

How do intergenerational relationship practices affect the wellbeing of children and their families? – A small scale study of families in low-income communities in South Wales.

Introduction

Children in low-income areas of Wales face intersecting challenges, low-income households are more likely to experience material deprivation, poor nutrition, domestic violence, low attainment in education and poor mental and physical health (Wales Centre for Public Policy, 2022). Levitus (as cited in Calder, 2023) describes how these challenges contribute to ‘social exclusion,’ in relation to poverty, refers to the experience of being excluded from fully engaging in society due to reasons beyond low income, such as limited access to education, healthcare, employment, and social opportunities. It is a broader concept than poverty itself, incorporating multiple factors that contribute to and perpetuate poverty (Calder, 2023).

There have been policies put in place to achieve equity for children growing up in low-income areas, such as the Wellbeing for Future Generations Act (Welsh Government, 2015), but this has been criticised for being purely aspirational and having no ability to ensure its aims are being fulfilled (Stokes, and Smyth, 2024) and 1 in 4 children continue to live in poverty in most constituencies in Wales (Davies, 2024).

The Child Poverty action group (2025) inform us that household income is the strongest predictor of educational attainment, meaning that children in low income families are more likely to experience the effects of social exclusion and continue the cycle of depravation. In 2022, the New curriculum for Wales revolutionised the education was designed and delivered in an attempt to make education wholly inclusive and responsive to the needs of all learners, as not to leave any child behind in regard to their learning and development (Welsh

Government, 2025). One of the elements of ensuring this was to include Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) under section 71 of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 to support the teaching of the Four Core Purposes (Senedd, 2021) tasking Schools and settings with creating safe and empowering environments that support learners, as they navigate a rapidly changing world. RSE helps learners and educators create an environment where young people feel comfortable and empowered to address topics that effect the mental and physical health of us all, which impacts our ability to learn and develop. Learning and discussing topics such as bodily autonomy, consent, and healthy relationships, in a safe and welcoming environment can function as a protective element that prepares children and helps them to overcome the challenges of life (Brook, 2025). The Centre for Young Lives (2024) published a report that brain development and executive functioning are linked to living in poverty and leads to absenteeism, if learners in deprived areas are not accessing the new curriculum, they are also not receiving RSE, and social exclusion persists. Marmot *et al.* (2020) agree that low income leads to low attainment and health inequality, and proposed 5 objectives to focus on, in order to bridge that gap.

1. Economic Stability
2. Education Access and Quality
3. Health Care Access and Quality
4. Neighbourhood and Built Environment
5. Social and Community Context

Good RSE can help boost self-esteem, confidence and the ability to think critically and develop empathy and strong values needed to achieve success under these objectives, this view is supported by The Children's Commissioner for Wales (2025) who tell us effective and high quality RSE will maintain the rights which Wales recognises children to have under the UNCRC, it will help empower children and

young people with the knowledge and skills they need to make informed choices (Article 17) enabling them to keep themselves safe from abuse and exploitation (Article 34) and experience attainable healthcare. This holistic view of education will help children develop and reach their full potential and be understanding of themselves and others (Article 29) (UNICEF, 2025).

This study seeks to gain insights into how intergenerational relationship patterns are impacting children and their families in low income areas and what these families need to break cycles of disadvantage in Wales.

Literature Review

Poverty in South Wales is influenced by a complex interplay of social factors, for example, unemployment and low pay, with youth unemployment rates in deprived areas at twice the national average (Welsh Government, 2023). Barriers to education see children from poor households are less likely to achieve educational success (Cross, *et al.* 2017). The Cost of Living Crisis (UK Parliament, 2024) and lack of social housing force families into overcrowded or unsafe homes (Shelter Cymru, 2025). The two-child limit was introduced in 2017 (DWP, 2017), restricting benefits to only the first two children in a family, this negatively impacted those who are already considered marginalised, like religious minorities and people in deprived areas (Child Poverty Action Group, 2024).

