



Briefing: Extended Families & Poverty

This briefing looks at what works in reducing poverty in the area of extended families (grandparents, kinship care, siblings, peers and community relationships) and is aimed at policy-makers and practitioners. It is based on wider research by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) on *Personal Relationships and Poverty* for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF).



THE EVIDENCE ON EXTENDED FAMILIES AND POVERTY:

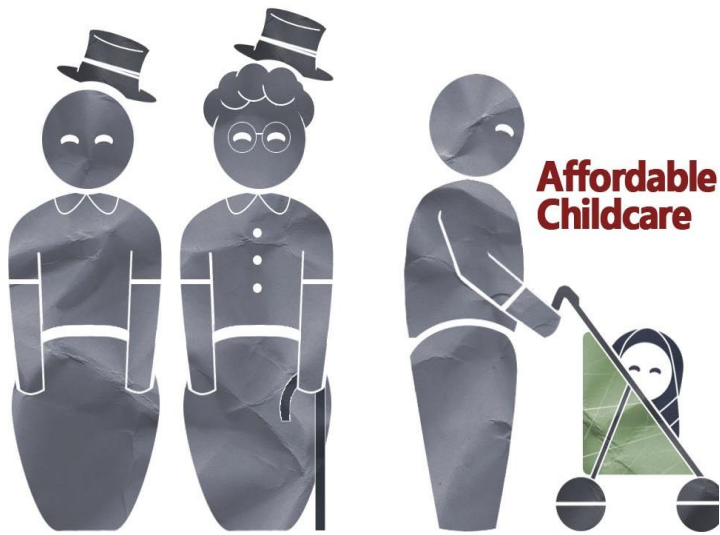
Parents in the older generation typically receive support from adult children only when they reach an advanced age. Before that, money and practical help usually move downwards, based on the needs of adult children and grandchildren, and this happens more often in low-income families. **Free and flexible childcare** from grandparents is a feature of all socio-economic groups but most frequently used by **parents with low incomes** and usually provided by grandmothers who are themselves on low incomes. Many give up employment or reduce their working hours to combine work and childcare. So poorer parents' ability to take up paid employment often comes at the expense of grandparents, effectively distributing low income or poverty across the generations. In the UK, state provision of childcare remains limited and private provision is of variable quality, expensive and typically available at fixed times not always suitable for mothers' working hours. Raising the state retirement pension age risks reducing the supply of grandparents able to provide childcare and in turn increases the poverty risks of low-income mothers without access to affordable childcare alternatives. Poverty can negatively impact on people's social networks, and the loss of these can create isolation and may exacerbate poverty. **Extended families and community relationships** can provide a crucial short-term **'safety net'** of financial and practical support to help people survive poverty, but they rarely help people escape poverty in the longer-term.

SUMMARY:

Policies and family relationships which help reconcile the tension between employment and caring responsibilities can reduce the chances of individual and family poverty.

- Extended families, especially grandparents, can be vital in providing free and flexible childcare which enables low-income mothers to (re-)enter employment. However, this increases grandparents' own poverty risks if they give up employment or reduce their working hours.
- Extended families also help with money - Intergenerational support tends to go downwards from parents to adult children and happens more often in low-income families. But this risks grandparents falling into poverty themselves.
- **Affordable and good quality childcare** would allow both mothers and grandparents to work if they choose and would reduce family poverty risks.
- **Keeping state pensions and pension credit at an adequate level** keeps older people out of poverty and means that any intergenerational support – either in money or childcare – would then be a matter of choice rather than necessity, and would not risk grandparents' own finances.
- Policies that aim to build vulnerable individuals' social support networks would help to reduce isolation and may help people survive short-term difficulties and poverty risks.





WHAT WORKS IN REDUCING POVERTY:

Recent UK anti-poverty policy has focused on increasing employment with the aim that this would not only improve the financial status of families but also prevent the intergenerational transmission of worklessness. But to reduce poverty more needs to be done by:

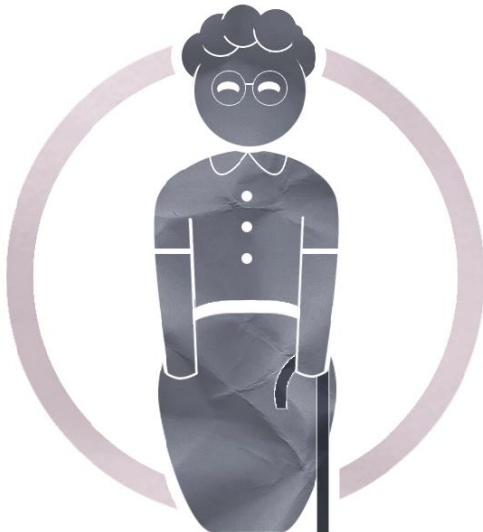
- Ensuring there is **good quality, affordable and available childcare** so low-income mothers and grandmothers can work if they choose. Families, and especially those on low incomes and headed by a lone parent, are often dependent on informal (free) childcare by grandmothers – but grandmothers then risk falling into poverty themselves if they stop working or reduce their working hours to care for grandchildren.
- **Enabling grandparental childcare to be a personal choice** for parents, not a necessity. It is appreciated by mothers not just for financial reasons, and policy should enable this to happen without undue financial risk to grandparents.
- Providing affordable childcare alternatives if the state retirement age is raised further. Grandparents who leave work to care for grandchildren before receiving their state pension may suffer financial hardship or, if they work longer, they will have fewer opportunities to care for grandchildren. There is a risk that older relatives' and/or mothers' access to the labour market would reduce.
- **Maintaining state retirement pensions and credit at an adequate level** to help keep older people out of poverty, and to ensure any money given to family members is out of choice without risking grandparents' finances. This will also help promote a redistribution of resources, however low, in the family. Evidence suggests grandparents would give more if the state provided essential services.

SOCIAL NETWORKS

Extended families and social networks can be a vital safety net to help people survive poverty, so for those that are socially isolated, the impact of poverty may be felt more acutely.

Poverty itself can also isolate people and disrupt their social relationships. **Policies that aim to build vulnerable individuals' social networks** may help to reduce some short-term difficulties and poverty risks.

Pensions



FURTHER INFORMATION

This briefing is based on research by Laura Stock, Judy Corlyon, Cristina Castellanos Serrano and Matt Gieve, Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. The full report and other briefings in the series are available on the Tavistock Institute website, along with an animation visualising what works in reducing poverty:

<http://www.tavinstitute.org/projects/personal-relationship-poverty-evidence-policy-review>



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