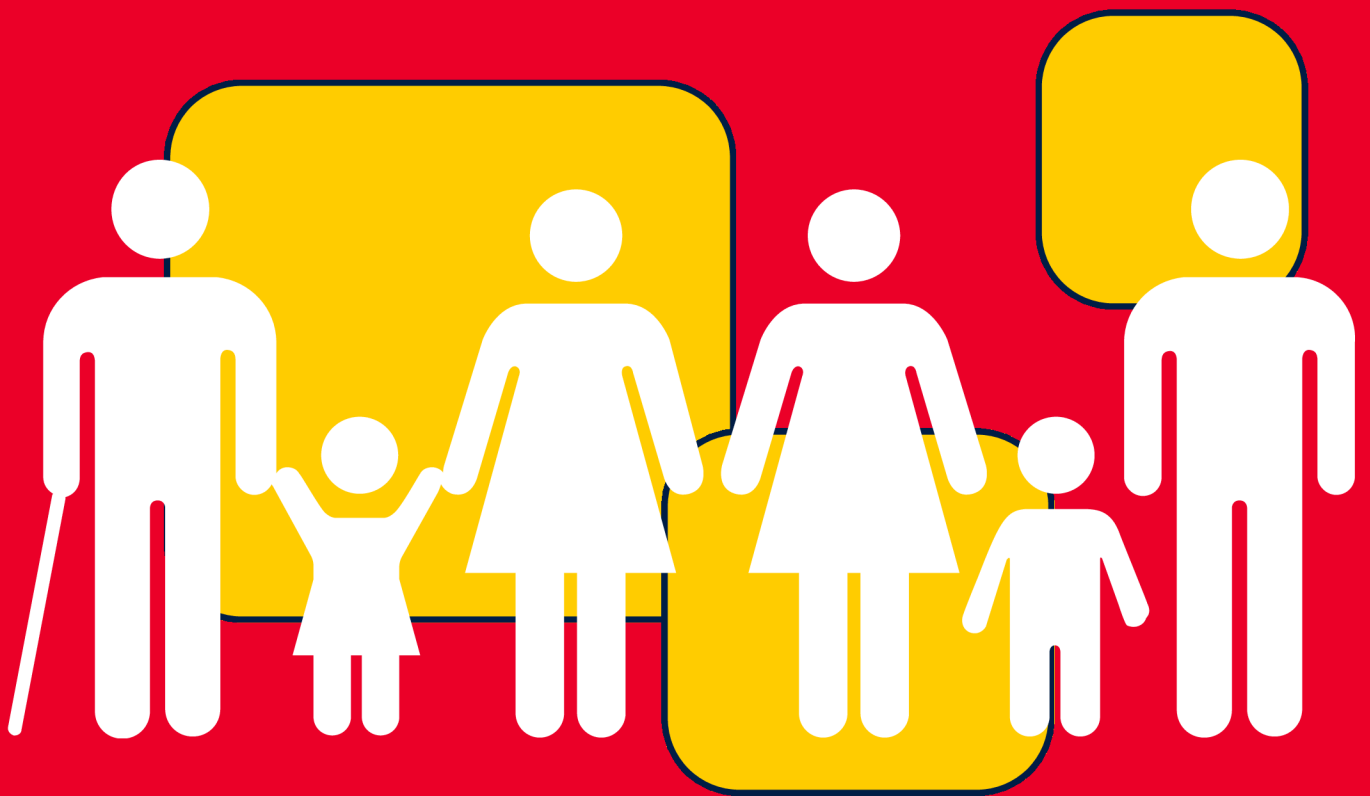




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# An updated perspective on child poverty and education in Northern Ireland



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<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Full Terminology</b>
<b>ACEs</b>	Adverse Childhood Experiences
<b>ASF</b>	Attainment Scotland Fund
<b>BPS</b>	British Psychological Society
<b>CAMHS</b>	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
<b>CYP</b>	Children and Young People
<b>DEIS</b>	Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools
<b>DWP</b>	Department of Work and Pensions
<b>DoH</b>	Department of Health
<b>EP</b>	Educational Psychologist
<b>HCPC</b>	Health and Care Professions Council
<b>NI</b>	Northern Ireland
<b>NIAO</b>	Northern Ireland Audit Office
<b>RCPCH</b>	Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
<b>SEL</b>	Social and emotional learning
<b>SEN</b>	Special Educational Need
<b>UC</b>	Universal Credit
<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UN</b>	United Nations

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# 01 Introduction

## Rationale

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This report provides an updated perspective on the issue of poverty, or resource-based inequality in Northern Ireland (NI). Through undertaking a brief narrative literature review, the working group have provided an overview of policies and research relating to the impact of resource-based inequalities on children's school life. Understanding the educational, environmental, social and emotional factors at play and how they impact a child's development and learning directly relates to the standards we adhere to as educational psychologists (EPs) (Health and Care Professions Council [HCPC], 2023). We invite EPs to engage with this topic through professional reflections on how their practice provides non-discriminatory, inclusive, and equitable care for under-resourced populations and advocates for reasonable, informed adjustments to achieve this (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2023; HCPC, 2024). In updating the perspective on this issue, we hope EPs feel more informed in supporting schools, families and children who face these challenges, and contribute to EPs understanding of resource-based inequality and associated implications for wellbeing, opportunity and development (BPS, 2023).

Given the complexity of the topic, this review focused specifically on the intersection of poverty and education, whilst acknowledging that poverty intersects with a myriad of other socio-economic factors and personal identities, which we have attempted to weave throughout this report. In doing so, we aim to build an understanding of how the inequity of this issue can contribute to stigmatisation, marginalisation and discrimination of certain groups and individuals over others, so that we might actively work to challenge barriers to inclusion and advocate for the implementation of change (BPS, 2023; HCPC, 2023).

## Definitions

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There is neither one universally agreed definition, nor one definitive experience of poverty. It generates diverse interpretations among those who experience poverty and wider society (Lister, 2021). While the Office for Statistics Regulation (2020) characterises poverty as being "when people lack the material resources to meet minimum needs", the United Nations (UN) (1998, para. 3) defines poverty as "a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity". It recognises that poverty impacts not only educational, financial, health and wellbeing opportunities but also produces negative ripple effects in the community (UN, 2020). Although several definitions of poverty exist, a common thread is the effect that under-resourcing, lack of choices and opportunities can have on individuals and communities. Poverty is a barrier to inclusion, impacting the extent to which individuals and communities can participate in and contribute to society (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022; Townsend, 1979).

## Measures

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Just as there is no universal definition of poverty, neither is there one measure which encapsulates the scope of people's experiences. Official measures of poverty tend to be income-based (Lister, 2021). For example, free school meals statistics have become a de facto measure of socioeconomic deprivation within the education sector, despite concerns about the accuracy of this measure within an educational context (Roy et al., 2024). More broadly, Table 1 outlines the measures of poverty most used by the United Kingdom (UK) government (Francis-Devine, 2024).

**Table 1:**

*Measures of Poverty used by the UK Government*

<b>Measure</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Absolute Poverty	Having an income of less than 60% of the median household income adjusted for inflation
Relative Poverty	Having less than 60% of the median household income in the current year
Persistent Poverty	Experiencing relative poverty for at least three out of the last four years
Poverty Depth/Poverty Gap	An indication of just how far below the poverty line an individual or family lies
Material Deprivation	The ability to afford basic resources deemed necessary for an acceptable standard of living

## Psychological Perspectives

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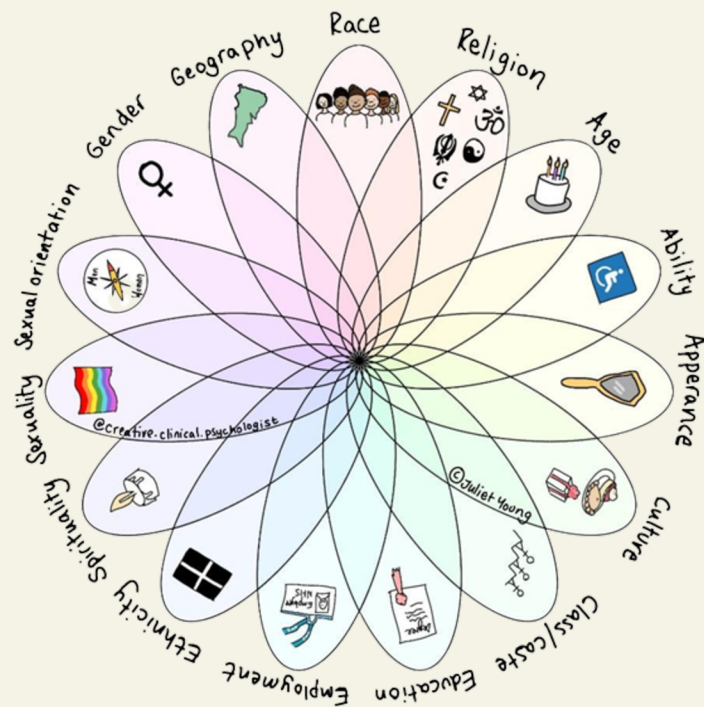
Individualistic perspectives of poverty (Fell & Hewstone, 2015) advance negative perceptions of those living in poverty, stereotyping poverty as a consequence of personal failings. This working group regard poverty as more complex and nuanced. Structural theories of poverty, as proposed by Rank, Yoon and Hirschl (2003), contend that macro-level factors contribute to individuals and communities being more susceptible to poverty, particularly vulnerable populations. Structural theories recognise that the most impactful causes of and solutions to poverty are found at policy and governmental level.

