

How does Poverty affect children's trauma



Understanding Child Poverty

A Global Issue



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How does poverty affect a 10-year-olds mental health and what trauma does poverty have on the child.

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WHAT IS TRAUMA AND ACES?

Trauma

Trauma, as described by Mind (2026), occurs when an individual experiences an extremely stressful, frightening, or distressing event that is difficult or impossible for them to cope with at the time. These situations often involve a loss of control, where the person feels powerless, overwhelmed, or unable to change what is happening to them (Mind, 2026). Trauma can develop because of a single significant event, such as an accident, abuse, or natural disaster, but it can also arise from ongoing exposure to stressful or harmful circumstances over a long period of time (Mind, 2026). Long-term situations such as neglect, domestic violence, or chronic illness can be just as traumatic as one-off events. The lasting impact of trauma can affect a person's emotional, psychological, and physical wellbeing, influencing how they think, feel, and respond to future situations (Mind, 2026).

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are stressful or harmful events that happen during childhood. These experiences can include abuse, neglect, or difficult family situations such as parents separating, domestic violence, or problems with drugs or alcohol in the home (Help Children Live Better, 2024). When children go through these experiences, it can cause childhood trauma and make them feel unsafe, scared, or upset. This can affect their emotions, behaviour, and wellbeing as they grow up (Help Children Live Better, 2024). Help Children Live Better (2024) also explains that ACEs are quite common, with around one in four children experiencing at least one ACE. Many of these children may suffer from some form of abuse or neglect. Without the right support, ACEs can have long-lasting effects on a child's mental health, learning, and relationships. Providing help early can reduce these effects and support children to cope better in the future (Help Children Live Better, 2024).



HOW DOES POVERTY AFFECT CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH

UNICEF (2024) highlights that experiencing poverty at any stage of childhood can have profound and long-lasting effects on a child's mental health and cognitive development, with consequences that may extend well into adulthood. Children growing up in poverty are at a significantly higher risk of experiencing developmental delays, which can negatively influence their educational attainment, emotional wellbeing, and overall life chances (UNICEF, 2024). Limited access to adequate nutrition, stable housing, quality healthcare, and educational resources can hinder brain development and reduce opportunities for learning and social interaction (UNICEF, 2024). Furthermore, the chronic stress associated with financial hardship can impair emotional regulation and resilience, increasing vulnerability to behavioural and psychological difficulties. Evidence also suggests that exposure to poverty during childhood raises the likelihood of mental health problems later in life, including anxiety and depression, as early adverse experiences can shape long-term emotional and psychological outcomes (UNICEF, 2024).

BBC Children in Need (2024) supports this evidence by reporting that, on average, nine children in every classroom are experiencing poverty, demonstrating how widespread and significant the issue is within the UK

Action for Children (2025) highlights that over 1.6 million children in the UK are living in low-income households and are struggling to afford necessities such as food and winter clothing. Living in poverty can place significant pressure on families, often leading to increased stress and instability within the home, which can negatively affect children's emotional wellbeing. Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to develop mental health difficulties, including anxiety and low self-esteem, as they get older (Action for Children, 2025). These challenges can impact their confidence, social relationships, and ability to succeed in education. Furthermore, 4.5 million children in the UK are currently living in poverty, meaning that 31% of all children are affected, highlighting the scale and seriousness of child poverty across the country (Action for Children, 2025).



The environmental impact that poverty have on children

When considering the environment, there are many factors that can impact children's mental health. One important environmental factor is housing. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021), poor housing conditions can have a significant negative effect on children's mental health and overall wellbeing. Children living in low-quality housing may be exposed to issues such as mould, damp and overcrowding, which can cause physical health problems including respiratory illnesses (WHO, 2021). These physical health issues can increase stress and discomfort for children, making it more difficult for them to feel safe and relaxed in their home environment.

In addition, poor housing conditions can disrupt children's sleep due to cold temperatures, noise, or uncomfortable living spaces. Lack of quality sleep has been linked to behavioural problems, difficulties with concentration, and emotional regulation issues, all of which can negatively affect a child's mental health (WHO, 2021). Over time, living in an unhealthy or unstable home environment can contribute to increased anxiety, low mood, and behavioural challenges, highlighting the important role that housing plays in shaping children's mental health outcomes.

When considering the outside environment, it can negatively affect children's mental health in many ways. One significant factor is the high crime rates often found in low-income areas, which can be dangerous and distressing for children (Boyle et al., 2019). Exposure to crime or the fear of violence can make children feel unsafe in their neighbourhoods and limit their ability to play or socialise freely. In addition, many low-income areas lack safe outdoor spaces such as parks or playgrounds, meaning children may have fewer opportunities for physical activity and positive social interaction (Boyle et al., 2019).

