

# *An Intersectional Poverty-Aware Approach to Understanding and Working with Neglect*

---

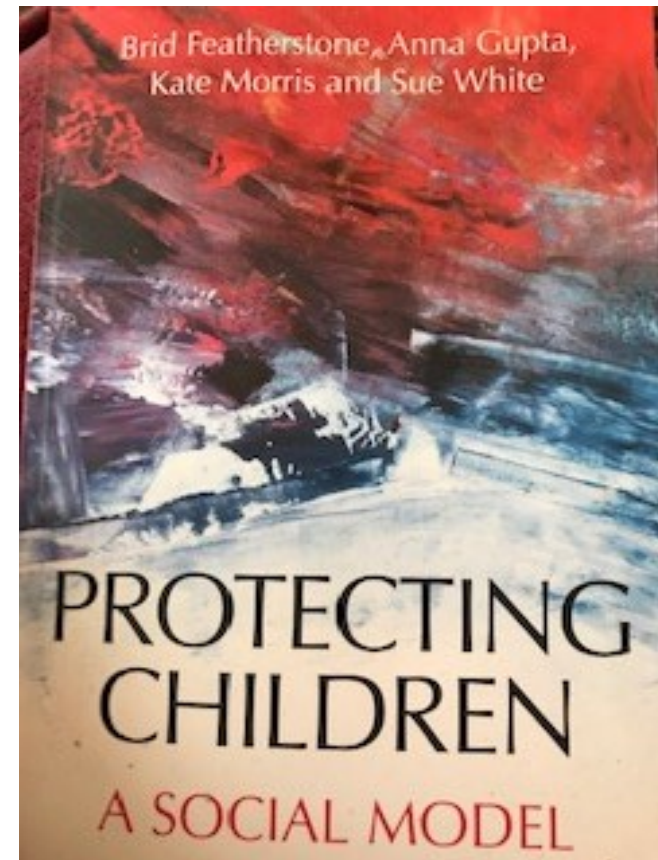
Prof. Anna Gupta



# A Social Model for Protecting Children and Supporting Families

---

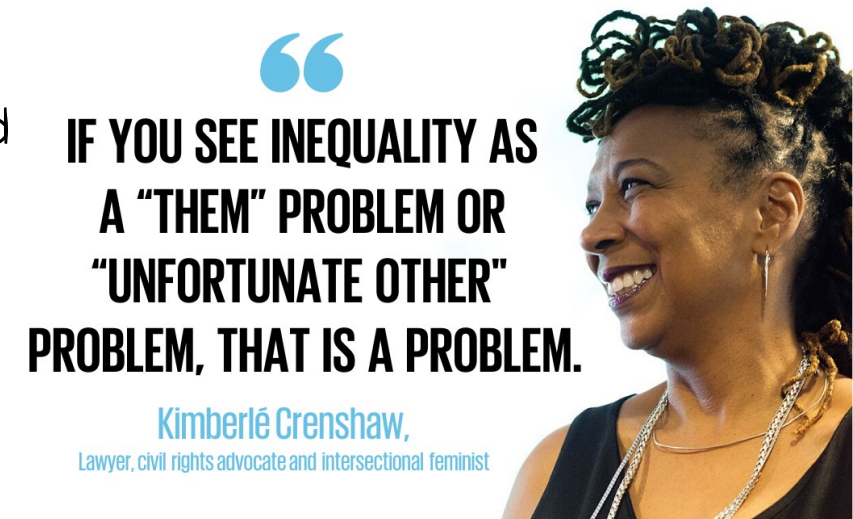
- The social model has challenged thinking across a range of fields, including disability and mental health, It specifically draws attention to the economic, environmental and cultural barriers faced by people with differing levels of (dis)ability.
- **A Social Model for Protecting Children:**
- Moves away from individualised notions of risk to children of parents' actions or inactions
- To one that recognises the social determinants of harm and the economic, social and cultural barriers faced by most of the families.
- As well as the protective capacities within families and communities and how these can be mobilised.



# Intersectionality

---

- Introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw - emerged from an understanding in the 1980s that race, gender and class cannot be understood as single or even incremental
- Intersectionality is a way of understanding social relations by examining intersecting forms of discrimination.
- It is the idea that a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege and the advantages and disadvantages that are felt by people due to a combination of these factors.
- Different sources of power and powerlessness intersect to frame people's lives.





# Intersecting Inequalities

- A Bangladeshi Muslim woman from a traditional family background with limited English language skills and no recourse to public funds faces multiple barriers to her capability to leave her violent partner and safeguard her children.
- These could include institutionalised financial and practical barriers, fear of discrimination and social isolation within a racist and Islamophobic society, as well as gendered expectations of women's role within her culture and community.



# The urgency of now!

- Cost-of-living crisis has, like COVID-19, exposed and intensified deep fault lines in our society
- Many people are struggling but this is not an 'equal opportunity' crisis! And, indeed the term 'crisis' is problematic



