

**The Effects of Poverty Throughout Lifespan Development**

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Poverty is a widespread problem that affects many people. Currently, in the United States, about 15 percent of people are affected by poverty. That means about 46 million people live in poverty (Berk, 2018). When poverty, work experience, and education levels combine it is known as socioeconomic status or SES. The effects of poverty and low SES can be seen on development throughout the lifespan, and the effects become worse the earlier they develop, and longer that people struggle with it. Throughout each stage of development, children and adults face numerous negative effects of poverty. I will discuss some of the specific ways that poverty affects each area of development, beginning with conception and prenatal development and spanning through childhood, adolescence and adulthood. I will also discuss some ideas and solutions of how to combat and counteract these negative effects, as well as some of the programs available to help those living in poverty.

Beginning at conception, poverty can have a negative impact on the mother and the developing fetus. Prenatal care is vitally important to healthy development. Women who do not have the necessary means will have difficulty receiving proper prenatal care since doctors visits and ultrasounds are so expensive. In addition, it may be difficult to find a means of transportation to important appointments. There is more likely to be a lack of education around prenatal care, causing many women to forego expensive doctors appointments, important vitamins and proper nutrition and physical activity. The poverty stricken are also more likely to engage in drug or alcohol abuse, as well as experience high levels of stress (Agin, 2009).

In addition to regular doctors visits and healthy diet and exercise, there are several environmental influences that can cause damage to the developing fetus. These are known as

teratogens, and include drugs, alcohol, radiation, environmental pollution, and infectious disease. Lack of Education, especially in low SES areas can create exposure and minimize protection against these teratogens. Drugs can include prescription and over the counter drugs, such as certain acne medications that contain isotretinoin. When taken during the first trimester, this medication can cause abnormalities in the eyes, ears, skull, brain, heart, and immune system. Illegal drugs, such as cocaine and heroin can cause complications such as breathing difficulties, physical defects, prematurity, low birth weight, and even death. Alcohol is another teratogen with harmful effects. When consumed during pregnancy, it can cause fetal alcohol syndrome. Fetal alcohol syndrome consists of facial abnormalities and brain injury. This can cause problems with memory, language, motor coordination and social skills. Even mild alcohol consumption is associated with brain development (Berk, 2018). Illegal drugs and alcohol use and abuse tend to be more prevalent in poverty stricken areas. High stress levels as well as lack of education in these areas contributes to increased drug and alcohol consumption.

In addition to teratogens that are ingested by the mother, there are some that are harder to avoid that are present in the environment such as radiation and environmental pollution, as well as infectious disease that can be passed from the mother to the fetus. Radiation in the environment has a severe negative impact on the fetus. There is a dramatic rise in miscarriage, brain damage, and deformities. Mercury and lead are both examples of environmental pollutants that can cause deformities and intellectual disability. Environmental pollutants are often released into the air in industrialized nations from factories and power plants (Berk, 2018). Finally, when a mother has an infectious disease such as AIDS or herpes, it can be passed to the fetus. Once again, in areas with high poverty rates, unsafe sex is more common, so these diseases are more prevalent. Prenatal care is very important to ensure safe labor and delivery. One of the most

important things a mother can do to keep herself and the developing fetus safe is to avoid dangerous teratogens during pregnancy. The problems associated with exposure to teratogens can cause high medical bills, thus amplifying poverty.

The first two years of life bring rapid growth both physically and cognitively. Height and weight increase faster than any other time after birth. Brain growth occurs faster than any other organ. Due to brain plasticity, there is a great capacity for learning in infants and toddlers. Poverty can have a large impact on both physical growth and cognitive ability. One of the biggest influences on physical growth is nutrition. Due to the rapid rate of growth extra calories are needed for developing organs. Breastfeeding can provide major nutritional and health benefits. When poverty is present breastfed infants are often malnourished. This can be due to a lack of knowledge about nutritional content, as well as lack of means to provide proper nutrition. In many areas that have these problems there can also be unsanitary conditions, which can cause additional health problems. Since there is a lack of education around breastfeeding as well as lack of money, formula or diluted milk may be used in place of or to supplement breastfeeding. These supplemental foods do not have the right amount of nutrients or calories for proper growth. Breastfeeding can also protect against intestinal and respiratory infections. Malnutrition present during infancy often carries over to toddlerhood. The foods available in poverty-stricken areas are often low in nutrients and in general, just not enough. In developing countries, some dietary diseases are present. Marasmus occurs when essential nutrients in the diet are low. When the mother is malnourished and cannot produce sufficient breast milk, and bottle-feeding is also lacking, the infant will become incredibly thin. There is a danger of death from marasmus. Toddlers between the ages of one and three may have a diet high in starchy foods but lacking protein. This can cause kwashiorkor, in which the body breaks down its own proteins and causes

