

Parenting and children's resilience in disadvantaged communities

There has been relatively little research about the distinctive challenges of bringing up children in disadvantaged areas, nor of children's perspectives on identifying and managing threats. In particular, we know very little about how parents and children promote their children's well-being and safeguard them from day-to-day risks. This research set out to develop understanding of these issues by examining the perspectives of parents and children living in ordinary families in four disadvantaged areas in and around Glasgow. It found:

- Despite high levels of low income, unemployment and drug misuse, both parents and young people usually identified positive aspects in their local areas, particularly associated with the presence of familiar and trusted family, friends and neighbours.
- Parents and children reported coping with a wide range of local risks to the children's immediate and long-term well-being. Their main concerns centred on threats from youth gangs and from adults or young people misusing drugs and alcohol.
- Parents believed that promoting organised, supervised activities reduced the likelihood of their children coming into contact with risks, provided safe alternatives and offered opportunities for skill and social development.
- Parents described parenting styles that were open, democratic, sophisticated and tenacious in working alongside their children to keep them safe. This challenges views that parenting problems are rife in areas with high levels of anti-social behaviour by young people.
- Children usually valued parents' interest and rules as showing concern for them although, particularly as they got older, they would sometimes ignore or subvert parental rules to create their own space and independence.
- Young people took responsibility for keeping themselves and their friends safe by sharing knowledge, looking out for each other and moving around together. They used their detailed local knowledge to avoid or minimise hazardous situations. Some were aware that certain adults saw such self-protective groups as threatening.
- Parents often had high aspirations for their children based on realistic assessments of their children's strengths. However, the capacity to fulfil such hopes, especially educational ones, relied on knowledge and resources that many parents may lack.
- In protecting their children from the effects of low income, parents showed a high degree of creativity and budgetary skill. Parents were very conscious of peer and commercial pressures to buy desired items and clothes that were hard to afford.



Background

Recent policies in relation to child welfare, juvenile justice and area regeneration emphasise the importance of effective parenting. Interventions focused on parents primarily affect families living in disadvantaged communities, yet there has been relatively little research about the distinctive challenges of bringing up children in these areas, nor of children's perspectives on identifying and managing threats. In particular, we know very little about the steps parents and children take to promote their children's well-being and safeguard them from the risks they encounter in their daily lives.

This research set out to develop understanding of these issues by examining the experiences and perspectives of parents and children living in four areas of disadvantage in the West of Scotland. Two linked studies explored the ways parents and children in ordinary families acted together and separately to cope with adverse environments

Risk and safety in disadvantaged communities

Parents and young people usually felt good about some aspects of the places they lived in, commonly the presence of relatives, neighbours and peers who all formed trusted and protective networks. Both adults and young people were also keenly aware of risks within their communities. The proximity and frequency of violence were central to the worries expressed by many children. Prominent were threats to short-term safety such as aggression from gangs and adults with drink or drug problems. The gangs were long-established and evidently an institutionalised response to the local environment and paucity of positive opportunities. Gangs also presented long-term dangers, in terms of young people being drawn into anti-social behaviour or crime which could restrict their aspirations and opportunities.

Whilst some young people were seen as a threat (through gang aggression), young people also saw their friendships as providing safety. A key message from the research was the positive role of the peer group as a means by which young people kept safe, for example, going to risky places in groups and using mobile phones to check all was well or to offer support. This positive role was often overlooked by parents. Friends helped provide knowledge of risks and safety, support and reciprocal monitoring, though there was a danger that moving in groups (for safety) was interpreted as threatening by adults or other children.

Interviewer: *"What do you do to keep safe?"*

Girl 1: *"Don't go into their place, I just hang round with a big gang."*

Girl 2: *"I don't hang about with a big gang, maybe one or two people because if you are in a gang, other people think you want trouble."*

[Group of 14-year-old girls]

Most parents and young people saw school as a haven from risks (although there were reports of bullying), but some parents spoke of schools not involving them enough in issues concerning their children.

Parents often went to considerable trouble to arrange organised activities for their children; these were seen to be safer than unstructured leisure and to promote positive skills and relationships.

Young people's accounts demonstrated how they were often the experts on their spheres of experience and deployed a range of techniques to keep safe (for example, avoiding people and places known to be risky; keeping a low profile; asking a friend or parent to go with them).

Safety and social exclusion

How parents and young people engaged with their communities was an important aspect of resilience and keeping young people safe. Both often categorised different parts of their neighbourhoods as safe or unsafe, 'good' or 'bad', and had an acute awareness of where boundaries lay. Children designated certain spaces as only safe at particular times of the day or week, depending on who would be there.

These classifications enabled judgements about where to spend time and how to travel so that children kept safe. However, keeping safe in this way meant that both children and their parents restricted children's movements and activities, excluding young people from certain areas and activities. This could include avoiding amenities that should have been a resource in their development and growth, such as local parks and sports facilities.