# Some background in understanding poverty today

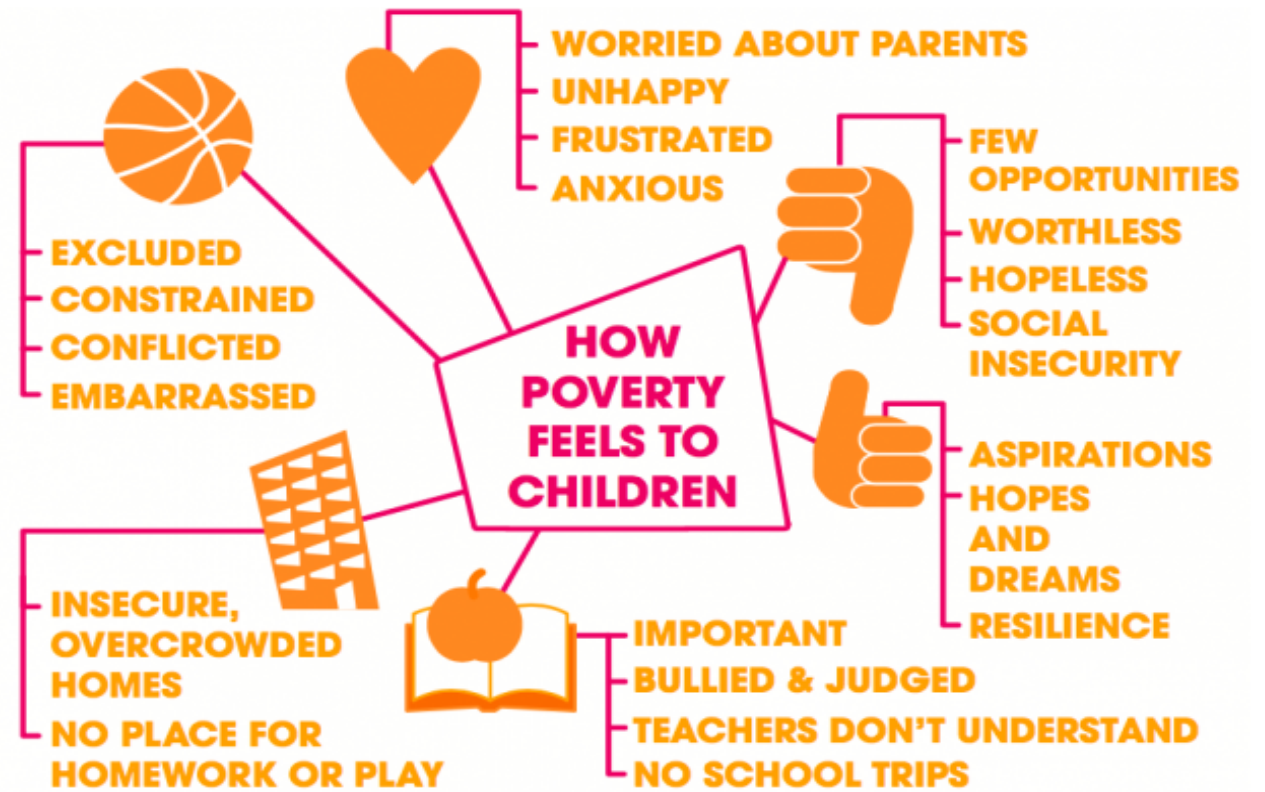
---

- [The decade that broke Britain: the disastrous decisions that left millions in a cost of living crisis | Politics | The Guardian](#)
- Policies since 2010, from the benefits cap to the bedroom tax, have left particular households very vulnerable amid the cost –of- living crisis.
- Currently 13.4 million children – 3.9 million children
- One in 6 were in persistent poverty – defined as spending at least 3 out of the last 4 years in poverty- for young children, this could be their whole life



# Poverty is Societal Neglect

- It harms children
- It harms adults
- It harms families and communities

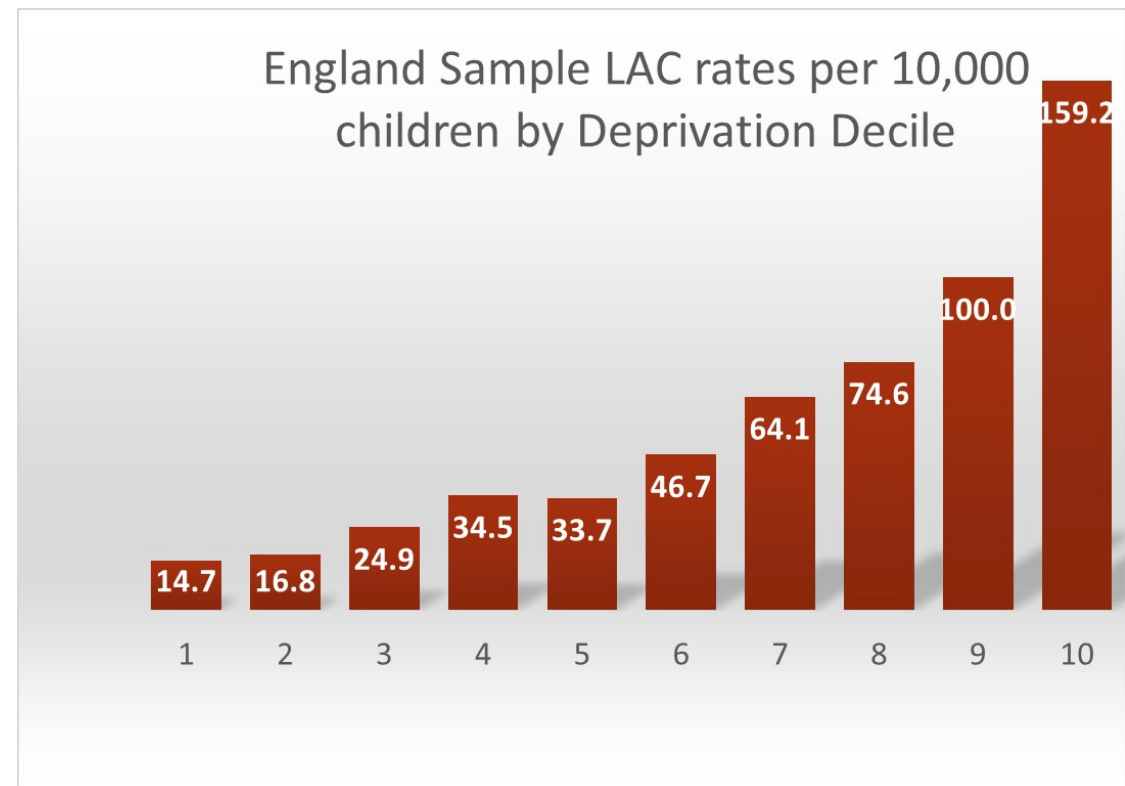


- Poverty leads to the **deprivation of certain basic capabilities**, and these can vary, 'from such elementary physical ones as being well nourished, being adequately clothed and sheltered, avoiding preventable morbidity, and so forth, to more complex social achievements such as taking part in the life of the community, being able to appear in public without shame, and so on'
- (Amartya Sen, Nobel Laureate for Economics).

