**[EN](javascript:void(0)" \o "English)**[ES](https://www.all4kids.org/es/news/blog/poverty-and-its-effects-on-children/)

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**Children in Poverty – Poverty and its Effects on Children**

**Children in Poverty – Effects of Poverty on Children**

It’s no question that poverty and its effects harms communities and even entire countries, but did you know that socioeconomic status directly impacts children as well? Children living in poverty experience a wide variety of risk factors, ranging from health concerns to increased difficulties at school. Unfortunately, about 15 million children (approximately 21% of all children!) in the United States live in low-income families (incomes below the federal poverty line or poverty threshold), a measurement that has been shown to underestimate the needs of working families. Research shows that on average, families require a household income of about twice that amount to cover basic expenses. It is no secret that poverty in America is an epidemic that needs to be confronted head-on! Besides having difficulties meeting basic, everyday needs, here are just a few of the many other ways child poverty harms children of all ages:

**The Health Risks of Childhood Poverty**

Most are unaware of just how greatly low-income households & extreme poverty can influence child health and cognitive [child development](https://www.all4kids.org/2018/09/25/why-the-first-5-years-of-child-development-are-so-important/). However, poverty does indeed impact growth from early childhood, starting with brain development and other body systems. Poverty itself can negatively affect how the body and mind develop, and economic hardship can actually alter the fundamental structure of the child’s brain. Children who directly or indirectly experience risk factors associated with poverty have higher odds of experiencing poor health problems as adults such as heart disease, hypertension, stroke, obesity, certain cancers, and even a shorter life expectancy.

In addition to brain development and health risks associated with holding low-socioeconomic status, a child’s mental health is at risk of being greatly affected as well. Low-income parents and children are more likely to be affected by challenges with mental health and mental illness. These mental health problems often impair overall academic achievement and the ability of children to succeed in school. The effects of poverty can place these children at a higher risk of involvement with child welfare and juvenile justice agencies.

**Growing Up in Impoverished Neighborhoods**

Unfortunately, children who are poor are more likely to be raised in impoverished neighborhoods. These types of neighborhoods that have concentrated poverty levels are often associated with difficulties in academics, behavioral and social issues, and worsening health. Additionally, these children are more likely to live in neighborhoods where they are exposed to environmental risk factors. These socioeconomic risk factors may include malnutrition, pollution, food insecurity, housing instability, economic hardship, led exposure, violence, and crime.

In regards to violence, even indirect exposure (such as witnessing a violent act or simply knowing of its occurrence) has shown to leave adverse developmental outcomes. As a result of family income inequality, poor children are also disproportionately more likely to attend schools in districts with fewer resources, less funding from local tax dollars, less parental involvement due to longer, lower wage working hours, facilities that are inadequate, and with school leadership that has a much higher turnover.

**Poverty and Academics**

In addition to these macro-level factors that influence neighborhood schools, poverty affects the way children learn as well. For starters, children who directly or indirectly experience risk factors associated with poverty or low parental education have higher than a 90% chance of having 1 or more problems with speech, learning, and/or emotional development. Also, kids who are experiencing poverty at home often have difficulties focusing at school. (You cannot learn well on an empty stomach!) There are also often higher levels of stressors and issues that these young children are worried about after school, in addition to having to worry about completing their homework.

**The Impact of Children in Poverty Within The Family**

Because children grow within the context of a family unit, it is important to recognize how poverty affects the household as a whole. Firstly, parents living below the poverty level often have difficulties meeting basic economic needs for their families, such as paying for rent, food, utilities, clothing, education, accommodations, health care, health insurance, transportation, and child care. Living in poverty often means having limited access to health care, food and housing security, greater risk of school drop-out for children, homeless, unemployment due to lack of education or child care and, unfortunately, not reaching one’s full potential.

**Poverty Status and Stress**

Additionally, stress and alienation have negative impacts connected to having little or no income. For parents, financial uncertainty is their major stressor when trying to meet their family’s basic needs. According to the “Stress in America” survey conducted by the American Psychological Association (2017), the proportion of adults who reported that stress impacts their physical and mental health and overall well-being is significantly growing.

Unfortunately, poverty status and stress are two markedly consistent factors among perpetrators of [child abuse](https://www.all4kids.org/2018/03/22/april-is-child-abuse-prevention-month/), and they are intrinsically intertwined. While there are multiple causes of child maltreatment (such as mental illness, intimate partner violence, substance abuse, poor parenting skills, unmanaged anger, lack of coping strategies, or other individual issues), the correlation between poverty and stress, abuse, and neglect cannot be ignored. Children that experience these traumatic events (also known as [adverse childhood experiences](https://www.samhsa.gov/capt/practicing-effective-prevention/prevention-behavioral-health/adverse-childhood-experiences)) are more likely to develop a variety of health problems, behavioral issues, or even substance abuse disorders down the road. The negative effects of adverse childhood experiences  will only lead to further problems as the child develops from teen to adulthood.

Multiple studies have found environmental complexities and material deprivations to be causes of serious physical abuse. For example, low income, uneducated caregivers, single parent households, an incarcerated parent, teen pregnancy, unemployment, and living in the midst of community violence are macro-level socioeconomic factors that undoubtedly lead to stress in the family.

