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# **It takes a whole village?**

**Anita Mehay, Cara Leavey and  
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*Supporting parents and addressing inequalities for Black,  
Asian and minority ethnic families*

## INTRODUCTION

Positive experiences with parents and parenting early in life are closely associated with better performance at school, better social and emotional development, improved work outcomes and better lifelong health, including longer life expectancy.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, less positive experiences early in life, particularly experiences of adversity, relate closely to many poorer outcomes: poverty, unemployment, homelessness, unhealthy behaviours and poor mental and physical health.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Giving every child the best start in life is therefore crucial to reducing health inequalities across the life course.

Yet not all family backgrounds are equal and inequalities in children's outcomes follow a social gradient where outcomes improve progressively the further up the socioeconomic spectrum, and worsen progressively the further down,<sup>5</sup> with evidence that the experience of racial inequality means that these outcomes are often comparatively poorer for minority ethnic

- 1 Marmot M (2010) *Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review*, The Marmot Review
- 2 Asmussen K, Fischer F, Drayton E and McBride T (2020) *Adverse Childhood Experiences: What we know, what we don't know, and what should happen next*, Early Intervention Foundation. <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/adverse-childhood-experiences-what-we-know-what-we-dont-know-and-what-should-happen-next>
- 3 Bellis MA, Lowey H, Leckenby N, Hughes K and Harrison D (2014) 'Adverse childhood experiences: retrospective study to determine their impact on adult health behaviours and health outcomes in a UK population', *Journal of Public Health*, 36(1): 81–91. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdt038>
- 4 Hughes K, Bellis MA, Hardcastle KA, Sethi D, Butchart A, Mikton C, Jones L and Dunne MP (2017) 'The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: a systematic review and meta-analysis', *The Lancet Public Health*, 2(8): e356–e566. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(17\)30118-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(17)30118-4)
- 5 Marmot M, Allen J, Boyce T, Goldblatt and Morrison J (2020) *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 years on*, Institute for Health Equity. <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

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groups.<sup>6</sup> Parenting has been a focus for policymakers for a number of years and in this article we review the key policy agendas to understand how parenting support for minority ethnic groups has featured and what action is required to address inequity in child outcomes.

## RECENT PARENTAL SUPPORT PROGRAMMES

The presence of a social gradient in child outcomes demonstrates the need for targeted services delivered from within universal provision delivered to all. Policies that are universal and proportionate are critical to reducing inequalities experienced by children, yet recent policies have struggled to develop and implement effective services based on this principle.

The original Sure Start programme, set up by the Labour government in the late 1990s, aimed to enhance the life chances of all young children aged under 5 years, particularly those growing up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The focus was on providing universal support for families in the most disadvantaged areas, rather than directly targeting individuals to avoid any impact on stigmatising families. The first evaluation when children were around 5-years was disappointing showing little effect on key outcomes (also hampered by difficulties with study design),<sup>7</sup> but subsequent research at age 11-years found positive outcomes for parents and children – including helping to improve the home learning environment and less harsh disciplines.<sup>8</sup> More recently, an evaluation in 2019 found that children in Sure Start areas were 18 per cent less likely to need a hospital visit, an association strongest among the poorest children.<sup>9</sup> Sure Start centres had seemed to be making good progress with effects which build and persist over time but the policy landscape changed focus before this impact was fully realised, with many turning into children centres around 2005 with a new policy focus to provide additional childcare to aid parents (mainly mothers) into employment.<sup>10</sup>

6 Ibid

7 The National Evaluation of Sure Start Team (2012) *The Impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on Five Year Olds and their Families*, Department for Education. <http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/impact/documents/RR067.pdf>

8 The National Evaluation of Sure Start Team (2012) *The Impact of Sure Start Local Programmes on Seven Year Olds and their Families*, Department for Education. <http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/impact/documents/DFE-RB220.pdf>

9 Cattan S, Conti G, Farquharson C and Ginja R (2019) *Report Reveals Benefits of Sure Start*, Institute for Fiscal Studies. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14188>

10 Lewis J (2011) 'From Sure Start to children's centres: an analysis of policy change in English early years programmes', *Journal of Social Policy*, 40(1): 71–88. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279410000280>