“Although we’ve got the big sports centre and the swimming pool and that, but when they’re walking from here to the swimming pool, like my boy is going from a different scheme so there’s always (the danger of trouble) if you come from a different scheme.”

[Mother in individual interview]

Another consequence was that people could become labelled as living in ‘bad’ areas. This could isolate them from the safety-enhancing networks through which parents and young people watch out for each other and hear about safe play and leisure opportunities.

“I think it’s just because we know everybody. Everybody you walk by you know, do you know what I mean? Don’t get me wrong, I know people up in (another area) and all but it’s just – it’s a place I wouldn’t like to stay, drugs-wise and ... it probably hasn’t got any more drug users than this area but, it’s just, all the junkies that walk about on my street – I know them all!” [Mother in individual interview]

Parenting

Parenting has been prominent in many government policies, including initiatives to tackle crime in disadvantaged communities. In the media and public imagination, ‘bad’ parenting is seen as complicit in anti-social and delinquent behaviour on the streets and in schools.

However, adults in this research described sophisticated strategies to minimise their children’s exposure to local dangers and to guard them against temptations to go ‘off the rails’. Most parents said they maintained open and democratic styles of parenting which respected young people’s views and opinions. Children usually confirmed this. Discussion between parents and children was normally the cornerstone of discipline. ‘Grounding’ was a common sanction too, and was often upheld despite creating difficulties for parents in managing their own time. In their questionnaire responses, the majority of parents stated that, in their experience, discussion and grounding were usually effective; they regarded smacking and ignoring misbehaviour as ineffective.

When negotiating rules, parents encouraged their children to be open about the children’s activities. This gave parents vital intelligence on the local area which helped them monitor risks and safety. Children were mostly accepting of rules about time and place, which they saw as representing parental concern for them. As they grew older, however, some kept quiet about certain activities, confident that they could take care of themselves.

Although children sometimes disregarded or subverted parental rules to avoid embarrassment amongst peers or simply to do things they wanted, at other times they made decisions for themselves based on their estimations of the safety and risk in a given situation.

Many parents described having to manage expenditure very carefully in order to make ends meet, despite pressures to buy fashionable items for their children.

“I’m so terrified of debt, I even budget my debt ... I just budget constantly, catalogues are within my control. I mean it’s not easy for a lot of folk they end up giving into their children, my children have never had a computer game or anything. If I’ve no got it, they don’t get it and I don’t go into debt for it.” [Mother]

Hopes for the future

Parents had high aspirations for their children, often wanting them to have more than they themselves had had in terms of opportunities, well-paid jobs and interesting lives. Many expected their children to move away from the area as adults to optimise their educational and employment prospects. Many of the children had high educational aspirations but opted for traditional non-professional jobs, often gender-related (e.g. girls: beautician, hairdresser; boys: joiner, mechanic).

Parents and young people recognised the importance of education and qualifications for success in the adult jobs market and access to more interesting and better-paid jobs. However, many had access to a limited supply of advice and guidance when it came to new forms of work (such as creative and media occupations) or jobs not traditionally entered into by people from disadvantaged backgrounds (such as medicine or law). For some, limited income and well-learned avoidance of debt could also affect their capacity to meet the costs of entering Higher Education and taking on student loans.

Conclusion

The research points to a number of specific implications across a range of policy areas. These include:

- Developing policies which are consistent with the many strengths and aspirations of parents and young people living in disadvantaged areas, as well as seeking to tackle some of the risk factors, including gang activity and drug/alcohol misuse.
- Ensuring national and local policies work with and promote informal networks that share information about safe activities and provide practical advice and support. Such networks are at the core of parents' strategies to keep young people safe in high-risk communities. The time it takes for these networks to develop should not be underestimated.
- Integrating socially isolated parents, as isolation from these networks can compound the experience of social exclusion and the difficult nature of parenting in high-risk situations.
- Challenging over-simple assumptions that areas have a negative culture of parenting and that peer group activity is largely anti-social.
- Schools capitalising on the evidence of parents' commitment to discussion and discipline, with parents acting as allies in behaviour management for school staff, even in challenging areas.
- Provision of a range of low-cost leisure facilities in disadvantaged communities, which maximise inclusion and safety at all times, to enhance children's social and educational resilience.

About the project

These findings come from research carried out in four neighbourhoods in the Glasgow area all characterised by high levels of socio-economic disadvantage measured by high levels of unemployment, crime and children receiving free school meals. Access to families was through schools. In total 231 parents and 259 children completed questionnaires; 17 discussion groups were held with parents and 16 with young people; 84 individual or couple interviews took place with parents and 60 with children.

The research was carried out by a team at the Glasgow Centre for the Child & Society, University of Glasgow.

For more information

The full report, **Parenting and children's resilience in disadvantaged communities** by Peter Seaman, Katrina Turner, Malcolm Hill, Anne Stafford and Moira Walker, is published for the Foundation by the National Children's Bureau

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