

Reducing the Impact of Child Poverty in Northern Ireland - A Good Practice Guide for Primary Schools

Official government statistics for 2005-06 show 29% (or 122,000) of children in Northern Ireland are living in families that are below the poverty line (60% below the median income). Moreover, around 10% (or 44,000) are living in severe poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Save the Children, two organisations working to end child poverty, funded a study of the impact of poverty on young children's experience of school. Children aged 4 – 11, parents and primary school Principals across Northern Ireland contributed to the research. This Good Practice Guide is based on the findings of the study. It aims to:

- *Raise awareness among teachers of the impact of poverty on children's school experience;*
- *Help schools to improve educational outcomes for children growing up in poverty;*
- *Provide examples of the wide range of good practice already evident in many of NI's schools.*

Making Ends Meet – what can schools do?

The study found that children whose families are struggling to make ends meet are keenly aware of the hidden costs of education. Children and parents identified the main costs of school as uniform (including shoes), lunches and school trips.

Schools can help by looking for the cheapest possible school uniform, particularly since there is no school uniform grant at primary level:

- *Have a simple colour uniform that can be bought in the cheaper stores and avoid using crests or badges as these tend to more than double the price of sweatshirts and polo shirts;*
- *Be flexible about shoes. Children, especially boys, go through shoes quickly and parents may not be able to afford to replace uniform shoes once worn out.*

Good practice hint: *some schools ask parents to donate sweatshirts, ties and polo shirts that are too small. These can be kept by the school to be borrowed for the day by children who come to school without a uniform or can be given to the child if the family is known to have financial problems.*

Free School Meals (FSMs) can be a source of worry for poorer children, especially if they are in a socially-mixed school. Breakfast clubs are popular with children and can help to improve punctuality and attendance. If things are very tight at home, children may rely on the food they get at school for basic nutrition. However, many children entitled to FSMs do not claim them due to fear of stigma and teasing or bullying.

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- *Make school meals as healthy and tasty as is possible within your school's circumstances and ensure that the system of paying for any food in school is non-stigmatising, i.e. that no one can tell who is paying and who is getting food for free. This should apply to breakfast and fruit juice as well as lunch. The swipe card system is a good example.*

Even at primary school, children may exclude themselves from **school trips** saying they “couldn’t be bothered” because they do not want to put pressure on their parents by asking for the cost of the trip. None of the parents who took part in the study realised that, legally, activities that take place during school hours must be free. They saw the ‘contribution’ to the cost of school trips as a fixed charge.

- *Find non-stigmatising ways to keep down the cost of school trips and make it clear that voluntary contributions are truly voluntary and that no child will be treated differently if his/her family is unable to make a contribution.*

I suppose education is free but there always seems to be something. You always seem to be handing out something. Now it mightn’t be large amounts of money, but I do feel that you are constantly handing out... [parent]

Out-of-School Activities

Missing out on structured after-school activities denies children important learning experiences which may affect their engagement in more formal learning at school. In out-of-school settings, they become used to seeing learning as a partnership rather than something that is imposed on them. This study – and others carried out as part of the JRF’s poverty and education programme – found that children from disadvantaged backgrounds miss out on these activities unless they are available without charge. Even then, if they do not live in walking distance of school, lack of transport may mean they are unable to participate in those free activities. Some of the most marginalised children, particularly boys, may

not take part in free after-school activities because they feel constricted by the long school days and do not want to spend any longer than they have to on school premises.

The focus of the Extended Schools’ policy is particularly on schools drawing children from disadvantaged areas. Schools can help ensure that Extended Schools’ money is well used to promote learning by:

- *Developing partnerships with local community groups to deliver after-school activities outside of the school building;*
- *Get children to bring in ‘play’ clothes which they can change into for after-school activities. It is important, however, to emphasise that these clothes should be old. This is to ensure that there isn’t a ‘fashion parade’ after school and that the clothes can be dirtied without concern;*
- *Ensure that the out-of-school activities are imaginative and cannot in any way be seen as a continuation of the formal school day.*

Good practice hint: some schools encourage children to use first names for the adults who work with them in out-of-school activities. This helps to clearly differentiate the experience from the formal school day.

Children’s worries – how can schools help improve pupils’ emotional health and wellbeing?

Growing up in poverty is stressful, no matter how hard parents work to protect children from the worst impacts. One of the key findings of this study is the extent to which children living in poorer families worry about everything and cannot take their education for granted in the way better-off children can. Schools can play an important role in alleviating some of that worry and teaching children to deal with anxiety, frustration and anger.

All the children who took part in the study worried about a range of issues. Testing, especially the Eleven Plus, was the most frequently mentioned worry. However, for those children who come from less well-off families, there are an additional range of worries that make school a less pleasant place for them. These worries included having the right uniform, including shoes; being able to afford to pay for school trips; and having the 'right' clothes to wear on non-uniform days.

