What are the Psychological Effects of Hunger on Children?

Despite being born in one of the world’s wealthiest countries, a significant proportion of children in the United States are food insecure: They do not have enough nutritious food for an active, healthy life. Food insecurity often leads to hunger, the painful sensation caused by lack of food. Research shows how food insecurity and hunger can harm the health and educational outcomes of children. However, these harms can be prevented through effective programs such as SNAP, WIC, the National School Lunch Program, and the Summer Food Service Program, helping children to reach their full potential.

Many children in the United States don’t have enough to eat.
- In 2014, 15.3 million children in the United States were food insecure (about 1 in 5). These children lived in households that were unable to always provide adequate food.¹
- Households with incomes near or below the federal poverty line (39.5%), single-parent households (35.3 % women; 21.7% men), and Black (26.1%) and Hispanic (22.4%) households had particularly high levels of food insecurity.²
- Low-income families report that eating healthily is especially difficult because fresh fruits and vegetables in their neighborhoods are rare, expensive, and of poor quality.³

Hunger hurts children in multiple ways.
- Low food security and hunger can contribute to toxic stress — the strong, unrelieved activation of the body’s stress management system.⁴
- A lack of healthy food can lead to malnutrition,⁵ health problems caused by a nutritionally-deficient diet.
- We all have a limited cognitive bandwidth. People tend to spend their limited mental reserves on resources that they lack, and so hungry children focus on food, which can lead to neglect of other areas of life such as schoolwork.⁶
- Food insecurity is frequently stigmatized through media messages and public discourse. Families often work to keep their food insecurity hidden, and children may feel stigmatized when using free and reduced lunch programs and other social services.⁷

Hunger has negative outcomes for kids.
- Studies show that food insufficiency is associated with higher prevalence of poor health conditions, including stomachaches, headaches, and colds;⁸ and that severe hunger can predict chronic illness among both preschool- and school-age children.⁹
- Hunger-related toxic stress can negatively affect brain development, learning, information processing, and academic achievement in children.⁹
- Malnutrition in the first years of life is especially harmful, impacting physical growth, decreasing resistance to disease, limiting the size and functioning of children’s brain structures, and stunting intellectual capacity.¹⁰
- Severe hunger is associated with anxiety and depression among children.¹¹ Research shows that families’ lack of sufficient food, irrespective of their income, is associated with depressive disorders and suicidality in adolescents.¹²
- Food insecure children may perform worse on academic achievement tests and learn less during the school year.¹³
- Children may feel ashamed and isolated by the stigma associated with their lack of food.¹⁴
What can we do about child hunger in the United States?

If properly funded and implemented, our nutrition assistance infrastructure can mitigate hunger and food insecurity, enabling children to reach their full potential. For example:

- The **Supplemental Assistance Nutrition Program** (SNAP) has been shown to increase food expenditures and decrease food insecurity for low-income households, and is associated with higher high-school graduation rates and better health outcomes in adulthood.\(^\text{xvi}\)
- **Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children** (WIC) benefits are associated with infant health and growth, signifying less malnutrition.\(^\text{xviii}\)
- Researchers have found persuasive evidence that the **National School Lunch Program** reduces food insecurity.\(^\text{xix}\) The **Community Eligibility Provision** can reduce stigma and encourage participation by low-income families.\(^\text{xx}\)
- $30 per month per child allocated through the **Summer Food Service Program** reduces very low food-security among children; $60 per month produces even greater reductions.\(^\text{xxi}\)
- Many **creative local and statewide programs** have begun to address the issue of food deserts – neighborhoods lacking access to healthy food – through community gardens, farmers markets, and tax incentives for stores providing fresh produce, with positive preliminary results.\(^\text{xxii}\)

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