Additionally, inadequate [bonding between the child and their caregivers](https://www.all4kids.org/2018/10/12/bonding-activities-for-parent-and-child/), intimate partner violence in the home, a physical or mental disability (either the parent or the child), and other health problems (such as being born prematurely), are micro-level issues that place parents under tremendous mental stress, which may translate into abusive behavior. Younger children are more vulnerable to abuse as well, as 46.5% of child abuse fatality victims were younger than one year old, and 34.5% were between the ages of one and three (“Child Welfare Information Gateway,” n.d.).

Furthermore, poor families living in poverty may not have access to adequate resources. Family income inequality creates high risk for neglect, criminal activity, and physical abuse due to additional stress in the home. While it is significant to note that most parents living in poverty or under stressful circumstances will not abuse or neglect their children, kids who grow up in poverty are at a greater risk for maltreatment overall.

**The Cycle of Poverty**

You may have heard the term, “The Cycle of Poverty.” The cycle of intergenerational poverty refers to the idea that poor parents raise their children in poverty, who are then more likely to become poor parents themselves. It is important to keep in mind that children are more vulnerable to negative consequences of poverty, than adults. While various types of risk factors exist for impoverished households (such as including single parent or single income households and low parental education), the best protection against further increasing the child poverty rate is access to the labor market, quality childcare, and adequate employment and education for parents.

In fact, according to Harvard’s Center on the Developing Child, it is best and more useful to intervene right at the start of development, rather than to try to fix things later. In other words, if we provide the right tools for parents and poor families in need, their children will have greater chances to get out of poverty and become successful as adults. Children who live in poverty are affected by one or more risk factors that have been linked to academic failure and poor health, a perfect combination for remaining in the cycle of poverty. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (2017), between three and 16 percent of children are affected by poverty in combination with another risk factor. An example of a risk factor may include single parent households or parents with no or low education (1.7 million). These alarming numbers will continue to rise if no adequate intervention is used.

**So, what can be done?**

Today, the leading strategy to break the cycle of poverty in families is the two-generation approach, which aims to improve the family’s economic growth and circumstances by supporting parents both as workers and as parents. If low-income parents are provided with the opportunity to receive higher education, then they will be given the chance they need to compete for higher pay.

Furthermore, if low-income parents are provided with quality child care for their children, then their children’s development will improve. Additionally, while we mentioned the numerous health outcomes that can arise from growing up in poverty, studies have shown that ending intergenerational poverty can greatly reduce these odds. Overall, by helping both generations reach their highest potential, we are helping multiple generations reach economic growth in order to escape the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

**Parental Education as Protective Factor**

Children who attend child care at an early age and whose parents have a high educational attainment, experience positive developmental benefits at a higher rate, compared to children who do not, including:

* By age 18 months, there is a significant difference in vocabulary between children whose parents have a high educational attainment and attend a high-quality child care, compared to children whose parents have a low educational attainment and low income. By age 3, children whose parents have a college degree have a vocabulary 2-3 times larger than children whose parents did not earn a high school diploma.
* By age 3, children with employed parents have a vocabulary of about 575 words compared to children with unemployed parents, who have a vocabulary of about 300 words.
* Children with educated parents have someone in their own home who understands the struggles associated with academics and can help them push through the everyday obstacles.
* Overall, parental education is indeed a significant predictor of child achievement. For example, in an analysis of data from several large-scale developmental studies, researchers concluded that maternal education was linked significantly to children’s intellectual outcomes even in the face of poverty. Additionally, an examination of the direct effects of parental education, but not income, on children’s standardized achievement scores found that both parental education and household income exerted indirect effects on parents’ achievement-fostering behaviors, and subsequently children’s achievement, through their effects on parents’ educational expectations.

By helping parents gain the resources and support needed to pursue an education, we can not only help them and their children, but their entire family and community for generations to come.

**School as a Protective Factor**

Likewise, it is no mystery that children’s own education is a tremendous protective factor in poverty as well. However, you may be surprised to learn that even school attendance alone can help change the course of their lives! Primarily, it has been said that “Every child is one caring adult away from a success story.” Attending a school in which there is at least one adult who cares — whether that is a teacher, school social worker, counselor, principal, or administrative assistant — can cultivate resilience in children.

**What you can do – TODAY!**

Along these same lines, you can choose to be that positive, caring adult in a young child’s life! You can volunteer to be a mentor, classroom aide, a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) for foster youth, work at an after school club, invite your own child’s friends over more often, volunteer in your [communities child abuse prevention program](https://www.all4kids.org/2017/11/27/child-abuse-prevention-programs/), or even be a foster or adoptive parent! You can truly make a difference in a child’s life.

Another big way that you and your family can help a young child, family, or even whole community is by giving, both of your time and finances! Donate to an organization that serves children in poverty, or sign up to volunteer at an event. Some individuals have even gone to their local school district and paid overdue lunch fees for students! Remember, it’s hard to learn when you’re hungry, and food insecurity disproportionately impacts low income families living below the poverty line! To make an effort towards poverty reduction, donate to local food banks, free clothing closets, and diaper banks. Tutoring children in need is also a huge way to help children’s lives and make a difference in reducing the growing poverty rate!

Additionally, we can help achieve extreme poverty reduction by spreading awareness of the effects of poverty on children! Talk to your friends, family, government representatives, school officials, and community members about the harmful effects and impacts of growing up in poverty. Be an advocate for children’s lives by supporting children’s rights, change, and hope in your own community and neighborhood! Share this article on social media, as well as factsheets, and other information about childhood poverty and how widespread it truly is in the United States. No child should grow up in poverty – let’s all do our part to help!

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