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](http://www.nccp.org)
Annie E. Casey, Kids Count Data Center: [www.datacenter.kidscount.org](http://www.datacenter.kidscount.org)
Child Trends Databank: [www.childtrendsdatabank.org](http://www.childtrendsdatabank.org)
Kaiser Family Foundation: [www.kff.org](http://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](http://www.cccp.org) (Texas-specific)
Children at Risk: [www.childrenatrisk.org](http://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](http://www.serve.gov/toolkits.asp)
A Place at the Table (action for food insecurity): [http://www.takepart.com/place-at-the-table](http://www.takepart.com/place-at-the-table)

References: