

Children in Poverty: Causes, Consequences, and Beating the Odds

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Characterizing Children in Poverty

- In 2001, one child in 6 (11.7 million children) was living in poverty.³
- Among all children whose families enter poverty, 15% will remain in poverty for 10 years or more.
- Minority children were more than twice as likely to live in poverty than Whites in 2001.³
- The number of children living in extreme poverty (less than 50% of the poverty line) dropped between 1993 and 2001, but the rates are no longer on the decline. These children suffer the greatest hardships because their families are less likely than other struggling families to utilize community assistance and social programs.³
- Among developed countries, the United States has higher child poverty rates than: Sweden, France, Germany, Australia, Canada, and the U.K.³

There are multiple contributors to poor outcomes for children in poverty.

Many of the issues facing these children are linked to parent education level, age, and marital status, along with neighborhood and race/ethnicity. Researchers have identified five ways that poverty operates, or ways in which various factors, in combination with income, result in poor child outcomes.¹

- **Poverty-related health problems** such as low birth weight, increased lead levels, anemia, and recurrent ear infections may account for a significant part of the cognitive and behavioral problems in poor children.
- The **home environment**, including educational stimulation, the condition of the home itself, and the warmth of parent-child interactions have also been shown to impact cognitive development.
- Specific **parenting practices** such as spanking and authoritarian parenting may contribute

to poor educational outcomes, behavior problems, etc.

- **Parent mental health** has been shown to reduce positive parent-child interactions and educational stimuli in the home. Poor mental health may also lead to a more conflictual home environment, particularly when children enter adolescence.
- **Living in poor neighborhoods** (which may be characterized by high levels of crime and unemployment), reduce the educational experiences presented in the home (more than individual parenting practices) and, therefore, impact cognitive development in children.

Academic Outcomes

Compared to children in homes with higher income or in which parents are unemployed, children in working poor families fare worse in a number of areas, including:

- Schools are less likely to identify them as academically “gifted.”⁷

- They are more likely to repeat a grade in school.⁷
- They are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities.⁷
- They are slightly more likely to suffer from developmental delays and learning disabilities than children who are not living in poverty.¹

Health Outcomes

- White women who experience poverty over many years are more than three times more likely to deliver a low birth weight baby than women who are not poor.¹
- Children who are born into poverty are more likely to die in their first month than those born into higher income families.^{1, 3}
- Children who experience poverty during the first 3 years of life show substandard nutrition, higher rates of chronic illness (e.g., asthma), and poor motor skills.³

Behavioral Outcomes

- Prolonged poverty during childhood often shows itself in the form of internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety, depression, and unhappiness.^{1,3}
- Poverty in the present manifests in externalizing behaviors, such as aggression and fighting in children.^{1,3}

There are many federal agencies that have been established to address the basic health and nutritional needs of infants and toddlers in poverty.²

- Women Infants and Children (WIC) serves 8 million people each month, meeting nutritional and other needs.
- Early Head Start combines home visits, center-based experiences, and family support for children ages birth – 5.
- However, there are few programs that work with parents to ensure that children’s earliest relationships are nurturing and healthy and therefore provide them with the best chance to be emotionally well-adjusted.

Despite a lack of federal programming and support, children in poverty often succeed, given the right family and community support.

In spite of the many challenges low-income children face, factors in their personalities, family systems, and environment can serve to buffer the negative effects of poverty. Family and environmental factors may be most relevant for intervention, as personality cannot be taught or changed.^{4, 5}

Children who overcome the negative effects of poverty often come from families in which:

- The mother is younger (for

boys) and the father is older (for girls).

- There are four or fewer children in the family spaced more than 2 years apart.
- There is focused nurturing during the first year of life and little prolonged separation from the primary caretaker.
- There is an array of alternative caretakers – grandparents, siblings, neighbors – who step in when parents are not consistently present.
- There is a multiage network of kin who share similar values and beliefs and to whom the at-risk youths can turn for counsel and support.
- A sibling caretaker or other young person is available to serve as a confidant.
- The household has structure and rules during adolescence despite poverty and stress.

Successful children also utilize their environment to:

- Connect themselves to mentors outside the family for support and guidance.
- Pursue help from others, even in the face of rejection.

Counselors and other specialists can improve the family environment by teaching parents basic principles of successful child development. For example:

- Children thrive in a family environment where they feel loved, where love is verbalized regularly, and where love is not withdrawn as a punishment.
- Parents need to learn how to listen to their children's concerns and be responsive to their needs.
- Stability is a key component of resiliency in children. Parents who are riddled with anxiety may allow emotions to dominate their parenting practices. Creating a plan for setting expectations and implementing discipline may help create consistency.
- Despite long hours of paid labor, parents need to prioritize family and seek assistance from family and neighbors to improve the care and support children receive.

Particularly for children born into poverty, early positive experiences can buffer the effects of their impoverished environment.⁶ Specifically, infants and toddlers show improved outcomes when parents:

- Enjoy the child and provide lots of close, physical contact.
- Are responsive to verbal and nonverbal signals from the baby.
- Use toys and pictures for stimulation.

- Encourage exploration of the environment.
- Provide organized, consistent, nurturing, and stimulating care.
- Feel confident about their parenting abilities.

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