



Save the Children



 Innovation  
Unit

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# A SNAPSHOT OF FAMILY LIFE ON A LOW INCOME

An ethnographic report for Save the Children UK

January 2018

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## I. About this report

In December 2017 Save the Children commissioned Innovation Unit to conduct ethnographic research with families with children aged 0 to 5 experiencing poverty in the UK today. This research was intended to support the PDQ Innovation team as they embarked upon a process of person centred co-design to develop innovative interventions that will support early learning.

### What is ethnography?

Ethnographic research is the study of people and cultures in context to try to understand the world from the point of view of the participants. While surveys and interviews start with what the researcher wants to know, ethnographic research starts with people's own knowledge and perspectives on the world. It provides a detailed picture of daily life - its joys and challenges - in the context of people's past experiences and future goals.

In anthropology, ethnographic research may take months or years of embedded research. For service innovation we use many of the qualities and practices from anthropology and compress the activities into much shorter timeframes. Insights from ethnographic research provide inspiration for ideas to try and principles to apply. They do not tell us generalisable 'facts' about populations. Generalising comes through triangulation and through developing and testing service concepts.

### Methodology

In order to develop an enquiry frame for the research we conducted a review of existing evidence on early child development, including literature on parenting, the home learning environment, digital technology in learning, barriers to literacy and the impact of poverty on learning.

We also ran a session with the Save the Children team to identify the hypotheses underpinning this research and draw out the themes they were most interested in developing a greater understanding about.

These were:

- Parents' needs, interests and sources of knowledge in relation to parenting and supporting their children's learning;
- How parents look after themselves and their own wellbeing - what is in their 'survival kit';
- Families' attitudes to, and use of, digital devices and the challenges and opportunities that this represents;
- How precariousness impacts on family lives and children's learning;

In December 2017 we spent time with eight families who live across London. Our conversations focused on understanding the family make up, their daily routines, interests and shared activities. We mapped people's social networks, explored their experience of and attitudes to parenting and the role they play to support their children's learning. We observed living environments, asked about learning and play activities and explored how work, finances and relationships impact on family life. Each ethnographic interview lasted between 4.5 and 7 hours. In our time with the families we talked, observed, went along to run errands and pick up children, drank tea and played. To aid our conversations we used some visual tools, which we completed together with families.

In December 2017 and January 2018 we carried out two synthesis sessions together with the Save the Children team, where we shared the families' stories and reflected on the emerging insights and cross cutting themes and started to identify some areas of opportunity for Save the Children to explore further. Those themes and areas of opportunity are set out in this report.

### Recruitment

We aimed to meet a range of families who live in poverty and experience precariousness. We define this as families that 'lack resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong'. Precarious families are defined as those that lack security and stability in relation to their work, finances, housing and/or social ties.

The identifying characteristics we used to recruit families were:

- At least one child aged 0-5
- Children that are in school and nursery
- Pre-school aged children who are not going to nursery
- Children in receipt of free school meals
- Families from minority ethnic backgrounds
- One or both parents who are out of work or have been out of work in the last year
- One or both parents on zero hour contracts
- Families receiving in work, or out of work, benefits
- Families who have visited food banks
- Single parent households
- One, two and more children including from different biological parents
- One or both parents or close relatives who have struggled with physical and/or mental health issues
- Parents experiencing problems with debt and/or housing
- Families with at least one child who has a physical or mental health issue
- Families with English as a second language

## 2. Introducing the families

This section presents a selection of the eight families with whom we conducted ethnographic research. All names have been changed.

Although we aimed to get a picture of what life is like for the whole family, in all of our interviews we met only with mums. 4 out of 8 families included dads, living in the family home all the time or often, however, none were present during our interviews. Further work that builds on this report will aim to deepen the insights on the perspective of children and dads.

### Luna's family



Luna is 31 years old and a single mother. She lives with her 3 children in a small Council flat on the outskirts of north London. The children are Mo, 14, Mandy, 6 and Elliott, 3. Luna and the children's father have been together on and off since she was 16. The children spend every second weekend with their dad. Luna moved to the UK from Ghana when she was 11. She didn't care for school when she was younger and failed her GCSEs. She is now catching up and wishes that someone had told her, back then, how important it was for her to keep up with her studies. Luna is focused and ambitious in what she wants to achieve. She has a degree in psychology and is finishing an HR degree in college. Between studying, working and her children, she has little spare time and is selective about how she uses it.

She is fiercely independent. She says she does not trust people anymore and prefers to keep herself to herself. Luna is a loving mother to her children. A Jehova Witness by religion, she feels that her job is to help her children to become good and whole people. She tries to spend one evening per week with each of her children 'learning about God' and spending quality time together.

### Jackie's family



Jackie is 26 and a single mother to Theo, who is 3. They live in a small 2 bedroom flat in north London, where Jackie grew up. They live close to Jackie's Mum and some of her friends, many of whom she has known since school and college. Theo's father is not around, out of both his choice and Jackie's. However, Theo sees his paternal grandfather fairly regularly.

Jackie works night shifts as a care worker a couple of days a week. She usually works until 8am then returns home to take Theo to nursery. During the night, her friend Michaela sleeps at the flat to look after Theo. Michaela is one of Jackie's best friends and Theo's Godmother. Jackie used to be very involved in the Church, but has more recently stepped away from the community, due to fears that she was being 'a hypocrite' because of her sex life, and having Theo out of marriage, although religion remains important to her.

## Catherine's family



## Beverley's family



Catherine and Mark have two boys: Dom, who is 3, and Kyle, who is 1. The family live in north London in a 2 bedroom house they rent from the Council. Catherine works as a school cleaner in the evenings, and Mark works full time in a warehouse. Dom often has aggressive outbursts and has recently been diagnosed with autism. He also sees a speech and language therapist as his speech has been slow to develop. He is particularly violent towards his Dad and his younger brother and this worries Catherine a lot. She is seeking parenting advice, particularly focused on autistic children but has not found anything locally.

The family are struggling financially and have no time to spend together. Catherine's Nan, who raised her, lives nearby and helps the family financially occasionally when Catherine asks, but otherwise, the family have very few friends and family connections.

