



# PSDP - Resources and Tools: Understanding the lived experiences of black and ethnic minority children and families

## Introduction

This briefing is particularly concerned with the issues that frame the lived experiences of diverse groups of children and families in the child protection system. A central aim of the briefing is to focus on black and ethnic minority children as these groups of children are over-represented in children's social work, but have unique issues as a result of various marginalised identities. It will provide summaries of research exploring salient factors affecting children and families' day-to-day realities, thus deepening practice supervisors' knowledge of how poverty and systemic inequalities affect families' social conditions.

Throughout the briefing, there will be an exploration of the intersectional factors that are influential in framing the lived experiences of black and ethnic minority children and families who come to the attention of child welfare services. The briefing will be interspersed with reflective prompts to help practice supervisors think through issues of difference, discrimination and social inequalities, in order to strengthen their critical capacity for supporting the learning and development of social workers to meet the challenges of working with families who experience poverty, discrimination and marginalisation.

This briefing is comprised of four sections:

1. an outline of some of the factors that frame the lived experiences of black and ethnic minority children who are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system
2. understanding how diversity, social inequality and poverty impact the lived experiences of children
3. listening to the voice of the child
4. exploring how practice supervisors can support social workers to reflect on issues of power and discrimination.

## Factors that frame the lived experiences of children

The lived experiences of children facing multiple adversities such as poverty, social deprivation, homelessness, parental mental health and substance misuse problems, and exposure to domestic violence, have been the focal point for a number of researchers (Bernard and Harris, 2016; Morris et al, 2018; Featherstone et al, 2014; Featherstone et al, 2018; Keddell and Hyslop, 2019).

Importantly, studies have drawn attention to the need to understand the relationship between poverty and parenting, and the lived realities for families living in poverty (Bywater, 2015; Bywaters and Sparks, 2017; Featherstone et al, 2016; Featherstone, 2017; Featherstone et al, 2018; Gupta and ATD, 2015; Gupta et al, 2016a; Gupta et al, 2016b). It is increasingly recognised that poverty exerts a powerful influence on the material context and circumstances of children and, most particularly, undermines their parents' caregiving capacity.

Crucially, as the demographics of children in the UK have become more racially and ethnically diverse, social workers must now grapple with a more complex range of safeguarding issues. Indeed, there are emergent forms of abuse and harmful parental behaviours that challenge belief systems about parenting norms and child-rearing practices, as well as understandings of thresholds for significant harm (Bernard 2019; Bernard and Gupta, 2008; Bernard and Harris, 2018).

This includes, for example:

- > abuse linked to faith and cultural beliefs, such as accusations of witchcraft or spirit possession (Briggs and Whittaker, 2018; DfE, 2012; Tedam, 2016; Tedam and Adjoa, 2017)
- > female genital mutilation (Connelly et al, 2018)
- > honour-based violence and forced marriage (Alijah and Chantler, 2015; Costello et al, 2015; Gupta, 2016).

In a similar vein, research draws attention to the fact that black and ethnic minority families are more likely to live in socio-economically disadvantaged communities (Barnard and Turner, 2011; Bernard, 2019; Bywaters et al, 2016; Jivraj and Khan, 2013; Morris et al, 2018).

Research on black and ethnic minority children and families' experiences of child welfare has illuminated the following:

- > racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare resulting in black children being overrepresented in the child welfare system (Owen and Statham, 2009; Selwyn et al, 2010; Tilbury and Thoburn, 2009)
- > exposure to racial discrimination and racial microaggressions - subtle slights and indignities experienced by racial minorities (Sue et al, 2007) negatively impact the mental and physical health of black and ethnic minority children and families (Bécares et al, 2015; Kelly et al, 2015; Kogan et al, 2015)
- > black children (particularly boys) are more likely to be excluded from school, which puts them at risk of experiencing criminal exploitation, and to be victims of serious youth violence (Firmin, 2017; Firmin and Pearce, 2016)
- > children living in gang-affected neighbourhoods have increased exposure to multiple stressors; county lines involving children to carry drugs from cities to rural areas; children going missing from home and care; and children at risk of sexual exploitation (Beckett et al, 2013; Firmin, 2018; Firmin et al, 2018)
- > there are barriers and challenges for black and ethnic minority disabled children and their families who experience multiple forms of inequalities (Ali et al, 2001; Kaushal and Nawaz, 2006; Nawaz, 2006)
- > in some communities, disabilities may be blamed on spirit possession and witchcraft-branding, and disabled children may thus be particularly vulnerable to maltreatment resulting from these accusations (Briggs and Whittaker, 2018; Tedam, 2014, see also AFRUCA (2009) 'What is witchcraft abuse?' available online at [www.afruca.org](http://www.afruca.org))
- > research shows that black and ethnic minority children are overrepresented in Special Education Needs and are more likely to be identified with social, emotional and mental health needs (Strand and Lindorff, 2018)
- > children and families with uncertain migration status are at increased risk of welfare exclusion because they may not have recourse to public funds (Farmer, 2017)
- > unaccompanied minors that are separated from their parents are at increased risk of being trafficked for domestic slavery and multiple forms of maltreatment (Bokhari, 2009; Clayton et al, 2019; Ehntfold et al, 2018; Ni Raghallaigh, 2014; Stobart, 2006; Westwood, 2016).

