

# Parenting in Poverty

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By **Bobbi Dempsey**

June 20, 2019

An uncomfortable feeling of déjà vu hit me as I watched a recent episode of a TV show about a single mom trying to survive in poverty.

I grew up a welfare kid, literally on public assistance from the day I was born until the day I graduated from high school. I knew all of the intricacies of programs like SNAP, commonly known as food stamps, by the time I was halfway through grade school.

Watching the Showtime show “SMILF,” I could almost physically feel the desperation and hopelessness of the main character, Bridgette, as she turns to public assistance to help feed herself and her young son. Relieved at being approved for SNAP benefits, she heads to the grocery store with her new electronic benefit transfer, or E.B.T., card.

Giddy with excitement, she strolls through the aisles, tossing anything that catches her fancy into the shopping cart.

This is where it immediately became obvious to me that Bridgette didn’t grow up in the system, as she seemed oblivious to the myriad rules and restrictions dictating what you can and cannot buy with SNAP benefits. Watching her throw some off-limits items into the cart with abandon, I started yelling at the screen, “You can’t get that! It’s not allowed.”

Indeed, she gets a harsh reality check when the cashier informs her that many of the things she wants to buy — even mundane items like tampons and paper towels — cannot be purchased with SNAP.

You might think that any nutritious food would be covered, but that would be wrong, too. Federal rules also prohibit the use of SNAP to buy hot food items, such as cooked chicken or seafood. This also includes beverages like coffee or tea when they are sold hot. Alcoholic beverages, low-alcohol beers promoted as “nonalcoholic,” and foods containing alcohol are banned, too, as are vitamins and similar dietary supplements.

Virtually all nonfood items are on the prohibited list. This includes cleaning supplies, soaps and other hygiene items, paper products and clothing. There are a few very specific exceptions, such as garden seeds used to produce foods for human consumption.

In the TV episode, Bridgette later assures her young son that they will have more money once she gets a good job. They daydream about a day when they will be able to buy a pony.

The scenes struck a chord with me. I’m a mom — although I have never been a single one — and have spent a large chunk of my life struggling to survive financially and desperately trying to overcome the huge disadvantage that comes with being born into severe poverty. Not only was I a food stamps kid, I was also occasionally a food stamps mom — thankfully for only brief periods during a medical crisis or unexpected job loss.

I am far too familiar with the seemingly endless array of indignities and flavors of shame that come with living in poverty. You get dirty glances for looking poor — but are also judged if you look “too rich,” by wearing something an observer deems too nice for someone on public assistance. Everything you buy or eat in view of others is up for public scrutiny and unwanted commentary.

This is especially true when you are forced to rely upon government assistance programs that are a lightning rod of controversy, attracting lots of heated opinions, along with plenty of judgment, shaming and personal attacks. Indeed, many comments on a recent report finding that almost half of the student population at community and public colleges had faced food insecurity reflected similar judgment.

During the course of my childhood, I had more embarrassing encounters at the grocery store checkout than I could count.

Today, people who receive SNAP benefits use an electronic benefit transfer card, which potentially enables them to blend in. But the version used by my state, Pennsylvania, has a distinctive design that makes it easy to spot from a distance.

That's still a vast improvement over the old system, where you had to tear food stamp coupons out of a paper booklet when you wanted to pay for your items. Trying to be inconspicuous while you did this was almost impossible. Cashiers were allowed to refuse loose coupons that had already been removed from the booklet, so you were forced to complete the painstaking process of ripping the coupons out one by one while other people around you watched. Even worse was if one of your friends from school spotted you paying for something at the store using those dreaded food stamps.

Bridgette is a fictional character, but her challenges are very familiar for many low-income parents trying to keep their heads above water.

Raising children can be tough for anyone. For parents living in poverty, it's compounded by the worry of trying to stall an inevitable eviction, or the panic that the power will be shut off at any moment. And even if you are stable enough to avoid that kind of drama, poverty often carries with it daily disappointments and embarrassing experiences.

I never went to birthday parties as a kid because I couldn't afford to buy a gift. I would "get sick" and have to stay home on field trip days because I couldn't afford the cost of the trip itself, let alone bringing spending money for any souvenirs or food. Joining any activity that involved dues to pay or uniforms to buy would have been inconceivable.

An increasingly thin, shredding safety net means there are more families in a permanent state of dire straits.

While the new plastic card may spare those families some shame, it can be difficult to reconcile that buying non-luxuries like toilet paper, tampons or a supermarket rotisserie chicken may be just as wild a fantasy as getting a child a pony.

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