Beverley and Luke live in south London, with their two children Grace, 1, and Tommy, 5, and their dog, Rex. The flat is very cramped and is in a state of disrepair.

Beverley is a stay at home Mum, taking care of Grace and taking Tommy to and from school. Luke has been searching for work for the past 8 months, after losing a series of jobs at construction and landscaping businesses due to falling business. Although he tries to keep his days full with Jobcentre courses and taking care of his ill parents, job-hunting is getting Luke down, and Beverley is worried about him. He is spending less and less time at home with the family because he goes out in the evenings with friends.

Beverley grew up in the area and has a very strong network of friends and family that she relies on. She sees her mum everyday and her parents help the family financially too.

## Angelica's family



## Jasmine's family



Angelica is a single mother with 2 young children: Gift, 1 and Thomas, 8 months. They are currently living in temporary accommodation in South London, after losing their privately rented flat due to her landlord subletting illegally. The Council is housing them in a hotel room until they can find more suitable and permanent accommodation. Angelica spends her days at home with Gift, and Thomas is currently in hospital after being born very prematurely. She visits him every morning, and during this time her close friend takes care of Gift. She has a close group of friends from her Church, but since they have moved to the hotel, the family is now further from the Church.

Angelica is hoping to soon be rehoused, especially as Thomas can't come home until their living situation improves. Gift also gets bored as there is not much space in the hotel room for her to play. She used to enjoy watching cartoons in their previous home, but this room has no TV so Gift can no longer do this.

Angelica would like to return to her work as a nurse one day. She also has a masters in accounting and would one day like to conduct some medical research into tropical diseases.

Jasmine lives with her husband Luca and their daughter, Maria, who is 2. Jasmine works in a beauty shop and Luca is a care worker, and also studying community development alongside his work. Their flat is a 2-bedroom housing association flat, south of London. The family moved here about a year ago when Luca got a new job. They like the area and made friends quickly through the Church.

Jasmine doesn't have lots of friends but is very close to her large family. Some live locally, and others live abroad, but she keeps in touch with all of them via WhatsApp. She is particularly close to her Aunty, who raised her when her parents moved back to Nigeria. Although she never asks her aunty for money, when they go out together, she pays for everything for Jasmine and Maria. This helps a lot with buying new clothes and being able to go out for dinner.

Jasmine says that Maria is 'a bit slow' and isn't talking yet, but she isn't worried about this. Maria can count and understand what is being said to her, so Jasmine is happy about that. Luca is a very "patient and good Dad" and they try to share the parenting as much as possible.

### 3. Summary of themes

Our conversations with families surfaced a wealth of insights about their experiences and perspectives. Of course, any observation or reflection on a particular family needs to be understood within the limited scope of depth and understanding, which a six hour encounter affords. This does not claim to be a representative study. However, the insights we have drawn out are strengthened by similarities that run across multiple stories, and grounded in our knowledge and understanding arising from our broader experience of researching families.

We have clustered the insights emerging from our conversations with families around eight themes:





### 3.1. Work and finances

#### → Precariousness generates fear and anxiety

The experience of precariousness is common to all the families we met: people working on zero hour contracts, losing their job and struggling to find another one, having to tag-parent between day and night shifts, struggling with debt, living with the constant anxiety of not being able to put food on the table. Many of the parents we talked to said that money - and for some, debt - is at the forefront of their minds.

Beverley's husband, Luke, has been out of work for 8 months and is trying hard, but struggling, to find a new job. This makes him feel depressed, so even though he has more time on his hands, he is actually less present and available to his family.

*“Luke has had a run of bad luck with work. He worked in a security company for 7 years and then lost his job. He then had a landscape gardening job, but their business was not going well, so, they had to let him go. Luke is a social butterfly; he needs to be out doing things. He hates not working.”*

Jackie works a few shifts a week in a care home. The number of her shifts depends on the whim of her manager. One of her greatest anxieties is to be unable to provide for her son Theo.

*“If you piss the manager off they will only put you down for 1 day. (..) You never know what is going to happen, you can't just keep £10 in your pocket. It is a constant panic, what if tomorrow I can't get something for him to eat?”*

Beverley, Catherine and Jasmine talked about how they have to do tag-parenting, combining day and night work shifts with their partners to share childcare.

*“I was working 4am - 8am in Sainsbury to fit around Luke's work and childcare for Tommy. I was so tired, because obviously Tommy wasn't sleeping and I was getting up at 4, and going to work until 8 and I was working overtime. So it didn't last long, because I was just constantly ill”. (Beverley)*

Angelica's situation is beyond precarious and can best be described as crisis. She is living with her 18 month old in

temporary accommodation (a hotel room) after being evicted from her rented flat. Her benefit status is complex and linked to her ex husband. Despite this, she approaches life with optimism, one day at a time.

*“Sometimes there comes a time in your life when things slow down, and you can't do the same things. But things will change.”*

#### → The stigma of poverty - “I am not a scrounger”

Most of the families we talked with seemed sensitive to the societal discourse around benefits and were keen for us to know that they were not 'benefit scroungers'. They were proud and did not want to be seen as struggling.

Jackie does not claim all the benefits she is entitled to, partly in fear of what people might think of her and partly because she is worried that the Council will one day ask her to pay the money back and then she would be in debt.

*“The Council is saying that they are paying for full housing benefit and I replied and said 'Please don't, because I am working 2 days a week' – I don't want to get in trouble. I don't like problems, I don't like debt.”*

*“I don't want to go to a foodbank, but I feel like I can always make something, even if there is no meat, it can just be pasta and tomato. It may not be 5 stars, but it is something.”*

In the course of our conversation Catherine said to us:

*“You are not here to catch benefit scroungers, then, are you?”*

Luna took pride in telling us that she manages her money wisely and, although there are no luxuries in her family, their needs are met.

*“I live within my means. Money that I have, I use on the kids. There is no excess, like designer bags etc. My money is focused on the things that we need. Our needs are met.”*



### → Bargain hunting and bulk-buying

Bargain hunting and bulk-buying is a coping strategy for families. Timing purchases and getting to know where and when you can get food or clothes at big discounts were skills that the families exercised regularly.

