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When it Comes to Kids,
Poverty Matters



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When it Comes to Kids, Poverty Matters

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Research commonly shows that poverty is one of the greatest risk factors for children, with links to poor academic performance, mental illness, teen pregnancy, drug use, and just about any other child or teen problem you can think of. Effects are stronger the longer children are exposed to the conditions of poverty, and young children are more negatively influenced than their older peers. Poverty effects are particularly negative in combination with other childhood risk factors (e.g. single parenthood, parental substance abuse, living in a dangerous neighborhood).

Issues of childhood poverty gain urgency for Idaho families in the midst of the current economic downturn. Even before the recession, many families experienced chronic economic insecurity in Idaho communities (Annoshian, 2004). Economic shortfall begins in the early stages of family life, as many Idaho young adults marry and have children before getting the education required for living wage work in today's economy (Shaklee & Brown, 2005).

Studies show that Idaho families are feeling the pain in the current recession, with 38% of households reporting reduced hours at work, and 26% with a family member laid off from work. Unemployment is higher for males than for females, and long term unemployment has been a strong pattern for this recession. With income loss on this scale, families are cutting back even on the basics, and home foreclosures are

becoming common in many Idaho communities. For details on these trends, see the Idaho Kids Count series, *Small Faces in a Big Recession* (Berning & Ames, 2009; Shaklee & Brown, 2009). These trends suggest that the current economic conditions in Idaho are stressing Idaho families and putting children at risk.

While studies consistently show that poverty puts children at risk, we might wonder what makes poverty such a problem. Do inadequate diet and limited access to health care combine to undermine children's health and their ability to grow and learn? Are poverty-level families unable to give their children the opportunities that can put them on the road to success? Maybe poor children are turned off by the inequity they see around them, turning their back on the system that left them with so few resources. Or do the daily challenges of life overstress poverty level parents, leaving them without the energy required for the nurturance and guidance their children need?

Berkeley Families in the Great Depression

Each of these factors alone could be sufficient to increase negative outcomes among our lowest income children. However, research can help us sort among these potential contributors to poverty effects. For psychologist Glen Elder, the Great Depression of the 1930's provided a chance to do just that.



Elder and colleagues looked at the economic downturn families experienced between 1929 and 1933, and how their individual behavior and family relationships changed as a result of the hardship (Elder, Liker & Cross, 1984). The researchers considered effects on parents and children alike, to see the dynamics for all family members.

Elder and colleagues based their analysis on a longitudinal study of families in Berkeley California in the 1930's, including follow up of the children as adults in the 1970's. About 60% of these families were in the middle class at the start of 1929, but three years later family incomes had declined by 30%. By 1934, the number of families in the survey at the bottom of the economic ladder more than tripled from job losses and transitions.

Investigators were interested in behaviors associated with income loss for depression era families. For children, measures were taken of three problem behaviors: emotional outbursts/tantrums, defiance, and social withdrawal. Parent behaviors of concern included inconsistent discipline, extreme discipline, hostility toward child, irritability, and conflict between parents about discipline.

Results showed little relationship between the economic downturn and mother's behavior. However, income loss had a negative effect on father's parenting behavior, with discipline practices that were more punitive and inconsistent. These gender differences in effect may reflect the greater responsibility family men feel for breadwinning, and their heightened frustration at seeing their family endure economic hardship.

For children, income loss was not directly linked to negative behavior.

However, children's outbursts/tantrums and defiance were related to the inconsistent, extreme, and conflicted discipline of their parents. That is, income loss increased the punitiveness and inconsistency of father's discipline in particular, with negative effects on children's behavior. Fathers who were irritable in temperament or relatively hostile to their child before the Depression showed especially negative effects of income loss on discipline style. Income loss had a negative effect on father's discipline only in households in which spouses were conflicted over discipline. The most adverse Depression effects were seen in families with initially conflicted marriages.

These findings underscore the important role parents play in moderating the effects of outside events – in this case a world-wide economic depression – on their children's lives. Many families in the study suffered serious economic loss in the initial years of the Depression. However, children's problem behavior was not directly affected by these sizeable income losses.

