

8

Kerry and the Food Bank



I don't usually talk to other people about my family having no money because I feel ashamed. Often it makes me very sad to think about it. It makes me feel different from my friends, so I often spend more and more time on my own. There are so many things I just can't do any more, like going on school trips, buying new things at the shops or having an ice cream in the café or buying my friends presents for their birthday. Some children laugh at you if your clothes are old and sometimes a bit crumpled and dirty. Sometimes I'm so angry about having no money that I could explode.

Me, Mum and my little brother Danny used to have a nice flat, but after Dad left, Mum couldn't pay the rent so we had to move. The first place was horrible. It was called Woodland House, but there were no woods that I could see and the view from the window was of an ugly lorry park. There were no shops or cafés or anywhere for children to play as the council had converted all the flats from a huge, out-of-town office block. Woodland House was miles from anywhere and we had such a long walk to the bus stop to get to school each morning. It was so cold in the winter that we had to spend a lot of time wrapped in blankets just to keep warm. And it was small. We didn't even have room for a table, so all our stuff was stacked on the floor in plastic bags. It was noisy too with people shouting and fighting right outside our door some nights. At least it was temporary, so after a few months we were rehoused in a proper flat which is much nicer and it is closer to school. But my mum still has hardly any money.

One afternoon after school Mum counted out all the money she had that day and told us there was just enough for some chips. When we arrived at the chippy, Mum said, "A large bag of chips please."

The man behind the counter said, "Do you want any fish then?"

Mum said, "No thanks. We're fine with chips."

But the man saw my look as I eyed the tasty fish in batter ready to be dropped into the fat. My mouth was watering at the sight of it. I couldn't believe it when he just popped a big fried fish into the bag of chips and handed it to my mum, who hadn't noticed. He gave me a big wink. When we got home, Mum was amazed, but I didn't tell her that maybe I had something to do with it. Anyway, we sat around with the fish and large helpings of chips and it was like a feast. Mum laughed for once and we all sat together eating and chatting. It was just like how we used to be before Mum stopped having any money.

But other nights weren't so good and we went to bed hungry. Our school has a breakfast club, so one morning I had big helpings of cereal and toast as I was starving!! Mrs Davies noticed that I was having second helpings of everything and she asked me if I was all right. As she is such a kind teacher, I decided to tell her the reason – that none of my family had any dinner the night before or the night before that – so my little brother and I were hungry. She looked very upset when she heard this. Later in the day, she said that she had written a letter to my mum



telling her about the food bank. I didn't know what a food bank was but thought that it sounded very exciting if it gave out food like a cashpoint at the bank.

When Mum read the letter, at first she was very angry, and started muttering things like "We don't need any charity, thank you very much," but after a while she said that we would give it a try. So, the next day, after school, we set off for the food bank. It was three miles from our flat! Walking there was fun as the sun was shining and we were so happy at the thought of having some food in the house. Walking back was a different story. Even though Mum carried the heaviest bags, Danny and I had to carry two bags each.

When it started to rain, Danny kept whining, "Mum, can't we get the bus?"

And she snapped back, "If we could afford the bus fare we wouldn't be going to the food bank, would we?"

So that was that.

The next time we went to the food bank I met a girl from my class, so I realized that we are not the only family with problems. We have been able to talk about it a bit and it is great to be with someone who really knows what it is like to have no money. The food bank has a café with a play area, so we have enjoyed being with each other there. It is lovely and warm, and the helpers are very friendly.

Now that we are living nearer to the centre of town it will be easier for Mum to find a job. Soon she is going to work as an office cleaner two evenings a week so perhaps things will get better for us. That's my dream!!



TEACHER'S NOTES

Lesson objectives

- ◇ To introduce pupils to the issue of children who live in poverty and to help them feel some empathy for what that must be like for a child.

Fact file

One-fifth of UK families live in poverty. The UK government's most recent poverty figures show that more than 4 million children are growing up in poverty, a rise of 500,000 over five years. The outcomes for children living in poverty are serious, with a high risk of poorer mental health, wellbeing and physical health, underachievement at school, and experience of bullying and stigma at school. Two-thirds of children living in poverty are in working families.

Austerity measures affecting families have had a particularly detrimental impact on the children. For example, parents on zero-hours contracts, people in the gig economy and people working in two or three different jobs are often not able to earn enough money to look after their children in the ways that they would like. Schools often provide clothes and food for children so that they can get through the day.