# The Intersectionality of Poverty

Intersectionality may be defined as: “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination combine, overlap, or intersect to produce and sustain complex inequities” (American Psychological Association, 2023, p.6).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991) allows us to understand how access to economic resources affords differing levels of power, privilege and opportunity to communities, families, and individuals, and how this intersects with multiple other aspects of personal and social identity. As outlined in Burnham’s Social GRRRAACCEEESSS (2012) (see Figure 1), these may include where a person lives, their family system, social class, health outcomes, employment, race, ethnicity, culture, environment and vulnerabilities associated with age, gender and ability. The theory of intersectionality suggests the way in which these multiple identities overlap contributes to stigmatisation, discrimination and oppression of certain groups (Crenshaw 1989; 1991).

Figure 1  
Burnham’s Social GRRRAACCEEESSS (@creative.clinical.psychologist, 2022)



## Terminology

As the term poverty is frequently used in both research literature and policy documents, this term will be used within this report. However, the authors acknowledge the importance of language and its connotations and prefer to use terminology such as economically vulnerable and under-resourced. These terms align with structural theories of poverty which recognise poverty as inequitable resourcing and opportunities rather than a result of individual factors or choices which, we feel contributes to attitudes of stigma, discrimination and blame.

# 02 Background and Policy Context

## Northern Ireland

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As a post-conflict nation, NI frequently contends with prolonged collapses of functioning governments. The cost-of-living crisis, housing emergency, Covid-19 and Brexit have only added to the deep social and economic adversities experienced by much of the population (Singleton, 2024). Despite this, systemically addressing poverty in NI has proven to be challenging. “Child Poverty in Northern Ireland” (Northern Ireland Audit Office [NIAO], 2024) highlighted that the Child Poverty Strategy, which ended in 2022, had done little to tackle the persistent reality that children in NI continued to live in relative poverty. In 2006, the Executive made a legal commitment to “adopt a strategy setting out how it proposes to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need” (Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act, 2006). As far back as 2015, the High Court ruled that the NI Executive had failed to meet this legal commitment. Despite instituting an Anti-Poverty Expert Panel and a Co-Design Group in 2020 tasked with formulating a novel anti-poverty strategy (NI Assembly, 2024), communications issues, the 2022 collapse of the Executive (Torrance, 2024) and the cost-of-living crisis prevented the implementation of proposed recommendations and the creation of a new Anti-Poverty Strategy (NIAO, 2024).

The absence of a working government for much of the last decade is frequently cited as an explanation for the failure of the Executive to systemically address poverty in NI. However, despite the Executive being re-assembled in 2024, consensus on an Anti-Poverty Strategy remains elusive. Consequently, unlike other UK regions, NI does not currently have an Anti-Poverty Strategy. This is despite the Department for Communities (2024) reporting that child poverty rates are increasing; from 18% in 2021/22 to 24% in 2022/23. One in four children in NI are living in relative poverty and one in five are not having their basic needs met including food, shelter and housing. (Independent Review of Education, 2023). Astonishingly, poverty does not feature at all in the Draft Programme for Government (NI Executive, 2024).

## The Education System

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Northern Ireland has an education system largely divided on religious and academic grounds characterised by a substantial dependence on grammar schools. The education cuts in the Draft Programme for Government (2024) were so dire that the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child recommended that the budget be withdrawn. The Children’s Law Centre launched legal proceedings in relation to the budget and education leaders stated that the cuts would “increase poverty, widen existing educational achievement gaps, further exacerbate NI’s mental health crisis and send Special Education Needs provision beyond the brink of collapse” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023).

Several reports support this standpoint. “A Fair Start” (Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement in Northern Ireland, 2021) emphasised that educational underachievement is impacted by social-economic disadvantage. “Child Poverty in Northern Ireland” (NIAO, 2024) underlined the attainment gaps between economically disadvantaged children and their peers and advocates for the prioritisation of early intervention and prevention to break the poverty cycle.

It is worth noting that doing nothing brings considerable cost to not only the current taxpayer, but to future generations. Child poverty costs an estimated £825 million - £1 billion annually, involving additional spending in health, housing and education to compensate for historic under-investment and support for children living in poverty who are at risk of longer term educational disadvantage. (NIAO, 2024).



# 03 The impact of poverty on the child, the family, and the education system

## The child

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Poverty impacts every aspect of a child or young person's (CYP) day, from basic unmet needs to social, emotional and behavioural development, achievements, learning ability and participation in the experiences and opportunities schools have to offer. Poverty is likely to impact approximately nine children in every average-sized classroom (Cooper & McNulty, 2024). Poverty is one of the most significant social determinants influencing the educational outcomes of children and increases their risk for cognitive and behavioural difficulties (Farah et al., 2006; Noble et al., 2006). It affects not only the physical, emotional, and cognitive development of students, but also their ability to succeed academically and socially (Ferguson et al., 2007).

