

Conceptual note No.1

The inclusion of ‘parenting’ in the PSE Survey UK

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Improved parenting is currently often advocated as the best route to improve outcomes for children, and explicitly, as a better alternative than reducing poverty. However, the relationship between poverty and parenting is not well understood. It is therefore worthwhile including some measures of parenting *alongside* the detailed study of poverty and social exclusion provided by the PSE in order both to improve our understanding of the relationship between poverty and parenting and to engage with current popular and policy debate in the area.

Relationships between parenting, poverty and outcomes for children

A link between poverty and outcomes for children is well established with poverty strongly associated with a large number of negative measures of child well-being including higher mortality and morbidity, and levels of mental ill-health (Bradshaw 2011: 27) and for children’s achievement “poverty and the persistence of poverty still matter” (Kiernan and Mensah 2011:324). There is also evidence for a link between parenting and outcomes for children: “maltreatment increases the risk of a wide range of other negative outcomes” (Hooper 2011: 192) and psychological research indicates that parent-child relationships are associated with cognitive/academic outcomes, social competence and (negatively) with high-risk health behaviours (O’Connor and Scott 2007: 14). However, academic research has emphasised how neither parental behaviour nor low income alone are sufficient to explain social disadvantage (e.g. Sullivan 2010) and the existence of *both* separate and related effects (e.g. Kiernan and Heurta 2008). Since determining the relationship between parenting and poverty is not straightforward including measures of both within a single survey will allow this to be explored.

Current focus on parenting versus poverty

Parenting is currently the focus of much political and policy attention in the UK. Significantly, recent reports emphasise the role of parenting while downplaying the importance of poverty (Field 2010; Allen 2011). Frank Field argues that “It is family background, parental education, good parenting and the opportunities for learning and development in those crucial years that together matter more to children than money” (2010: 5): Allen that “the right kind of parenting is a bigger influence on their [children’s] future than wealth, class, education or any other common social factor” (2011: xiv). Government commissioned reports and political speeches therefore argue that it is ‘what parents do, not who they are’ that makes a difference to children. Academic researchers have countered by restating the ongoing importance of

poverty and inequality and warned against the tendency to ignore structural explanations in favour of a cultural deficit model (Gordon 2011) and in particular the strategy of placing “absolute faith...in the power of practices of ‘good parenting’” (Jensen 2010: 1). The entrance of parenting as such a major element into political debates on inequality and poverty mean that it is incumbent on the PSE to include some measures of parenting in order to engage with these discussions.

Measuring parenting

As parenting is multi-faceted it is unsurprising that most sociological accounts of parenting tend to use qualitative research methods; thereby allowing researchers to explore how parents and children think about ‘good parenting’ in the round. Attempts at quantifying parenting tend to include a broad and varied range of measures that can comprise; family characteristics, parental characteristics, quality of parent-child relationships, parenting behaviours, and parenting activities. While all of these are potentially of interest, issues over how these dimensions can be operationalised, combined with pragmatic constraints imposed by a survey format, mean that only some are appropriate for inclusion in the PSE. Additionally, a comprehensive measurement of parenting is not a central element of the PSE and therefore variables should only be included when they will allow for the most useful engagement with current policy and academic discussions. This requires an awareness of the most popularly used measures.

Family characteristics refer to the family form and the types and status of relationships within the household. It includes, for example, the presence of step-parents/children, whether parents are married or cohabiting, and number of siblings and generations present. *Parental characteristics* include demographic information such as the age of mother at birth along with markers of social position such as income, occupation, employment status, and education/qualifications. The *parent-child relationship* is a subjective measure of relationship quality. It is often assessed from the view of only one person/partner, though it is accepted that survey questions should preferably be supported by observations and interviews (Rothbaum and Weisz 1994). If a valid measure of relationship quality is to be constructed a battery of questions is required in order to replicate commonly used psychological scales (e.g. the version of the Pianta scale used in the Millennium Cohort Study required answering 15 statements). *Parenting behaviours* refer to the establishment of discipline and routine, and clear boundaries in terms of child behaviour. Assessing the extent to which parents actually practice routines rather than express positive views about their existence is difficult in a survey method and therefore usually relies either on a large number of questions or additional observational methods. *Parenting activities* refers, firstly, to activities which involve child and parent participating in a joint activity. These tend to be restricted to child centred activities, such as playing a game together. There is then an additional narrowing through focussing on activities associated with positive outcomes for children e.g. reading to your child. Finally, the activities most frequently included reflect the fact that the greatest attention has been focused on pre-school children and therefore are appropriate for this stage of development. Parenting activities can also include those activities which are related to children but do not involved direct interaction. This form of engagement is marked by an interest in children’s lives without the children necessarily being present, for example attending a school parents’ day to discuss their child’s progress. Again, there is often a focus on education and preparedness for future employment.

Parenting in the PSE

Parent-child relationships and *parenting behaviour* will not be included in the survey due to the combined problems of: the limitations of a survey only method; a requirement for a large number of questions to construct robust scales; a lack of confidence in measures of relationship quality that are asked of only one partner and inability to ask questions of both children and parents; a requirement for significant variation in the questions depending on the age of the children, and a question mark over *what* exactly such questions are measuring including a concern that what is labelled as 'good' may be simply reflecting dominant middle-class views of parenting (see Jensen 2010). *Family characteristics* will be captured in the PSE and will include additional questions about the existence of dependent children who do not reside with their parents in order to capture parent-child attachments *across* households. *Parental characteristics* will also be measured. A number of age appropriate *parenting activities* will be included.

By including these elements of parenting/family, the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey will be able to provide evidence about the relationship between poverty and aspects of parenting that have received significant recent political attention but which, as yet, have been the subject of limited empirical research.

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