The Effect of Poverty on Children’s Development

English for Social Science

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Economic hardships and setbacks can have significant effects on children’s development. Children who are financially challenged are at risk to a harmful cognitive development; leading to behavioral, social, and emotional problems and health conditions (Ten Important Questions About Child Poverty and Family Economic Hardship, n.d.). As a result, to these negative problems, children can struggle in their future academic achievement, employment and health (Ten Important Questions About Child Poverty and Family Economic Hardship, n.d.). To what extend does poverty affect a child’s development? This analysis aims to explore the degree to which a child’s future endeavors is determined by their family’s financial struggles.

In the United States, 41% of all children come from a low-income family. The other 59% is just above the poverty threshold (Basic Facts about Low-Income Children under 18 Years, 2016, 2018). Research confirms that a family of four needs to have an annual income of $40,000 to meet their necessities, however, this may vary depending on factors such as the local cost of living and family size (Knitzer, J. 2007). On average, most low-income families earn $20,000 annually, forecasting negative relationships and environments the children of these families are a at risk of. Data shows that 79% of students that attend low-performing schools face poverty (Ripke, Crosby, 2002). Factors that come from the lack of a suitable income detain children from thriving and flourishing into productive adults. (Knitzer, J. 2007). Low-income children don’t have access to the same quality of resources that high-income parents tend to provide for their kids. These can include: a quality home & community, health care, early learning programs, & child care (Ripke, Crosby, 2002). In addition, low-income children may struggle from health conditions such as malnutrition because of the gap in the quality of health care available to low- and high-income families. A lack of home stability, safe community, and inadequate schooling further contributes to their at-risk condition (Ripke, Crosby, 2002). All of these factors negatively correlate to children’s cognitive development which eventually will trifle their future success and development.

The relationships of primary caregivers with their infants further expand on the connection between brain development and an infants’ experiences. When the caregiver, provides nurturance and stability, young children will thrive. However, the absence of the caregiver, can contribute to the delay in learning social & emotional skills as an infant (Knitzer, 2007). The younger the child, the more likely they are to experience trauma when exposed to harmful environments, abandonment, and inconsistent caregiving (Knitzer, 2007). About 55% of these low-income children have parents that work full time, 52 weeks a year and even when working more hours, their parents are still not making ends meet (Knitzer, 2007). As a result of working 40 or more hours, children are deprived of proper child care, for instances, nurturance and support that is needed for proper development.

Socioeconomic difficulties have been linked with children’s learning abilities and academic performances that later predicts their future productivity and prosperity (Knitzer, 2007). Several meta-analysis researches have proven that there is a direct linear relationship between the family’s income and children’s success rates (Knitzer, 2007). Low-income children perform worse academically than children with a higher income family because privilege children receive proper nourishment, and early learning programs at a premature age that creates a learning gap for the two-social class. (Ripke, Crosby, 2002) A longitudinal study analyzed by economists has shown that overall, children given good quality care, attention, education and had attentive parents, developed higher IQ’s in the following years and by age 21 were less likely to drop out of school, participate in crime and violent activities, be unemployed and more likely to enroll in a 4-year college. (Knitzer, 2007). This example portrays that higher income children are more likely to develop well and become more successful than low-income children due the resources given at an early age. There is a positive correlation between children with low problem-solving skills & critical analysis and low socioeconomic status (Knitzer, 2007).

The early years during infancy are the most crucial; a combination of earliest experiences and genetics hardwire their brain to shape their personality throughout their lifespan (Knitzer, 2007) Early brain development affects mental health as well as physical health (Knitzer, 2007). A study that provides supporting evidence on the cause of children’s cognitive development, defined their participants as children younger than three years old, “Because children's first three years of life are a "sensitive period" during which their experiences are important for development” (Williamson, Salkie, Letourneau, 2005 P.3). At a point of young children’s development, there is a stage where a child is most responsive to certain stimulus, enabling them to adapt and quickly learn a particular skill. The presence or absences of a skill can deeply influences the overall development of an individual. (Bornstein, 1989) Not only will experiences shape them but their nutrition as well, receiving poor nourishment at the brain’s vital formation years because of economic deprivation, relates to lack of critical thinking and retention of information in the child’s following years. (Ripke, Crosby, 2002) A poor diet is link with having low test scores, vocabulary comprehension, and mathematic skills (Ripke, Crosby, 2002). Children’s early experiences are critical to their cognitive development into their adult lives. Once brain circuits are formed, it is difficult to rewire them. (Knitzer, 2007) As a child grows older it becomes harder to correct them and even more challenging when they are adolescents and then, adults (Knitzer, 2007). If a child does not retain and develop the social and emotional skills to advance in their early ages, they are more likely to have difficulties learning it later on (Knitzer, 2007). The inability to obtain these skills causes complications such as high levels of stress, diabetes, and substance abuse. (Knitzer, 2007)

Years of research have proven that the increase of income in a financially challenged family, positively improves a child’s development (Knitzer, 2007). Welfare programs greatly benefits families and proves the importance of income. The aid has shown an increase in academic success and school readiness in young children (Knitzer, 2007). In a conducted study of bivariate and multivariate analyses, researchers examined the relationship of three variable: caregiver’s activity, household income, and guardian’s education to the cognitive development of young children in in the welfare programs. (Williamson, Salkie, Letourneau, 2005). The results strengthened the association between the household income and the child’s cognitive development. The research also reinforces that “the cognitive development of young children is influenced as much by the actual amount of household income as by their parents' activity” (Williamson, Salkie, Letourneau, 2005 P.5). This further emphasizes how crucial the development of meaningful and healthy relationships is for infants’ cognitive development and how income can contribute to the quality of these relationships. Other studies have examined that when receiving welfare, children’s achievement differed based on their poverty levels (Ripke, Crosby, 2002) On the other hand, welfare programs that only increase levels of employment and not the income have shown to have little to no effects on children, as well as when welfare stops funding families; the data shows that the inconsistency of income adversely affects children. (Knitzer, 2007).

Research has demonstrated that child poverty has created numerous effects that gives insight to children’s success in their adulthood. Being born into a low financial status deprives one from reaching their potential because of the deficiency of resources that enhance cognitive development. In the contrary, privileged children that have access to fortunate living environment, nourishment, and early education programs, have the potential for greater cognitive development when compared to low-income children that don’t receive the same support and assistance. However, with government aids as an alternative for providing low-income families with higher income to prosper their children, it shows that raising families earning positively affects the development of a child. Children’s cognitive development is fundamental, the way they perceive, process, make decisions, solve-problems and reaction leads to the destination they head for in life.

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