### Basic Needs

Children who come in to school tired, hungry, and cold are unable to function and learn to the best of their ability (Cooper & McNulty, 2024; Cooper & Mullen, 2023). Reports from Barnardo's (2024; Cooper & McNulty, 2024; Cooper & Mullen, 2023) have demonstrated the impact of the current cost-of-living crisis on children. It was found that, among children aged eight to 17 in NI, 11% have had to bed share or sleep on the floor over a two-month period, reporting feelings of tiredness, low mood, embarrassment, and anxiety at school the next day (Cooper & Mullen, 2023). Increasing fuel and food costs have resulted in more families having to choose between heating homes or buying food, with a quarter of parents of school-age children in NI (26%) reporting that they struggled to provide enough food for their family in the last year (Cooper & McNulty, 2024). These findings demonstrate how experiencing poverty has implications for a child's ability to attend and function in school.

### Health inequalities

Children in economically vulnerable families are at greater risk of malnutrition, chronic health conditions, and to experience limited access to healthcare (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH), 2023; 2024). Results of the NI National Dental Epidemiology Oral Health Survey (2018-2019) revealed that dental decay prevalence and severity was higher for children living in more deprived areas (45%) compared to more affluent areas (16%; Department of Health [DoH], 2023). Severe dental decay can result in absences from school due to toothaches, appointments for fillings, crowns or even hospital admission for extraction (DoH, 2023; Peres et al., 2019).

## Health inequalities continued

Food insecurity means many under-resourced households cannot access a nutritionally dense and varied diet (RCPCH, 2024) and struggle to meet fruit and vegetable requirements, often consuming foods higher in saturated fats and sugars (Food Standards Agency, 2019). Poor nutrition can affect cognitive function, leading to difficulties with concentration, memory, and overall academic performance (Alloway et al., 2009), while access to nutritious food has been shown to improve academic performance and reduce school absences (Cooper & McNulty, 2024). Research has also shown that, although childhood obesity rates have risen generally across NI, Primary One children in deprived areas were 36% more likely to experience being overweight or obese compared to their peers, putting them at increased risk of health complications, such as Type 2 diabetes (Breslin et al., 2022).

## Geography

Where a child lives can have long-term consequences for their development, as exposure to adverse conditions associated with housing and the environment are not equally distributed (RCPCH, 2023; 2024). Chronic health conditions have been found to be higher in children from poorer socioeconomic backgrounds (Gottlieb et al., 1995). For example, asthma is the most common long-term condition amongst CYP (Ferrante & La Grutta, 2018) and is one of the top ten causes of emergency hospital admissions for CYP in the UK (Keeble & Kossarova, 2017; RCPCH, 2020). These admissions are strongly associated with deprivation (Simms-Williams et al., 2024). Living in cold or damp homes (a direct result of fuel poverty) and exposure to higher levels of air pollution are contributing factors to increased levels of respiratory disease (RCPCH, 2023). Many families, and therefore children, have little choice in their housing. They have fewer economic resources to make adaptations within the home, and they tend to have less access to green spaces which may help mitigate some of the effects of environmental pollution or flood risk (RCPCH, 2023). Children in the UK are much more likely than any other EU country to miss school due to ill health associated with poor living conditions such as damp housing (Cooper & McNulty, 2024), which impacts their ability to engage in and enjoy school.

Families with children of different ages (and different school finish times) may struggle with the cost of fuel or taxis. Additionally, some children may have longer journeys to school or depend on car lifts or taxis for transport, with associated fuel and transport costs (Barnardo's, 2024). These costs rise for longer journeys, such as for those in rural areas or families whose social housing is a greater distance from their child's school. These inequalities are particularly stark for vulnerable minorities in NI, such as refugees and those seeking sanctuary (Devlin, 2022; Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Loader et al., 2023). Temporary housing can create difficulties with commutes and in securing and maintaining school placements, with associated educational disruptions potentially exacerbating challenges these populations already experience, such as the effects of trauma and displacement (Devlin, 2022; Loader et al., 2023).