Jackie talked about how the fear of not being able to provide for Theo made her buy food, nappies and wipes in bulk.

*“When I was a new mum, I bought so much stuff, pampers, wipes, just because I thought I wouldn’t have it when I needed it. You’d come to my house and there was just pampers everywhere. I would spend my last money buying extra pampers, wipes or baby food. I panic that I can’t provide for him, more than I do for myself.”*

### → Gambling: entertainment and a gateway to small luxuries

One family we talked to mentioned they gamble regularly, and are currently in debt. Gambling, for them, is a form of entertainment - not devoid of a sense of guilt - but also a way of affording otherwise unattainable luxuries. A win of £1,500, allowed the family to go on holiday in Jamaica for 2 weeks.

Catherine reflected on her gambling habits:

*“I think I do it a bit too much. Whenever I go on(line) I top up my account. I know I’ve got money in there now. I would never go into a bookies though, because they’re all old in there and they stare at you, and then I would think I’m actually a gambler.”*



## 3.2 Living Environment

### → Cramped living

Almost all the families we visited were living in spaces that felt too small for them. Older children had to share small bedrooms with younger children and toys and clothes were cluttering up living spaces. Most families were dreaming of moving away, either outside of London or to a different house.

Beverley's home is badly need of repair. She told us:

*“This place is falling apart. The bathroom is freezing. That's why we've got a heater in there because I can't bathe the kids without having the heater on in the bathroom for at least 15 minutes, otherwise they are going to get ill.”*

Angelica is living in temporary accommodation, having been evicted from her rented flat due to a legal case against her landlord. She, her 1-and-a-half year old, and all their belongings are squeezed in a single hotel room, surrounded by families who are in a similar situation to theirs. The hotel is half an hour away from the hospital where Angelica goes every day to spend time with her premature-born 8-month-old son. The hotel staff are kind and friendly and Angelica is determinedly optimistic that this is only a temporary situation.

*“I wish I wasn't involved in this. It happened so quick, so it wasn't possible to find somewhere else to stay.”*

### → The omnipresent TV

Television screens dominated most living rooms and on some occasions were on - sometimes on loud volume - the whole day. Some families had screens in the parents' or children's rooms, in addition to the one in the living room. One of the participants mentioned that they gather around the TV to watch shows as a family, but for most of the others watching TV is a solitary activity, more about relaxation than information and learning. A number of people talked about watching films and videos on their iPads, and so the television's role becomes background entertainment or playing particular favourite shows (like, for example Antiques Roadshow, the Housewives of Atlanta or The Secret Lives of 5 Year Olds). Often children will watch some TV when they come home from school - if they are not on their iPads.

### →Life indoors

The vast majority of families did not have access to a garden. School aged children spent most afternoons in the confined spaces of their home, playing with toys or, more often, with tablets or watching TV. Younger children too tended to be mostly at home with their mothers, while they looked after the house. Family outings were not a frequent occurrence, even on the weekend, as tired parents use the opportunity to rest. Some of the outings mentioned were: an occasional meal out, 'cheap times' at the cinema, seeing family, going to softplay and food shopping. Feeling unsafe in the local area was cited as a reason for not using parks.

Catherine feels anxious walking around her local area, although that is where she grew up. She says:

*“I wouldn't take the kids to the park by myself. You get a lot of stabbings here. I panic walking down the street.”*

Jackie is resourceful in looking for cheap activities to do with her son Theo and makes sure she saves for her regular 'date nights' with him, when, once a month, they dress up and go out for a meal together.

*“We go to soft play, go to the park, Theo likes to try and catch pigeons. Sometimes early on a Saturday morning we go to the cinema because it's really cheap – you can watch films for £2.50. I have got Netflix, but it's something to do outside. I would want him to go swimming but swimming lessons are £30 a month – considering what I have to pay on rent...”*

Luna says that on the weekends they mostly chill at home, but when she does go out to walk, take pictures or run errands, she will take the children with her.

*“On Saturday I don't do anything – when we go out it is so expensive. If I do go out then I would take the kids. I do everything I do, with them.”*



### 3.3 Support Networks

#### → What constitutes family?

Of the families we met, only one had strong and wide local networks of support and lived in the neighbourhood where the mum grew up. Relationships with grandparents are complex and sometimes conflictual. The mums we met often talked about wanting their parenting style to be different from that of their own parents. However, the majority of mums received financial, practical and emotional support from their parents. Half of the mums we met also relied on friends to help out with childcare and when describing their social network, they considered these friends like family.

Catherine grew up with her nan, not her parents, but now she sees her mum on a weekly basis. Her nan helps her and her family financially:

*“I will ask my Nan for something because I know she’ll hand it over.”*

Beverley lives in the neighbourhood where she grew up, sees her parents and nan on a daily basis and has in her local network old time friends and school mums. She is close to her mum and talks with her several times a day.

*“I ring my mum at least once a day for a chat. After being with the kids all day I like to have adult conversations.”*

Angelica’s network is not very large; it is made up mostly of Church friends and old university friends. Having no family around her, she would not cope in her difficult situation if it wasn’t for the help of her friends, in particular a close friend from Church, who belongs to the same Nigerian tribe as her.

*“I got integrated along the way! In my network is, I would say, my Church, old work friends - but there’s not plenty of them about. And then old school friends who I met at uni. I go to Church every week and one friend is particularly close - when we met we realised that we are related. We are from the same tribe, the same kindred”.*

#### → Self dependence and small networks of support

Another theme emerging from our conversations is that the number of people in a family’s support network

tends to be limited, and asking for help is something that some of the mums will try to avoid doing at all costs. Outside of a small trusted circle of friends and family, support networks are really quite small and some families look to people around them with a mix of suspicion and fear of being judged. For three mums (all of African origin) their Church community was a really important part of their social network.

Luna says that she does not get close to people anymore, after her trust was betrayed in the past. She is also fiercely independent and prefers to manage on her own, rather than ask for help from others.

