the greater frequency of contact. However, some children may target peers in response to stresses and threats to self-esteem associated with poverty.

An unexpected finding was the association of persistent poverty with slightly more happiness with families, after taking other factors into account. It may be that, in the absence of other risk factors, stable life on a low income is associated with particular appreciation of family relationships.

Policy implications

Factors other than poverty influenced the quality of children's personal and social relationships. Encouragingly, most children, including those persistently experiencing poverty, reported high levels of happiness with their friendships and families. Issues like bullying, falling out with friends and difficulty in confiding in others affected children in more affluent as well as low-income homes. Nevertheless, children living in poverty were more likely to experience these problems than their peers. This is due, at least partly, to their exposure to other inter-related risk factors such as maternal mental health problems and lower levels of parental education.

In policy terms, beyond reinforcing the case for ending child poverty, these findings underline the importance of all children receiving support to develop positive relationships. This includes teaching and other school-based activities that help to develop socio-emotional and relationship skills, for example through personal, social, health and economic education or pastoral tutorial time. Parents also need accessible advice and support in helping children with these skills.

Further research is needed to explore poverty's causal role in predicting changes in relationships over time, the implications of children in poverty spending more free time with their friends, and the apparent variations in peer relationships linked to ethnic background and between England and the rest of the UK.

About the project

The research analysed Millennium Cohort Study data. The sample comprised 10,313 children. The study measured associations between poverty and relationships before and after controlling for other relevant factors, and examined the effects of more and less persistent poverty. Outcomes were measured at age eleven, while poverty measures and controls came from all MCS stages (nine months, three, five, seven and eleven years). Poverty was taken as family income below 60 per cent of the MCS median. Children were divided into three groups: persistent experience of poverty (16.8 per cent); some experience of poverty (28.8 per cent); no experience of poverty (54.3 per cent). The research also consulted with the project's advisory group and the National Children's Bureau's Young Research Advisors.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

This summary is part of JRF's research and development programme. The views are those of the authors and not necessarily those of JRF. The full report, **Poverty and children's personal and social relationships: secondary analysis of Millennium Cohort Study data**, by Jen Gibb, Katie Rix and Emma Wallace (National Children's Bureau) and Emla Fitzsimons and Tarek Mostafa (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, UCL Institute of Education), is published by the National Children's Bureau and available online at www.ncb.org.uk

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