swelling. These diseases can cause permanent damage to organs such as the liver, brain, and heart (Berk, 2018). Although these severe dietary conditions and diseases are not a prevalent problem in America, the effects of malnutrition are still present. Inexpensive food choices often lack important nutrients and can affect cognitive development as well.

Although rapid growth tapers off, physical and cognitive growth continues into early childhood. The preschool years bring about improvement in coordination, perception, attention, memory, language, logical thinking, and imagination. Once again, nutrition plays a huge part in development during this time. As children's growth begins to slow so does their appetite. Preschoolers may become picky eaters, so nutritional food choices become even more important. At this age, children begin to imitate the food choices and habits of the adults in their life. Poverty and low SES can cause lack of access to the types of foods necessary to provide a nutritious diet. Poor diet can affect attention, memory and intelligence. It can also result in behavioral problems. Lack of a nutritious diet can also affect the immune system, which makes children more susceptible to disease. The combination of malnutrition and disease can hinder both physical and cognitive development. Families suffering from poverty have poor or no medical insurance. This may result in children missing out on important childhood immunizations. Medical care overall can suffer due to inability to pay medical bills or to find transportation to appointments. Another impact of poverty and low income is increased injury, and lack of safety in general. Often low SES families live in areas that are crowded, run down, and high in crime. It is also difficult to acquire or afford basic safety devices such as car seats and bicycle helmets. Executive function is an important part of development. It includes inhibition, flexible shifting, working memory, and planning. Poverty often leads to poor parenting. A stressful environment can cause harsh and intrusive parenting practices. Often these

parents engage in corporal punishment. The development of executive function suffers when parental influence is negative. Children tend to develop behaviors that are reactive and inflexible (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013).

Poverty continues to affect health care and nutrition into middle childhood. Often health insurance and regular meals are lacking. One problem that becomes more prominent in middle childhood is obesity and overweight. Heredity plays a part in obesity, but it is also evident that poverty also plays a part. One reason for this is family stress, especially around lack of resources as well as parental stress from working long hours at low paying jobs. Oftentimes due to these long working hours parents provide easy and convenient food choices which tend to be high in fat and sugar but low in nutritional value. Comfort eating can also play a part in overeating. These types of eating habits disrupt metabolism, hunger regulation, and healthy sleep patterns. It also causes fatigue that makes physical activity difficult, thus creating a cycle of poor eating and lack of exercise. Obesity puts children at risk for lasting health problems throughout life. High blood pressure and diabetes are just a couple of negative health consequences. Physical appearance becomes a concern for children struggling with obesity, which can result in poor self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.

Poverty also continues to have a negative impact on development as well, especially with executive function and working memory. Working memory focuses on a child's ability to reorganize ideas, combine new schemes with old ones, and change and improve their ways of thinking. Studies have shown that when children come from poverty-stricken low SES families they are more likely to have difficulties with working memory tasks. In addition, poverty in middle childhood also predicts a reduction in working memory in early adulthood. Literacy and mathematical skills also decrease due to poverty. Children living in poverty will often have

difficulties concentrating on school work due to wondering where their next meal will come from, or worrying about stressors in their home life.