# Child welfare inequalities - a question of human rights

- Clear link between social deprivation and a child's life chances in relation to entering care or their ability to live with their family of origin (Bywaters et al. – CWIP)

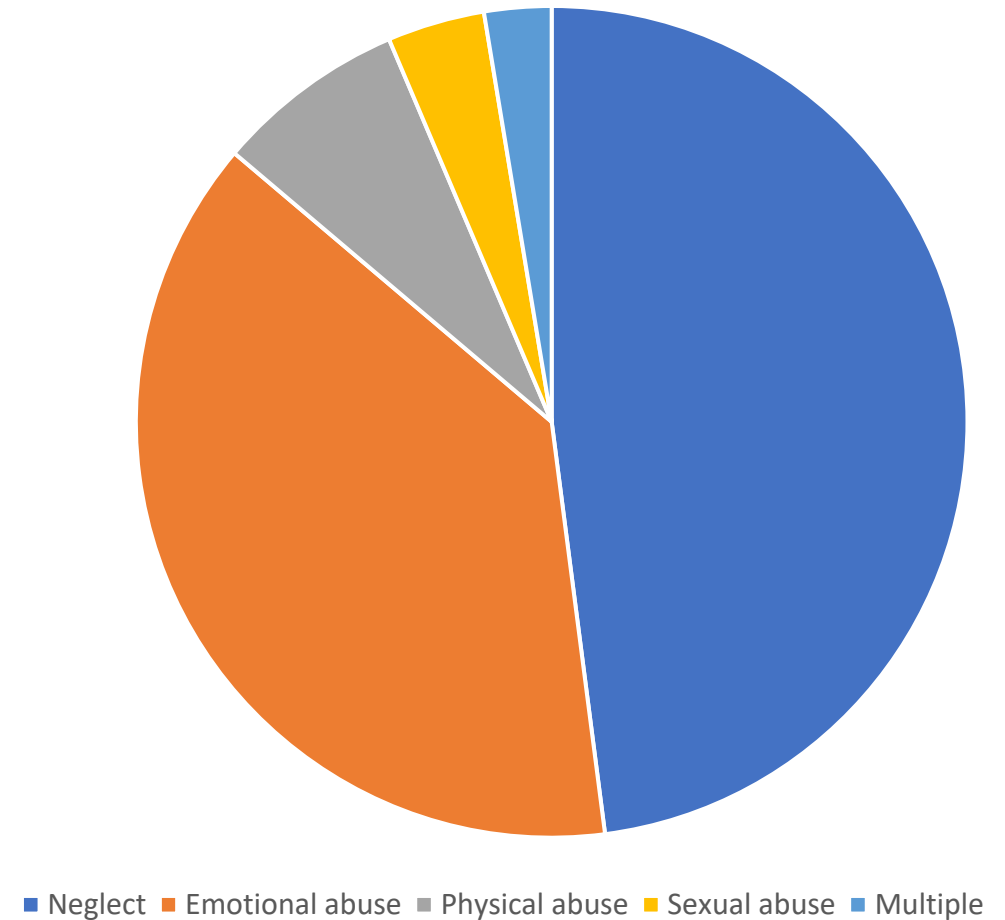
**Child protection/ welfare inequity** occurs when children and/or their parents face unequal **chances**, **experiences** or **outcomes** of involvement with child protection services that are systematically associated with structural social disadvantage and are unjust and avoidable.





# Number of children who were the subject of a child protection plan at 31 March 2022 by initial category of abuse

- Neglect – 24,430
- Emotional abuse – 19,480
- Physical abuse – 3,780
- Sexual abuse – 1,930
- Multiple – 1,280
- <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need>



# Outing the Elephant.....Poverty matters in child protection

---

- Although we know most of children on CP plans or in care are from poor backgrounds - **poverty is largely invisible in practice and policy**. Instead:
- Tackling poverty and inequality is often not seen as the **'core business'** for child protection workers or policy makers, instead the assessment of risk and parenting capacity is
- Poverty is the wallpaper of practice - "too big to tackle – too familiar to notice"
- *Though not all social workers talked about the poor in this way, the notion of an underclass that social work must regulate and persuade into respectability (with or without coercion) permeates through the data.*
- (Morris et al, 2018)





## The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: an evidence review

Paul Bywaters, Lisa Bunting, Gavin Davidson, Jennifer Harrality,  
Will Mason, Claire McCartin and Nicole Steels

*This report examines evidence on two key aspects of the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect: how poverty affects a child's chance of being abused or neglected, and the impact abuse or neglect in childhood has on poverty in adult life.*

## The relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect: An evidence review (JRF, 2016, Nuffield, 2022)

- 1. Extensive evidence of association (supported by quasi experimental studies in the US)
- 2. An explanatory model:
  - Poverty works **directly** – material hardship or lack of money to buy in support
  - **Indirectly** – through parental stress and neighbourhood conditions
  - Poverty works in **interaction with other factors** such as DV, MH and substance misuse (complex and circularity)
  - Poverty is neither a necessary nor sufficient factor in the occurrence of child abuse and neglect.
  - **Poverty is only one factor, but perhaps the most pervasive (& interwoven) – complex systemic causes**
  - **NOT either psychological OR social it is BOTH/AND**

# The implications for social work with children and families

- [Full-report-relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect.pdf \(nuffieldfoundation.org\)](https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/full-report-relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect.pdf)

Up dated review (2022) provides credible evidence that increasing poverty increases rates of child maltreatment and, therefore, demand on services

Economic shocks increased abuse and neglect except when families were protected by welfare benefit

This evidence makes for uncomfortable reading for a range of constituencies- activists on poverty, professionals and policy makers