There is commonality between factors associated with poverty, and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (The World Health Organisation, 2020), such as, a positive correlation between depression, household density and violence, suggesting a higher likelihood of conflict when poor mental health is present (Lanchimba, Díaz-Sánchez and Velasco, 2023). This research aligns with the

statistics around DA and IPV show that women in Wales' most deprived communities are 2–3 times more likely to experience DA than those in more affluent areas (Wales Centre for Public Policy, 2022).

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025) state that under these conditions, physical and mental health are adversely affected, and this can contribute to engagement with risky behaviours such as substance and alcohol misuse. Avena *et al* (2021) agree that the stress of financial uncertainty, coupled with an increase in free time and low employment aspirations can lead people to seek solace in substance misuse.

The presence of these factors in a person's life contributes to their ACE score, the higher the score, the more susceptible someone is to lifelong health issues (Public Health Wales, 2025). ACEs can also affect someone's mental health negatively, increasing anxiety and depression, affect their ability to build and maintain healthy relationships. The toxic stress from ACEs affects brain development and learning, and people may be more likely to engage in substance abuse, anti-social and risky sexual behaviour (Harvard, 2018).

The literature around children's relationships with parents discusses the acceptance of unhealthy relationships as normalised, which leads to Intergenerational relational practices as explained by Hou *et al.* (2015), who established that parents are children's fundamental source of learning in their psychological development. As they grow up, the same-gender parent is commonly who they identify with, and the behaviours they model become the acceptable norm, they will continue to tolerate and perpetrate these gender patterns as they become adults. These findings are consistent with the 'Social Learning Model', one of the most widely studied theoretical explanations for children repeating the actions modelled by their parents, originated by Bandura (1979), in one study he found the perpetrators, and victims of violence, act as models who demonstrate violence to children, as an acceptable or effective means of resolving conflicts. While Bandura's

Social Learning theory can explain some aspects of social learning, it has faced criticism for underestimating the individuals agency and neglecting how behaviours change over time (Firmansyah and Saepuloh, 2022).

Johnson and Mollborn (2009) studied disadvantaged children and found that children and teenagers, with more adult responsibilities at home, or faced a life transition associated with adulthood i.e. Relationships or pregnancy and were unlikely to have a positive outlook for their future, self-identified as adults at a young age.

As well as these children's perceptions, there is emerging research to suggest that children experiencing hardship may physically grow up too fast, Sun (2024), details research into how increased levels of cortisol, trigger an early onset of puberty as part of the bodies unconscious effort to begin the reproductive process earlier, Kelly *et al.* (2017) supports this view and found increased stress contributed to girls beginning menstruation earlier.

There is also documentation of a phenomenon, where parents who experience ACEs, impact their children by creating a home environment that pressures their child to take on the role of the caregiver, Greene, *et al.* (2020) suggest that a mother's childhood experiences of abuse or neglect, could manifest as emotional overdependence upon her child. Nuttall, Speidel and Valentino (2019) develop this further by explaining that role reversal can influence children's concept of self, contributing to children perceiving themselves as more mature than their chronological age, this strengthens the idea that children in deprived areas are more likely to accumulate ACEs and perpetuate the cycle of depravation by imitating the behaviour of their primary influencers, however, the research provides little data on when it occurs between father figures and their children (Greene *et al.* 2020).

Furthermore, according to Ainsworth, *et al.* (2015) the importance of caregiver responsiveness in shaping attachment and proposes that early interactions between infants and their primary caregivers shape their emotional and social development, influencing their attachment styles and future relationships (Vertel, 2023).

