

Effects of deprivation on child development



Deprivation, including neglect, is damaging to children largely through the absence of an optimal environment and a lack of opportunities for development, rather than through the active perpetration of abuse by caregivers. Nevertheless, the effects can be long lasting and have important implications for the opportunities that these children have in later life, and the lives of their children. It is therefore of utmost importance that social work involves an understanding of what is meant by deprivation and what the possible effects might be, in order that professionals may seek to counteract negative possible outcomes with positive actions. While deprivation can take many different forms, this essay will attempt to focus on three broad areas of deprivation in order to illustrate how childhood development may be adversely affected. The first area focuses mainly on how an impoverished and under-stimulating environment, including poor opportunities for play, can lead to a lack of cognitive and intellectual development in children and babies. The second area will look at how a paucity of social interactions with others can lead to less developed social skills, including the development of empathy and Theory of Mind (ToM). The final section will deal with the effect on children's emotional development of poor or inconsistent caregiving, including emotional neglect, and especially with a focus on attachment styles and behaviours. It is however very important to note that while these different sections make distinctions between various types of childhood development, in fact all these areas are interconnected, and the distinctions here are made for the purposes of the essay alone. Finally, the essay will look at how social work practices can be adjusted to more effectively serve clients at risk of the adverse effects of deprivation.

This section will focus on the effects of environmental under stimulation on childhood development. Deprivation can refer to lack of time (and their own skills) given by caregivers to expand children cognitively or lack of resources, such as books, play blocks etc for children to use, Or both.

Children go through stages of intellectual development, as well as the development of skills. Without opportunities to practice and to succeed, children can't do this. They struggle to master skills, and they also find it more difficult to develop satisfactorily through the stages of social development. In order to illustrate this, this essay will start by looking at the cognitive developmental theory of Piaget.

Piaget is often the first call of response in any debate surrounding educational development, which is perhaps surprising as he was not (in the traditional sense) a psychologist, but rather a "genetic epistemologist (someone with an interest in the biological explanation of knowledge.)" (Bancroft&carr 1995). Despite this, Piaget's comprehensive studies have become part of the basis of developmental psychology, and are particularly relevant to discussions on the implications of cognitive deprivation.

Piaget's theory states that there are four main stages to development; the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage, and the formal operational stage. These four stages cover not only intellectual development, but also the development of skills. If one or more of these stages are missed, the skills may never develop. Genie for example, the girl who was kept in a room with no contact or interaction until she was fourteen, missed out on every single stage of development. Although she was eventually taught to walk, she was, for example, never was able to

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she speak grammatically and although her “ fine motor coordination was close to normal, she had extremely weak gross motor skills. She was also unable to focus on anything more than 13 feet away there was suggestion of an inability to unite touch and sight. (Curtiss, Susan (1977))

Of course Genie is an extreme example; for most cases of cognitive deprivation it is a simple case of care-givers not having the resources or the inclination to stimulate their children cognitively, leading to gaps in their child's development. For example, a child who is under stimulated, left in a cot or a familiar environment without new experiences and toys are more likely to try and create their own stimulation, eg by misbehaving, being destructive, and even harming themselves through actions such as hair pulling. A stimulating babyhood is also perceived as being integral for the creation of the parent-child relationship, and the ‘ development of self-soothing and self-regulatory abilities later in childhood’ (Thompson, 2001)

The stilted development of children who are exposed to sensory deprivation during infancy, eg in an orphanage or deprived home, have indicated that stimulating experience are integral for not only development but also survival (Robinson, M, (2011))

Erikson also conducted extensive research on the effects of cognitive deprivation, but focused on the development of the ego. This theory is typically referred to as mastery; the basic idea is that if a child masters a skill, this will create a sense of self confidence. If a child does not master a skill, eg learning to read or to communicate socially, they will have a low confidence in their ability to develop and learn and therefore they will do so at a slowed pace. Erikson believed a healthy ego “ propels the child in to the next stage of development.” (R. Green 1999)

As stipulated, deprivation does not only refer to a lack of cognitive stimulation, but can also refer to the lack of social input into a child, where caregivers do not interact sufficiently, nor explore personal and social aspects of living effectively. This is often done through play, but also through modeling behaviour of caregivers – encouraging children to care for teddies and dolls may help children develop an empathic response to others. Children who do not have many opportunities for play with other children can also struggle. They find it difficult to understand the point of view of others and do not learn to modify their behaviour to fit in with others.

Also important is the concept of containment and ‘ good enough parenting’. Without this, children find it hard to cope with their own distress, or perhaps their frustration that everything is not done just the way they want it done.

