

# Healthy Child Development and the Critical Role of Prevention Science

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Most children in poverty fare reasonably well. However, a substantial proportion of children growing up in poverty suffer adverse consequences that undermine healthy child development. Conditions of poverty elevate children's risks for numerous undesirable outcomes. It is now estimated that 37% of all children will experience a child protective services investigation of some kind by age 18 years (Kim et al., 2017), which is much larger than originally thought. The key consideration is that children growing up in poverty are considerably over-represented among that 37% group.

Children residing in poverty are at increased risk for health-related problems such as neonatal and infant mortality, injuries from accidents of child abuse/neglect, asthma and other disorders, toxic lead exposure, and adverse impact on brain development during early childhood. The children are also at risk for developmental delays, lower school readiness, lower academic achievement, higher incidence of emotional and behavioral problems, child maltreatment, high-school dropout, teen parenthood, and exposure to domestic and/or neighborhood violence. Children in poverty experience higher levels of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which elevates risk for general medical disorders in adulthood, and for suicide, substance use, and mental health problems across the lifespan.

The broad interdisciplinary field of prevention science has been accruing evidence on programs and policies that can help. An overriding goal of prevention is prevalence reduction. A 2009 report from the Institute of Medicine entitled "Preventing Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People" endorsed the adoption of a population health perspective, with an eye towards providing families and communities with easy access to evidence-based preventive interventions that minimize stigma and maximize reach. There are many areas of evidence-based prevention including but not limited to infant health, efficacious parenting, child maltreatment, early childhood education, language and literacy development, childhood obesity, physical activity and nutrition, delinquency and violence, youth substance use, teen parenthood, cyber-bullying, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), school dropout, and victimization.

Two areas illustrate the progress being made by many applications of prevention. In the parenting and family support area, home visitation has shown positive outcomes for mothers and their offspring, as illustrated by the Nurse-Family Partnership for first-time mothers in poverty. Evidence-based parenting support has shown a number of advantages for families and communities, as exemplified by several programs such as the Incredible Years (for group support of parents), Triple P (for multi-level community-wide implementation), and Strengthening Families (for school-delivered programming aimed at parents of young teens). In addition to improvement of the human condition, programs such as these are cost effective. For example, parenting-based prevention of child maltreatment has shown a \$7.48 return on each dollar invested, and parenting support to prevent teen substance abuse has shown \$5.00 return on the dollar (Washington State Institute for Public Policy).

In the classroom area, the PAX Good Behavior Game has shown short-term (increased self-regulation, prosocial interactions; reduced disruptive/aggressive behavior) and long-term (academic performance; reduction in substance abuse and delinquent behavior) outcomes.

There are many evidence-based policies that either directly impact poverty (e.g., tax credits, employment training/placement) or indirectly impact poverty (e.g., quality early childhood education, healthcare access).

Research on prevention has been building for multiple decades. There is now a large and varied arsenal of evidence-supported programs and policies. Prevention strategies to improve the lives of children and their families are available touching on many sectors of the community and addressing a broad array of environmental facets impacting children experiencing the adversities of poverty. The national Prevention Science Coalition to Improve Lives is continuing in its work to compile a compendium of evidence and strategies from prevention science and to assist policy-makers.

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