The ‘universal parenting offer’ announced by the Cameron-led government in 2011, becoming the ‘CANparent’ initiative by the time it was launched in 2012, was perhaps the highpoint of government support for parenting in Britain but suffered from poor translation into practice. It was the latest government-led intervention in parenting, and Cameron was keen to ‘normalise’ this support, repeatedly presenting it as similar to helping people to ‘learn to drive’. At the same time, he responded to the age-old criticism that the state should not be interfering in the family by suggesting: “This is not the nanny state – it’s the sensible state.”<sup>11</sup> CANparent, except for the quality mark, did not survive much past the 18-month pilot phase but this was not due to parents rejecting it, but more an indication of its poor implementation. For example, a voucher of just £100 was made available to parents to buy a parenting programme, even though during the consultation phase most experienced providers had said evidence-based programmes would cost many hundreds of pounds per parent.<sup>12</sup>

**“Cameron was keen to ‘normalise’ this support, repeatedly presenting it as similar to helping people to ‘learn to drive’”**

The ‘Troubled Families’ programme was also launched around this time and further reflected not just poor implementation but also a fully targeted approach that saw certain groups of parents stigmatised. The programme initially intended to change repeating generational patterns of poor parenting, abuse, violence, drug use, antisocial behaviour and crime in the most troubled families in the UK. Its specific aim was to get 120,000 ‘troubled’ families to turn their lives around by 2015 and in particular to get children back to school, reduce youth crime and reduce the high costs these families place on the public sector. However, most of the people targeted were not involved in crime or antisocial behaviour; and most were not alcohol or drug dependent. Most were poor, unemployed and with very high levels of mental/physical illnesses and disabilities, resulting in high state support costs.<sup>13</sup> The

11 Watt N (2012) ‘Parenting lessons: this is not the nanny state, says David Cameron’, *Guardian*, 17 May 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/may/18/parenting-lessons-not-nanny-state-david-cameron>

12 Lindsay G and Totsika V (2017) ‘The effectiveness of universal parenting programmes: the CANparent trial’, *BMC Psychology*, 5: 35. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29058642/>

13 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) *National Evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme 2015–2020: Findings. Evaluation overview policy report*, MHCLG. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-evaluation-of-the-troubled-families-programme-2015-to-2020-findings>

government controversially hailed the programme a success in ‘turning around’ the lives of ‘troubled families’, but in reality it did little more than try to make poverty something struggling families could ‘cope’ with.

## THE INTERACTION BETWEEN PARENTING SUPPORT, RACIAL DISADVANTAGE AND DEPRIVATION

Throughout this changing policy landscape, there have been attempts to address a key shortcoming of parenting support: reaching and impacting minority ethnic families. Yet, multiple reviews had shown that the parenting programmes that were on offer rarely reached these families and if they did, parents often did not participate in them or dropped out.<sup>14,15</sup> Government initiatives have missed examples of good practice happening beyond the state. It was in the context of New Labour’s first attempts to better reach minority ethnic families that the Race Equality Foundation developed an inclusive evidence-based parenting programme called ‘Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities’ (SFSC). This was designed to promote protective factors that are associated with better outcomes for children. The programme offers value by engaging parents to think about their cultural values and beliefs and examine how they influence their behaviour and parenting choices. The programme has stood the test of time, despite the various policy changes, and has been used extensively to reach, retain and have an impact on parents from a number of backgrounds, including parents from marginalised communities, Black, Asian and minority ethnic parents and teenage parents. A range of group-based parenting programmes like the SFSC have been delivered in the UK and evidence from recent reviews shows that these can be effective in terms of both child and parental outcomes, such as mental wellbeing, positive relationships and reduced use of physical punishments.<sup>16,17</sup> Meanwhile a large national trial is under way to specifically examine the effects of the SFSC for families from minority

14 Butt J and Box L (1998) *Family Centred: A study of use of family centres by black families*, Race Equality Unit

15 Smith C (1996) *Developing Parenting Programmes*, National Children’s Bureau

16 Karlsen S (2013) *Evaluation of the Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities Programme 2009–2010*, Race Equality Foundation. <http://raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2009-2010-report-edited-2.pdf>

17 Karlsen S (2013) *Evaluation of the Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities Programme 2009–2010*, Race Equality Foundation. <http://raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2009-2010-report-edited-2.pdf>

ethnic groups and those living in poverty<sup>18</sup> as well as adapting the programme for other population groups, such as young men in prison.<sup>19</sup>