University of  
HUDDERSFIELD  
transforming professionals



## Final Report

### The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect: New Evidence

March 2022

Paul Bywater and Guy Skinner  
with

Aimee Cooper, Ella Kennedy, Afra Malik

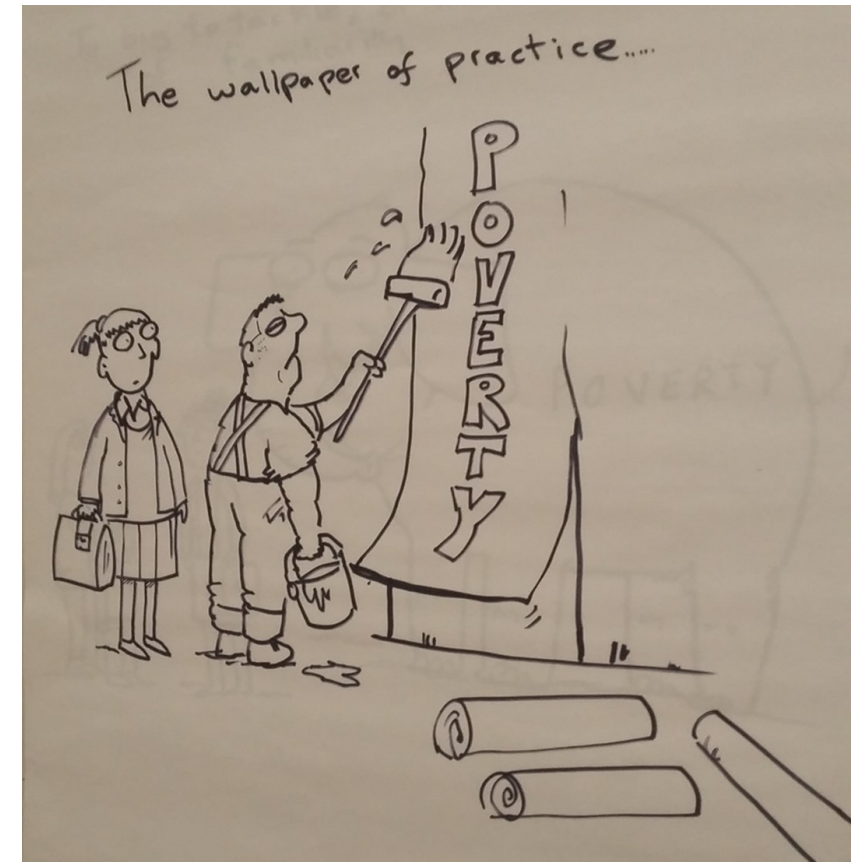




# More evidence

---

- Deep poverty and persistent poverty more damaging for children's safety and development than a low income or temporary difficulties.
- Insecurity and unpredictability of income, often the result of benefit administration practices, housing and employment, compound the problems of parenting with an inadequate income
- Gender, age, ethnicity, and health or disability of children and parents influence the ways in which adverse economic conditions affect family life.
- A lack of recognition of parents' difficulties in meeting children's basic needs compounds parents' feelings of **shame** and **stigma**. In turn, this reduces the chances of services establishing effective relationships with families under pressure.
- Policies, systems and practice do not adequately recognise how economic conditions are inextricably connected to factors such as mental health, domestic violence and abuse and addictions.



# Two explanatory models

---

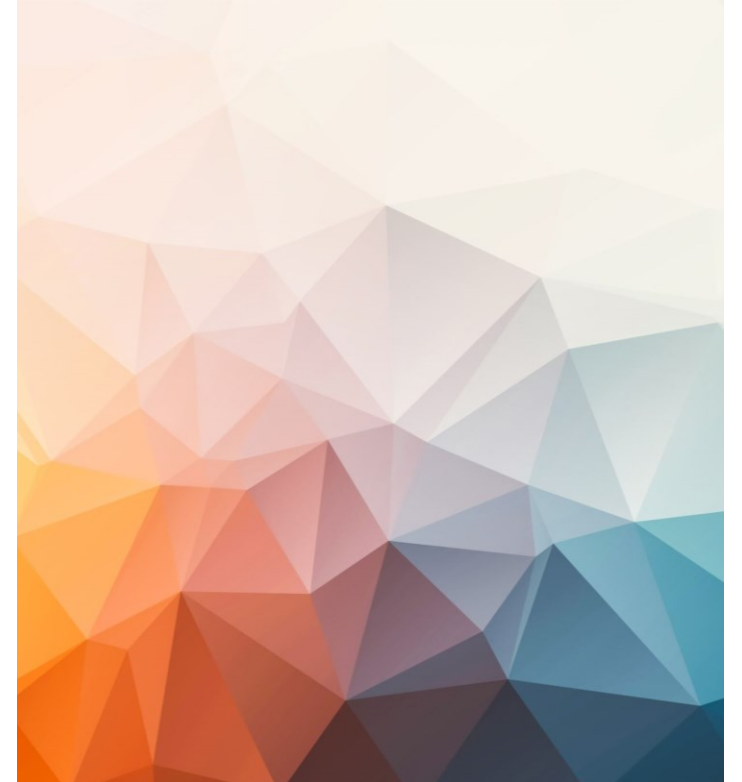
Two explanatory models for the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect are the investment model (Duncan et al., 2014) and family stress model (Conger et al., 2000), which are not mutually exclusive.

---

The investment model focuses on the capabilities of parents to provide resources for their children to thrive and succeed, which is dependent on the distribution of resources within societies.

---

The family stress model focuses on the emotional and psychological consequences of poverty and lack of resources, with feelings of shame and stigma exacerbating stress.





# Unpacking causation

- Direct and systemic causation
- When thinking about the relationship between poverty, parenting and child abuse and neglect, an understanding of systemic causation requires us to move away from models of assessment that focus on individual blame and responsibility, to thinking in contextual, interactional and dynamic ways about families' lives (Featherstone et al., 2018).

# Mental health, parental conflict and social context

## *Mental health, Resilience and Inequalities (WHO)*

- ‘levels of mental distress among communities need to be understood less in terms of individual pathology and more as a response to relative deprivation and social injustice, which erode the emotional, spiritual and intellectual resources essential to psychological wellbeing’ (Friedl, 2009)

## INTER-PARENTAL CONFLICT AND OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXTS OF POVERTY AND ECONOMIC PRESSURE – RESEARCH REVIEW (EIF report, 2017)

Higher levels of poverty rates are associated with increased rates of family conflict.

Economic pressure also places parents at elevated risk for a variety adverse of psychological outcomes including anxiety and depression which in turn are associated with problems in the inter-parental relationship including inter-parental conflict and reduced relationship satisfaction

Economic pressure and parents’ psychological distress are also prospectively linked to difficulties with parenting.



# Definition of Neglect

---

- *Working Together* defines '**Neglect**' as being:
- The persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development.
- Neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to:
  - provide adequate food, clothing and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment);
  - protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger;
  - ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate caregivers);
  - or ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.
- It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs (DfE, 2018).
- **KEY ISSUES – ATTRIBUTED CAUSE, INTERPRETATION, SEVERITY/ EXTENT, INFLUENCE OF VALUES**
- *Children are experiencing harm but who and what is causing it?*

**Poverty is societal neglect** – a parent's inability to provide supervision (because they have to have 3 jobs to feed their children) or a safe place to live is not parental neglect. It is caused by poverty and injustice.

**Poverty is not emotional abuse** – being a victim of domestic violence, unable to escape due to a lack of resources and support is not emotional abuse by parents. It is a failure of leadership, policy and the law.

**It takes a community to raise a child – it also takes a community to let a child down.** *Maddie Henaway, Parent Systems Advocate, Family Inclusion Network of South East Queensland.*

If way we talk about harm to children in child protection policy and practice ignores social causes and is almost entirely focused on parental characteristics, choices and skill deficits. It leads to the wrong solutions being offered to families.