*“I am learning to just be quiet with people. I feel like a quiet life is a happy life. Everyone knowing your business. You tell someone something and everyone knows. Nowadays it is hard to find a really good friend. I know a lot of people but some of them show their true colours when you really need them.”*

*“Sometimes it is like how low are you willing to sink, to get that support. I am saying some people will help you, but the hoops you have to jump through for that support aren’t worth it. I don’t like favours from guys because they always want something in return. If it goes beyond my dignity then I don’t want to do it.”*

#### → The digital social network

Alongside people’s local social networks, smartphones connect parents to wider communities of people, who they may or may not know personally. Every mum we talked to used WhatsApp to communicate with friends and families, living nearby or across the world. Many also used Facebook and Instagram.

Jasmine is connected to family members living all over the world: America, Canada, Nigeria...

*“I talk to family on WhatsApp who are all over the world.”*

... and follows the parenting tips of a mum from Switzerland on Instagram.

*“I look online for advice and there is a girl in Switzerland I follow on Instagram – I started following her because her boy was born around the same time as Maria. It is mostly about eating and feeding children, home-made food, healthy eating”*



## 3.4 Super Mums

### → The absence of dads

In half of the families we visited, dads lived in the family home either all the time or some of the time. Two dads seemed to support their partners with parenting, while another one was much more in the background, leaving all the work and decision making to mum.

Three dads who were not living in the family home saw their children with a certain regularity and two of them were contributing financially. On the other hand, two of the mums we talked to did not want to talk about their partner, who had disappeared from their lives and the lives of their children, leaving them to manage (and sometimes struggle) on their own.

### → Traditional gender roles

In families where dads were present, we observed that traditional gender roles prevailed, with mums being largely or totally responsible for looking after the house and the children, in some cases working around their childcare responsibilities. Only one of the mums we talked to said that her partner is a good dad and admitted that he is more patient than her with their daughter.

Catherine told us she does most of the parenting:

*“Mark just sits there on the sofa and is at work all day.”*

Jasmine says of her ‘hubby’:

*“He would say more good things about her than me – he is always talking about what is good for her. He has more patience than me. I will say ‘That is enough’ if she has a tantrum, but he knows how to calm her down.”*

### → Mums with strong shoulders

On the whole, the mums we met were striving (and largely managing) to be strong, resourceful, resilient and independent. They got some support, mostly from parents and friends and, in a couple of cases, from their partners. Their reward was seeing their children grow and develop. But it is clear that the anxiety of precariousness, the demands of parenting, and sometimes troubled relationships, take their toll and hardly any of the women we met had the luxury of time or treats for themselves. They were completely absorbed in keeping their family afloat.

Jackie told us:

*“Maybe one day I will break but then will go back to being the same. I am raising him by myself. I have to be the mum and the dad. I can’t do everything as a woman in a man’s role.”*



## 3.5 Parenting

### → Stress and anxiety is a common feature of parenthood

Even without having to deal with the challenges of precariousness, parenting can be stressful and difficult. For many of the mums we spoke to, anxiety about money was compounding worries about their children. Some were also clearly insecure about their parenting skills, while others acknowledged that their parenting is about trial and error and they are constantly learning.

Jackie's anxieties revolve around not being able to provide for Theo. Being the only person he has in the world, she feels a strong sense of responsibility for him.

*"I think about dying a lot. If something was going to happen to me, what will happen to Theo?"*

Angelica is travelling every morning to the hospital to spend time with her 37-week-old premature-born baby, Thomas. She is looking forward to him coming home, but the issues with her accommodation make it difficult.

*"The hospital team are liaising with social services regarding that. He might come home or not. I guess it's too congested here for him to come. When he comes home he will still be poorly, so he will have home visits everyday."*

Jackie reflects on how the challenges of being a parent have impacted on her mental health:

*"No one can teach you how to be a parent. It is so easy to fall into depression. Post-natal doesn't stop at one year on. It hits everyone different. It's like automatic."*

Luna is determined to be positive:

*"If you think about fears, you feel like you are a victim I will teach them everything I can. I myself am still learning every day."*

### → Little quality time for mum and dad

In the families where mum and dad were together, they did not get much quality time with each other. Tag parenting, stresses and money worries push nurturing the couple's relationship down the list of priorities.

Beverley and Luke have little time with each other. Even though Luke has not been in work, this has not translated into more quality time with Beverley and the family. He has been feeling low and they struggle financially, so it is hard for them to get a babysitter.

*"Me and Luke don't really go out much together either because we struggle for a babysitter. (...) Grace is a really good baby, but she has stopped sleeping now. She basically sleeps in my bed every night. Luke sleeps on the sofa."*

Luna told us that, if she wanted, she and the father of her children could be together. Also, one of her friends from Church would like a relationship with her. However, she feels that focusing on her children, her studying and her work is more important for her now, and leaves her little headspace to think about anything else.

*"I see him as much as I would like to. He wants a relationship but I don't. If I have stuff I want to do what's the point of me going out. I have to get on and make sure it happens"*

### → Hopes and fears

When we asked mums what they hoped for their children in the future, many told us that they hoped they could grow up to be whatever they wanted to be - and be happy. Unlike the previous generation, today's parents do not seem interested in determining their children's career paths - which makes sense, given that the professions we know today may well have become obsolete by the time these children become professionals themselves - but rather want them to be happy, whatever they do.

Mums did, however, talk about what they hoped would not happen to their children: dropping out of school and having to work hard to start a career in their 30s; going to jail or becoming drug dealers; being abusive, unkind or unashamed.



When asked about their fears, some revealed a deeper sense of worry and anxiety, fearing that their children might be stabbed, hit by a car or abducted. One talked about the fear of dying and/or being unable to feed her child. Some mums also said they worry about what is happening in the world more widely, and this was particularly brought on by watching the news.

Luna said she hopes that her children will grow up to be 'normal', 'decent' people and will have the opportunity of doing what makes them happy.

*"I just hope that they turn out to be normal people, whole and content people, not abusive. There are a lot of broken people out there, I don't want them to become one of them. (...) As for my daughter, I want her to be decent, a modest woman and to respect herself. (...) I don't have any plan to choose anything for them. I just want them to be happy. I understand the meaning of doing something that you enjoy."*

Catherine revealed her sense of deep anxiety exploring dreaded scenarios:

*"I would rather him be hit by a car than be taken by someone, because I think you've got more chance of finding your child if that happened"*.