During this period we have also seen changing policies impacting the socioeconomic contexts facing families. There are now more children living in poverty since 2010, with more than four million children affected.<sup>20</sup> Minority ethnic groups are disproportionately affected, with nearly half of ethnic minority children living in poverty compared 20 per cent of children in white British families. On average, people from minority ethnic groups have lower incomes, higher unemployment and are more likely to live in overcrowded accommodation than white British groups.<sup>21</sup> The labour market is also not always the route out of poverty. The majority of people now living in poverty are in work and there is evidence that this rise in ‘in-work’ poverty has had a disproportionate impact on minority ethnic families, who are more likely to enter roles with lower wages and precarious and insecure employment contracts.<sup>22</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated these rooted socioeconomic differences across society.<sup>23</sup>

It is not incidental that minority ethnic groups face increased challenges relating to their socioeconomic contexts where the fundamental causes of these inequities (‘causes of the causes’) relate to disadvantage and racial discrimination. For instance, despite improving educational attainment, ethnic minority people are still being held back in the job market with increased rates of unemployment, reduced occupational attainment and

18 See University College London (2021) *Together Study*. [www.ucl.ac.uk/together-study](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/together-study)

19 See National Institute for Health Research (2020) ‘NIHR’s annual Research for Social Care call funds over £2 million of new research’, press release, 13 November 2020. <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/news/nihrs-annual-research-for-social-care-call-funds-over-2-million-of-new-social-care-research/26167>

20 Marmot M, Allen J, Boyce T, Goldblatt P and Morrison J (2020) *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 years on*, Institute for Health Equity. <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/the-marmot-review-10-years-on>

21 Equality and Human Rights Commission (2016) *Healing a divided Britain: the need for a comprehensive race equality strategy*. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/healing-divided-britain-need-comprehensive-race-equality-strategy>

22 Rahman F (2019) *Tackling Structural Inequality in the UK Should Sit at the Heart of Boosting Living Standards*, Resolution Foundation. <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2019/10/Spotlight-structural-inequality-in-the-UK.pdf>

23 Nazroo J and Becares L (2020) ‘Racism is the key to understanding ethnic inequalities in Covid-19 – despite what UK government says’, *The Conversation*, 27 October 2020. <https://theconversation.com/racism-is-the-key-to-understanding-ethnic-inequalities-in-covid-19-despite-what-uk-government-says-148838>

pay disparities.<sup>24,25</sup> Notably, tests of applications sent to employers show that there are systematic racial discrimination within the labour market across ethnicities, where applicants with Pakistani names had to make 1.5 times as many applications as a white British applicant to get an employer call-back.<sup>26</sup> Ten years of austerity cuts, visibly seen in poorer areas, are likely to have contributed to increases in the number of children in poverty. Coupled with policy changes such as the benefit cap, the two-child limit and an increasingly hostile environment for immigration (particularly for those with ‘no recourse to public funds’) we have seen a disproportionate increase in child poverty among minority ethnic children. Ethnic minorities, particularly Black people, are also significantly overrepresented in the criminal justice system but this is not necessarily due to higher offending rates but the result of disproportionate use of stop and search and harsher sentencing practices in relation to ethnic minorities.<sup>27</sup> Ethnic minorities are also under-represented in positions of power and leadership, such as judges<sup>28</sup> and MP’s<sup>29</sup> and have little representation at this level.

**“Tests of applications sent to employers show that there continues to be systematic racial discrimination within the labour market across ethnicities”**

This unequal distribution of income, wealth and power in society has a significant influence on parenting and the contexts which allow families and child health to thrive. The policy agendas rarely attempt to address the socioeconomic conditions and issues of disadvantage and racial discrimination that cause many of the problems faced by families, and in the case of the Troubled Families programme, actually downplayed the role of income, while emphasising other factors, such as family breakdown,

24 Ibid

25 Ayrton C and Holden J (2021) *Employment Briefing Paper*, Race Equality Foundation

26 Di Stasio V and Heath V (2019) *Are employers in Britain discriminating against ethnic minorities?* Nuffield College, University of Oxford. [http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Are-employers-in-Britain-discriminating-against-ethnic-minorities\\_final.pdf](http://csi.nuff.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Are-employers-in-Britain-discriminating-against-ethnic-minorities_final.pdf)