Piaget's research highlights that children's decision-making abilities, impulse control, and risk assessment are underdeveloped compared to adults (Houdé, and Borst, 2022) which is why adult behaviours like drinking, smoking or sexual activity are considered risky behaviours for children and teenagers, and legally restricted to protect them from harm. However, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (Pitula *et al.*, 2016) informs us that children who experience low levels of trust in their caregivers due to neglect or abuse, which is more common in areas of deprivation, are more likely to be associated with delinquent behaviours and social disengagement, i.e., smoking, substance misuse or pregnancy. Low rates of teen pregnancies are often seen as an indicator of a societies overall educational success as young mothers will typically experience lower educational attainment, in school and employment (Wall-Wieler, Roos and Nickel, 2016).

2022 saw the lowest recorded number of teenage conception in South Wales (FSRH, 2024), with improved RSE, positively associated with this decline. However, regional variation shows that the rates for girls in deprived areas are 4 times more likely to conceive than those in the least deprived. A barrier to inclusion remains in lower income areas, some of those factors could be associated with lower school attendance affected by factors discussed in this review.

The literature highlights a deficit view of people from deprived areas where these issues are prevalent. Dinishak (2016) reminds us that this perspective can lead to a narrow understanding of complex social issues, failing to recognise the diversity and complexity of human experiences. This can perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce

power imbalances, as it can be used to justify discrimination and lead policy makers to view these people as lacking the skills or resources necessary to succeed, rather than acknowledging the impact of systemic inequities (Oxford University Press, 2025).

Investing in inclusive, evidence-based RSE creates communities where people are healthier, more respectful, and better equipped for fulfilling relationships. It is a tool for social progress, public health, and equality, as shown by Antle et al. (2019).

RSE interventions have also shown positive results on intrafamily dynamics, (Lanchimba, Díaz-Sánchez and Velasco, 2023). McCrory and Viding (2015) reinforce this research by reporting on the effectiveness of primary prevention as a strategy to reduce abuse and neglect in vulnerable households.

Despite the research being empirically proven to be an effective strategy to uphold the rights of children and improve lifelong health and well being outcomes, misinformation has led to a backlash by concerned parents in Wales, worried that RSE will expose their children to inappropriate material (Humanists, 2022). The High Court ruled that the curriculum was lawful and intends to keep children safe and to promote respect and healthy relationships Welsh Government (2021), however, Kelly (2023) discusses how educators are fearful of 'getting things wrong' amidst the heightened sensitivity around the subject. Recipients of RSE will have better educational and career outcomes as a result of them having a foundation of respect for themselves, and others that will increase their confidence and self-worth and give them a stronger understanding of communication, consent, and boundaries (Welsh Government, 2022). It can help young people navigate social pressures and build resilience and become empowered, informed citizens, who recognise and challenge harm in society, fostering safer communities and achieving a higher level of

attainment and wellbeing, regardless of the socio-economic status of the community they are from (Harding, 2024).

Methodology

This study seeks to explore lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings that families attach to relationships, and how this impacts intergenerational wellbeing. The research team will adopt a constructivist, participatory approach to collect qualitative data that allows for deeper contextual insights into how experience of RSE can influence family dynamics, communication, and emotional wellbeing—something quantitative methods alone cannot capture (McMullin, 2021).

A deficit perspective is often associated with marginalised groups, these communities are often researched "on" rather than "with." To avoid the data falling under this perspective, a participatory approach will be implemented to ensure participants are active co-researchers. Cotterell and Buffel (2023) critically assess the power and privilege of academics, and how this can be a barrier to ensuring the data collected is meaningful and purposeful. Seeing participants as more than just subjects, gives them a higher level of agency in the research and achieves a more authentic response that will better serve the study, and the community involved (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

The positionality of the research team can be shaped by various characteristics, including gender, race, personal experiences, and values and beliefs (Ozano and Khatri 2018). Shared history, values, or motivations for engagement in this area of research must be considered when analysing the data as not to allow bias to affect the interpretation of the data (Dhillon, 2018).

Constructivism in social research, is a philosophical framework which asserts, individuals actively construct their own understanding of reality through their experiences and interactions (Denicolo, Long, and Bradley-Cole, 2016), when used as the ontology of a study, it brings focus to understanding subjective experiences and the meanings people ascribe to them, giving the research team the perspective that knowledge is not passively received but actively built and shaped by the individual, this will inform the methodological approach.