During adolescence, children go through another growth spurt which increases nutritional needs. Low SES families continue to be more likely to have convenience foods which are low in nutritional value. It is common for adolescents to lack important vitamins and nutrients such as iron, calcium, and magnesium. Lack of nutrients from foods create many health issues for children already struggling with a poor home life. Children who have begun to develop obesity in childhood may develop other eating disorders. These can include anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder. The health risks from these types of eating disorders can magnify the effects of poverty, and create additional medical bills that the family can already not afford. In addition, children already struggling from low self-esteem and poor self-image may develop mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Adolescent pregnancy and Parenthood are often higher in areas with poverty where education around safe sex is lacking and access to family planning and birth control are lower. Teen girls who are from poverty-stricken homes already have many struggles such as minimal parental involvement or neglect and abuse, poor school performance, and substance use or abuse. Teen mothers are more likely to drop out of school and take low-paying jobs that require minimal skills or collect unemployment. As a direct result, the cycle of poverty continues. It is important that adolescents are provided with an effective sex education course in school that provides opportunities to practice real life scenarios, as well as clear and accurate information. Sex education courses are most beneficial when they start early and continue through high school. It is also important for free and accessible contraceptives to be available to students. Teenagers must be informed of all the risks associated with unprotected sex (Berk, 2018).

Poverty continues to affect development through early adulthood. Death rates increase with higher rates of poverty. Extreme obesity and lack of health insurance create many problems for young adults starting out on their own. Low SES has a strong association with diseases and health such as overweight and obesity, stress, jobs with more health risks, diet, and less supportive social relationships. Poor health in childhood carries over into adulthood. When children are already heavier or overweight in middle childhood and adolescence, they tend to continue to gain weight into adulthood. Low-cost and calorie-dense convenience foods play a huge part in this. With new life stressors, such as trying to pay rent or attending college, fast easy foods seem like a helpful option. It is important that young adults receive education about the importance of a healthy diet and lifestyle in order to prevent medical and mental health conditions. As weight increases so does social discrimination. Low income is also related to psychological stress. young adults who work in low-paying unsatisfying jobs and have financial difficulties tend to be more susceptible to increased alcohol and drug use. A feeling of hopelessness can often be present when these stressors are high. This causes a peak in drug and alcohol use between the ages of 19 and 25 years, and intravenous drug use is more common. Along with substance abuse increased sexual problems occur such as unprotected sex, contraction of STIs, and unplanned pregnancies. HIV is a sexually transmitted disease that is spread commonly among minority groups in areas with high poverty.

There begins to be a cycle in which poverty creates problems that in turn increase the chance of poverty. One example is college and career choices. Many students will put off college due to financial restraints, and then are forced to work jobs that require fewer skills, but pay low wages. Some are even unable to find work and must resort to unemployment. Even with students that do attend college, high poverty rates and poor quality schools in low income

neighborhoods increase drop out rates. Only 44% of 25 to 34 year olds will graduate from college. This along with unplanned pregnancies begins the cycle again, creating more families living in poverty. As their children grow up living in poverty, they will face many of the same issues that their parents faced. It is likely that they in turn will grow up and work a low paying job and possibly have children of their own, and thus the cycle is carried on.

As adults move into middle adulthood, the changes that began in early adulthood continue at a gradual pace. Some additional problems that begin are vision, hearing, and skin problems. With these types of issues, there come new medications and prescription glasses that are used to treat ailments vision impairments. Of course these types of things will cost money. Families that struggle with poverty may have inadequate health insurance to pay for appointments, medications and glasses, and probably also lack the funds to pay for them. If unable to attend appointments or purchase the necessary medications, these conditions may worsen, causing even more difficulties as they progress. Health and fitness continue to be an important theme throughout middle adulthood. A healthy diet and regular exercise routine are important for prevention and control of certain chronic diseases and illnesses. In poor neighborhoods and families living in poverty, there may not be resources available to purchase healthy foods or safe places to engage in physical activity.

Moving through middle adulthood divorce becomes more common. This results in something called feminization of poverty in which single mothers are forced to lower their living standard in order to afford rent. In these situations, the mother often provides primary care for the children. This is done so on a single income and there is often high stress involved. In addition, many adults begin to have parents that require a higher level of care, and may feel responsible to provide extra care to these parents. This can involve financial assistance for

parents that may need In-home Assistance or To live in an assisted living facility. Another struggle moving through middle adulthood can be unemployment. A majority of laid-off workers consist of people in middle adulthood. Although there are programs to help these people find new jobs, it is often difficult to find jobs of comparable status and pay. All of these things can increase the already negative effects of poverty.