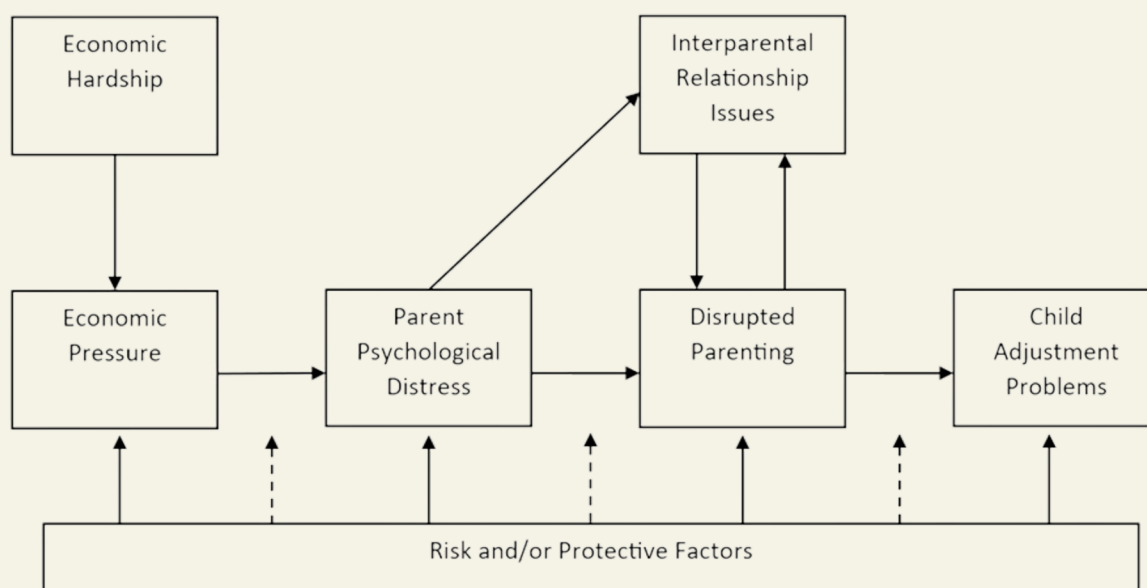
# The family

## Family stress

Family stress models illustrate that poverty creates economic pressures for families, consequently triggering psychological distress in parents, and thus exacerbating child maladjustment (Masarik & Conger, 2017). This process is mediated through various pathways that consider the impacts of parental mental health, interparental relationship issues and disruptions to parenting (see Figure 2). Recently, it has been estimated that one in four children under 16 in the UK live with a parent who experiences mental health issues (Abel et al., 2019). Reviews show support for the family stress models, however, in recent years that model has been expanded to consider intersectional factors including family ethnicity and family structure (Barnett, 2008; Conger et al., 2010).

Figure 2

Family Systems Model (adapted from Masarik and Conger, 2017)



The risk and/or protective factors aspect of the model represent individual, family and/or community factors that can exacerbate or mitigate stress experienced within the family system. Depending on the variable, this can interact with the rest of the model at any stage, directly or indirectly. For example, McConnell and colleagues (2011) found that increased parental social support reduced parental stress, increased effective parenting and thus was associated with more positive outcomes for children. Other research has cited effective coping strategies as having a positive impact in reducing depressive symptoms in parents over time (Wadsworth et al., 2011; Wadsworth et al., 2013). Examples of risk factors that compound the stress process are discussed by White and colleagues (2015); such as neighbourhood adversity and harsh parenting as predictive of internalising and externalising symptoms in young people.

### Adverse childhood experiences in the family context

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are shown to be strongly socioeconomically patterned at a familial level (Walsh et al., 2019). Previous reviews have suggested a mismatch in understanding the relationship between poverty and childhood adversities (Bywaters et al., 2016), with dominant discourse surrounding pathologizing individual families and minimising the effects of poverty on families (Gupta, 2017). A shift in thinking regarding family systems positions poverty as more causal and interactive with a myriad of ACEs (Metzler et al., 2017; Walsh et al., 2019). Large-scale longitudinal studies including the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) (Lacey et al., 2022) identified several ACE clusters specific to the family system: 'parental separation and mother's mental health problems', and 'parental mental health problems, convictions and separations'. Except for close family bereavement, poverty was strongly linked with every adversity studied. This link was particularly strong with maternal mental health problems and parental separation (Lacey et al., 2022). The UK Millenium Cohort study further emphasised this point, highlighting the complexity and compounding effects of the relationship between poverty and poor parental mental health on children's outcomes (Adjei et al., 2024).

### Factors affecting families in NI

Family systems within NI must be considered in light of the residual impacts of 'The Troubles'; exacerbating rates of parental mental ill-health, substance misuse and previous parental incarceration within the community, thus contributing to intergenerational effects (Austin, 2019). Within NI, families are under additional childcare pressures, with research from the Equality Commission citing insufficient places, particularly for children under two (McQuaid et al., 2013). Currently parents are unable to fulfil childcare costs, preventing them from accessing services at all or opting for reduced childcare hours (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). This has implications for families in terms of employment access and consequently impacts household income. In 2021, Employers for Childcare reported an average weekly cost of £170, equating to 34% of the median household income.

Northern Ireland was impacted by the introduction of the Universal Credit (UC) system in 2010. Research from the charity Gingerbread, examined the impact of the UC system on lone parents' finances, highlighting outcomes had not improved and nearly two thirds of children from lone parent families lived in poverty (Rabindrakumar, 2018). While some lone mothers were reported to have increased financial wellbeing, this was supported by training and flexible working and heavily reliant on free childcare being provided by family members. Furthermore, the reduction of children's ages that consider mothers to be available for employment under UC (from 10 to 7 years in 2010, and 7 to 5 years in 2012) have had a reported negative impact on parental mental health (Katikireddi et al., 2018), which has consequences for children's adjustment per the family stress model.