Jasmine said she worries there might be a nuclear war:

*"With what is going on in the world I am afraid that Trump will start the third world war."*

### → Learning about parenting through the net and social media

When we asked mums where they learn about parenting, many mentioned the internet and social media, followed by other mums and, sometimes, their own parents. They talked about reading about potty training or tantrums online; checking out Netmums' message boards for useful tips or reassurance; and following other parents' blogs or instagram accounts. School-gate mums were a source of information and support for three of the mothers we talked with and one of them said that it is easier to share some struggles with other mums whom she doesn't know well, than it is

to confess to close friends that she is struggling. On the whole, people did not want to be taught how to parent, but appreciated the reassurance and knowledge of peers, especially in the anonymous and on-demand format of online sites.

Jackie told us:

*"I read online on Netmums. The questions and answers. It's good to ask people you don't know. I wouldn't buy a parenting book."*

She also said that the media influences her sometimes, but she thinks they exaggerate a lot. For example, despite Theo's young age, she is already worried about bullying. She said:

*"If Theo got bullied how would he or I cope? But I haven't crossed that bridge yet. I feel like I'm really consumed in my own thoughts, but I'd rather not get caught up with that and get depressed about it."*

Jasmine sums up her sources of information on parenting:

*"I look online for advice and there is a girl in Switzerland I follow on Instagram (...) I have some friends who have kids around Maria's age and I do get advice from them. Or I would just type into Google."*

### → Living in the moment

With some exceptions, most of the people we talked to were living in the moment rather than planning much ahead in the future. The 'admin of life' - like filling in benefit forms, or applying for jobs - and the demands of work and parenting often take up all parents' bandwidth and mean that people are mostly focused on getting through life day-to-day. Some talked about desired future events such as becoming a midwife or moving to Norfolk - which were more aspirations than concrete plans.

Jackie was currently deciding whether she would, and could, begin studying to be a midwife. The decision was proving difficult and she had been putting it off for a while. She had not made any practical plans yet as how she would manage to do this whilst taking care of Theo and working.



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*“A guy told me I should apply, but I feel like that is signing up for something I am not sure of, but then I know I want to do it... but, am I ready?”*

Some mums dealt with this lack of ability to plan through positive thinking, not dwelling on worries or negativity. Jasmine was one example of this:

*“I don’t really put negative things in my mind, that’s the truth, whatever comes you take it. Once you have help in your life, the rest will follow.”*



## 3.6 Digital Lives

### → Slaves to the smartphone

A prominent insight emerging from our observations of families is how helpful and, at the same time, how scarily all-absorbing smartphones can be. Smartphones were a constant and prominent presence in our interactions with families. Mums told us about how their phones keep them connected to friends and families; help them access the information they need; give them bite-sized moments of relaxation when browsing Facebook or Instagram; or when putting their kids in front of a video or a gaming app. Some also admitted being 'glued' to their phones or 'addicted' to it. We can all identify with the drive to check our smartphones for texts, updates, news. However, for a couple of the mums we talked to, the draw of the smartphone seemed to be so dominating that they struggled to focus for long on anything else. This appeared to impact on the quality of their interaction with their children.

Angelica told us that her phone is essential to her, as it keeps her connected to her network of support and is a source of entertainment for Gift in the confined spaces of their small temporary accommodation.

*"It feels very, very important to me. It's my friend. My phone is my friend. It keeps me updated with information, to communicate, and nursery rhymes for her. So it does a lot of good. If anything happens to it I could cry."*

Catherine recognised that she uses her phone a lot...

*"I'm near enough glued to it all day... It is a very horrible addiction to be addicted to the phone."*

Jasmine said:

*"It is a really terrible thing, being addicted to the phone."*

### → Digital is the main source of learning and information for parents

For the parents we met the internet was not only the resource of choice when it comes to parenting, but also their main source of learning in general. From articles

and posts on Facebook, to cooking instructions and motivational videos on YouTube, the omnipresent smartphone was a provider of information and learning. The degree of people's trust for information on the small screen seems to be proportional to its convenience and accessibility.

Angelica uses her phone to keep up to date with industry news in nursing so she can stay connected to her previous profession.

*"I get a free subscription to the Nursing Times, so I can look at that on my phone. I can keep up to date and learn the new research that's coming through".*

Jackie uses videos as a way to tackle her main parenting issue at the moment: potty training.

*"I've watched so many videos. He can't get it. I hope he'll get it one day, but I've watched so many!"*

Luna makes notes on the Evernote app on her smartphone for her stories.

*"The best time is early in the morning, just after waking up, and at night, before going to bed. I will be typing into my app, sometimes I will write 1,500 words"*

### → Digital play is taking over

Although some toys were present in most of the homes we visited, we were struck by how prominent digital play was, compared to traditional toys. Indeed, it felt like tablets had largely taken the spot of the 'favourite toy'. Screens offer entertainment without the inconvenience of making a mess, which is particularly helpful in small spaces. The younger children we met played often with their own tablets or smartphones (or their mothers' if they didn't have their own) and older children would go straight for the tablet - and sometimes fight with each other over who got to play with it first, upon returning home from nursery or school. The most common activity that younger children did on their tablets was watching YouTube videos. Children as young as 3 amazed us with their ability to quickly navigate to their favourite videos. Older children played with their friends



online on Playstation games such as Fifa, Grand Theft Auto or Call of Duty.

Catherine's 3 year-old son, Dom, told us his favourite thing was watching Ryan's Toy Review on YouTube. On the tablet, the videos show another child playing with various toys...

*"I like to watch Ryan's Toy Review"*

Angelica told us that letting Gift watch nursery rhymes on her smartphone is her 'strategy' to distract her when Gift is very active and she needs to get things done.

