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| Summary Notes MEETING THE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY |

## iNTRODUCTION

We will be discussing the key details of the background to the mental health challenges faced by children living in poverty. This is fundamental now more than ever, given that 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020, the number of young people living within low income households increased significantly up to 31%. You also need to remember that of course poverty is a wide sweeping phrase whereby some families they will struggle to pay for certain additional things for their children whereas six in ten families said that they would struggle to cover the cost of three or more essentials such as food rent and childcare as a result of the disruption caused by lockdown in particular, and that the effects of this is still being experienced.

We will be considering what we can do for this often vulnerable group of children. By taking a specific focus on the practical strategies which have been found to be useful in enhancing the mental wellbeing, we will be taking an honest look at how we can implement these strategies in school, how we can work their families and why they are needed. Please do practise self-care as always and take as many breaks as you need to safely work through this training.

What does your school have in place to support children who are living in poverty?

## mENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES for children and young people living in poverty:

For many, social disadvantages including that of poverty can implicate the standard of living irrespective of how much a parent or carer loves their child and tries to provide for them in relation to not only mental health, but also physical well-being which is deeply intertwined.

If we consider the principles of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, physiological or basic needs, as some might say, are really the building blocks of all future well-being. A young child who is perhaps living in a home without heating, receiving a lack of regular meals which have nutritional value, living in cramped living conditions which may have an impact on their Physical health, such as respiratory diseases. This is unlikely to contribute to the feelings of safety a young person needs particularly in those that have unstable housing and perhaps been homeless also.

Perhaps a young person that doesn't feel that their needs are met, may feel unloved or that they belong, such factors will work together to have an impact on their self-esteem will have to work much harder to keep up with their peers. They are likely to experience greater challenges in terms of being able to reach their full potential such as in academic achievement which can fuel intergenerational unemployment.

Children living in poverty have become a government concern over the previous few years through the advent of schemes such as Pupil Premium or the concept of Free School meals. This has undeniably been a fantastic improvement in terms of the nutritional health of these young people. However, there are still several aspects of material deprivation which will have an impact on the mental well-being. There still remains a number of issues which will still have an impact on the mental health of young people. They may be living in an area of high crime and perhaps feel very afraid about leaving their home to go to school each day. There may be a lack of green spaces to play and often areas of social deprivation may also have overstretched services. This may mean that young people who may have the beginnings of mental health concerns, or simply just need someone to speak to, may be denied this opportunity due to a lack of appropriate levels of provision in that area.

Many of these young people are affected by the digital divide which that is that they may have been without devices at home or lacking the internet by which to have sustained contact with their peers during lockdown. They may have become withdrawn and socially isolated and struggling to be able to remake bonds with peers. Older adolescents may also have to work as well as complete their studies which may also have an impact on their educational achievement.

These disadvantages and more can work together so that the young person to fuel negative self-fulfilling prophecies. That means that they may be less hopeful about their futures. In some, this can manifest as low mood which may lead eventually to depression. They are less likely to have supportive friends or emotional bonds at home whereby they can seek support when they need it. This means that often any potential mental health concerns tend to escalate much faster than in other young people especially true with young people of colour or those who may belong to the LGBTQ community, for example. Not only will these young people be facing the disadvantage due to poverty, but also the further marginalisation of their groups. The numbers of young people who also experience anxiety is also overly disproportionate within this group of young people. This often stems around the lack of practical resources. For example, the fear of not having the right equipment for school, the concerns around not being able to enjoy the weekend with their friends because perhaps getting the bus is too expensive.

They are more likely to belong to highly emotionally charged home environments whereby parents may argue they may be more likely to witness or experience abuse or domestic violence and generally the escalation of safeguarding issues which may also affect the life course, giving rise to longer term mental ill-health such as PTSD. I will add the link for Buttle UK in the notes as they also did an interesting piece of research whereby they interviewed the support workers that were working with children in poverty. They found, for example, that 51% of the young people within their sample referred to the relationship with their parents to be very fraught.

Generally, there is also a high proportion of parents and carers within these circumstances who also suffer from mental health problems as well which may also be observed by the young people. For example, substance misuse, criminality or unhealthy coping behaviours. For this reason, this can add to the anxieties faced by young people because they may end up having to be the carer for their parents rather than the other way round. This can of course impact on their schooling and therefore the sense of community that they feel at school because they may not be able to attend all of the time. For others, parental mental health concerns may also stem from putting pressure onto themselves to give their children the best and keep up with others.

How do factors such as these affect the beliefs a young person has about themselves, how they view their futures and what they perceive others to think ok?

## MEETING THE MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG living in poverty:

The important think about mental health is intervening as we know that many mental health conditions develop before the age of 24, many stemming from childhood. Alongside some of the suggestions we will discuss, always follow your usual safeguarding channels and ensure that any concerns are followed up. If you are that person, think about what you can do train staff in your procedures and how we can give them reassurance that it is better to report even the smallest of suspicions early on rather than wait for escalation.

If you are at all concerned about a child or young person, you should always speak to your designated safeguarding lead as a matter of priority. They will be able to advise on suitable next steps and speaking to them about any concerns should always be the first action you take, ahead of any of the suggestions on this page.

I have pulled together some of the most effective strategies and many of these link to the 3 Rs principle of risk, resilience, and resources.

1. **Understanding the needs of the local community**

* This is vitally important and will underpin all of the other strategies.
* Do we know what it is like to live in the local community?
* Do your young people travel into school from other areas? What services are available to them?
* Every member of staff needs to know their local statistics such as levels of unemployment, number of young people on free school meals. It is also important to realise that there may be other young people living in more recent poverty who do not have free school meals due to parent or carer salaries beyond the threshold but this may still not be sufficient to fully provide for their children. This may be the case in situations surrounding debt for example.