There are many possible effects of this deprivation which include a temporary or permanent delay in cognitive development, heightened aggression, emotional or social detachment, and an increase in the likelihood of depression in adulthood. (Myers, D. (2008) Exploring psychology)

The other key thing to explore here is Theory of mind. Theory of mind is the “ability to attribute mental states beliefs, intents, desires, pretending, knowledge, etc.-to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, and intentions that are different from one’s own” . (Premack, D. G; Woordruff, G. (1978).)Children who are deprived in this area may well develop Theory of Mind and other social skills later in life, but the damage is done because their early lack of skills means that they lack friends, they lack confidence, and this can have a snowball effect, with lack of opportunities continuing in life because they are lacking in social skills and are often aggressive and detached.

The effect on childhood development of emotional deprivation can be dramatic. Spitz and Wolf, in the 1940’s studies of US orphanages, found that children who had no significant personal interaction at all could suffer from anaclitic depression, and that morbidity was extremely high, even where nutrition and medical guidelines were adhered to.(L. Cytryn, D. McKnew; 1996)

This is deprivation at its extreme. However, less extreme levels of deprivation can also result in poor developmental prospects for children.

An obvious area to discuss here is attachment. Children who are not securely attached find it difficult to have the confidence to explore their environments - they are spending too much time in protective measures - fearful children do not explore and do not therefore learn or develop . Mary Ainsworth developed a way to test children’s attachment to their caregivers called the “strange situation”, whereby children were left by, and then re-united with

their caregiver. Children who were distressed upon parting but easily comforted at the reunion are described as having “secure attachment” (B. Inge 1992). Children with insecure attachment, who would be unable to be comforted or entirely unphased by the whole situation, often find it difficult later to make attachments to others, or are sometimes indiscriminate about attaching themselves to adults, and so are more at risk, for instance by being more vulnerable to abuse.

The effect of emotional deprivation on development seems thoroughly studied, especially among institutionalized children who have had their emotional needs severely neglected through a lack of resources, time and inclination. All psychologists are well aware of the sometimes tempestuous desires and attitudes of those who felt neglected and rejected in childhood. However, recently, “psychologically unavailable mothering” has been identified as a real form of abuse.

Another area to explore, connected to attachment, is the effect of relationship breakdown, lack of parenting through death or divorce. This is obviously to do with loss and bereavement as well, but can also be linked to deprivation and neglect, as Rutter in the Isle of Wight study has shown that acrimonious separations between parents are much worse for children than when it is not acrimonious (E. Mash, R. A. Berkley) therefore it is more than just the loss itself which is the issue. When parents are not focusing on the wellbeing of children, they suffer: academically they do less well in school, they are more likely to have early pregnancies, they are more likely to be unemployed and to get divorced themselves - so the effect of deprivation really lasts into the next generations.

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All the effects of the deprivation this essay have discussed are likely to be perpetuated into the next generations. Parents who do not know how to play or empathise or communicate effectively without aggression or contain their emotions effectively, because of a deprivation in these areas when they were children, are less likely to enable their own children to have these skills as well.

All of these forms of deprivation have massive implications for Social Work practice, and there are many places that social workers can intervene with this intergenerational transmission of deprivation. One example of this is Sure Start, which is currently under threat of being cut by the government. Sure Start is a multi disciplinary approach, including social workers, which is designed to help parents and babies/young children in deprived areas overcome the effects of early deprivation. Considering the devastating effects of deprivation, Social workers and other professionals need to have a heightened awareness of its existence and implications; There have been studies showing that children who suffer from deprivation have more long term problems developmentally than children who suffer from physical abuse.

There has also been a heightened Involvement of social workers in CAMHS (child and adolescent mental health teams) – another multi disciplinary team, which deals with the mental health of young people and the reasons for their conditions. It has long been apparent that psychological health is directly linked to childhood deprivation, but only recently have social workers been seen to be working with other professionals to try and integrate more preventative measures against the psychological effects of deprivation,

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rather than simply working to address the effects. Working alongside mental health professionals in order to pinpoint and prevent the causes and effects of deprivation is a new phenomenon, and one which has seriously changed the direction of modern social work practice.

Links with community midwives, G. Ps, nurseries and primary schools, in order to identify those at risk early on, have become more and more important in Social work. Community midwives and GP's have to check on childrens weight and development and their relationship with their care-givers. More involvement and communication between the professionals around infants and children are integral tools in identifying the early signs of deprivation and it's effect on development.

Greater focus on and help for children leaving care is another step that the social work sector should be taking. These people will be the ones having children early, and the ones who are likely to continue the cycle of neglect and deprivation. They are also typically poorer, and economic deprivation can be a massive contributor to neglect and deprivation in all its forms.

In conclusion, there are many different strains of deprivation, all of them with devastating effects on childhood development, and all with relevant implications for social work. It would be prudent to point out at this point that all of the strains of deprivation are interrelated and to an extent interdependent, and often children who are exposed to one are almost undoubtedly exposed to another. For Social workers, the main focus should be on the importance of stopping the intergenerational transmission of the effects of deprivation. Early intervention is paramount in preventing these

transmissions, and today more and more of the focus has been directed into prevention and rehabilitation, so Social workers are involved in more of a rehabilitating role, which will work to change the face of social work practice.