Help and support for children and young people

A range of organizations provide important services for children living in poverty. For example, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) provides up-to-date information. JRF funds research projects to document the extent of child poverty in the UK and makes strong, evidence-based policy recommendations to the government. The Trussell Trust supports a nationwide network of food banks that provide emergency food and support to individuals and families locked in poverty. The Trust also campaigns for change to end the need for food banks in the UK. Between April 2018 and March 2019, the Trussell Trust distributed a record 1.6 million food bank parcels. The Children's Society campaigns to ensure that every local council adequately funds emergency support for families desperate for support at a time of crisis. Schools and churches also play an important role in helping families living in poverty through provision of breakfast clubs and school lunches.

In the story, Kerry was very upset by the change in her family's circumstances after they had to leave their home because her mother could not pay the rent. Encouraged by the kindness of the man behind the counter in the chip shop, she confided in her teacher, who was able to put the family in touch with the local food bank. There, the volunteers would provide not only food but also advice and



information to Kerry's mum. Meanwhile, the school was able to provide Kerry and her brother with breakfast and free lunches.

Comprehension activities

1. How did Kerry feel when her mum said that they had little money for food?
2. What did Kerry think of Woodland House?
3. Why do you think that her mum did not want to go to the food bank at first?
4. What steps did Kerry take to ensure that the family had enough to eat?

Further activities

1. There are some case studies on the Trussell Trust website, e.g. *Sarah's Story* and *Marcella's Story* (www.trusselltrust.org), which show what a food bank is like. Working in small groups, brainstorm ways to make the food bank more welcoming and friendly for children.
2. Kerry hated living in Woodland House. Working in pairs or small groups, on a large piece of paper, plan a design to make Woodland House more suitable for families to live in. Think about the inside of the flats (heating, cooking, bathrooms, storage) as well as the environment outside (gardens, play areas, transport facilities). Once the task is finished, each group should put their design up on the wall and present their plans to the whole class.



RESOURCES

Books and articles

Hudson, K. (2019) *Lowborn*. London: Chatto & Windus.

In this book, Kerry Hudson vividly describes what it is like to live in poverty as she revisits, as an adult, the places where she grew up. As a child, she was constantly on the move with her single mother, living in bed and breakfast accommodation and council flats, and consequently attending nine primary schools and five secondary schools.

Rhodes, E. (2019) "From poverty to flourishing." *The Psychologist*, December, 10–11.

Websites

Joseph Rowntree Foundation www.jrf.org.uk

Joseph Rowntree Foundation's (2016) publication "Growing up in poverty detrimental to children's friendships and family life" (www.jrf.org.uk/press/growing-poverty-detrimental-childrens-friendships-and-family-life) proposes that children who experience poverty are more likely to have problems with relationships, including an increased likelihood of being bullied and fighting with their friends, and having less communicative relationships with friends and family. These problems have an impact on how well children perform at school and their likelihood of finding a way out of poverty as adults.

JRF also found that children who have experienced poverty, particularly persistent poverty, are:

More likely to be solitary. More than a third of children in persistent poverty were described as tending to play alone, compared to a quarter of children who have never experienced poverty.

Three times as likely to fall out with their friends "most days" (9% of children in persistent poverty compared to 3% of those who had never experienced poverty).

Four times more likely to fight with or bully other children (16% of those in persistent poverty, compared to 4% of those who had never been poor). They are also more than twice as likely to report being bullied frequently themselves (12% compared to 5% of the never poor).

Less likely to talk to their friends about their worries (34% of those in persistent poverty, compared to 43% of the never poor).

More likely to spend time with their friends outside school. Half of children (50%) in persistent poverty say they see their friends outside school most days, compared with a third (35%) of children who had never been in poverty.

The Children's Society www.childrenssociety.org.uk

This charity aims to fight child poverty and neglect and help all children have a better chance in life. According to their definition, a child is said to be living in poverty when they are living in a family with an income below 60 per cent of the UK's average after adjusting for family size. Almost two-thirds of children living in poverty have at least one parent in work. This shows that, for many, work simply isn't paying enough for parents to provide for their children. As they indicate, parents living in poverty are skipping meals

so they can afford to feed their children, and in winter many families are forced to make the impossible choice between feeding their children or heating their homes. Low wages make it difficult for families to escape poverty and it is even harder when at the same time the prices of everyday essentials like food and fuel are rising.

The Trussell Trust www.trusselltrust.org

The Trussell Trust aims to end hunger and poverty in the UK. Its annual report paints a stark picture of what poverty means for daily life. People on low incomes spend more of their income compared to the average on essentials – food, utilities, rent, bus fares and so on. When they are swept into deeper poverty, they are often forced to cut back the food budget. Many of these families also go without other essentials and are excluded from opportunities to learn, to enjoy life and to improve their prospects. To release children and families from this situation, the Trussell Trust argues that we need to redesign the systems that trap them there, such as housing and labour markets and social security systems. The report indicates key successful steps to begin this process.