The people experiencing poverty, violence, intergenerational trauma and homelessness are conceptualised as perpetrators of neglect and abuse – as if they are choosing their circumstances – letting the rest of us off the hook.

# *Children and Families with No Recourse to Public Funds: Learning from Case Reviews (Jolly & Gupta, 2022)*

---

- 26 SCRs (18 from the past 5 years) were analysed
- The SCRs show how destitution and extreme poverty manifested in families' lives and the inevitable harms. However, rarely viewed as a 'safeguarding' issue.
- The tension between child welfare and immigration control and the influence of political and mainstream media discourses, permeated organisational cultures and professional practice - families being treated with suspicion and viewed as 'undeserving', and families avoiding professionals for fear of alerting the immigration authorities. A fear not unfounded.
- Insecure and unsuitable housing was a feature of many of the families' lives, with vulnerable families moved away from sources of support, both personal and professional, exacerbating social isolation, mental health difficulties and risk of exploitation and violence for some.



# Poverty and Parenting – Some assumptions

Poor people are responsible for their poverty (feckless, welfare scroungers) – so it must be the individual's fault

The vast majority of parents living in poverty do not neglect or abuse their children – so it must be the individual's fault

If you focus on poverty you excuse harmful behaviour and leave children unprotected.

If poverty is caused by structural factors – what can we as social workers/ other professionals do about it?



# Relationships Matter...

## Families tell us.....

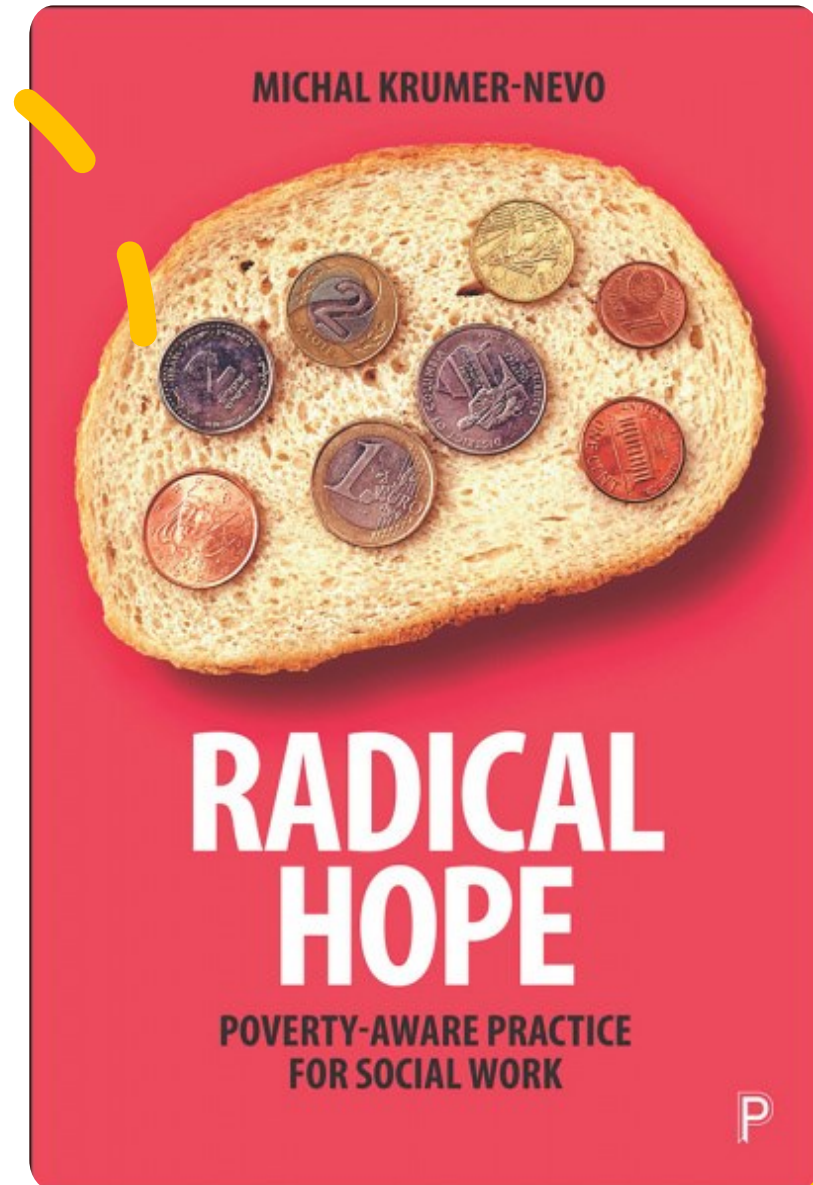


## However..

- Strengths-based approaches when only focussing on the micro-context of families' lives & SW / family relationship can also reinforce a process of individualisation and pathologisation, if the contexts within which the families exist and workers practise are not explicitly recognised and addressed (Keddell, 2013; Roose et al., 2014).

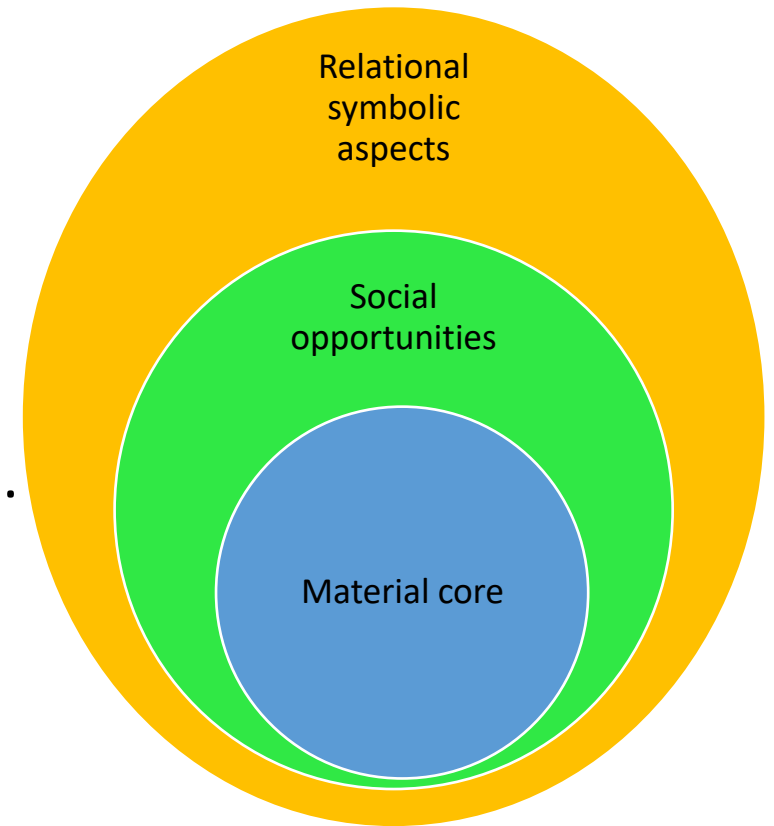
# Poverty aware practice

- What is it?
- **Empirical and humane**
- Pays attention to the psycho-social impacts of poverty and inequality
- Is aware of shame and micro-aggressions
- Poverty as a violation of human rights
- Incorporates a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty and other social inequalities in assessments and plans



