What does the evidence tell us?  
How do we currently support families?  
How can we use the evidence to inform how services are developed?  
How About Families can support you to develop your services?
Parenting on a Low Income: Using evidence to inform how we support families?

Participants came from a range of organisations across Scotland including local authorities, charitable and voluntary organisations and Scottish Government. One Parent Families Scotland and the Child Poverty Action Group for Scotland supported the event.

The event was participative, with a range of opportunities to get involved and share thoughts and ideas about how to use evidence in planning service developments. Group discussions encouraged reflection on the research, consideration of the findings in the context of current service provision and identification of ways in which services could be developed to meet the on-going needs of parents and families living on a low income.

The experience of living on low income and in poverty is almost always overwhelmingly negative, impacting on adults and children’s lives in a variety of ways, including loss of self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness, damage to present and future health and well-being, feelings of isolation and restricted opportunities and choices.

Given the negative effects of financial hardship, and the current economic climate where rises in the cost of living and increasing unemployment are increasingly affecting people of all ages, About Families asked what research could tell us about the impact of low income on parenting and how this research could inform services which are supporting parents and families, including those with disabilities.

What does the evidence tell us?

Findings that surprised participants

Many participants commented that they were not surprised by the evidence; however, there were many reflections on how low income can have varying influences on families.

The following points were recurring themes from discussions around ‘surprises’ to the evidence:

- Dealing with financial difficulty is stressful; however, it is the impact of stress on parenting, rather than poverty itself, which is the major factor affecting parents.
- How well parents manage whilst experiencing financial hardship - ‘the amount of coping strategies that exist’.
- The increase in child poverty which is forecast between now and 2020-21.
- Geographical areas of deprivation are commonly referred to, however, there is also a need to recognise the number of families who live in poverty but do not live in deprived areas.
- The recurring need for quality, affordable childcare which is represented within the research. This was recognised as a major barrier for parents, however, it was questioned why this is not available in the UK and why there is not more ‘outcry’ about this.
- The stigma which is associated with accepting support and how informal support from friends and family may not always be seen positively.
Findings that participants want to know more about

The evidence reports prompted many participants to reflect on specific issues they wanted to know more about:

- How families can be supported to help themselves – the focus on providing more effective services risks creating a ‘dependency’ for services. The research shows how many parents manage – is this because of resilience, different experiences of (un)happiness, or, do they have specific skills? This approach was also seen to clearly link with an ‘asset-based’ approach to supporting families.
- How the changes which are being introduced in the welfare system will impact on families affected by disability.
- How the imprisonment of a parent can affect parents on a low income and how this can be a factor which undermines parents’ ability to cope with financial hardship.
- How to increase the confidence of parents to return to work or education.
- The effects of changing working rhythms on poverty, for example the impact of seasonal work or short term contracts of employment.
- The role that working in collaboration with other organisations, including the private sector, can play in meeting increasing needs with fewer resources.
- The links between low income and poor health.

In addition, participants wanted to know more about how parents could be involved in planning services. This included a desire to know if parents and families want to be included in developing services or if parents on a low income are spending their time managing their circumstances – ‘they’re so time poor they’re running to stand still’.

Findings that participants didn’t agree with

It was felt by some participants that there is a danger of labelling families as ‘deprived’ or ‘in poverty’ as those who have income and expenditure problems, however this is not always the case. This also links to ‘surprises’ to the research in that some participants were surprised by the spread of families who are experiencing ‘low income’ as being broader than those who live in geographical areas of deprivation.
Do you have any evidence to add?

Participants at the event were asked to share any additional evidence that they felt was relevant to the ‘Parenting on a Low Income’ topic. Below are some additional reflections from the experiences of participants:

- Voluntary organisations who are working with families have experiences of increasing rates of poor mental health and well-being, but this is not being tackled early enough. There is a need for a service which is not counselling but that can support mental health and well-being.
- ‘Loan sharks’ are frequently used by families to pay for childcare deposits or family holidays. More needs to be done to raise awareness of high interest rates and that high street money shops are owned by banks.
- People living on a low income are less likely to seek support, unless it can help them to feel like they are managing by increasing confidence, self-esteem and contributing to a feeling of pride. Cooking classes were identified as one way of achieving this.
- There is a need for more early intervention support. It was felt that just now organisations are supporting families at crisis point.
- Current policy developments were felt to be leading towards universal services, however, it is important to acknowledge that some families will always require more support.

