

Child resilience in
lullabies for little
criminals by heather
o'neill



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The resilience of a child in an unstable environment has been a crucial theme throughout Heather O'Neill's book, *Lullabies for Little Criminals*. The novel focuses on Baby, who struggles to survive and hopes to overcome the impact that poverty and low self-worth has on her own development. In this essay, I will outline how both income-health gradient and living in a home without a stable parental role model has intermingled to cause a low quality of life for Baby.

Income-health gradient is the connection between low income and high incidence of illness, in other words, as income increases, people are less likely to suffer ill health because they will be able to afford to live in safer neighbourhoods, cleaner homes and be have easier access to healthcare. This can be a vicious cycle given that “ Health, substance abuse and disability can all lead to low income, which in turn can turn into homelessness” (Davidson, 2019), and in turn, homelessness does not easily facilitate a person to thrive economically in order to turn their financial situation around. During the book, both Jules and Baby find themselves to be homeless, being evicted from their homes and living either on the streets or staying in hotels. This has an adverse effect on their health as a result, since the stress of homelessness contributed to smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, not uncommon in those that find themselves in this position (Davidson, 2019, p. 206). Baby living in much lower housing standards than her classmates, finds herself isolated by her peers. This was evident when Baby invited a school friend over for dinner and the friend left disgusted by the mess of the apartment and the living environment that Baby was in. This resulted in Baby feeling rejected and more isolated because of her perceived

lack of self-worth (O'Neill, 2016, p. 118). A person's social network has an impact on the situations they find themselves in as well as the decisions they make, therefore contributing to their health. When Baby finds herself without the friendships she is looking for, this affects her stress level, self-esteem, anxiety and overall mental health, likely playing a role in her poor decision making, seen in becoming closer to Alphonse and his friends, even though she recognized that they were unsavory characters of which she shouldn't associate with.

Living in an unstable environment due to lack of parental supervision and low-income environment contributed to Baby living in poverty since there was only one parent able to bring an income into the home. In addition to this, Baby was also surrounded by addiction, criminal behaviour and suffered from low self-worth which in turn resulted in her making poor judgements, such as participating in drug use and prostitution, that would further affect her health and livelihood.

Without a mother figure to turn to for advice and to view as a role model, Baby made poor choices such as the friends she chose to involve herself with, her relationship with her boyfriend and her choice to participate in prostitution. Baby's father was struggling with his own mental health and addiction issues, which did not allow him to provide financially or emotionally for Baby while she was in his care. Her upbringing by her father and her social environment produced her low self-esteem and self-worth and pushed her towards also living the life her father had known growing up, which involved an off and on-again involvement with drugs and crime. The United Nations Rights of the Child states that all children should “ be protected from economic exploitation and from

performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development" (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1990), but without supervision of parents or other authorities, for example school, Baby was not protected as she should have been. Although Baby did show some awareness that this was not the life she wanted, and worked at times to make decisions that would keep her safe, the environment was not forgiving, and she didn't have access to the resources that could help her avoid completely avoid all dangers. Since Baby was not able to find examples set by her parents on how to make good decisions or to access them easily for advice, Baby was left to make her own decisions for most of her life. Baby recognized that she didn't belong to her community, and there were times when she tried to fit in with those around her, when unsuccessful in making friends, she would find attention from any sources she could, which ultimately being pushed into prostitution by her boyfriend, Alphonse. If Baby had someone in her life that was showing her by example, how to make good decisions, and how to amend her mistakes, she may have been able to find a way to steer her life towards a more productive positive path and also had more self-worth to allow herself to reject her boyfriend's persuasion into prostitution.

While not always available to Baby as a parental role model, there were times in the novel when Jules tried to fulfil this roll and confronted Baby about the choices she was making. An example is when Jules discovered that Baby had come home with new socks, he questioned her immediately and suspected she was involved in prostitution, telling her " If you start with guys

now, you'll be all used up and no guy will want you. You're going to be a pervert! No guys like a pervert! You'll know all these moves and shit that he won't. You'll only be fit for drug addicts. Why can't you be a normal girl?" (O'Neill, 2016, p. 156). Though this approach was Jules's attempt to guide his daughter, it was instead too abrupt and accusatory, therefore impacting her self-esteem in a negative way, and reinforcing her own beliefs about her self-worth and caused their relationship to be more strained. With the exception of a few similar incidents, for the most part though, Baby was left on her own to fend for herself while Jules was in jail, out with friends doing drugs or trying his next idea on how to make money. This forced independence, permitted the opportunity for Baby to meet associate with people in her neighbourhood who were not good role models and that led her to make decisions such as trying heroin and prostitution. I believe that with the guidance and encouragement of stable parents, Baby may not have made these choices in the end.

People take cues from the people around them on how they should behave (Davidson, 2019, p. 239) and this novel exposes this with almost all of the people we meet. To struggle with low income and the constant threat of homelessness, Baby was thrown into a life where the odds were against her in having a healthy life. The impact created physical health and mental health issues that she struggled to overcome and pushed her towards finding a way to consider herself of worth and she found people around her that would accept her as she was. In doing this she contributed to the impairment of her health. Baby's resilience and ability to survive her upbringing has added to her overall ability to cope with the determinants to

her health, however, I believe that she cannot continue to thrive in the environment she has been living in without severe health issues.

References

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