Rather, children suffered when hardship undermined the ability of family adults to parent their children. Fathers showed the strongest effects, becoming inconsistent and punitive in discipline. Disagreements between spouses escalated as well, exacerbating the problem for children. In these ways the stress of economic hardship compromises parents' abilities to build home environments in which children thrive.

Iowa Families in the 1980's Recession

These findings on Berkeley families come from a severe economic depression experienced 80 years ago. Can we expect the results to generalize to more recent trends for families in a recession?



A more recent study by Rand Conger and colleagues suggest trends that are just as strong (Neppi, Conger, Scaramella, & Ontai, 2009). In the 1980's, farms in Iowa suffered an economic downturn when crop prices fell and many farm families went bankrupt. During this period, land values in the area dropped 39 – 46%, and the number of farms declined 15 - 27%. Especially significant were losses of farms in the mid-size range (50-500 acres). Researchers interviewed families who had lost their farms over these years, as well as comparison groups who were small town residents or farmers who had successfully weathered the economic storm.

What was the psychological fallout of such economic upheaval? Adverse effects were worst among those families who lost their farms. Adults in these families described losing the farm as the worst experience of their life, even worse than the major illness of their children. For these families, farming was more than an income, it was a way of life for all family members. Farm families liked the responsibility children learn in farm life in caring for the animals and other chores. They also liked the bond of work and family roles on the farm, appreciating the chance to spend time working together with their children.

To these families, farming was a commitment across generations. Losing the land was especially hard on men, who felt a stronger attachment than their wives to their farm operations. "It's the eleventh commandment. Thou shalt farm," said one farm husband. Men were less likely than women to let go of their identities as farmers, dreaming of a return to farming in the future. Husbands also experienced more depression over the farm loss than did their wives. The farm they lost was not theirs alone.

It was the home for many generations of their family. In the words of one farmer, losing the farm was like "five years of hell."

Researchers interviewed families as they faced economic crisis, noting effects on family life. The first signs of economic stress were shown in relationships between parents. Spouses on edge were easily provoked into hostile exchanges in a cycle destructive to family stability. Economic stress resulted in hostility, which led to conflict between family adults, resulting in a decline in marital happiness, which led to more hostility, etc., etc. Negative effects on marital relations were greatest for those who lost their farms.

Adults who were stressed, depressed and irritable made poor parents as well. Such parents withdrew from their parental role, neglecting the ongoing guidance and warmth that is so effective in keeping children on a positive course. However, serious child misbehavior got their attention, drawing a harsh parental response. This "overwhelmed" parenting pattern alternated neglect and over-reaction, resulting in a hostile home atmosphere.

Children soon learned that misbehavior was a sure way to get Mom's and Dad's attention. Youth from families where harsh parenting prevailed showed elevated rates of externalizing behavior, including noncompliance and delinquency. In contrast, children fared well in homes where parents maintained positive discipline strategies despite economic problems.

In short, Conger and colleagues saw family meltdown in action. Parents overwhelmed by economic stress first turned on each other, increasing hostility and conflict. Soon these adverse effects spilled over into their parenting, withdrawing from the children when possible, and lashing out when misbehavior could no longer be ignored.



Parallels between these Iowa recession families and the Berkeley families in the Depression are clear. In both studies, the chronic strain of economic loss wore parents down to the point where they could no longer effectively fulfill their parental role. Effects on behavior were stronger for fathers than for mothers, and were exacerbated by conflict between parents.

The Long Arm of Poverty

Both studies followed the children as they entered adulthood to see the long term effects of family economic hardship as these young adults started households of their own. The problems they had shown as children and adolescents were evident in adulthood as well.

Ill-tempered males given to tantrums as children in the Berkeley study tended to show unstable work patterns in adulthood. According to the investigators, “the long arm of child temper outbursts extends into men’s worklife.” Erratic workers ended up in lower status employment by 1970. Those who were temperamental children were more likely to have employment patterns as adults with spells of unemployment, numerous employers, and status fluctuations.

Child temperament was linked to marriage for both men and women. Long term effects of childhood temper outbursts are seen for women in mate selection, in marriages to men of lower economic status. Men who had emotional outbursts as children were more likely to divorce their first wife.