# The education system

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## Resources

Children from under-resourced families often lack access to basic resources needed to succeed in school, such as textbooks, educational materials, technology, and a quiet, safe space for studying (Barnardo's, 2024). The absence of such resources can hinder a child's ability to engage fully with the curriculum and result in them struggling to complete assignments or classroom activities that require tools or materials they cannot afford or access. Digital poverty is also a factor. Purdy et al. (2023) highlight that: higher living costs and bills limit internet access in some households, meaning CYP can struggle to complete homework which supports their learning; that the online world is viewed as an integral part of CYP's social life and a source of enjoyment and connection; and that for children in disadvantaged households, where device sharing is common, or in rural areas with poorer connectivity there will be implications for CYP's sense of inclusion and reduced opportunities to connect with friends.

## School engagement and participation

There is strong evidence demonstrating that children from under-resourced areas are absent from school more often than their peers (Gubbels et al., 2019; Klein et al., 2020). A pilot programme by Barnardo's, working with children and families to overcome barriers to attendance, found that almost 70% of CYP involved between October 2023 and July 2024 were in receipt of free school meals (Barnardo's, 2024). Studies consistently show that children living in low-income households tend to have lower grades, higher rates of absenteeism, and a greater likelihood of repeating grades (Yang et al., 2018). Inconsistent attendance, limited parental involvement due to work commitments, and a lack of educational support outside of school contribute to these challenges (Yang et al., 2018).

Maître et al. (2021) reported that children living in poverty report a greater dislike of school and lower levels of engagement with school life. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation identified high levels of male pupils in the most disadvantaged areas showing signs of disengagement from school by age nine or ten (Horgan, 2009). One factor associated with poorer engagement and enjoyment of school life could be that greater numbers of disadvantaged children reported fewer opportunities to participate in sports, art and after-schools activities (Horgan, 2009). Research shows that more affluent children regularly engage in activities such as sports and reading, compared to those from under-resourced areas, whose activities tended to be more sedentary and screen-based (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Kennewell et al., 2022). Economically vulnerable children benefit from extracurricular activities as much as their more affluent peers (Kennewell et al., 2022) but have less opportunity to access these. Barriers include costs associated with places, additional materials required and transport.

## Academic achievement

Poverty is closely linked to lower academic achievement (Jackson & Addison, 2018; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Leitch & Cownie, 2020). Poverty can negatively impact a child's cognitive skill development and has been associated with lower cognitive attainments from early childhood (Ayoub et al., 2009; Fitzpatrick et al., 2024; Holliday et al., 2014). The gap between children living in disadvantaged areas and their better off peers is apparent when starting school, with substantial differences noted in rates of cognitive skill acquisition in children as young as three (Ayoub et al., 2009). The correlation between economic vulnerability and academic skill acquisition is of major significance given cognitive skills in childhood are strong predictors of long-term academic success (Holliday et al., 2014) and have clear implications for employment, further education and social mobility (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024). The Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) (2014) emphasises the links between childhood poverty, academic attainment and economic outcomes in adulthood. Evidence suggests that economically vulnerable children are at greatest risk of becoming poor adults (DWP, 2014).

Language skills are fundamental for accessing the curriculum and supporting CYP's development socially and emotionally. Language exposure varies according to levels of deprivation (Neuman et al., 2018), depending greatly on the social and economic resources available within the community to support a language rich learning environment, e.g. SureStart, or other affordable childcare options. Moreover, economically vulnerable children may experience developmental delays that affect their readiness for school, particularly in literacy and numeracy (Williams & Lerner, 2019). Economically vulnerable children in NI may be further disadvantaged by educational support systems on the edge of collapse (Fitzpatrick et al., 2024). Children experiencing greater social, emotional and behavioural needs, or "learning gaps" which require additional support are at risk of being additionally disenfranchised by the current unsustainable Special Educational Needs (SEN) system which is under immense strain (NIAO, 2020). This is inequitable for those who have few resources to seek support outside this system and are at the mercy of long waiting lists (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2020).

## Social, emotional and behavioural needs

Feeling emotionally healthy and well is fundamental to learning and a positive sense of self (Maslow, 1943). When a child lives with stress or anxiety and little autonomy to change their situation, their nervous system (including their brain) also lives in a state of stress and arousal. This inhibits the extent to which the child can maintain an engaged, regulated state conducive to learning and social engagement (Porges, 2009), with implications for how they can regulate their behaviour and attention at school.