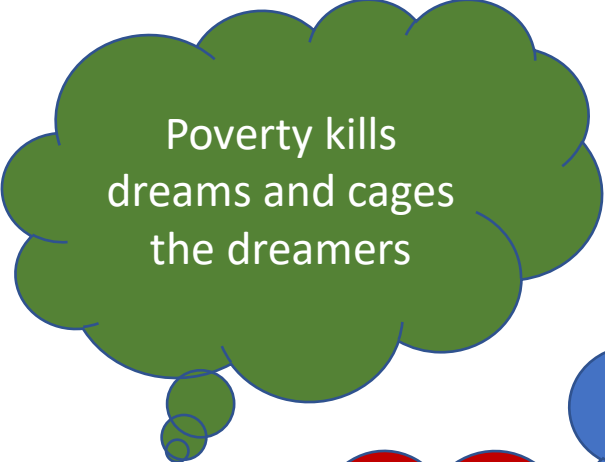
# POVERTY AWARE PRACTICE

- This approach builds upon and extends the structural analysis of poverty, viewing poverty:
  - not only as a lack of material and social capital (e.g. adequate housing, education and health),
  - but also as a lack of symbolic capital, manifested in stigmatisation, discrimination, 'Othering', lack of voice and ignoring the knowledge of poor people (Lister, 2004 ).
- Apparently poor choices and decisions may in fact be rational or adaptive in the context of inadequate and insecure resources.

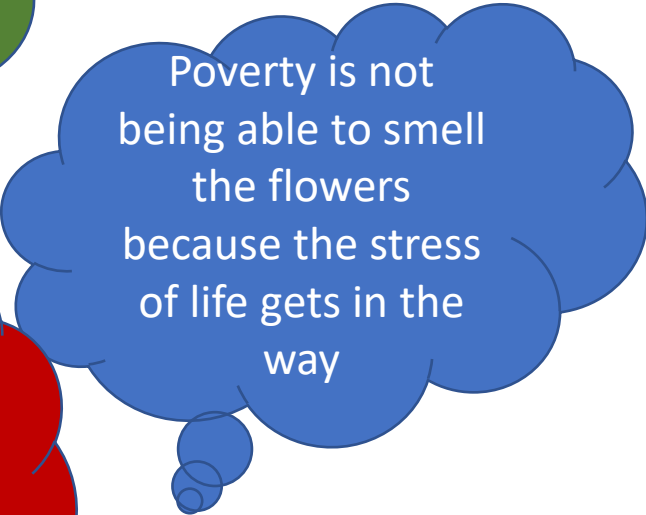


## Understanding Poverty in All its Forms – 6 Dimensions: *A participatory research study into poverty in the UK (ATD Fourth World, 2019)*

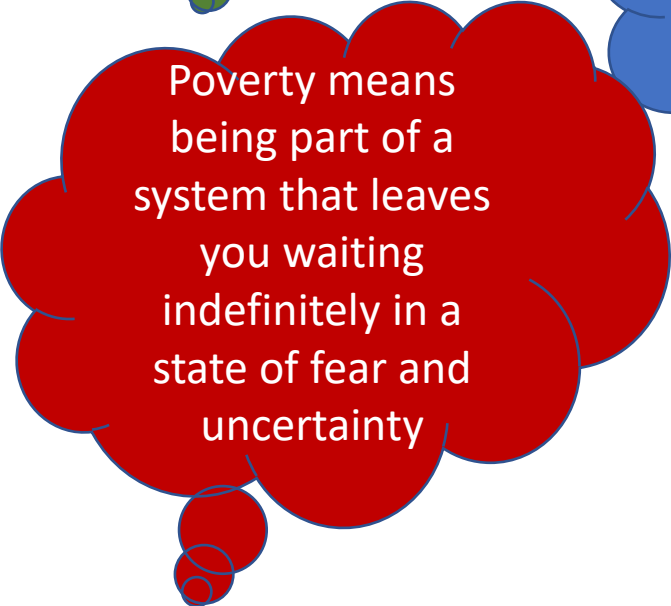
- Disempowering systems, structures and policies
- Stigma, blame and judgement
- Financial insecurity, financial exclusion and debt
- Lack of control over choices
- Damaged health and well-being
- Unrecognised struggles, skills and contributions



Poverty kills  
dreams and cages  
the dreamers



Poverty is not  
being able to smell  
the flowers  
because the stress  
of life gets in the  
way



Poverty means  
being part of a  
system that leaves  
you waiting  
indefinitely in a  
state of fear and  
uncertainty



# Lack of symbolic capital- Othering

"a process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between 'us' and 'them' and through which social distance is established and maintained"  
(Lister, 2004)



# Developing a poverty-aware lens: Micro-aggressions

---

- Observations from work in the family courts - **the dominance of psychological thinking/ individual pathology:**
  - ***‘Mother has led a chaotic lifestyle (reflecting her personality disorder), including many house moves’*** – all 3 were because she was in temporary accommodation and moved by the local authority/ private landlords
  - ***‘Father showed lack of commitment (because of not attending an appointment with psychiatrist)’*** – he is in serious rent arrears & on a zero hour contract – the psychiatrist changed the time of the appointment the day before and he was working on a job
  - ***‘Mother could be taking more responsibility for getting her (teenage) daughter to school by giving up work’***– she is in private rented accommodation, on a low income, no savings and has another child

**Maybe not determinative of outcome but all contributing to narratives of parental deficit and culpability (& compounding internalisation of shame)**

***Power, hierarchy and the construction of knowledge***



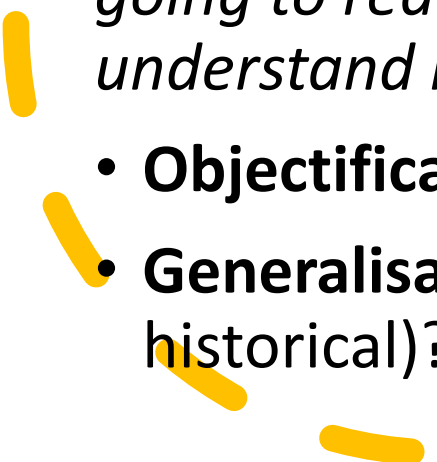
# What does it look like?

