

Succeeding despite the obstacles: Closing the education gap for children in poverty

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Facts about childhood poverty

- The federal poverty level was defined in 1965 as the cost of a minimum diet multiplied by 3, adjusted for family size. In 2013, the federal poverty level for a family of four is \$23,550.
 - On average, families need an income of twice the federal poverty level to meet basic living needs.
- In 2012, nearly 16 million children in the United States were living below the federal poverty level.
 - The poverty rate is higher among families with young children (25% for 2-5 year olds compared to 22% for 6-11 year olds in 2011)
 - The poverty rate is higher among ethnic minority children (39% for African Americans, 34% for Hispanics, 36% for American Indian/Alaska Natives in 2011).
- More than half of children living below the federal poverty level have at least one parent member who is working full-time.

Childhood poverty and academic achievement

- Experiences of poverty during childhood, especially during early childhood, are a potent predictor of academic failure.
- Children in poverty are four times as likely to drop out before graduating from high school.
- Economic disparities in academic achievement start early and widen over time.
- Economic disparities account for most of the race/ethnic gap in academic achievement.

Risk factors for poor academic achievement among children living in poverty

- Many of the conditions associated with poverty operate through the proximity of the home environment.
 - Low income households have fewer books and other resources to stimulate cognitive development.
 - The stresses of poverty affect the quality of the parent-child relationship. Low income parents are more likely to engage in harsh, inconsistent discipline.
- Poverty affects academic achievement through a wide range of domains.
 - Children living in poverty are more likely to experience hunger and other chronic health conditions that affect school attendance and academic achievement.
 - Children living in poverty are more likely to live in neighborhoods characterized by few resources and poor schools.

Factors contributing to resilience among children living in poverty

- Many low income/poor families have strengths.
 - Most low income parents engage in positive interactions with their children.
 - Most low income parents strongly endorse the importance of education.
- Communities can also provide important sources of resilience for low income families.

How can we intervene to close gaps in academic achievement associated with poverty?

- Intervention efforts must be targeted at all levels: child/family, community, and policy
- Child/family interventions:
 - High quality preschool works.
- Community interventions
 - Community-wide interventions have the potential for reaching the largest number of families and children.
 - Improving neighborhood resources and schools is an important component of efforts to improve academic achievement for all children.
- Policy interventions
 - Household income matters. Increasing family incomes through job creation, increasing minimum wages, etc., will improve outcomes for children.
 - Child nutrition programs (WIC, National School Lunch Program) have the added benefit of contributing to improved academic achievement.
 - Access to high quality preschool and pre-kindergarten programs should be expanded.

Resources – Facts about children in poverty:

National Center for Children in Poverty: www.nccp.org

Annie E. Casey, Kids Count Data Center: www.datacenter.kidscount.org

Child Trends Databank: www.childtrends.databank.org

Kaiser Family Foundation: www.kff.org (excellent source of information on health insurance coverage, Medicaid and Medicare, and the implementation of the Affordable Care Act)

Center for Public Policy Priorities: www.cccp.org (Texas-specific)

Children at Risk: www.childrenatrisk.org (Texas-specific; based in Houston but expanded to North Texas in 2008)

Corporation for National & Community Service, United We Serve toolkits:

<http://www.serve.gov/toolkits.asp>

A Place at the Table (action for food insecurity): <http://www.takepart.com/place-at-the-table>

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