In an attempt to avoid a deficit view, a positivist approach was considered, however, the approach was less open ended than a constructivist approach, meaning the data collected would be viewed from a restricted perspective that does not allow for the development of nuanced information within the study (Open University, 2025).

The Meaning of the research is context-dependent, so Bandura's 1977 Social Learning Theory (Sokar, Haj-Yahia, and Greenbaum, 2023), will be used to form the epistemology of the study. This theoretical framework postulates that children mimic the behaviours modelled by their families who provide the earliest learning experiences. McCloud and Abdullah (2014) go on to say that this framework also suggests that children grow up with a greater acceptance of these behaviours.

The research will also refer to Ainsworth, *et al.* (2015) whose research into attachment highlights how early attachment experiences can influence the emotional, social, and cognitive development of children, affecting their relationships and behaviours throughout life.

Method

This study will rely on a mixed method approach to research will gather data from creative workshops, focus groups, and a wellbeing survey adapted from the WHO-5 Well-Being Index (The World Health Organization, 2024).

Government-funded programs such as Flying start, that provides support services to families in disadvantaged areas of Wales (Rhondda Cynon Taff, 2025) will act as the Gatekeeper to the community the study aims to collaborate with. The research team will liaise with them and offer to provide a series of creative sessions over summer holidays where families can attend together to participate in a research project, using print, and digital flyers, posted on social media, and in family service providers like community centres and health clinics to advertise the workshops.

These workshops will act as a convenience sample - a method where participants are selected based on their availability and willingness to take part in the study (Emerson, 2021). Snowball sampling will also be used, where participants will invite other members of the target demographic to make use of the workshops and opportunity to share their opinions (Parker, Scott and Geddes, 2019).

Participants will be invited to complete a brief wellbeing scale at their first and last session. From these sessions, participants invited to take part in focus groups at a later date.

To make the focus groups convenient and accessible, the research team will be able to entertain children while parents take part at regular intervals during the sessions, in small groups of 4 – 6 people. The children will not be interviewed formally, but causal discussion will be documented during the activities.

The participants will be invited to attend a reflective focus session at the end of the course of workshops, where we celebrate the creative and social achievements of the community and share the findings, a form of 'member checking' (McKim, 2023).

Collage workshop

in order to achieve a higher level of authenticity from the results of the research, and ensure that participants feel that they are actively

engaged in the research, creative methods of data collection will be used, referring to 'The Hundred Languages' philosophy which recognises the endless capabilities of children to co construct knowledge (Reggio Children, 2022)

Creative methods of data collection are more inclusive and accessible to people than dense academic discussion or text, and more likely to keep participants stimulated and engaged in the research process in order to open up and engage in discussion (Watt and Wakefield, 2017). The research seeks to foster causal discussion between participants and researchers, on how relationships shape identity. Therefore, a collage workshop will be set up to encourage self-reflection on personal definitions of family and relationships. Pescott (2022) suggests collage as a tool to encourage and empower participants to do this in a broad and inclusive manner. Roberts and Woods (2018) suggest this is a way to allow participants to remain agentic in the research by allowing them space, time and creative control in response to the task set out by the research team. The aim of the workshop is to use art to express emotions, memories, and diverse perspectives on connection, which Glaw, *et al.* (2017) claim, increase validity and depth of knowledge while allowing participants to express ideas in a non-verbal way, overcoming barriers to communication.

Yet, there are limitations such as, the possibility of the visual data be interpreted differently by researchers compared to participants (Glaw, *et al.* 2017) the research team will aim to overcome this potential limitation by returning to the research and performing member checking, to enhance participants agency over the information gathered from them and providing validity by confirming meaning as co collaborators (McKim, 2023).