## Othering in social work reports

- **De contextualization** - *Mother has problems budgeting she has regularly used food banks*

- **Professional jargon**

*“When I read it I thought ‘this isn’t me!’ ....I couldn’t even understand it, all the jargon in it. It’s not made for lay people it’s made for academics that are going to read it. But for the parent, when it’s about you, you want to understand it, you want to know what they are saying.”*

- **Objectification** (“homeless”, “drug user”, “violent”, “liar”)
  - **Generalisation** (traits not actions) – Over-reliance on diagnosis (often historical)?
- 

# Understanding marginalization & the importance of advocacy - Angela's story

---

- I believe that going to school is important. Kids need to get a good education because it will help them find a job when they are older. If they can find a job then they can earn money and I want my children to earn money so they can pay their own bills and become independent.
- Two and a half years ago, in a case conference, the school complained that my daughters were being late for school and sometimes missing school altogether. It was because they had no zipcards. This meant they could be thrown off the bus and the school complained about their poor attendance.
- It's fair to say that it was disrupting their education. They were missing out. But I don't remember the school or social services ever asking if they could help.
- I realised that we needed a plan to get their zipcards sorted out but it was not easy:
  - Firstly, you have to apply online but I had no computer at home and no way to get online.
  - Second, you also need an email address to apply online. I don't have a computer so I didn't need one.
  - Third, to apply for a zipcard, I needed the girls' birth certificates. And I needed passport sized photos too. We had lost the birth certificates a long time ago so we had to order them online and that cost money. And we didn't have any passport sized photos so we had to buy them as well.

# Obstacles to change

---

- Within society
- Within organisations
- In everyday practice



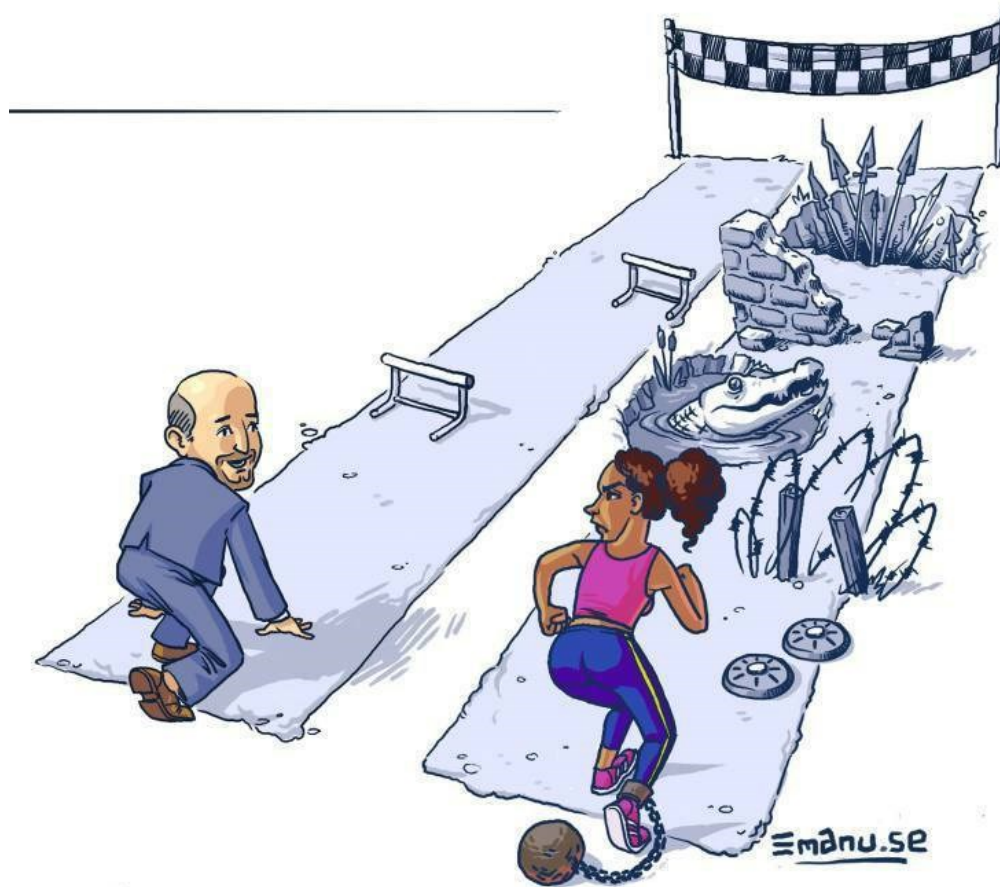




# Individualisation of social problems

- The links between public issues and private troubles have been lost
- Relationship between explanation and causation is often unhelpfully discussed
- The problems with meritocratic thinking (anyone can make it if they try!)





“What’s the matter?  
It’s the same distance!”