Late adulthood starts at age 65 and goes through 80 years of age. Life expectancy decreases with increased poverty, malnutrition, and disease. Late adulthood brings many physical declines, and there are increased medical problems. Vision problems become worsening with such things as cataracts and macular degeneration. Hearing impairments also start to worsen. With continued poverty throughout life, many older adults have an increased risk of health problems. Some of these include cardiovascular and respiratory problems, heart disease, cancer, and type 2 diabetes. In addition many older adults are less trusting of healthcare professionals and may forego medical treatment or routine healthcare check ups. Other common ailments in late adulthood include osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, and increased mental health problems, such as Alzheimer's disease and dementia. The risk of Alzheimer's and dementia tend to be higher in people who have had continuous poor nutrition and health problems caused from poverty throughout their lives (Berk, 2018). As older adults begin to have more difficulty with activities of daily living they may need additional help inside the home or in an assisted living facility. It is important for older adults to maintain their cognitive abilities through remaining mentally active and healthy. In areas with poverty or low SES there are fewer opportunities for continued education and programs to keep older adults mentally active. There can also be increased maltreatment in older adults especially in low SES families due to high

stress levels or lack of education. Maltreatment can also occur more often in living facilities and high poverty areas.

Over the years many solutions have come into play to help combat the effects of poverty. Here in Maine there are some programs aimed at helping mothers-to-be and parents of young children. For instance the WIC program, women infants and children, weekly checks are provided to buy specific food items to help provide nutritious food for pregnant women and young children. Of course we have the food stamp program and temporary assistance for needy families (TANF), both of which help families that do not make enough money and need help purchasing food and other items, and paying bills. There are all sorts of sliding scale fees for medical providers as well as individual companies that offer discounts, such as a reduced gym membership. There are summer food programs for school-age children and rent assistance programs as well. With all of the programs available to help families in need, it is concerning that poverty remains such a huge problem for so many people. That is why I love the ideas of Rutger Bregman.

In the Ted talk video “Poverty isn't a lack of character, it's the lack of cash”, Rutger Bregman discusses some very interesting ideas about poverty. For instance there was a study done on sugarcane farmers in India. A large portion of their income comes from the sugarcane harvest once a year. An IQ test was done on these farmers before and after the harvest occurred. It was discovered that before the harvest, the farmers scored an average of 14 points lower on the IQ tests Bregman goes on to discuss the scarcity mentality, which is the idea that people have a narrow focus on a basic need when that need That basic need is lacking. This can include money for bills, where the next meal is coming from, or time to get things done. The focus on these lacking items is so strong that George Orwell once said “poverty annihilates the future”. In

another study in Canada in 1974, residents were given a basic income in order to stay above the poverty line. This experiment lasted for 4 years, and later when the research was analyzed it was discovered that the experiment had been successful. People didn't quit jobs, stayed in school longer, school performance improved, hospitalizations went down, and mental health and domestic violence issues also decreased. Bregman goes on to talk about a basic income guarantee in which a monthly unconditional grant is provided to pay for basic needs. The estimated cost of childhood poverty in the United States is 500 billion dollars. A basic income guarantee would cost the country around only 175 billion dollars, so it would be a very practical solution to end poverty (Bregman, 2017).

As we can see poverty affects many people, and poses many problems throughout the lifespan. Most often when people start out life living in poverty, it is something that they struggle with throughout their lives. In turn they often start families of their own while still living in poverty, thus creating a cycle of poverty. The effects of poverty are all-encompassing, and there are no parts of development that are not affected when people live in poverty for long periods of time. Although there are many programs to help people living in poverty, many of them do not provide enough assistance or for a long enough period of time, and poverty persists. A basic income guarantee would be a great way to eradicate poverty, so that everyone has an equal chance to live a long and healthy life.

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