How do we currently support families?

Participants were asked to share examples, from their own experiences, of good practice and gaps in current support services for parents and families on a low income. Below are some key examples which participants reflected on.

Good Practice

Examples of good practice which were identified by participants focused on approaches to providing support, examples of services which were felt to be providing effective support and involving service users in planning services.

Approaches to providing support:

- Many comments related to the accessibility of services. Ideas such as having an ‘open-door’ approach, where no appointment is necessary, providing childcare and providing transport were felt to increase accessibility. Targeting services at specific groups, such as young mums or fathers, was also felt to increase accessibility of services.
- Working with partner organisations, including those within the private sector, was identified as an effective approach to developing services. For example, ‘Give It Up For Baby’ is a smoking cessation scheme delivered by NHS Tayside, in partnership with large supermarkets, where pregnant women are offered vouchers for groceries as a result of stopping smoking.
- Signposting to specialist services that provide advice about benefits was recognised as effective practice as this can help to ensure that people are well informed about their entitlements.
- Generating creativity within services was seen as an important approach to ensuring that parents are not ‘de-skilled’ as a result of accessing support services.
Approaches to providing support (contd.):

- Peer support was seen as a valuable source of support for parents and families which not only enables parents and families to learn from each other’s experiences but also contributes to developing capacity within communities.

Examples of services:

- The ‘Making Money Work’ project helps people in Dundee who are in transition from benefits to employment/training by providing advice and support around financial issues.
- The ‘101 Project’ (One Parent Families Scotland) in Dundee offers support to parents to improve the well-being of the whole family.
- The ‘Bookbug’ programme aims to provide free packs of books to every child in Scotland and also runs free activities, such as Bookbug sessions, where babies, toddlers, pre-schoolers and their parents come together to enjoy rhymes, sing songs and listen to stories.
- Fruit and vegetable co-ops were recognised as an effective way to support parents and families access affordable healthy foods.
- Credit unions were seen as a valuable source of financial support for local communities.
- Community gardening initiatives were recognised as healthy, empowering and low cost activities which parents and families could become involved in with their local communities.
- Parenting programmes such as the ‘Positive Parenting Programme’ in HM Prison Barlinnie and the ‘Triple P’ programme.

Involving service users:

- Involving people in planning and designing services was seen as an effective way of ensuring that services provide the support which parents and families require. Focus groups, open days, 1-1 sessions and evaluation sessions were all seen as valuable ways to gain information and feedback from service users.
- It was recognised that consultation must be proper and open and not tokenistic in nature. Relating to this, it was acknowledged that approaches to consultation need to be appropriate for people who are busy working and bringing up children. Existing structures for involvement and participation in decision-making need to be inclusive of low income families.
Gaps in Current Services

There was consensus that more needs to be done to support parents on a low income. The following points highlight the gaps in services which were identified:

- Poverty is not always ‘visible’ and as such it is important to make sure that services are not missing people who really need support. By providing targeted services there is a risk of labelling people and creating stigmatisation. There is also a risk of missing people who require support, for example those who are ‘in work poor’.
- There were differing opinions as to whether a universal service or targeted service would be more beneficial for parents and families. It was felt that there is currently a ‘post-code lottery’ as services are delivered differently for different communities.
- It was felt that more needs to be done to help people help themselves. This links to an asset based approach to supporting parents and families and also links to building resilience for families and communities.
- Preventative services which reach parents and families before a crisis point were seen as important to ensuring families on a low income receive the support that they require, when it is required.
- A lack of affordable, flexible and appropriate childcare services was recognised as a key barrier to parents returning to work or education. In particular, there is a lack of appropriate childcare services for children with disabilities.
- Limited access to respite services is a significant issue for families affected by disability.
- Many participants felt that there are more opportunities for organisations to work in partnership as well as share information between organisations, to ensure that services really meet the needs of parents and families. Many services were felt to be ‘precious’ about the support they can provide.
- Changing terminology, for example community development, social capital and asset based approaches, was felt to be a waste of time as services must re-develop their language to fit with funding criteria, whilst the work remains the same. In addition, service users do not use any of this language themselves.
- It was felt that there is a gap in information which is available for parents which is simple, straight forward and uses plain English. It is important that information, and sources of information, are clear to ensure that parents understand the details and know where to access further support as required.
How can we use the evidence to inform how services are developed?

