The Impact of Poverty and Violence on Children's Social-Emotional Development

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1. What is social-emotional development and why is it important?
   - Focus on self-regulation

2. How do poverty and violence negatively impact social-emotional development?
   - Focus on community violence

3. How can we promote social-emotional development in contexts of adversity?
   - Focus on school-based programming
WHAT IS SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT?
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**COGNITIVE**
- Working Memory
- Set Shifting
- Inhibitory Control
- Effortful Control
- Sustained Attention

**SOCIAL**
- Respect
- Social Competence
- Problem Solving
- Empathy

**EMOTIONAL**
- Emotion Regulation
- Emotion Knowledge

- Respect
- Social Competence
- Problem Solving
- Empathy
- Emotion Regulation
- Emotion Knowledge
Self-regulation is one of the most important sets of skills in the social-emotional domain.

“An individual's ability to automatically or effortfully regulate (e.g., control, modulate, inhibit, initiate) his or her thoughts, behaviors, or emotions with the purpose of achieving a particular goal” (McCoy, 2013)
* The preschool period is an important “window of opportunity” for building self-regulation skills!
SELF-REGULATION AND THE BRAIN

Prefrontal Cortex
(Executive Functions)

Limbic System
(Emotion)
WHY IS SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IMPORTANT?

Early Social-Emotional Skills

- Pay attention in school
- Wait for turn
- Control anger
- Respect peers & adults
- Show compassion
- Remember & follow directions

Successful Adults

- Enter school ready to learn
- Achieve academically
- Graduate on time
- Be physically & mentally healthy
- Avoid violence
- Earn more money

(Blair & Razza, 2008; Duncan et al., 2011; Moffitt et al., 2011; Raver et al., 2011)
HOW DO POVERTY AND VIOLENCE NEGATIVELY IMPACT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT?
POVERTY AND VIOLENCE ARE PREVALENT

- **Poverty**
  - 1 in 4 U.S. children under 5 lives in poverty (NCCP, 2015)
  - 1.9 bil kids (86%) live in a developing country (UNICEF, 2005)
    - Of those in least developed countries, 45% live on <$1.90/day (UNICEF, 2005)

- **Violence**
  - 60.6% of U.S. children (0-17) witnessed or were directly victimized by violence (Finkelhor, Turner, Omrod, & Hamby, 2009)
  - 300 million children under 5 exposed to societal violence worldwide (Pinheiro, 2006)

- **Co-occurrence**
  - Those below the poverty line are >2x as likely to be victims of violent crime (39.7 per 1000 vs. 16.9 per 1000) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014)
POVERTY AND VIOLENCE AFFECT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Poverty

Violence

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Violent crime is particularly prevalent in the city of Chicago.

How does this community violence affect children’s self-regulation?
$N_{\text{violcrime}} = 58,088$
Goal is to compare the average self-regulation scores of children who were **recently exposed to violence** to those who were **not recently exposed**.
A RESEARCH EXAMPLE: RESULTS

$b = -.002 + (d = -.05)$

$+ p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01$

$ b = -17.18 ** (d = -.15)$

(McCoy, Raver, & Sharkey, 2015)
Recent exposure to a violent crime in children’s neighborhoods leads them to be:
- Less accurate
- More impulsive

For children with already high levels of anxiety, violence also leads to avoidance of emotional stimuli.

Findings are true regardless of whether the child directly experienced or knew about the crime.

May explain other studies showing links between recent crime exposure and reduced performance on standardized tests (Sharkey, 2010).

Additional work suggests effects of chronic exposure over time on emotion regulation, suggesting links with mental health (McCoy, Raver, & Sharkey, 2015).
This research shows that adversity negatively impacts social-emotional skills, with implications for other outcomes over time

...but why?
Poverty and violence directly affect brain development...but they do so differently (Sheridan & McLaughlin, 2014)

- Deprivation (e.g., lack of stimulation) is more likely to affect areas of the brain associated with cognitive capacities
- Threat (e.g., violence) is more likely to affect areas of the brain associated with emotional processing
Poverty and violence also affect children’s social environments:

- Higher levels of adult (teacher, parent, etc.) stress and mental health issues that compromise the quality of adult-child interactions and modeling of healthy behaviors
- Less freedom to explore environments and receive direct enrichment
- Broader changes in social norms and expectations
HOW CAN WE PROMOTE SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CONTEXTS OF ADVERSITY?
Supports can help children to acquire **skills** and **strategies** that they can use to focus attention, deal with conflict, manage emotions, and cope with stress.

These skills are not inborn! **We must teach them!**
INTERVENTIONS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD ARE PARTICULARLY COST-EFFECTIVE

Figure 1a
Returns to a Unit Dollar Invested

(a) Return to a unit dollar invested at different ages from the perspective of the beginning of life, assuming one dollar initially invested at each age.
SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS

- There are numerous school-based programs and curricula to support self-regulation and social-emotional development.

- For example:
  - **Tools of the Mind**: preschool (toolsofthemind.org)
  - **Preschool PATHS**: preschool (pathstraining.com)
  - **Incredible Years**: preschool (incredibleyears.com)
  - **Chicago School Readiness Project**: preschool (steinhardt.nyu.edu/ihdsc/csrp/)
  - **4Rs**: elementary school (morningsidecenter.org/4rs-research-study)
  - **Becoming a Man**: high school

- By building positive skills and coping strategies, these programs not only protect kids against negative effects of violence, but may also *break cycles of violence over time*. 
TUCKER THE TURTLE (PATHS)

Step 1

1.

Step 2

2.

Step 3

3.

Step 4

(www.pathstraining.com)
ADAPTED CBT (BECOMING A MAN)
FUTURE WORK

Impacts of education-based interventions on social-emotional outcomes (and self-regulation, in particular) remain small and insufficient.

Future directions include:

- Development of more impactful, sustainable, and scalable intervention approaches, both to reduce adversity and provide supports
  - Ensuring continuity within the school, across schools, and to the home
  - Continued attention toward needs of teachers, children
- Rigorous evaluation (e.g., RCT) of existing approaches
- Adaptation of programs for use in diverse cultural contexts
- Scaling up of programs (e.g., through integration in local, state, and federal curricula)
WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Structure children’s environments so that they are predictable and low in stress
- Allow children freedom to solve their own problems, be creative, and explore
- Praise and reward children when they show positive social-emotional skills
- Play games in which children practice regulation (e.g., Freeze, Red Light/Green Light, Simon Says)
- Teach children strategies they can use to solve social problems or control their emotions
- Practice these strategies by making a plan with children, trying the plan, reflecting with them on what did/didn’t work
- Model empathy, positive self-regulation, and conflict resolution
“When we think that kids just need willpower to overcome adversity, we miss opportunities to provide the relationships and build the skills that can actually strengthen resilience.”

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THANK YOU!

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For additional information on social-emotional development and resilience in the face of adversity, visit developingchild.harvard.edu