Schools can help by:

- *Reducing demands on families (see section above on Making Ends Meet);*
- *Replacing non-uniform days by other ways of raising money for charity;*
- *Teaching children to talk about feelings, friendships and about how different people can see the same event differently, as encouraged by the new curriculum.*
- *Helping children to develop listening and problem solving skills.*
- *Working with community health organizations, such as Healthy Living Centres, to provide children with classes in yoga, massage and basic relaxation techniques.*

Good practice tip: *one school had recognised the problem with non-uniform days and replaced them with a “funny hair” day and an “odd-shoe” day for pupils and teachers.*

Maintaining children's engagement with school

One of the most worrying findings of this study was that some boys had already started to disengage from school by age 10 or 11. In all schools, boys complained more than girls about not being able to get outside to play both during and after school hours and about the amount of work, particularly homework,

that they had to do. In all schools, children spoke a great deal about what is, and is not, fair about how pupils are treated. Girls in the disadvantaged schools were as likely as boys to complain about being shouted at by teachers but only boys concluded that this led them to 'hate' school. It seems that the combination of what they perceive as long school days, the amount of work and teachers' shouting at them is causing some boys to disengage even at primary school. Schools can help to counter this by:

- *Trying to break up the school day as much as possible, giving frequent short breaks and, particularly during winter months, making sure that all children get some time outside;*
- *Supporting teachers in disadvantaged schools who have a huge additional burden of 'welfare' work including ensuring children are not hungry, having to operate savings schemes for school trips, deal with parents who are uncomfortable and defensive in the school setting etc;*
- *Making teachers aware of the negative impact that their shouting at children has on the child's motivation to learn;*
- *Improving children's participation in running the school, thereby giving them more of a feeling of control over their school lives.*

Good practice hint: *school councils are only one way of increasing children's participation in running the school. Some schools have mediation programmes where children are trained to help solve playground disputes; others have peer support programmes to help children who are new to the school, have additional needs or who are being bullied.*

Parental Involvement in School

Parental involvement in a child's education has been shown to help with attendance, attainment and more positive attitudes to school and learning. However,

interviews with parents made it clear that parents' own experiences of school as a child leave some parents intimidated by the school environment and lacking in confidence in dealing with teachers. This is much more likely to be the case in disadvantaged areas. Parents with poor literacy skills will struggle to help their child with homework. Schools can help by:

- *Making parents feel welcome in the school. Some schools provide information evenings, 'pamper' sessions and coffee mornings to help parents feel that the school is 'theirs'. These schools report a high level of parental involvement in the Parent Teacher Association and elections for parent-governors.*
- *Offering home visits when children first start school. This helps the teacher assess the child's level of development but can also help build a positive relationship with the parent outside the formal school setting.*
- *Provide placements for parents who are training in childcare or early childhood education, catering or other careers that could be supported by the school.*

Good practice hint: *Some schools provide 'helping your child with homework' classes which provide basic literacy and numeracy skills in a non-stigmatising manner. Others provide parenting courses that help parents manage a child's behaviour at home in a positive manner and so help improve the child's behaviour at school.*

Falling school rolls

In some areas in Northern Ireland changing demographics, and the resulting fall in numbers of children at school, are having a highly detrimental impact on the way children living in poverty experience school. This is the case whether the child is attending a more disadvantaged school that is heading for closure or an advantaged school that is increasingly

drawing children from disadvantaged areas who, traditionally, attended the more disadvantaged school. On the one hand, children from poorer families attending the more advantaged schools can experience stigmatisation, as these schools may have less experience of ensuring the impact of poverty on pupils is minimised. On the other hand, those attending the disadvantaged schools that are heading for closure experience damaging levels of uncertainty and an increased awareness of the poverty faced by themselves and their school. It was clear from the conversations with P6 and P7 pupils in schools which are heading for closure that they are picking up on teachers' and parents' anxieties about their schools' futures and that they themselves are anxious as a result.

Schools can help by:

- *Being aware that children are aware of the difficulties the school faces and giving them full and accurate information;*
- *Provide a similar level of information to parents.*
- *Implement the good practice proposed in this Guide.*

The Department of Education can help by not forcing families whose children have attended the schools moving towards closure to transfer their children to a nearer school once places become available there. The withdrawal of free transport because places are available in a nearer school has the effect of forcing a transfer if the family cannot afford to pay for transport.

Further copies of this Practice Guide can be downloaded free of charge from www.savethechildren.org.uk

This Guide is based on the research study *The Impact of Poverty on Young Children's Experience of School*, by Goretta Horgan, University of Ulster. The report is available to download free of charge from www.jrf.org.uk