## Social, emotional, and behavioural needs continued

Research has shown that economically vulnerable children are at a higher risk of experiencing mental, emotional and behavioural challenges (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). Poverty can impact a CYP's wellbeing and behaviour, social engagement and participation in school life because being under-resourced is a source of stress and insecurity for the whole family. This stress can manifest in emotional and behavioural issues that interfere with a child's ability to concentrate, interact with peers, and participate in school activities (Alloway et al., 2009).

Economically vulnerable children may experience anxiety, depression or aggression (Santiago et al., 2011). Such emotional and behavioural challenges can create barriers to effective learning and can reduce students' overall learning experiences. Longitudinal research in Ireland has shown that experiencing persistent poverty is associated with a decline in social emotional wellbeing throughout childhood, including greater emotional difficulties, problems with peers and behavioural concerns (Maître et al., 2021; O' Driscoll et al., 2024). For example, among a cohort of nine-year-olds, greater levels of deprivation were linked with increased risk of lower self-concept and esteem (Maître et al., 2021).



# 04 Example of good practice

## Republic of Ireland

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The anti-poverty initiative DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunities In Schools; Jeffers & Lillis, 2024) is designated to allocate supports and resources to schools to combat educational disadvantage (Fleming & Harford, 2023). These schools cater for communities with high levels of social and economic hardship (Downes et al., 2020). DEIS schools receive funding for literacy and numeracy initiatives. They can also access resources like Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinators, the School Books Scheme and the School Completion Programme. DEIS strives to enhance retention, academic achievement and community involvement (Department of Education and Skills, 2017), e.g. through facilitating access to alternative curricular paths for pupils, such as the Junior Certificate Schools Programme and Leaving Certificate Applied.

Early intervention is fundamental to DEIS (Fleming & Harford, 2023). Improved student literacy and numeracy outcomes (Smyth et al., 2015) have been a key metric of DEIS's success, with Weir and Kavanagh (2018) asserting that the attainment gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools has continuously narrowed. However, it must be recognised that DEIS resources are still insufficient to fully bridge the funding disparity among post-primary schools, which continues to contribute to educational disadvantage (Fleming & Harford, 2023). Weir and Kavanagh (2018) have also acknowledged that significant barriers to success remain.



## Scotland

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Scotland is renowned for its progressive education and poverty alleviation policies, which strive to align with Scandinavian models (Adams, 2023). For example, Scotland has refrained from imposing high University tuition fees. Additionally, it has enacted several legislative measures, including the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, to systematically address child poverty through initiatives such as the "Attainment Scotland Fund (ASF)" (McKinney et al., 2023; Thompson & Ivinson, 2020).

The ASF focuses on areas such as literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing for under resourced pupils through:

- Strategic Equity Funding: Provides targeted support to address the attainment gap.
- Pupil Equity Fund: Direct school funding to facilitate equity-focused endeavours.
- Care Experienced Children and Young People Fund: Specific supports for children with care experience.

Like DEIS, Scotland's ASF encounters persistent challenges threatening its effectiveness, including the cost-of-living crisis, which aggravates family struggles leading to resource shortages and recruitment difficulties (Scottish Government, 2024).



# 05 Recommendations

## Government

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Governmental and departmental strategies and policies need to prioritise the eradication and reduction of child poverty as well as initiating measures to improve the lives of those currently living in poverty. This includes addressing intersectional factors and confounding variables including, but not exclusive to, parental mental health, employment and healthcare.

Schools need to be financially supported at governmental level to meet the needs of children and families experiencing poverty. In recent years, the NI educational system has been subject to cuts, reducing schools' capacity to offer wraparound care and early intervention that help mitigate against the effects of poverty, including sustenance support (e.g. free school meals) and after-school activities.

Investment in programmes such as SureStart and preschool interventions should be prioritised as they offer young children from disadvantaged backgrounds access to learning experiences that foster cognitive, social, and emotional development (Holliday et al., 2014). Early exposure to literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills helps mitigate gaps in academic readiness and can have long-term educational benefits (Holliday et al., 2014).

## Schools

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It is recommended that schools ensure that their policies and practices are inclusive of children and families who are living in more challenging circumstances

Schools should be supported to provide social-emotional learning (SEL) programmes, school-based mental health services and peer support networks to help students manage stress and emotional difficulties. Ideally these opportunities should be achieved in collaboration with multi-agency teams e.g. CAMHS, or mental health experts.

Increase access to green spaces for CYP living in under-resourced or highly urbanised areas who may not be able to avail of these opportunities outside school, e.g. through initiatives such as eco schools ([www.eco-schoolsni.org](http://www.eco-schoolsni.org)) and forest schools programmes ([www.forestschooolsni.com](http://www.forestschooolsni.com)). Schools can access funding to plant native trees on their grounds to help create green learning spaces. Such initiatives may also help in combating known cognitive and respiratory health outcomes associated with air pollution (World Health Organisation, 2018).