*"I try to put them (nursery rhymes) on the phone... It can distract her so I can do things. She is very active, so if I want to distract her. It's one of my strategies. I can put her in her seat and she watches it."*

### → A missed opportunity for educational digital play

Although children in the families we met spent a fair amount of time with the tablet, few parents talked about learning through apps. One mum said that she felt it was hard to find apps with suitable learning for her 5 year old. Other parents did not seem to consider play on the tablet as a potential learning opportunity. Digital play tends to be a lonely activity, with the exception of older children playing online with friends on their Playstation. During our visits, parents were focused on the interview and so it is not surprising that we did not see them join their children in their digital play. However, our conversations and observations suggest that most parents do not get involved in their children's digital play. This means that what could be a shared experience of play and learning becomes a solitary and repetitive activity for the child.

Catherine told us that Dom would like to play on the Wii with his dad, but that hardly ever happens.

*"Dom asks Mark sometimes (to play on the Wii), but he never really does"*

### → The lack of rules around digital

The families we met didn't have hard and fast rules around the use of digital technology. Some said that they rationed use based on battery life. When the battery runs out, the tablet is put away. In one family the remaining battery life would be equally divided between quarreling siblings, so for example, if there was 20% left, one child would get to use it until it was down to 10% and then would have to hand it over to the other child.

Parents tried to keep an eye on their older children's digital lives, mainly through checking their smartphones, but they acknowledged that they did not know everything their children did on social media or on their Playstations. This seemed to be driven partly by lack of knowledge and tech skills (parents' tech skills were generally not as strong as their children's) and by the feeling that there is no point in trying to control what children do in this sphere and that one should focus instead on helping them make the right choices for themselves.

Luna told us that she does not control her son's smartphone and his use of the Playstation and TV in his room.

*"I haven't felt the need to check it – it isn't about trust – I just remember myself when I was growing up and there is nothing that my parents could have done. I think you just have to teach them the best you can and then they can choose for themselves. I am not sure what he does, when I go in this room, he changes the channel."*



## 3.7 Supporting Learning

### → Street learning vs school learning

Almost all the parents we talked to, in different ways, made a distinction between 'street learning' - practical skills, foundational values, and generally stuff that is 'useful for real life' - and 'school learning'. Teaching children about reading, writing and general knowledge was seen as the job of schools and several parents did not take an active role in supporting their children's school learning at home. Teaching children to become 'good', 'kind', 'whole' people was what parents saw as their own responsibility. They went about it in different ways, from imposing limits and making sure children knew what is 'not ok', to sharing religious teachings and creating quality time for children to open up about what is happening in their lives.

When we asked Luna what is most important for her that her children learn, she said:

*"Nothing stands out as particularly important, maybe maths a bit. I haven't used much of what I learnt at school. (...) I am just trying to give them a foundation for their lives. I give them what I know and then they can add it to what they know out there. I don't know what I am doing but I show up, I take them to school and I treat them how I would want people to treat me."*

Talking about learning for her 3 year old, Theo, Jackie said:

*"I teach him the basics of life. Being book smart isn't the same as being street smart. Learn what you can inside at school, and then learn what you can outside. (...) He can't learn everything from me. I'm still learning too. He learns things at nursery. Manners starts at home. Please and thank you's, the basics – you should already know that when you get to nursery. It shows you've got some kind of home training."*

### → Keeping school at a distance

Parents involvement in their children's schooling was generally low. Most mums did not know their children's teachers, rarely went to school outside of drop-offs and pick-ups, and did not do homework with their children. Some had had negative experiences of school in their youth and this may have impacted on their confidence in engaging with their children's schools. With the exception of a mum who

lived in the neighbourhood where she grew up, people didn't have much contact with other parents in school.

Beverley occasionally sees her son's teacher during drop off and pick up, but isn't much involved in his school life. The main contact she has with the school is paying for activities or events.

*"His teacher seems alright. But there is a lot to pay for: sweet cones, cakes for the Christmas fair, a costume for the nativity play, and a school trip in January which we have to pay for before Christmas".*

### → Headspace and opportunities to support learning through play, shared activities and stimulation

One of the things that the families we met had in common is the relatively small number of settings that make up the backdrop to their lives - home, school or work, few after school activities and rare family outings. Overall, both parents and children seemed to enjoy little diversity of stimulation and experiences. The lack of money was mentioned as a factor that limits what children and parents do in their free time.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we heard that learning activities are the first to disappear when money is short. But, as some parents told us, stimulating and learning-rich activities do not always cost money. We also observed, particularly in some families, how stress, tiredness, everyday worries, and the lack of stimulation and excitement in the parent's own life, mean that they often don't have the headspace to create opportunities for quality time, play or learning activities with their children.

Having said this, parents shared with us lovely examples of their play/learn/nurturing interactions with their children:

Jackie saves up for her monthly 'date night' with 3 year old Theo...

*"He dresses up nice and takes me out on a date, we go out to eat. Then we come home and sit on the sofa together and watch Minions for the thousandth time. Even if I don't have the funds I will create the funds so we can go out on date night."*



...she and Theo share little routines like counting airplanes in the sky, racing to the house door on the way home from nursery, handing the key over to Theo to open the door.

Jasmine told us how she involves Maria in her exercise routine as an opportunity to learn to count:

*“Now she knows how to count. I do a work-out sometimes so she helps, counting my squats.”*

Luna said she tries to spend time with each of her children every week, learning about God. She will use this quality time to read some Church books and also to talk about what is happening in school and in her children’s lives, to nurture her connection and relationship with them.

*“It is important to do it one-to-one. We read about God and talk about what happened in their week, what is going on for them.”*

Angelica talked about how she is keen to let 18 month-old Gift explore the world:

*“I would like her to learn everything. Everything good. I would say that play is general learning, but not specific at her age. She is still a baby so everything is catchy to her. Everything seems to be attractive. She is trying to explore what this is, what that is.”*



### 3.8 'Save the Parent'

Being a parent is a difficult job, even at the best of times. Keeping up with the demands of work (or the search for work) and household tasks; striving to protect children from dangers and support them to thrive; comparing oneself to others who are perceived to be more accomplished parents; dealing with anxieties and concerns about children or family; managing sometimes difficult relationships between parents - all of this takes up lots of bandwidth, energy and resource. The opportunities for relaxation are not enough and 'treats' are rare, compared to life before children. Despite the challenges they faced and the anxiety of precariousness, the parents we met were resourceful, positive and hopeful about their children's future. They had aspirations for themselves, which at times got drowned out by the demands of everyday life, and they relied largely on their own resourcefulness and resilience to keep their family on track.