These negative aspects of the outside environment can have a serious impact on children's emotional wellbeing. Feeling unsafe in their local area can lead to increased anxiety, emotional distress, and difficulties coping with their emotions. Over time, this can negatively affect children's mental health and overall development (Boyle et al., 2019).

In low-income households, children often have limited access to support services that could help them cope with their environment. Mental health care and support services are frequently less available in low-income areas, making it harder for children to understand their emotions and receive appropriate help for their mental health needs (Annis et al., 2023). In addition, there are often fewer supportive community spaces, such as youth centres or safe hubs, where children can feel secure and seek guidance or support when needed (Annis et al., 2023). As a result of this lack of support, children living in these environments are more likely to have their mental health difficulties go untreated, which can cause problems to worsen over time. This highlights how limited access to support and services in low-income environments can negatively impact children's mental health and wellbeing (Annis et al., 2023).



THE IMPACT POVERTY HAVE ON CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH.

Poverty can negatively impact children's mental health because it often exposes them to unstable living conditions, including overcrowded housing or homelessness. These circumstances can create chronic stress and anxiety, making children feel unsafe and uncertain about where they will live. Such instability can interfere with emotional regulation, increase feelings of insecurity, and contribute to long-term mental health difficulties (Children and Young People's Mental Health, n.d.).

Children living in poverty are also at a higher risk of developing depression and experiencing negative emotional outcomes. They may feel shame or humiliation when comparing themselves to their peers who have more resources, which can significantly impact their self-esteem and overall mental health. Experiences of social exclusion or perceived inferiority can contribute to feelings of hopelessness, sadness, and social withdrawal, increasing the likelihood of depressive symptoms (Reiss, 2013). Poverty-related stressors, combined with these social and emotional challenges, can have a cumulative effect on children's psychological wellbeing.

When a child is living in poverty, it can lead to many difficulties, particularly increased levels of stress and anxiety. Children experiencing poverty are often exposed to ongoing stress related to their home lives, such as food insecurity, housing instability, and feeling unsafe in their living environment. This constant uncertainty can place a significant strain on children's mental health. Chronic stress and anxiety can interfere with emotional regulation and increase the risk of mental health problems such as anxiety disorders and depression (American Psychological Association, 2024). In addition, children living in poverty may worry about their family's financial situation, the possibility of homelessness, or their personal safety at home or in their neighbourhood. These persistent worries can cause heightened anxiety and emotional distress, making it difficult for children to feel secure and supported. Over time, prolonged exposure to stress and anxiety can have long-term negative effects on children's mental health and overall wellbeing (American Psychological Association, 2024).



Bullying and stigma are significant challenges that children living in poverty may face, particularly in school settings. Children may be teased, excluded, or treated differently by their peers because of their financial situation. This can include being mocked for their clothing, inability to afford food, or inability to participate in school trips and extracurricular activities that other children can access Children in Wales. (n.d.). Such experiences of social exclusion and peer victimization can contribute to feelings of shame, embarrassment, and low self-esteem, which can have a lasting impact on children's mental health and emotional wellbeing Children in Wales. (n.d.).

Bullying and stigma are common challenges that children living in poverty may face, particularly in school settings. Children in low-income families may be teased, excluded from activities, or treated differently by their peers because of their financial situation. They may be bullied due to the clothing they wear, the inability to afford school meals, or their inability to participate in school trips and extracurricular activities that other children can access (Sudarsan,2022). Such experiences of exclusion and ridicule can have a significant negative impact on children's mental health, contributing to low self-esteem, anxiety, and feelings of social isolation. Over time, repeated exposure to bullying and stigma can increase the risk of depression and emotional difficulties, compounding the challenges associated with living in poverty (Sudarsan,2022).

Bullying and Stigma



Admin. (2023).