# Organizations

---

It's not core business

It's beyond our remit

It's too political

We must not encourage dependency

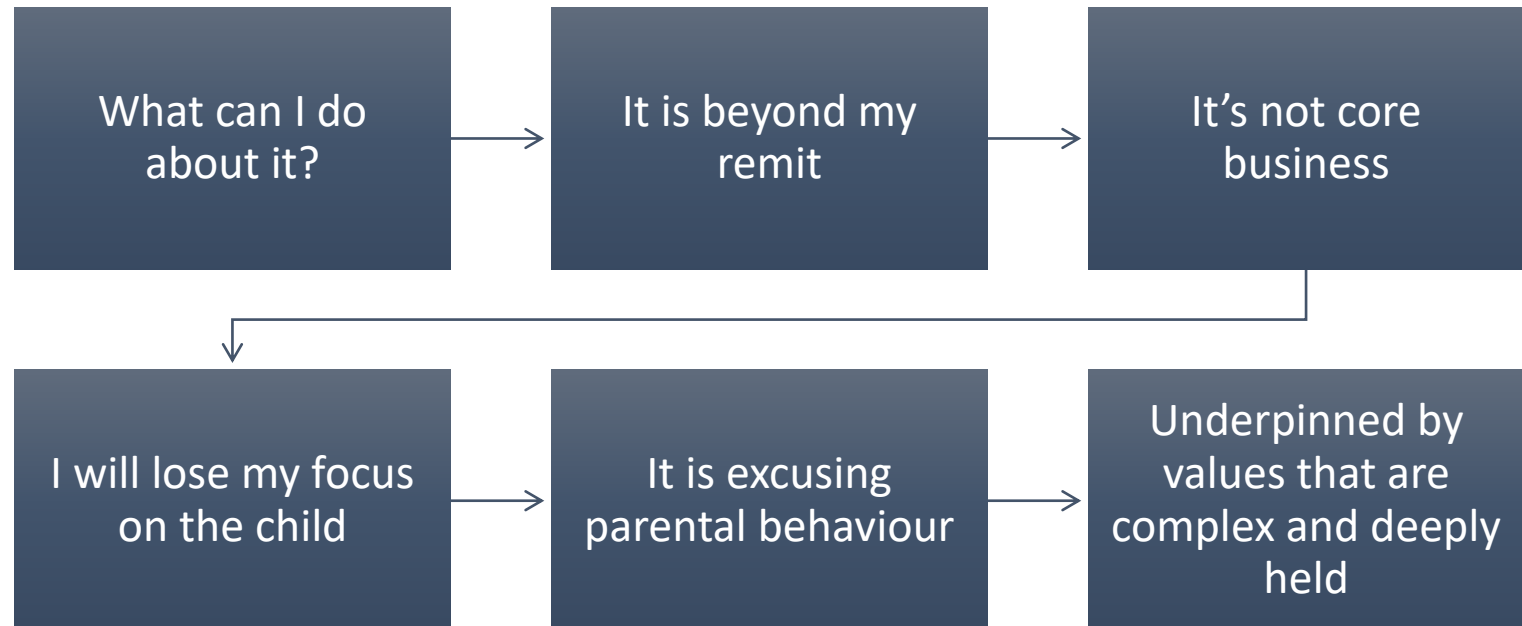
# Helpful organizational approaches

- Knowing and understanding local data
- Income maximisation and support resources
- Avoiding silos- maximising resources and supports across the council and third sector
- Forming alliances and knowing communities
- Co-production
- Poverty proofing
- Training
- Supervision practice
- Safe spaces for critical reflection
- Welfare benefits/ housing advisors as part of teams





# Social workers & other professionals



# SO, WHAT ARE WE SUPPOSED TO DO IN PRACTICE?

The material and the emotional are intertwined  
Poverty and other structural inequalities are an issue  
of power relations







Relationships based practice

Rights-based practice



# Helpful practice approaches

- **Relentlessly empirical and humane**
  - What is life like for this child and this family in this housing and in this neighbourhood? –inc. intersecting disability, racism and immigration issues
  - Incorporate poverty and other social inequalities central to assessments and work with families, including the material and affective impacts on their lived experiences.
  - A day in the life approach
  - This approach requires attention to the psycho-social impacts of poverty and inequality and how interacts with mental health, substance misuse, domestic abuse....
- 
- 
- 
- 



# Poverty aware practice – some more suggestions

---



- **Ask yourself: What are my values and beliefs regarding poverty? What are the implications for my practice?**
  - Critically reflect on and challenge assumptions of own and others especially in a risk averse system that individualises blame - often fuelled by dominant political and media discourses
- Use a multi-factorial analysis of causes of problems – **avoid simple & often blaming explanations**
- Don't lose focus on child, but recognise **relational factors and child's well-being (& rights) closely bound to parental and family well-being**
- **Value families' hopes and aspirations** – ask what would help them not only parent their children safely but also enable them to flourish?
- **Recognise and address 'micro-aggressions'** – often small, innocuous but shaming and 'othering' practices – challenge others
- **Provide practical help and proactive advocacy** (symbolic capital / emotional impact)



## Final final thoughts - embedding ethics and human rights

- (C)hild protection raises complex moral and political issues which have no one right technical solution. Practitioners are asked to solve problems everyday that philosophers have argued about the last two thousand years... Moral evaluations can and must be made if children's lives and wellbeing are to be secured. What matters is that we should not disguise this and pretend it is all a matter of finding better checklists or new models of psychopathology- technical fixes when the proper decision is a decision about what constitutes a good society (Dingwall et al, 1983, p. 244)

# Some References

Bywaters, P., Bunting, L. , Davidson, G. , Hanratty,J. , Mason, W. , McCartan, C. and Steils, N. (2016) The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: an evidence review. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. <https://www.irf.org.uk/report/relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect-evidence-review>

Bywaters, P., Skinner, G., Cooper, A., Kennedy, E., & Malik, A. (2022) *The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect: New Evidence*. Nuffield Foundation/ Uni. of Huddersfield, [https://research.hud.ac.uk/media/assets/document/hhs/RelationshipBetweenPovertyChildAbuseandNeglect\\_Report.pdf](https://research.hud.ac.uk/media/assets/document/hhs/RelationshipBetweenPovertyChildAbuseandNeglect_Report.pdf)

Child Welfare Inequalities Project – a range of briefing papers and publications are available at <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/research-directories/current-projects/2014/child-welfare-inequality-uk/>

Featherstone, B. Gupta, A., Morris, K., White, S.(2018) *Protecting Children: A social Model*, Bristol: Policy Press

Gupta, A., Blumhardt, H. and ATD Fourth World (2016) 'Giving Poverty a Voice: Families' experiences of social work practice in a risk-averse system', *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 5 (1), pp. 163-172

Krumer- Nevo, M. (2021) *Radical Hope: Poverty-Aware Practice for Social Work*, Bristol: Policy Press

Morris, K., Mason, W., Bywaters, P., Featherstone, B., Daniel, B., Brady, G., Bunting, L., Hooper, J., Mirza, N., Scourfield, J. and Webb, C. (2018) 'Social work, poverty, and child welfare interventions', *Child & Family Social Work*, **23**(3), pp.364-372.

Saar-Heiman, Y. & Gupta, A. (2019) 'The poverty-aware paradigm for child protection: A critical framework for policy and practice' *British Journal of Social Work*. Early on-line publication – available from July 2019