#### → Work, identity... and childcare

Work, or the absence of it, was unsurprisingly an important feature in our conversations with families about their lives. In one family, the dad's inability to find work after losing his job was impacting on his own and his family's wellbeing. One mum said she hated her job, but still, the few hours in the evening when she worked as a cleaner in the local school were the only time she had to herself, and so were, in a way, precious. Several mums talked about how difficult it is to find work that is compatible with their childcare responsibilities. Three working mums talked to us about their aspirations to continue their studies and develop a career different from what they were doing at the moment. However, for the time being, those felt more like remote aspirations than concrete prospects because they did not have the funds or time to pursue them.

Beverley, who used to work and is now a stay-at-home mum, shared with us the challenges of finding work while being the main carer for her small children:

*"It is to find a job that fits around childcare for Grace and then I've only really got school hours because of Tommy, then my mum works Tuesday and Friday, so it's quite hard to find a job for just a Tuesday and Friday! I did look at doing evenings, and I did apply for*

*a job at ASDA, but they only gave me 2 days notice for a training day so I couldn't get to it."*

Jackie told us about her desire to study to become a midwife and leave her job in a care home behind, but acknowledged that, in her current situation, this aspiration is a difficult one to realise:

*"I would like to go back to university and study midwifery. But how would I manage with Theo and work? I am not sure. I will decide by Monday. Monday is my 27th Birthday."*

Angelica had started to do a degree in nursing before having to stop when she became pregnant with Thomas, who is now 8 months old. She has a subscription to Nursing Times and talks about her aspirations for a career in nursing or research:

*"I like acquiring knowledge. What you learn, nobody can take that away from you. I read things on the internet and get a lot of information from there. One day I would like to do some research too, in infectious disease, or tropical disease. If I went back to Nigeria, I would like to help."*

#### → Just getting some sleep: a mum's greatest aspiration

When we asked the mums what they do to look after themselves and what is their definition of a treat, we heard that sleep and time on their own are what they most long for. Only two of the mums we talked to mentioned going out with friends or doing things other than staying in and going to sleep.

Beverley compared her lifestyle before the children with now:

*"I was always out before I had the kids. Always out. But now... I'm tired by 9."*

Luna told us about what she does when she has a bit of time to herself:

*"I go to bed to get time on my own. I lock myself away in my room. I might watch something but usually I just go to sleep".*



Jackie describes her notion of a treat:

*“I do literally nothing, not even put the TV on. I just want to do nothing. Make a nice slice of bread with butter and jam and do nothing. My favourite things are peace and quiet.”*

### → Asking for help is tough

We already talked about how the families’ networks of support were often restricted to a relatively small circle of trusted people; how self reliance was, by virtue or necessity, very important to some of the mums we talked to; how opening up to others felt difficult, either for fear either of a betrayal of trust or of being judged. All this means that asking for help is difficult - and for many of the mums we talked to - a last resort option. This has a cost in terms of wellbeing, both for individuals and for families.

Luna expressed her reluctance to ask for help from people around her:

*“I wouldn’t call someone else. I just feel like that is throwing all of your mess onto someone else.”*

### → Feeling like a good enough parent

The mums we talked to had different degrees of awareness and confidence about their parenting style, but it was clear that being a good parent was important to all of them. Many directly or indirectly compared themselves to other parents - within their family or in their circle of acquaintances. Some drew the foundation of their parenting from their own experience of being parented. Others were intentionally focusing on moving away from their parents’ ways. Although many mums talked about looking for and finding practical information on parenting online, the question of being a ‘good parent’ is more subtle and profound. It is not as easy to find help and reassurance on that front. Many of the mums we talked to do not have parents or partners who can share the weight of this question with them, help them to see and celebrate their achievements, put worries in perspective and reinforce their belief in themselves as a good enough parent.

Catherine thinks that Dom’s autism is the fault of her ‘crap parenting’.

*“My parenting style is crap. Would Dom really be the way he is if I was better?”*

Jackie shared her wisdom on parenting and the advice she would offer to other parents:

*“Just be the best you can, and be the best for your kid. And don’t compare your kids to other kids. Just let the boy do what he wants to do. Just let him be. That’s one of the biggest things I had to learn.”*

### → Help from services?

Most of the families we talked to were struggling in different ways, from coping with children’s special educational needs, being in debt, out of work, with mental health difficulties and, in one case, living in temporary accommodation with a small baby in hospital. However, they were ‘just about managing’ and so mostly not on the radar of services that could help them. Angelica’s situation was particularly difficult, and the limitations of her temporary accommodation impacted on the chances of her son Thomas coming home from hospital. Catherine struggled alone to cope with Dom’s autism. She told us that she had asked her GP for advice and looked for parenting courses but hadn’t found any.

## 4. Opportunities

In this final section we identify areas of opportunity arising from the key insights in this research. It is important to note that these are based on our observations of 8 families and should not be taken as blanket statements but rather revealing parallels. We have formulated a series of ‘How Might We?’ questions, setting out design challenges that Save the Children may want to explore and develop, going forward. Any further work would need to test, triangulate and build on the insights below.

