

# **LISTENING TO CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY**

## **POWER POINT PRESENTATION**

**Communication à la conférence :**

**Who cares ? Roadmap for a recommendation to fight child poverty**

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The title of this presentation is: What can be gained from listening to children living in poverty? And how to achieve it?

As everybody knows, listening to children is easier said than done: after all, we as adults usually think that we know better. So you have to try hard to truly listen to what children have to say: it's not a natural gift.

But once you have listen to children, once you have heard what they have to say, what do you do next? Being from a research department of the French ministry, we think it's not enough to hear what children have to say: you also have to try to be policy oriented to really gain from what you have heard: in other word, you have to translate what you have learned in policy relevant recommendations.

This presentation has thus three parts:

- How to listen to children living in poverty?
- What can be learned from listening to them?
- How can these lessons be translated in recommendations?

How to listen to children living in poverty? The starting point is that it's not a natural gift and that it's not straightforward: you have to set the right conditions to be able to listen to what children have to say. And it is where methodology can help. Let's see how we proceeded.

There are four distinctive features in our methodology:

- The first one is to meet the children in a setting familiar to them, to meet them in presence of other children they know, and to meet them in a context which is not stigmatising: that is: meet them in presence of children who are not living in poverty;
- The second distinctive feature is to meet the children twice in order to neutralise whatever limitation is attached to a first and once encounter such as anxiety, boasting, shyness and so on; every child in this study has been met twice;
- The third one is to make sure your understanding of what they say is the same as their understanding: in our study, this has been achieved by reading at the beginning of the second encounter a summary of what the researcher had learned during the first meeting;
- The last one is to give priority to what best suits the children you meet: for example: be ready to listen individually to a child if he is not comfortable with the group, use different channels of expressions (conversations but also photographs, drawings, games, and so on) and try to make it all as fun as possible.

Just one example to give an idea of the kind of exercises we used: the second meeting started with the following exercise: what would take with you to stay on a desert island for one week? You have three suitcases: one for happiness (symbolised by a heart), one for dreams (symbolised by a cloud) and one for things to forget (symbolised by a stop sign).

All in all, in this study: we met 6 groups of more or less 5 children, aged 6 to 12, in different settings such as: residential care, out-of-school activities, cultural associations, and so on

And by the way, we also met three groups of children of the same age group but from affluent background to put what we heard in perspective: in other word: comparison groups.

What have we learned? Of course, we have learned a lot, ... As everybody here is well aware: poverty affect the lifes of children in different ways and in different domains. But to keep it simple, I have chosen to pick one or two examples and to present them along three dimensions: what we have learned concerning: their relationships with themselves, their relationships with others and their relationships with their environment. It is no accident that this framework is borrowed from the literature on well-being because it's precisely what we have talked about with the children we met: their subjective and psychological well-being.

I will also pick one or two examples of strategies used by children to cope with the impact of poverty.

**First: relationships with themselves.** Children we have met are definitely not immune to the constraints that weight on their parents lives: their time is not a time of innocence. they have to share responsibility for dealing with shortages (a common motto is: don't waste food), they have to take their share in making ends meet, they feel responsible for it. Moreover, they sometimes seem to have to act as support for their parents.

Contrary to young children from affluent background, who don't seem to be aware of their privileged position, children from poor background are constantly reminded and have pretty well interiorised the meaning of "struggle for live". Some even say that that makes them more lucid and more mature than the other children of their age-group.

**Relationships with others.** It is hard to overestimate the significance, in this generation, of all those new devices: mobile phones, console game, computer, internet access and so on. Not only are they status symbols but they have come to be essential parts of the way children relate to others and to the rest of the world. The children we have met are the first to understand the importance of these belongings to belong to their age group. And from what we have heard, it is safe to consider them as essential vehicles of communications. Furthermore, since agency and a sense of control have been proved to be essential part of the well-being of children (Fattore et al., 2007), these devices may well be, for the children of today, the equivalent of open playground for the children of yesterday.

The prevalence of intense emotional reactions is common in the relationships with others: hypocrisy is definitely not a valued social skill for these children. This goes hand in hand with an acute sensitivity to unfairness, inequality of treatment and to anyone, adult or peer, who break one's promise. Needless to say it's a frequent source of conflicts. Examples abounds of broken relationships which are exacerbated: people don't part, they break-up, they don't stay apart, they keep away.