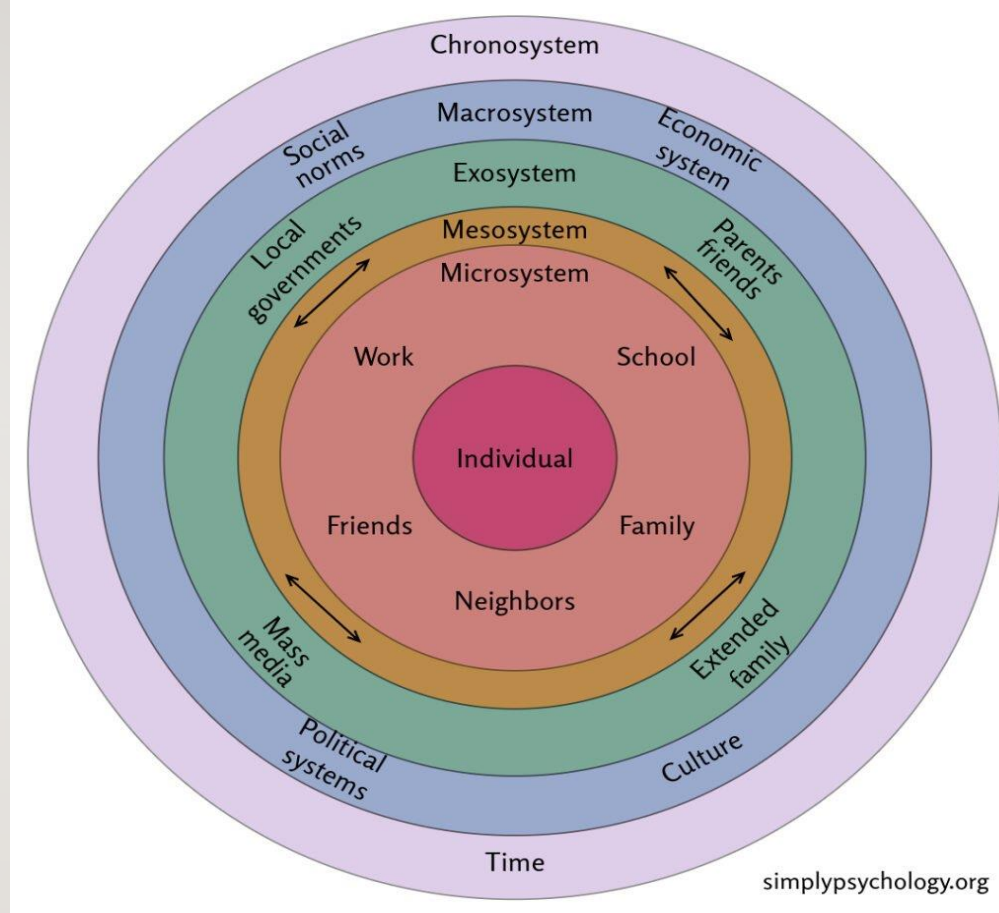
Bronfenbrenner Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights the importance of the environment in a child's development, showing how various connected layers of their environment shape their growth and experiences (Cherry, 2023).

Bronfenbrenner's theory consists of five different systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. These five systems work together to support a child's development and help them form interactions with the world and their environment (Cherry, 2023).

Bronfenbrenner also states that children are influenced not only by the people around them but also by the environments in which they live. When children grow up in unhealthy or unstable environments, such as those affected by poverty, their development can be negatively impacted. Poverty can limit access to resources, stability, and supportive relationships, which are all important for healthy development (Tong and An, 2024).

A healthy environment requires consistency, safety, and emotional support, and these factors are often difficult to provide when a child is living in poverty. As a result, a child's overall development and well-being may be affected development (Tong and An, 2024).



Guy-Evans (2025)



How does attachment affect children in poverty mental health.

Firstly, attachment theory refers to the emotional bond that develops between a child and their primary caregiver. This attachment is crucial for a child's development, as it helps them feel safe, secure, and protected within their environment. A secure attachment also supports children in learning how to regulate and manage their emotions, which is an essential part of healthy emotional and social development (NSPCC, 2021). According to the NSPCC (2021), responsive and consistent caregiving enables children to develop confidence in their caregiver, forming a foundation for emotional wellbeing.

When a child is living in poverty, attachment can be negatively affected in several ways. Primary caregivers may experience mental health difficulties due to financial stress, which can limit their emotional availability and ability to provide the stability a child needs to feel safe and understand the world around them (Oppenheim, 2024). In addition, caregivers may be required to work long hours or multiple jobs to financially support their family. As a result, children may spend less time with their primary caregiver, reducing opportunities for consistent interaction and emotional bonding. This lack of consistent caregiving can weaken attachment, leaving the child feeling less secure and protected within their environment (Oppenheim, 2024).

When a child does not develop the attachment they need, it can have a significant impact on their mental health. Without a secure attachment, children may struggle to understand, express, and regulate their emotions, as there may be no consistent caregiver to support them in making sense of how they feel. As a result, children may experience heightened levels of anxiety and stress, often mirroring the emotional states of their primary caregiver, as children learn about emotions through observation and interaction. Over time, these ongoing emotional difficulties can increase the risk of mental health conditions such as depression, even at a young age (Action for Children, 2025).



Outcomes if the trauma is not addressed/ long lasting affects.