There was consensus that the ‘Parenting on a Low Income’ evidence report should be shared with other organisations, decision makers and policy makers. In relation to funding applications it was also felt that the evidence report would be a good resource to provide evidence which could support a range of initiatives.

A theme which arose from discussion was that we do not necessarily need to develop new or more services to support parents on a low income. It was recognised that we need better knowledge of what services are available and to ensure that frontline staff know of what services are available, so that they can signpost parents to specialist services as appropriate.

**Training**

It was identified that training could be valuable for front-line staff to be able to effectively signpost parents to financial advice.

It was felt that organisations specialising in providing financial advice could provide training for organisations who are already engaging parents and families living on a low income, including those with disabilities.

It was also felt that organisations providing financial advice for parents and families have an opportunity to address issues around mental health and smoking cessation, as appropriate. Training around how to handle these complex issues may be valuable.

**Accessible services**

Ensuring that services target all groups in society and are open-minded about who needs support will help ensure that financial advice is accessible for anyone who needs it.

**Partnership working**

Organisations providing financial advice working in partnership with organisations that are supporting parents and families would be an opportunity to raise awareness of support services available and also increase the amount of signposting which can occur between organisations providing differing specialist services.

**On-line support for lone parents**

Providing information and advice, along with an on-line forum for lone parents could provide valuable support for parents and families on a low income. Not only can this help to address barriers around stigma associated with seeking support, it can also help to address barriers for people living in rural communities.

This on-line resource would also explore the use of social media and mobile devices as a mechanism of reaching lone parents and providing practical and emotional support.
How About Families can support you to develop your services

Through the sharing of evidence and ideas for action, About Families aims to support voluntary and statutory organisations to develop their services to meet the needs of parents and families, including those with disabilities.

Some of the actions in this report will be relevant to your organisation but there may also be other actions, specific to your organisation, which would develop your services to better meet the needs of parents and families. About Families can support you to plan actions, involve your service users and evaluate the difference your services are making. Below are two examples of how About Families is supporting organisations.

**Heart to Heart**

Heart to Heart is a registered charity that offers support to those who have been affected by divorce or separation.

About Families is working with Heart to Heart to develop support which can be offered specifically for parents who have experienced relationship difficulties. We are currently seeking the views of service users who are also parents themselves, to learn about how this support could be developed. This will help to develop a toolkit specifically tailored to support parents and families.

**Citizens Advice Scotland (CAS) and Children 1st**

CAS and Children 1st support kinship carers through different services. Both organisations are working with local authorities to raise awareness of the needs of kinship carers.

About Families is working with CAS and Children 1st to increase knowledge and understanding for how local authorities can support kinship carers; to empower kinship carers to share their experiences; and to increase the capacity and confidence of kinship carers to articulate their needs to statutory organisations.

**Supporting you**

If you have an idea for how your services could be developed to further support parents and families on a low income, including families affected by disability, please contact Katrina Reid, Development Officer for About Families, and request an ‘Ideas for Action’ form (contact details below). This short form asks you about your initial ideas for developing your services.

Once you have completed an ‘Ideas for Action’ form, About Families will explore with you how you could be supported to take your actions forward.

Katrina Reid can be contacted at Katrina.reid@ed.ac.uk or 0131 651 1941.

---

**Parenting on a Low Income Community of Practice**

Following the forum event About Families are now facilitating a Community of Practice to further explore the research and how it could inform service developments with a range of organisations.

More information is available on the About Families website. If you are interested in taking part, please contact Katrina.