**Relationships with their environment.** For this age-group, access to extracurricular activities represents a huge potential of opportunities: to socialise outside school and family, to engage in rewarding activities, to be recognised for unique competencies and to broaden one's perspectives. Most children we have met clearly want to take part in various extracurricular activities and they have many expectations.

Needless to say that financial barriers to these activities do exist and have an impact on how, when and what activities they can attend. But apart from financial barriers, there have been clear signs of embarrassment and disappointment when they took part. We suspect that there are still many socio-cultural obstacles to their participation in theses various forms of extracurricular activities. Social segregation is surely at work but, as we will see now, this is a complex phenomenon where they may play an active role.

**Strategies.** Poverty is not only a fate you have to endure passively: it is a social position you have to deal with. In other words, people living in poverty have actively developed strategies, that is capacities, competencies, for coping with it.

I will just pick three examples.

One of the interesting ideas that came from our study was that one of these strategies might be what we have called "**consented segregation**": the idea behind this notion is : since the dices are loaded, since we are regarded as truly different from the common lot and frequently rejected, then let's choose places and activities where the risk of being stigmatised or rejected is minimal. This strategy has been observed in the careful selection of a restricted group of friends, in the choice of a school, in the choice of extracurricular activities and in the reciprocal stigmatisation of "the others".

The issues at stake here are: feeling at ease and finding one's place, the place where I belong to, which all too frequently means withdrawal into oneself.

This withdrawal into oneself doesn't mean loneliness: children can rely on a kind of solidarity between children who share the same living conditions, the same tower block, the same neighbourhood, even if relationships can be tense and strained. The following quote is explicit:

*There is a link between us. If anyone fight, I will go directly on him, sure. You don't touch one of us in our tower block without having the rest of us coming to rescue. (Y a un lien entre nous. Si y en a un qui se bat, moi je vais directement darrer dessus, c'est clair. On touche pas à un de la cité sans avoir le reste à dos.)*

Even if we as adults have forgotten, the presence of pets and of transitional objects play a crucial role in the daily life of children from this age-group. It doesn't seem to be specific to children living in poverty but in many difficult circumstances, animals are a reassuring presence and transitional objects are the safe confidant of their hopes and anxieties.

I now come to the final word: three recommendations.

Maybe one of the most straightforward recommendations we can make is that professionals be better trained in available communications skills such as those used in participative research methodology. This may be a practical way to implement Recommendation 3.1 of the background paper of this conference (Children's right to be heard), which states: *Ensure all those working with and for children understand the impact of poverty and social exclusion and the need to listen and to take account of the views of children*).

From the perspective of children we have met, we would like to add a general recommendation which cross different domain-specific recommendations: **paying due attention to everything that links and connect these children to others and to their environment**, be it: mobile devices, internet connections, pets, open playgrounds, friendly extracurricular activities, and so on. The fact is: opportunities do exist but many are lost and even spoiled by a lack of appropriate incentives to include children from poor background and inappropriate reactions to the difficulties they pose.

In the 2009 report on the consequences of poverty from the French Community ombudsman on the rights of the child, we find this comment from one of the persons interviewed: *"the hardest thing is not living with nothing but to be considered as nothing"* (in French: *Le plus dur, ce n'est pas de vivre sans rien, c'est d'être considéré comme rien*). As research has repeatedly showed, fair treatment and respect are prominent dimensions of the well-being for children in general and no lesser for children living in poverty (see for example Rees, Bradshaw, Goswani, Keung, 2010, p.17).

I'm tempted to translate all we have heard from the children we met in this simple recommendation to all professionals who have to deal with children living in poverty: first of all, do no harm: poverty is a burden in every moment of a life, don't add to this burden by being offensive to the children who have to live with it.

And to make sure that the message is clearly heard and understood, I would suggest that social workers, teachers, care givers and so on have to swear this principle of the Hippocratic oath at the end of their professional training.

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Full report (soon) available on the Internet site of the Observatory for Childhood, Youth and Youth Care of the French community Ministry: [www.oejaj.cfwb.be](http://www.oejaj.cfwb.be)