

Poverty, Family Stress & Parenting

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Be careful what you give children, for sooner or later you are sure to get it back.

-- Barbara Kingsolver

The experience of long-term poverty affects a child's personality development, through a family stress process in which poverty is considered to be one of the major factors. This causes family dysfunction, stress among caregivers and inadequate parenting.

According to the World Bank estimates in 2003, there were 1.2 billion out of the developing world's 4.8 billion people living on \$1 per day, while another 2.8 billion are living on less than \$2 per day.

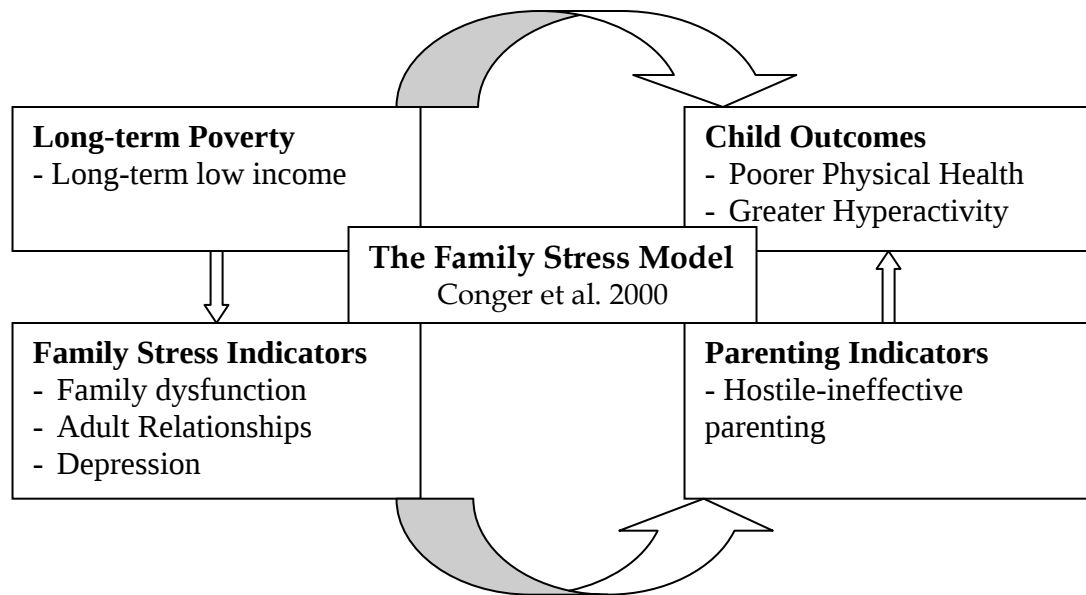
Many factors contribute to family poverty including underemployment and unemployment. Some may 'inherit' poverty because of being born into a particular social group defined by race, class and location. Families who constitute the 'working group' may have one or both parents working at or near the minimum wage.

The findings of a research done by Zaslow & Eldred (1998) provide strong support for the view that parenting is important to children's development, as are influences from the children's larger social context.

Impacts of poverty

The 'Family Stress Model' (Conger et al. 2000) proposes that the experience of poverty is one of the more important factors that can put severe strains on spousal relationships, bring about feelings of depression and increasing family dysfunction.

According to the 'Family Stress Model' family contributes to emotional distress (e.g. depression) and family dysfunction. Family distress causes problems in the relationship between adults that are, in turn, linked to less effective parenting – a complex notion that involves insufficient surveillance, lack of control over the child's behavior, lack of warmth and support, inconsistency, and displays of aggression or hostility by parents or older siblings.



Overall there could be following three impacts of poverty on parents and children (McClelland, 2000):

1. Hardship and stress.
2. Isolation and exclusion.
3. Longer-term impacts as adults

a) Hardship & stress

People with inadequate income typically give accounts of their difficulties in meeting basic costs, including struggling to pay for food, accommodation, clothing, education, health care, utilities, transport and recreation and trying to balance competing demands.

The harmful impact of poverty on parents and children comes from the stress and alienation connected with having a very low income; the continual juggling of finances, financial uncertainty in some cases and very often the sense of being different and less worthwhile. For children, the impact of stress and unhappiness may be direct and indirect through the parents' experiences and behavior.

b) Isolation & exclusion

Homelessness is perhaps the extreme manifestation of isolation and stress for children arising from the combination of low income and housing difficulties.

In poor families children could feel homelessness due to lack of parents' attention. Because poverty is blocking the ways of parents to perform the role of good parenting. In most of the poor families, usually both mother and father work for the survival.

Taylor & Macdonald (1998) found that at age six, the children in families of low incomes had more isolated lives in that they were significantly less likely than other children to:

- Live in a good neighborhood.
- Play with friends away from school.
- Be involved in sport and music.
- Be involved in any formal activities.
- Go on holiday.

c) Longer-term impacts

Family poverty and low socio-economic status are consistently related to poorer school performance and low school retention rates. Young people from low socio-economic backgrounds are early school leavers. Those with low achievement at school are more likely to be unemployed, out of the labor market, in part-time employment (McClelland et al. 1998).

In extremely poor conditions parents willingly induce their children in to the labor market which exposes children to many risks, such as sexual and physical abuse.

Conclusions

Economically deprived parents struggle for the survival of their families. They are often unable to pay attention to the importance of parental care. Therefore, the children in poor families usually miss the personality development teachings from their first learning institution the family.

Lack of parents' attention, especially in early childhood years, could negatively impact the child's personality and therefore their future in the long run.

Poverty has been found as a major barrier, which has blocked the way of parents to perform their parental duties with full attention. Furthermore, economic deprivation leads to depression and stress in the parents and ultimately dysfunction of the family. So, parents stress directly affects the children as well.

Recommendations

If child's upbringing fails, both the child and the society will suffer a great deal of pain and trouble. Therefore, there is a need to start focusing on poverty and lack of parental training.

First, for poverty alleviation state parties should generate more employment opportunities. Also there could be a possibility of providing small loans (micro-credit) to the poor families, which help them to establish their own enterprises.

Zaslow & Eldred (1998) found in a study that there is need of parenting education to improve the academic and social performance of children.

Secondly, Parental training is of importance, but it can not be done in isolation. Sleek & Staff (1998) found in a research that, 'improved parenting can lead to better child outcomes, but only if other needs in a family's life are also addressed.'

Also educating mothers about parenting is of great important and previous studies have found following changes in the mothers after parenting education:

- Mothers become more emotionally supportive and warm toward their children.
- Mothers spend more time on specific parenting chores, such as dressing, feeding and bathing.

References

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