

Turner (1997) showed that this effect was more pronounced for children living in low-income families compared with children living in middle- or high-income families. What is it about living in a disadvantaged area that leads to higher rates of childhood anxiety disorders?

Parenting in disadvantaged neighbourhoods

One possible explanation for the higher rates of childhood anxiety disorders in disadvantaged areas is that this environment changes parenting behaviours. Anxious behaviours in unsafe environments can be advantageous. For example, Eilam et al. (2011) propose that 'anxiety and the consequent precautionary behaviour are adaptive and vital since they enable an individual to practice defensive means in total physical safety' (p.1002). Environmental pressures may cause parents to act in certain ways to try to protect their children from the increased risk of threats that exist in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. While these parenting behaviours are entirely understandable given the context of an increased risk of harm, these behaviours may increase child anxiety.

I now turn to three aspects of parenting that have been associated with the development of child anxiety and may be particularly prevalent in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Overprotection

Overprotective parenting occurs when a parent takes excessive measures to prevent their child from engaging in situations or behaviours that may or may not lead to their child being harmed.

In order to examine whether overprotective parenting leads to greater child anxiety, de Wilde and Rapee (2008) experimentally manipulated how controlling parents were when their child encountered a social threat. Children were asked to prepare a short speech (a situation most children, and adults for that matter, find a bit scary) and their

mothers were either asked to wholly intervene in the preparation (highly controlling parenting) or to only assist if the child asked for help (low controlling parenting). Children whose mothers had been overly controlling were more anxious about the speech than children whose mothers had been minimally controlling.

Negative verbal information

A large body of research indicates that providing children with negative verbal information increases anxiety (Muris & Field, 2010). Consequently, a possible explanation for the increased prevalence of anxiety disorders in children living in disadvantaged environments is that parents may be inclined to provide more negative information in threatening environments, in order to educate their children about neighbourhood risks. Parents may believe 'knowledge is power' and that this will protect their children – although as a very wise mother (and psychologist) said to me, the risk of her child developing an anxiety disorder through hearing lots of bad things about the world was much higher than the risk of her child being abducted by a stranger. Anxious parents living in unsafe neighbourhoods may find it harder to disguise their own fears than non-anxious parents, and may verbalise worries in front of their children. This may be behind the finding that the children of parents who have difficulties with anxiety and live in low-income areas are at an even greater risk of developing an anxiety disorder (Beidel & Turner, 1997).

Harsh parenting

Pinderhughes et al. (2007) found that parents living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods use harsher discipline and greater amounts of restrictive control. They suggest this may be due to the parents themselves experiencing high levels of stress, which reduces their resources to provide warm, nurturing, and consistent parenting, or it may be an intentional strategy employed to prepare

children for life in a dangerous neighbourhood. Harsh parenting has been identified as a mediator between socio-economic disadvantage and child anxiety (McLoyd, 1998). What's more, the relationship between harsh parenting and internalising problems (such as anxiety) becomes stronger as neighbourhood danger increases (Callahan et al., 2011).

Implications

There are some indicators that children from low socio-economic status families fare poorer in therapy (e.g. Cromley & Lavigne, 2008), perhaps because therapy doesn't traditionally undo societal inequalities. In an ideal world, policy and funds would tackle eliminating the roots of disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but we live in the real world. A more efficient approach may be to target working with groups of parents living in disadvantaged areas to help them manage the (small but real) increased risks to their children, and to learn behavioural techniques (such as those used by Cartwright-Hatton et al., 2011) to help minimise their child's risk of developing problematic anxiety.

I hope that research I am conducting with colleagues at Sussex will clarify the role of various parenting behaviours in childhood anxiety in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. It is especially important to understand the context of child anxiety in disadvantaged neighbourhoods given that research indicates such children may have poorer outcomes in current therapeutic interventions. When working with anxious families in the clinic, researching anxiety, or informing policy, let us not forget the children with the bogeyman for a neighbour.



Suzanne Dash is a postdoctoral research assistant at the University of Sussex
s.dash@sussex.ac.uk

Eilam, D., Izhar, R. & Mort, J. (2011). Threat detection: Behavioral practices in animals and humans. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 35, 999–1006.

End Child Poverty (March 2011). Child Poverty Map of the UK Part 1: England. Retrieved from tinyurl.com/65thqtq.

Higgins, N., Robb, P. & Britton, A. (2010). Geographic patterns of crime. In J.

Flatley, C. Kershaw & K. Smith (Eds.) *Crime in England and Wales 2009/10* (3rd edn). London: Home Office.

McLoyd, V.C. (1998). Socioeconomic disadvantage and child development. *American Psychologist*, 53(2), 185–204.

MORI (2003). *Neighbourhood noise*. London: DEFRA.

Muris, P. & Field, A.P. (2010). The role of verbal threat information in the development of childhood fear.

'Beware the Jabberwock!'. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 13(2), 129–150.

Pinderhughes, E.E., Nix, R., Foster, E.M. et al. (2007). Parenting in context: Impact of neighbourhood poverty, residential stability, public services, social networks, and danger on parental behaviors. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 63(4), 941–953.

Ridge, T. (2011). The everyday costs of

poverty in childhood: A review of qualitative research exploring the lives and experiences of low-income children in the UK. *Children & Society*, 25, 73–84.

Woodward, L. & Fergusson, D.M. (2001). Life course outcomes of young people with anxiety disorders in adolescence. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 40(9), 1086–1093.