27 Equality and Human Rights Commission (2016) *Healing a divided Britain: the need for a comprehensive race equality strategy*. <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/healing-divided-britain-need-comprehensive-race-equality-strategy>

28 Ibid

29 Uberoi E and Lees R (2020) *Ethnic diversity in politics and public life (Briefing Paper)*. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn01156/>

alcohol abuse and educational attainment.<sup>30</sup> The irony should not be lost and bears repeating that many of the key policy agendas outlined have been implemented during a period when other services and support for disadvantaged families have been withdrawn or scaled back, with even steeper cuts in poorer areas.

Most recently, the government's 2021 Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report fails to address this in its focus on families.<sup>31</sup> Although the review recognises that racial disparities exist in a number of ways, it places family structures and cultures firmly as the roots of these disparities, therefore implying that minority ethnic families are themselves the reason for the inequalities. Although the report does highlight the importance of parenting and socioeconomic conditions, it unfortunately reflects a longstanding tradition of recasting issues of disadvantage as problems of individual behaviour and moralising over cultural norms, rather than getting to the fundamental causes of inequities. The review concludes by suggesting another review, this time into "support for families".<sup>32</sup>

**“it unfortunately reflects a longstanding tradition of recasting issues of disadvantage as problems of individual behaviour and moralising over cultural norms”**

## URGENT POLICY ACTION TO ADDRESS INEQUALITIES

While there has been repeated recognition in policy over recent decades on the significance of parenting, policy agendas have provided half-hearted, ineffective and sometimes stigmatising support, rather than the kind of universal and proportionate support that families need. While a basic universal service is essential, we need to ensure that the families most likely to need extra support find it easiest to get it without fear of judgement and stigma. The one 'action' that has persisted has been parenting programmes that have shown

30 Lambert M and Crossley S (2017) "Getting with the (Troubled Families) Programme": a review', *Social Policy and Society*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746416000385>

31 Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities>

32 Ibid, pp. 60–62

promising outcomes for children and families, particularly those from minority ethnic groups, but there will always be limitations to how much parenting programmes can pick up and fully address all families complex social needs, especially in a context of disadvantage, discrimination, and major cuts to public services that affect children and families. Policy action to reduce inequalities will need to act on these fundamental causes or risk continuing the failures of previous agendas. The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to amplify and exacerbate existing inequalities, with indications of more families falling into poverty.<sup>33</sup> The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report<sup>34</sup> raises questions about what opportunities the government will create to address socioeconomic inequalities and understand how disadvantages and racial discrimination negatively shapes the lives and opportunities of minority ethnic people.<sup>35</sup>

**“policy agendas have provided half-hearted, ineffective and sometimes stigmatising support”**

If we are serious about improving the experiences of and outcomes for minority ethnic children and families, we need to provide universal and proportionate parenting support which can better reach minority ethnic families whilst also addressing the fundamental causes of inequalities in the unequal distribution of income, wealth and power in society. This must include action to end in-work poverty, improve the quality of schooling (including ending all school exclusions), and ensure state support for families including the provision of adequate and affordable housing. We need to address these factors that transmit racial inequality from one generation to the next.

33 Social Metrics Commission (2021) *Measuring Poverty 2020: A report of the Social Metrics Commission*, The Legatum Institute. <https://socialmetricscommission.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Measuring-Poverty-2020-Web.pdf>

34 Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021) *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The report*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities>

35 Nazroo J and Becares L (2020) ‘Racism is the key to understanding ethnic inequalities in Covid-19 – despite what UK government says’, *The Conversation*, 27 October 2020. <https://theconversation.com/racism-is-the-key-to-understanding-ethnic-inequalities-in-covid-19-despite-what-uk-government-says-148838>

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**Jabeer Butt is chief executive of the Race Equality Foundation. Jabeer has researched and written extensively about racial inequality in care and health. Jabeer provides leadership on the Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities parent education initiative at the Foundation. Jabeer was on the Marmot Advisory Group supporting Sir Michael Marmot in the production of his recent report on the social determinants of health inequalities. He is currently co-investigator on the £1.3 million NIHR funded extension of the VirusWatch study focusing in Covid-19 and the BAME communities led by Professor Robert Aldridge of University College London.**