In the Depression era sample, girls given to childhood temper outbursts tended to grow into ill tempered mothers, according to the reports of their children.

Ill-tempered mothers and fathers were least likely to be described by their children as accepting, affectionate and willing to listen. The children reported spending little time with their parents, seldom shared their ideas or feelings, or sought their advice. According to Elder, “Depression hardships initiated a cycle of alienation among the young who soon became parents of children in postwar America.”

Like the Berkeley sample, noncompliant youth in the 1980’s Iowa sample also showed problem behaviors into young adulthood, with increased illegal activity, substance abuse and careless driving. Many became parents themselves, employing the same harsh parenting style they had experienced as youth. Observations of these young parents with their preschool children showed reliance on demands, coercion, criticism, and threats to influence their children’s behavior.

Continuity in parenting was also shown by those who experienced positive parenting as teenagers. These young parents used consistent positive approaches in interacting with their children. Whether past experience was positive or harsh, these data suggest that youth learn specific parenting behaviors that they emulate as adults in interaction with their own children.

These studies present compelling evidence of extended effects of an economic downturn on families. Economic stress induced conflict between parents, leading to harsh parenting practices which compromised developmental outcomes for youth. Antisocial behavior of youth raised with harsh parenting persisted as they reached young adulthood. These young adults became parents who employed the same harsh parenting style with their young children, perpetuating the cycle into the next generation.



In sum, these studies of families across the generations show that the effects of an economic downturn on family life can extend into the next generation:

- Links between chronic economic hardship and child outcomes are moderated by parenting behavior.
- Hard times increased parental inconsistency and punitiveness, with negative effects on children.
- Negative effects of economic stress on parenting were strongest when couples were conflicted.
- Ill-tempered children tended to grow into adults with problems of instability at work and at home.
- Young adults treated their own children in the harsh or positive style they experienced as youth.
- An impressive number of families showed stamina and resilience in the face of great economic loss. Parents in these families were able to address their children's psychological needs even when physical needs went unmet.

Recession Strategies for Idaho's Children and Families

Trends of the current recession have brought economic conditions to Idaho families that are parallel in many ways to the experiences of families in the Berkeley and Iowa studies cited above, including extended bouts of unemployment and home foreclosures (Shaklee & Brown, 2009).

While these two studies show potential for multigenerational negative effects for children in poverty, they also show the key role parents play in developing a positive home environment for children. This research suggests several approaches to addressing poverty effects for families.

Relieve Economic Stress. These studies show the multigenerational risk to children when families face extended economic stress. Several policy choices of the past two years can limit effects of the downturn on families, including the extension of unemployment benefits for the long term unemployed, the recent expansion of health care benefits to be implemented in the next few years, as well as programs to modify mortgages to keep families in their homes.

Particularly important is the need to get people back to work. Some aspects of the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) were designed to preserve and/or create jobs. Idaho has lagged other states in accessing those funds, but should take full advantage of the final months of funding to bring the most benefit to Idaho families (Brown, 2009a & b; Brown, 2010). These federal funds are designed to stimulate economic growth in Idaho, generating much needed jobs for families.

An especially effective approach to economic relief for families is the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which keeps many low income working families out of poverty. Nearly half of the states (24) have their own EITC as well, further increasing the income available to working families. Idaho could help its hard working low income families by instituting a state Earned Income Tax Credit.



Support Parents. These studies show parents to be at the heart of the effect of poverty on children. That is, even when economic crisis hit, children fared well when parents were able to maintain a positive atmosphere at home with consistent guidance for their children. In contrast, children showed problems when their parents were in conflict with each other and punitive in child discipline.

Communities often reach out to children in poverty, to ensure they have access to positive events (e.g. youth sports, field trips). However, these studies underscore the importance of support for parents as the central players in establishing positive home environments for their children.

Family support can be formal, through parent networks and programs such as Parents as Teachers.

However, informal supports will be important as well, with intentional outreach to include economically stressed parents along with their children in neighborhood events, school activities, and extended family gatherings. Communities, organizations, and family members should focus on reaching the whole family in these times of economic stress.

About the Author:

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