Unfortunately, if children's mental health affected by poverty is not addressed, they can experience a range of negative outcomes. They may develop anxiety and depression as a result of the constant stress and trauma they have experienced. In addition, children might develop behaviour difficulty or struggle with social withdrawal, avoiding interactions with others as a way to cope with their stress (Mental Health Foundation, 2025).

Poverty can also have long-lasting effects on children's education and development. Children may experience learning difficulties because stress at home can make it hard for them to focus on class and fully engage with new material, meaning they may fall behind their peers (Jackson, 2017). In addition, children may achieve lower academic outcomes as they grow older, struggling to complete tasks or stay focused due to ongoing stress and feelings of being overwhelmed (Jackson, 2017).

Poverty can have many long-lasting effects on children as they grow older. One significant outcome is an increased risk of substance abuse, as children who have experienced poverty may turn to drugs as a coping mechanism for the trauma and stress they endured during childhood (Child Poverty Action Group, 2024). Another lasting effect is limited employment opportunities, which can result from poor academic performance caused by difficulties concentrating in school. In addition, children may face social challenges, including difficulty expressing emotions and communicating effectively with others, which can further limit their personal and professional opportunities (Child Poverty Action Group, 2024).



Interventions

When it comes to interventions, there are many approaches that can be used to support children living in poverty. One effective approach is a child-centred intervention, which focuses directly on the individual needs of the child. This approach prioritises therapies such as play therapy and school-based trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (Laurenzi et al., 2022). These interventions help children process stressful or traumatic experiences and develop skills to manage strong emotions and emotional regulation more effectively. By focusing on the child's emotional and psychological wellbeing, child-centred interventions can reduce stress and improve coping strategies, particularly for children exposed to ongoing adversity (Laurenzi et al., 2022).

There are also family-based interventions that can support both children and families experiencing poverty. For example, parent support groups provide caregivers with emotional support and a safe space to talk when they are feeling overwhelmed or in need of help. These groups can reduce parental stress and improve coping skills, which in turn has a positive impact on children's wellbeing (Action for Children, no date).

In addition, local councils can provide practical support such as social housing and food assistance to help ensure children live in a safe and stable environment and have access to necessities like food and clean water. Alongside this, home-visiting programmes delivered by nurses or trained professionals offer regular check-ins with families. These visits help monitor children's health and development while also supporting parents in meeting their child's needs (Action for Children, no date).

Schools can also play an important role in supporting children's mental health through targeted interventions. One of the most significant supports for children living in poverty is access to free school meals, which help ensure that children receive adequate nutrition. Proper nutrition is essential for concentration, emotional regulation, and overall mental wellbeing (Robin, 2024).

Schools may also provide after-school activities, such as sports or arts clubs. These activities help children develop new skills, build confidence, and form positive relationships with peers and supportive adults. After-school programmes can offer a safe and structured environment, contributing to improved emotional wellbeing and a sense of belonging for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Robin, 2024).

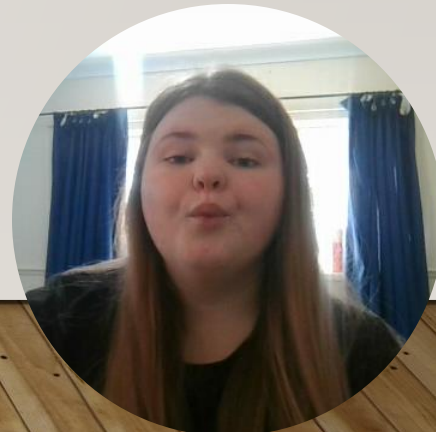


Outcomes from the interventions

Mental health interventions can lead to reduced feelings of anxiety and depression in children, significant improvements in emotional regulation, and increased self-esteem. Additionally, these interventions contribute to greater long-term mental health stability as children transition into adulthood (Antalek et al., 2025).

There are also many educational outcomes that improve following mental health interventions. One key outcome is improved school attendance and attention, as children are more likely to attend school regularly and engage in learning when they feel safe and supported. Their concentration and memory also improve because they experience reduced stress related to financial insecurity and challenges in their home environment (UK Data Service, 2024). Finally, academic achievement and graduation rates increase, as children are better able to focus on their schoolwork and are more motivated to succeed academically in pursuit of a better future (UK Data Service, 2024).

The long-term outcomes of effective interventions for children with mental health issues include a lower likelihood of substance and alcohol abuse, as they learn healthier ways to cope with emotions and know where to seek support if needed (King et al., 2023). These interventions also reduce the risk of drug and alcohol addiction, helping children make safer choices as they grow older (King et al., 2023). Most importantly, children who receive such interventions are more likely to break the cycle of poverty, achieving greater economic stability and creating better opportunities for themselves and their future families (King et al., 2023).



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