In summary, the issues arising for black and ethnic minority children and families are therefore complex and multi-layered, making the application of thresholds for significant harm very challenging (Bernard, 2019).

One may argue that the physical and emotional stressors on black and ethnic minority parents may result in some struggling to have an emotionally-engaged relationship with their children. Thus, for social work interventions, it is important to recognise that inequality and disadvantage place black and ethnic minority children in far more precarious circumstances, which means that they experience multiple adversities and are at higher risk of negative outcomes (Barn and Kirton, 2015; Bernard and Harris, 2016; Bernard and Harris, 2019; Clarke, 2016).

All in all, a number of factors combine to make it exceedingly challenging for black and ethnic minority parents to protect their children from the consequences of living in economically impoverished and unsafe neighbourhoods (Aldridge et al, 2011; Shute, 2011).

Arguably, black parents must nurture their children to have positive self-esteem in a societal context where their identities are devalued, and where society seemingly values them less than other groups of children (Bernard, 2002; Epstien et al, 2017; Goff et al, 2014). It is thus argued that parents must work doubly hard to provide their children with counter narratives to offset the negative messages that undermine black children's self-esteem (Bernard, 2002). Such factors must be adequately understood to comprehend the lived experiences of this population of children.



## Reflective questions

- > What are some of the strategies families may use to resist oppression and help their children navigate racially hostile environments?
- > Can you think of ways black and ethnic minority parents might utilise their cultural knowledge to help their children cultivate hope and build resilience in a context of adversities?
- > How might you help social workers navigate some of the complexities involved in making threshold decisions for significant harm?
- > For developing poverty-informed practice, how might you help social workers to better understand the impact of poverty on parents' care-giving capabilities?

## Understanding of how diversity, social inequality and poverty impacts the lived experiences of children

In a multi-racial context where social workers will be exposed to families from diverse cultural backgrounds with wide variations in parenting beliefs and child-rearing practices, there are many dimensions and complexities that come into play when considering what constitutes 'good-enough' parenting. For instance, how social workers agree on a core set of values for safeguarding black and ethnic minority children is open to interpretation.

In the context of safeguarding work, it is important to recognise that religious belief and cultural traditions can be sources of resilience for black and ethnic minority children and their families. Nonetheless, it is important and necessary to understand the ways in which religious beliefs and cultural practices may pose risks for some children (Bernard 2019). In truth, to engage effectively with families, who may conceptualise their parental practices very differently to those of the majority population, social workers must navigate dangerously fine lines. These may include being culturally sensitive without resorting to cultural relativism, and using skills to sensitively question claims that certain types of behaviours are the norm in ethnic minority families, in order to challenge culturally-specific practices that are harmful to children without pathologising how parents raise them (Bernard and Gupta, 2008).

Indeed, one of the biggest challenges for many social workers is engaging in conversations about race and culture because they can be emotionally-loaded and uncomfortable (see Burman et al, 2004). Notably, anxieties about discussing race, and ideas embedded in cultural traditions, often present obstacles for social workers to engage with black and ethnic minority families. It is for these reasons that practice supervisors must have the knowledge and skills to facilitate safe learning spaces (either individually or in group supervision) for social workers to have critical engagement with questions about diversity and discrimination. Another important factor to take into consideration is that practitioners must also have knowledge of how social inequalities and poverty significantly impact the lived experiences of black and ethnic minority children and their families in order to enable nuanced conversations about power, race, gender, and class oppression.



## Reflective questions

If you're facilitating a group supervision session with frontline social workers, to think about some of the issues highlighted in this section, you might want to consider the following:

- > How might you help to nurture social workers' learning and development plans to ensure they are able to broaden their knowledge and skills?
- > What are some of the enablers and barriers for social workers in addressing and challenging their deep-rooted beliefs about race and culture in child welfare?
- > Having read the information in this knowledge briefing, what can you do as a practice supervisor to create these kinds of reflective spaces?
- > What do you think might be some of the opportunities and challenges in helping social workers to learn, reflect and develop their skills, knowledge and confidence for exploration of these issues? How might you go about this? What do you think you should stop, start or continue doing?

## Listening to the voice of the child

Whilst there has been increasing attention given to listening to the voice of the child in decision-making in statutory child care, it is important to note that the experiences of black and ethnic minority children and families are rarely explored (Ofsted, 2011; MacDonald, 2017; Mannay et al, 2018; Woodman et al, 2018).

For example, Ofsted carried out an analysis of 67 serious case reviews (SCRs) in 2010 to see what lessons could be learned about listening to what children had to say about their experiences in assessments and found that the voice of the child is often overlooked. In a similar vein, Bernard and Harris (2019) reviewed 14 SCRs involving black children and similarly found that, even when children were old enough to ascertain their wishes and feelings, their voices were often overlooked.

