



Valuing Children, Valuing Parents

Focus on family in the fight against child poverty in Europe

Foreword by Fran Bennet

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« This report is about children and parents living in poverty, especially those affected by the child protection system. Its key messages are that society needs to understand more about the lived experience of poverty, by listening to these children and parents; that family support policies should be seen as an integral part of anti-poverty strategies; and that innovative ways of working with these families should be found, to help develop their family relationships and aspirations.

The National Action Plans on Social Inclusion are intended, in part, to demonstrate how European Union Member States will 'preserve family solidarity in all its forms', as part of the broader drive against child poverty and social exclusion. *Valuing children, valuing parents* effectively suggests how this aim might be achieved. In particular, it looks at child protection: the very real risk for some parents, especially those living in severe poverty, of having their children taken into care either temporarily or permanently. The reason often given is 'child neglect' – meaning inability to provide adequately for the children's needs. At a time when the policy focus is so often on the need to balance rights with more responsibilities, these parents' greatest dread is that their most important responsibility – bringing up their children – will be taken away from them. This is one of the many valuable perspectives parents with experience of poverty bring to such policy debates, as I know from personal contact with ATD Fourth World over many years.

The report describes the significance of parenthood to people living in long term poverty. They can feel valued and relied on by someone for the first time. The birth of a baby brings hope. They are more connected to the rest of society, with a recognised role. But, crucially, they can simultaneously feel undermined in the ability to carry out their responsibilities to the full by the inadequacy of the material resources at their disposal. And they may constantly be told by others how lacking in resources they are in a broader sense. This is 'overexposed parenting'. Contact with professionals all too often brings feelings of inferiority and isolation. One young mother graphically described to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty in the UK what 'poverty' meant in her life:

" ... Having all the same dreams for the future that everyone else has, but no way on earth to make them come true ... Having no choice of where we live, what school the kids go to, or what kind of job we get ... Needing help – but being too scared of being judged an unfit mother to ask for it ... Telling my whole life story over and over again, just to get what I'm entitled to ... Having not one person to talk to who isn't paid to listen ... Being told that I have nothing to offer my own child, and believing it – then."¹

¹ Participant at meeting of All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, 18 June 2002

And yet the vast majority of parents try their hardest to shield their children from the full force of poverty, at a high cost to themselves. Parents try to help their children to 'fit in' and 'join in' – to be 'normal', like their peers, as children so much want to be.²

Valuing children, valuing parents shows how, far from having nothing to offer, parents living in persistent poverty often demonstrate the tenacity of family links and a sheer bloody-minded determination to keep going against all odds. Tess Ridge's research also shows how children try to protect their parents from poverty; this is not a one-way street. ATD Fourth World asks vital questions about how we can build on these positive responses to living in poverty by parents and children alike.

And, importantly, as the report says, "This is not a moralist approach promoting 'family values'. It recognises the way things are – the reality for people involved, and the aspirations expressed by adults and children." It is almost 30 years now since I was a volunteer for ATD Fourth World. I remember vividly my struggle to understand the day-to-day realities of life for parents and children living in persistent poverty, learning both from the families themselves and from the ATD staff working alongside them. In particular, I learned that parenting *is* harder in a poor environment, especially when your self esteem has been repeatedly battered and your powers of endurance sapped by living in long-term poverty; but – above all – I learned that parents living in long term poverty have the same aspirations and values as other parents.

And if these parents are listened to, they can also explain how their attempts to protect their children from the full impact of poverty and defend them from other people's actions can backfire, and so cause the problems which often attract the attention of professionals. They may keep their children at home, instead of letting them go to school, if the children are being picked on and bullied because their poverty makes them seem different. Or they may flare up at teachers or other authority figures who seem all too ready to blame their children. And they may ask for various forms of practical help to alleviate their situation, and find themselves being referred to child protection services.

The report tells us what may happen next – and what this does to families. Parents in poverty may feel that when their children are taken away there is no obvious way to 'requalify' as caring parents. They may see their children being given, in terms of living standards and experiences, a life they cannot possibly give them themselves. And if children are placed some distance from home, their links with school, friends and local environment will be severed, and it may be too costly for their parents to visit them regularly.

Valuing children, valuing parents argues instead for a focus on 'family continuity'; for the importance of learning from families living in poverty, especially those with the greatest difficulties; and for ensuring that children in poverty have friends. The emphasis on friendship, and on culture and relaxation, makes ATD Fourth World's work much broader in scope than that of many other anti-poverty organisations. The report gives many examples of constructive ways of working with families to provide alternatives to children being taken into care – or, if this does happen, to ensure that it is with parents' co-operation. One point emerging from these examples is the importance of families getting together with others who have similar experiences. This has long been a feature of ATD Fourth World's work, though not necessarily of traditional social work. Parents find out that they are not the only ones who have problems, and that there are things they can do to improve their situation. One of the key messages from this report is that when parents feel more in control of the processes to support them and keep their children safe, such processes will be more likely to succeed.

This report should be widely read by all those concerned about child poverty in the European Union and engaged in debating how to tackle it more effectively.»

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Full discussion paper can be ordered from : ATD Fourth World Europe, 107 avenue du Général Leclerc, 95480 Pierrelaye France (price 18 Euros incl. postage) **or downloaded from :**
www.atd-fourthworld.org/europe/valuingchildren/index_vcvp.htm

² Tess Ridge, *Childhood Poverty and Social Exclusion: From a child's perspective*, The Policy Press, 2002