Focus groups

Focus groups are a qualitative research method where a small group of people discuss a specific topic, with the goal of gathering in-depth insights into perceptions, attitudes, and experiences, allowing researchers to explore group dynamics, shared experiences, and social norms through guided discussions (Gill and Baillie, 2018). Focus groups support participatory research by triangulating data to improve validity (Nyumba, *et al.* 2018).

Focus groups are useful for exploring sensitive or complex social issues as it does not put participants in high pressure environment. Guest, *et al.* (2017) suggests the interactive nature of focus groups encourage openness and safety to reveal diverse perspectives that might not be obtained in a one-to-one interview, however, there are challenges to be aware of. Group Bias can occur if the participants views are swayed by a dominant voice, or facilitator's presence in the group (Guest, *et al.* 2017) and recommend a trained facilitator, from the target demographic, who is not affiliated with them, to help the group feel comfortable to be open and honest.

Ethical Considerations

To create an ethical foundation, appropriate expectations must be set between the research team, and the participants, Sim, and Waterfield (2019) remind us that this is difficult to achieve in a group, so facilitators must account for their lack of control by recognising when the discussion breaches the agreed boundaries of consent and guiding the discussion back within them.

The research team will introduce themselves and state their intention, explaining the purpose of the workshop and obtaining consent-a person's voluntary and informed agreement to participate in research, and assent consent, given by the guardian of a person who cannot legally give consent- for child participants. The research team will only use data, if participants demonstrate understanding and willingness to share (Morris *et al.* 2024) and clarify that consent can be withdrawn at any time, to demonstrate that the participants have agency within the study.

When discussing healthy relationships and families, there may be times when the discussion brings up sensitive subjects. The researchers must appreciate that these subjects can cause participants to become upset, so as part of our ethical responsibility, the researchers will never lead participants to discuss triggering issues, respond to disclosures with respect and compassion, and be prepared to guide people to further resources to refer to for help and advice. If a member of the research team believes a participant, or member of staff is in immediate danger, the police will be informed.

Incorporating Arnstein's Ladder of Participation, adapted by Roger Hart (Warwickshire County Council, no date), will help ensure that the study is ethical, inclusive, and genuinely engages participants rather than treating them as passive subjects. It will be difficult to achieve research that is fully initiated by the participants, as there are specific areas to be explored to give focus to the research question, and there is a duty of care to ensure sensitive topics are dealt with appropriately in an environment where adults and children are interacting with each other to prevent exposure to inappropriate discussion, but this study will ensure everyone involved is informed and has input into how they respond within the project.

This study will use ethical guidelines for research set by BERA (2024) to ensure complex ethical issues are navigated to create a study which is able to gain informed Consent, risk assess to mitigate harm and protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, promote equity and inclusivity and aim to benefit future practice and policy making to make a positive difference to the community where the research is conducted.

From the beginning of the study, the research team must consider the suitability of the topic, access to people and the space they belong to, guarantees of confidentiality and the analysis of findings (Zhang and Liu, 2018).

Issues with consent in research can undermine ethical standards, participant autonomy, and the validity of study results. Tulyakul and Meepring (2020) remind us to be aware of barriers to understanding, such as jargon or confusing language that may hinder understanding, agree and recommend an ethics review board to scrutinize consent considerations. Terms of the study will be negotiated with the gatekeepers and participants with honesty, sensitivity, and impartiality with participants to conform to a participatory style of research, which Connor, Copland and Owen (2018) recommend, to exercise good judgement when working within ethical guidelines.

By the end of the study, the researchers hope to see data on how families engage with existing family support services in the target communities (RCT, 2025) and how these families perceive and understand RSE and holistic development. It may also develop understanding of the role of attachment security in breaking intergenerational cycles of and low attainment and wellbeing in the community involved.

The data should help identify systemic barriers to implementing interventions and lead us to develop co-designed interventions to

empower families in deprived Welsh communities, to be proposed as evidence-based recommendations for Welsh policymakers and practitioners.

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