Studies that directly report children's participation pay minimal attention to black and ethnic minority children's perspectives (Dixon et al, 2019; O'Reilly and Dolan, 2017; Sen, 2016), thus tell us very little about the barriers for these children in child protection services. As mentioned above, given that black children are overrepresented in the care-experienced population, there is an urgent need to develop effective communication tools to engage such children so that they can be empowered to share their experiences in meaningful ways.

In many aspects, there is much we can learn from Grace and colleagues' (2018) research with indigenous and Aboriginal children in Australia, which has explored ways of creating safe sharing spaces for children to be empowered to engage in decision-making about their lives. They identified the value in providing participatory tools, such as cards with images and simple questions which can be used as prompts to encourage children to talk about their experiences (see Grace et al, 2018, *The Kids Say Project: Supporting Children to Talk about their Experiences and to Engage in Decision-making*).

Additionally, the practice model set out by Tait and Wosu in *The Child's World* (2019) is especially valuable for aiding effective communication with children and young people to better inform assessments of children's everyday realities. Specifically, Tait and Wosu emphasise the importance of understanding the relational world of children and the experiences that shape their lives, to provide social workers with some practical tools on how to build rapport and create opportunities to develop trust with children and young people (see Tait and Wosu's chapter, *Securing Effective Communication with Children and Young People* for a more in-depth discussion).



## Reflective questions

From the points raised above, practice supervisors should be skilled to support social workers to engage in direct work with children in the margins.

- > What are some of the factors that might help social workers to develop trusting, relationship-based interventions with black and ethnic minority children and their families?
- > How might you facilitate learning to engage black and ethnic minority children's voices in a meaningful way?
- > How might you foster the ability of social workers to engage with the diverse voices (e.g. age, ethnicity, gender, ability, sexuality) of black and ethnic minority children and young people?

## How practice supervisors can support social workers to reflect on issues of power and discrimination

Arguably, given the range of issues families must contend with, social workers need to have a sound understanding of what Firmin (2017) calls the contextual factors that contribute to parenting stressors for some families.

Firmin's work stresses that the experiences of black children and their families need to be understood through a contextual lens because of the intersecting factors rooted in social inequalities that impact their day-to-day lives. Intersectionality is an organising concept that is used to analyse the constellation of categories such as race, gender, social class, age, sexual orientation, disability and other defining elements of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

The concept has come to be recognised as an important critical approach to make sense of how systemic inequalities and relations of power manifest for individuals and groups. Thus, intersectionality as a concept is critically important for providing social workers with conceptual tools to better understand experiences rooted in race and class-based inequalities, and their influence on parents' help-seeking behaviours, as well as access to resources, and their capacity to parent effectively.

In social work, engagement with intersectionality can help open up ways for understanding the lived experiences of minority service users (see, for example, Bernard, forthcoming; Joy, 2019; Mattsson, 2006; Mehrotra, 2010; Murphy et al, 2009; Nayak and Robbins, 2018). In children and families social work, an intersectional approach provides the scaffolding that can be used alongside the Assessment Triangle (2000) to facilitate more nuanced appreciation of the developmental needs of ethnic minority children, parenting capacity, as well as families and the environmental factors that circumscribe their experiences.



## Reflective questions

- > How might an intersectional framework be used to foster a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that impact parenting and coping strategies for making more nuanced assessments of black children's lived experiences?
- > How can you open up discussions around intersectionality in individual and group supervision?

## Summary of key points

- > as black and ethnic minority children have become more diverse as a group in the UK, the issues arising for them in child protection practice take more complex forms
- > emerging forms of abuse based on religious beliefs, underpinned by cultural traditions, are bringing new challenges concerning thresholds for interventions for child protection
- > there is evidence to show that black and ethnic minority families are disproportionately affected by poverty and therefore overrepresented in the child welfare system
- > black and ethnic minority children in families affected by factors caused by social inequalities like poverty, unemployment, and living in economically-disadvantaged neighbourhoods, are at the greatest risk of child welfare interventions
- > to capture the lived experiences of black and ethnic minority children, social workers must be critically reflexive, understand the intersectionality of different forms of oppression, and be willing and able to engage in conversations that are emotionally-loaded and discomforting
- > social workers have to strike a balance between sensitively navigating how to respectfully challenge parental attitudes and behaviours framed around culture whilst at the same time keep a focus on the rights of the child
- > a deficit-focused approach with black and ethnic minority families can undervalue the attributes, resources, and assets of the family, and thus be an obstacle in parental engagement
- > social workers must be able to identify and examine their own racial biases to increase their overall awareness of how their beliefs might impact their work with different racial and ethnic groups.



**We want to hear more about your experiences of using PSDP resources and tools. Connect via Twitter using #PSDP to share your ideas and hear how other practice supervisors use the resources.**

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