1. **Promote the local offer:**

* We need to encourage young people that it is ok to ask for help and healthy to talk about our feeling and emotions. This could be done in PSHE, form time or circle time if you are in a primary setting. Additionally, it maybe that a young person approaches us asking for help.
* In this situation it is often helpful to offer services both inside and outside of school as many young people may feel more comfortable this way. It isn’t just about educating them on mental health services but also the wider offer so this might include youth services, community schemes or local charities that often offer activities free of charge during the evenings, weekends and summer holidays and can help young people to have a place to go, get exercise, make new friends and more.

1. **Mental health ‘check in reminders’ around school:**

* This might include posters or having mindfulness activities at the start of the day, encouraging all teachers to start the lesson asking how everyone is and so on... it is about helping to normalise recognising their own mental health needs and normalising discussions around feelings.

1. **Resource banks:**

* This may sound like an obvious suggestion, but this takes so much pressure off a young person. These may include spare equipment such as new school bags, facilities to be able to wash and return uniforms clean, shower facilities with toiletries... the practical things that help young people to be able to fit in and more confident in themselves.

1. **Recognise positive decisions:**

* Embracing the positive can also help to generate a school atmosphere for everyone which helps to fill in some of those gaps we spoke about at the beginning. It helps to demonstrate love, belonging and support. It could be that you could set up random acts of kindness schemes where we celebrate seeing young people supporting each other, working hard, being compassionate and more.

1. **Celebrate milestones:**

* Some young people won’t be able to celebrate birthdays or other special occasions at home so small acts such as making birthday cards or arranging some extra fun time for the class that day can make a child feel special and appreciated.

1. **Be realistic:**

* Of course as educators we want the very best, we want all young people to achieve but all staff must be realistic in the way that we are setting homework, expectations around costly activities and trips and more.
* There may not be access to devices or the internet home by which to work from, they may not have a desk to be able to write neatly at home or parents/carers who are able to help. This doesn’t mean making allowances but what it does mean is that we need to think about what we are asking young people to do, plan first.

1. **Don’t jump to conclusions:**

* Are they late for school because they had care responsibilities? Are they wearing the wrong unform because that was all that parents or carers could access?
* We need to have a delicate conversation with young to person to find out the why before we can consider appropriate action. This is so important when applying behaviour management as we don’t want these young people to be disciplined for something beyond their control. It is damaging to their social and emotional wellbeing which can contribute to mental health concerns.

What would you rank as the top 3 of these 8 strategies?

## Meeting the mental health needs of the family of children and young people living in poverty:

1. **Use a strengths based approach-**celebrate achievement with parents, have in school as regularly as practical to find out what their child has been doing and helping them to consider ways of promoting further progress in their child.
2. **Good collaborative links with social services-**if we can collaborate well with social services it means we can keep our knowledge as educators fresh in relation to what is available. This can help us have conversations around what is available to support parents and carers.
3. **Think practically-**how can we help to alleviate some of the stresses parents living in poverty might face? Can we do book swaps instead of fairs? Is there another way of doing school photographs so that these families don’t have to miss out?
4. **Meet and greet-**this is about having staff available outside school not just to ensure the safety of students, but to interact with parents and provide opportunities for informal conversations as these can often feel less threatening to these parents as some of them may have had stressful experiences themselves in school. This will help them to reframe school hopefully as a positive place with teachers that want to support.
5. **Parent workshops-**some schools have shared their successes in running some twilight workshops for parents to cover the basic fundamentals in English and maths or how to support with homework or revision. This helps to alleviate some of the anxieties that many parents have about supporting their child.
6. **Extended school programmes-**what are we doing to share any additional provision that we have such as breakfast or after school clubs and so on... remember that not all parents will be able to read emails and letters. This may alienate them further so we need to think creatively about how we can spread the word and this will also be helpful for EAL families too.

Which strategy for working with families are you most likely to share with a colleague? Why?

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

* We have looked at some of the challenges experienced by those living in poverty.
* We have considered risks and what we can do to mitigating against these factors where possible.
* We need to use a non-judgemental approach to work with families which is enshrined with a strengths-based, positive approach to demonstrate what brilliant things their young person is doing.

What will be your next three steps following this training?

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### Books

## Tania Thomas-Presswood and Donald Presswood (2008) Meeting the needs of students and families from poverty: a handbook for school and mental health professionals

Clare Erasmus (2021) The Designated Mental Health Lead Planner: A Guide and Checklist for the School Year.

### Websites

* <https://buttleuk.org/>
* <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-poverty>
* <https://buttleuk.org/news/news-list/impact-of-poverty-on-child-mental-health/>
* <https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2017/02/15/poverty-has-devastating-impact-on-childrens-mental-health/>

## **References/ACADEMIC READING**

Deighton, J., Lereya, S. T., Casey, P., Patalay, P., Humphrey, N., & Wolpert, M. (2019). Prevalence of mental health problems in schools: poverty and other risk factors among 28 000 adolescents in England. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, *215*(3), 565-567.

Marryat, L., Thompson, L., Minnis, H., & Wilson, P. (2018). Primary schools and the amplification of social differences in child mental health: a population-based cohort study. *J Epidemiol Community Health*, *72*(1), 27-33.

Oldfield, J., Stevenson, A., Ortiz, E., & Haley, B. (2018). Promoting or suppressing resilience to mental health outcomes in at risk young people: The role of parental and peer attachment and school connectedness. *Journal of adolescence*, *64*, 13-22.

Weist, M. D., Bruns, E. J., Whitaker, K., Wei, Y., Kutcher, S., Larsen, T., ... & Short, K. H. (2017). School mental health promotion and intervention: Experiences from four nations. *School Psychology International*, *38*(4), 343-362.