## Schools continued

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We recommend that schools are allocated funding to provide a sense of material security in school and promote participation in extra-curricular activities. Many schools proactively implement initiatives to help families financially, such as swaps of clothing, uniforms, coats or other seasonal items. Such initiatives protect CYP against potential shame, embarrassment or social exclusion.

### Key adults: caregivers and school staff

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Key adults can provide early intervention support through the quality of their interactions with children. It is recommended that this support is recognised and valued as a key relational strategy at a whole-school level. Positive relationships between adults and children have significant effects on children's self-efficacy and social and emotional competence, with more pronounced effects for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Liu et al., 2023).

Providing teachers with continued professional development in this area, including in trauma-informed interventions will better equip schools to address the unique challenges faced by children from adverse backgrounds (Sun et al., 2023). Children who are particularly vulnerable to the effects of poverty will benefit from access to a key adult who nurtures safety and regulation amid the persistent stressors of poverty.

While poverty can limit parental involvement in school activities, schools can adopt strategies to engage parents in meaningful ways. Offering flexible meeting times, translation services, and hosting community events can help bridge the gap between schools and families. Offering parenting programmes or resources to help parents support their children's learning at home can empower families to become more actively involved in their children's education.

It is recommended that schools continue to seek opportunities to establish community links which may offer additional school- and community-based support to children and families. Social service organisations, local nonprofits, and faith-based institutions can help families navigate financial and social challenges, creating a stronger network of support for children.



## Implications for EPs

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We recommend that EPs adopt a holistic approach when considering assessment methods and tools, many of which are normed on white, middle-class cohorts, which may not be reflective of the experiences of economically vulnerable children in NI.

EPs, as reflexive practitioners, need to acknowledge and challenge biases and assumptions operating within their practice, individually and systemically (HCPC, 2023).

EPs should be aware of the impact of poverty on a child's learning, participation, and enjoyment of school and how poverty may contribute to or exacerbate needs in any area of a child's development. These should be considered in the formulation of a child's needs and reflect the intersectionality of other systems around the child.

EPs are well placed to be agents for change (Elliot et al., 2021). EPs should use the privilege and power afforded to them by virtue of their position to champion schools and advocate for implementation of these key governmental recommendations at a whole-service level (BPS, 2023).

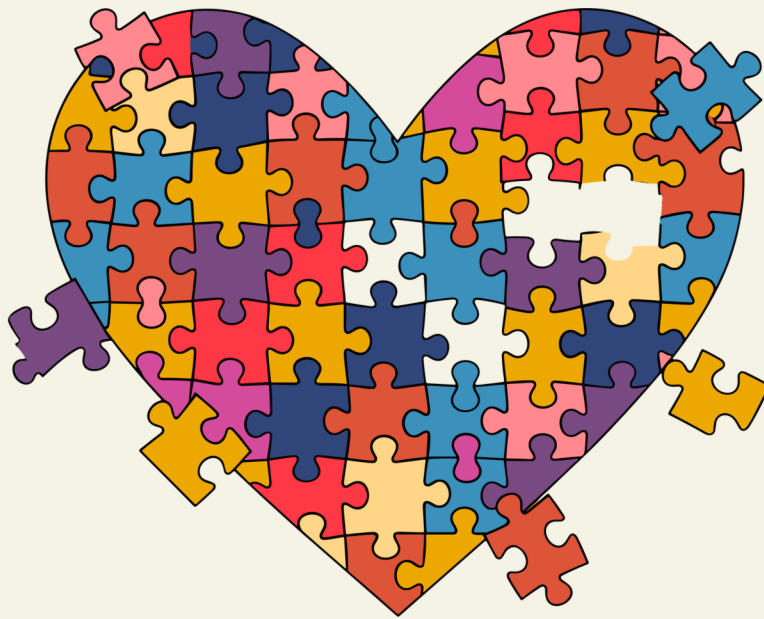
EPs can use their consultation skills with all stakeholders to inspire and challenge thinking about the effects and impacts that poverty might have on children and families (BPS, 2023; HCPC, 2024). Effective consultation can encourage stakeholders to think collaboratively to promote protective factors around children and families in their communities.

EPs should continue to produce and share examples of research-based evidence, such as those outlined in this report, to increase protective factors for those experiencing poverty.



## 06 Conclusion

The impact of poverty on children's education is multifaceted and pervasive, affecting academic performance, social development, and overall wellbeing (Ferguson et al., 2007). However, while poverty poses considerable challenges, various protective factors, such as high-quality early education, supportive school environments, and access to healthcare and community resources can mitigate its adverse effects on education, and some children can develop resilience in the face of poverty (Boost et al., 2020). By implementing strategies at the individual, familial, and institutional levels, society can help children from under-resourced backgrounds overcome the barriers of poverty and succeed academically, ultimately breaking the cycle of disadvantage and promoting greater educational equity.



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