### Challenge 1 - Parents do not engage in school life

Insights	How might we...?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some parents had negative experiences of school in their own youth</li> <li>• Few parents know their children’s teachers</li> <li>• Few mums engage with other parents in school</li> <li>• Parents don’t tend to get very involved in supporting their children with homework</li> <li>• Parents did not have much knowledge about the school curriculum and what their children were learning</li> <li>• Parents recognised the importance of education to do well in life, but felt that school learning was less important than ‘life learning’</li> <li>• Children in school used computers and the internet to do homework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help parents to become more familiar with the school curriculum?</li> <li>• Make it fun and easy for parents to help their children with homework?</li> <li>• Help schools to support parents to use digital technology more to support their children's learning?</li> </ul>

### Challenge 2 - Missed learning opportunities in the use of digital technology by children

Insights	How might we...?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Screens are often used as babysitters and children spend a significant amount of time in front of tablets, smartphones, television and Playstations</li> <li>• Children develop very quickly a strong proficiency with digital technology devices and are able to use them independently</li> <li>• Parents often don’t know where to find good digital content for their children to play with and learn from</li> <li>• Digital play is largely a lonely activity, with few parents engaging in digital play alongside their children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help parents to access high quality digital learning content that is age appropriate for their children?</li> <li>• Create more opportunities for parents and children to play educational games together using digital technology?</li> <li>• Build parents’ skills and confidence in using digital technology for learning?</li> </ul>

### Challenge 3 – Making digital technology work for parents

Insights	How might we...?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smartphones, apps and digital technology are prominent in people’s lives. They can play a helpful role, for example facilitating contact with friends and access to information, and also monopolise people’s time and attention in ways that are difficult to control</li> <li>People have a high level of trust for digital content, and the internet is the main source of information and learning for parents</li> <li>People trust the advice of peers and value anonymity, as it makes them feel more able to open up and seek help</li> <li>Parents often do not have hard and fast rules around the use of digital devices and may feel at a loss about how to control and direct their children’s behaviour in this space</li> <li>Parents are often themselves not in control of their digital technology use and admit being ‘addicted to their phones’ and sometimes feeling anxious as a result</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Help parents to access confidence-building support and reassurance via digital technology (reducing barriers to help-seeking through anonymity)</li> <li>Help parents have a healthy relationship with their digital devices?</li> <li>Help parents be more in control of the activities and content their children engage with through digital media?</li> </ul>

### Challenge 4 - Parents may underestimate their potential as ‘brain builders’ for their children

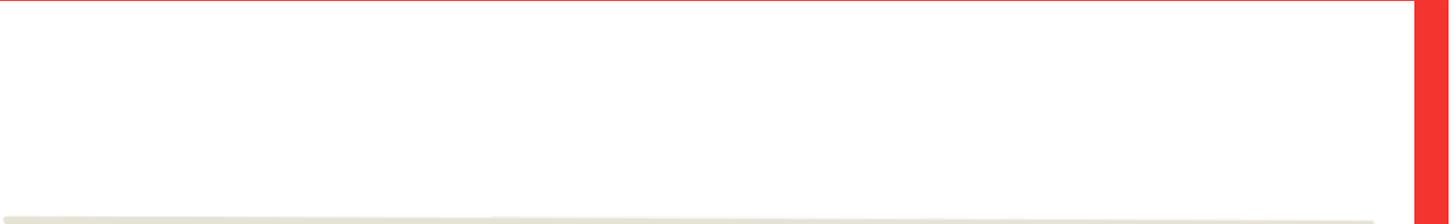
Insights	How might we...?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents seek information about parenting online, they value the wisdom of peers and the anonymity of the net</li> <li>Parents make a distinction between ‘school learning’ and ‘life learning’. They see their role more in the latter camp than in the former</li> <li>Mums tend to be far more involved in parenting and supporting their children’s learning than dads</li> <li>Poverty and precariousness can affect families’ ability to offer a range of different experiences to their children</li> <li>Stress, tiredness and anxiety impact on parents’ ability to spend quality time with their children and create opportunities for sharing learning and play activities</li> <li>Some families are very resourceful in creating quality time that nurtures parent-child relationships through routines and special moments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Help parents to access trusted and reliable information about parenting and child development?</li> <li>Create opportunities for parents to enjoy more affordable learning activities with their children?</li> <li>Help dads to be more involved in their children’s learning?</li> <li>Help parents understand the value of play and play more with their children?</li> </ul>

Challenge 5 - Being a parent is tough, especially when you experience precariousness and poverty

Insights	How might we...?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Precariousness creates stress and anxiety, which compound the natural anxieties that surround being a parent</li> <li>● Some people have very low confidence in their parenting style, they fear being judged and feel guilty for their supposed failings and have no one to support or advise them</li> <li>● For some people, parenthood is a quick and unexpected transition from 'all is fine' to 'hardly coping'</li> <li>● Some parents struggle with mental health issues, which may or may not be recognised, and are accentuated by the strain of poverty and precariousness</li> <li>● Parents have dreams and aspirations for their own lives and careers, which often get drowned by the need to keep on top of day-to-day family necessities</li> <li>● Dads are often absent from family life, and sometimes play an unhelpful and negative role in parenting</li> <li>● Parents struggle to find work that fits around childcare, without resorting to unsustainable working patterns - this is worst in single mother households</li> <li>● Some parents are isolated, have few friends and a very limited support network</li> <li>● Parents – especially mums – often don't have time or energy to spend on cultivating friendships and even on their couple relationship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Help parents access support that strengthens their confidence and makes them feel good about themselves?</li> <li>● Help parents - and especially mums - to find employment that is compatible with their childcare responsibilities?</li> <li>● Support parents to cultivate and realise their ambitions for their own future and career, while also keeping their family life on track through the challenges of precariousness?</li> <li>● Create support for dads to be at their best and positively engage in family life?</li> <li>● Help parents to support other parents?</li> <li>● Help parents – and especially mums – to invest time and energy in cultivating their relationships with friends and partners?</li> </ul>

Challenge 6 – Families spend a lot of time ‘stuck at home’ without much stimulation

<b>Insights</b>	<b>How might we...?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Many families live in homes that they feel are too small for them</li><li>• Some families’ homes are badly in need of repairs</li><li>• Few families have a garden</li><li>• Some parents don’t feel safe in their local areas and won’t go to their local park with their children</li><li>• Parents often lack the resources, time and energy to take their children on outings</li><li>• Children experience little diversity of settings in their routine, shuttling mainly from home to school and back</li><li>• Small spaces can limit the possibilities for creative play</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Help parents feel safer in their local communities?</li><li>• Collaborate with corporates to create affordable products to support play, learning and creativity in small spaces?</li></ul>



*With thanks to the families who opened their doors to our researchers and shared a snapshot of their lives with us and to the Save the Children Innovation team, for their enthusiastic contribution to analysis and insight generation in this research.*