

A child's development hinges heavily upon the environment he or she comes from. Children's behavior, self-sufficiency, sociability, and academic ability are molded by the interactions they have with adults as well as their physical surroundings. Some environments and adult interactions prohibit adequate functioning. This paper will seek to discuss certain family structures and parenting styles that correlate with maladaptive parent-child conflict; the lasting effects of child abuse; and the impact of childhood poverty. Furthermore, this paper will discuss the responsibilities of educators to address parent-child conflict, child abuse, and poverty, and offer suggestions as to how they can effectively curb or minimize the impact of these matters.

### **Parent-Child Conflict**

Children and adolescents derive the majority of their nurturance from their family. From birth through infancy, children are mainly controlled by their parents. As children reach the ages of 5 and 12, they begin to share control over their own lives with their parents. When children reach adolescents, they strive to be independent of their parents in order to develop their own identity. In all stages of child and adolescent development, parents and children naturally experience conflict within their *family system*. Family system defines the "highly complex system" of parent-child interaction and influence. While every parent-child relationship will inevitably find itself confronting ordinary issues like the temper tantrum of a two-year-old, an argument over bedtime with a ten-year-old, or the choice of music of an adolescent, there are significant behavioral, psychological, and cognitive issues that can stem from the family structure and parenting style. It is important to be aware that while certain family structures and parenting styles

show a correlation to certain behavioral, psychological, and/or cognitive deficits, these problems certainly do not occur in every case where a specific family structure or parenting style is present. Therefore, reservation must be used before labeling specific family structures or parenting styles as “bad.”

The term “parent” most frequently refers to a mother or a father, however, when discussing the influence of a family’s structure on a child’s development it is important to recognize the term as encompassing all primary guardians such as aunts and uncles, grandparents, or foster parents. Studies show children raised in dual-parent families have fewer behavioral, psychological, and cognitive deficits than children raised in single-parent families. Dual-parent families are not limited to “traditional” mother/father parentage, but also encompass dual-parent families where the parents may be of the same sex, grandparents, or foster parents. On the contrary, children raised in single-parent families primarily risk problems associated with limited economic resources. Children raised by single mothers run the greatest risk of being affected by poverty due to unequal employment and salary opportunities for women. The absence of the same-sex parent increases the likelihood of behavioral problems in both sexes, decreased masculine traits in boys, and inadequate guidance for girls concerning their sexuality. These problems are exacerbated when the single-parent is a teenager. Dual-parent households are generally more financially equipped to raise a child, and they are less likely to experience role overload.

Change within the family structure can also be an extremely difficult time for a child or adolescent. Life altering events such as divorce, the remarriage of a parent, or the arrival of a new sibling are changes to the family structure that can negatively impact

a child or adolescent's development. Children generally experience some elevated level of defiance, aggression, depression, and/or anger following a change within their family's structure. Furthermore, the parents' preoccupation with the divorce tends to temporarily lower the quality of parenting a child receives. Younger children have the most initial difficulty understanding the changes occurring in their family structure but are more adaptable than older children in the long-run.

The way parents interact daily with their children plays a significant role in how the child approaches the world. Children tend to be most well adapted behaviorally, psychologically, and cognitively when their parents are warm, responsive, and regulated in their discipline. Children raised in an environment absent of affection and empathy have a greater tendency of exhibiting aggressive behavior. Prolonged physical and/or emotional detachment in the parent-child relationship can contribute to reduced levels of social and cognitive output on the behalf of a child, and has also been linked to behavioral problems. Parents that ineffectively address disciplinary issues also contribute to increased levels of disruptive behaviors and aggression in their children. Ineffective discipline is more than simply refusing to discipline one's child. It can include methods that fail to teach self-control and self-discipline. Parents that utilize discipline that focuses coercion via intimidation, yelling, and/or corporal punishment (*power-assertive discipline*) are least likely to nurture self-control and self-discipline in a child.

How a parent approaches the parent-child relationship can be categorized into four different parenting styles based on the level of warmth, responsiveness, and regulated discipline the child receives. *Authoritarian parents* provide little warmth or positive involvement with their children but expect their children to conform to rigid

rules through harsh discipline. Children reared by authoritarian parents have an increased likelihood of exhibiting anxiety, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, social incompetence, and lack of initiative. *Permissive-indulgent parents* provide the warmth and responsiveness children need, however, they fail to institute regulated discipline into their child's development, which can foster selfishness, disrespect towards others, lack of self-control, and lower academic performance. *Permissive-indifferent parents* also fail to regulate discipline, but they also neglect their child's need for warmth and responsiveness. Children raised by permissive-indifferent parents are more likely to exhibit a lack of self-control, poor performance in school, and social incompetence. Children are most likely to be self-reliant, socially responsible, and academically sound when their parents exhibit *authoritative parenting* qualities. Authoritative parents provide the high levels of warmth and responsiveness a child needs while establishing a regulated environment of discipline that promotes consistency and reinforcement over punishment.

Teachers are capable of positively influencing the development of children that are experiencing psychological, behavioral, and or cognitive difficulties due to family structure and/or parenting style issues. As discussed above, teachers should avoid marginalizing any one type of family structure. Teachers should be especially concerned with providing a "stable, predictable school environment" for students coping with changing family structures. Students going through changes should also be given opportunities to discuss their feelings and receive support. Teachers can also foster much needed warmth, responsiveness, and regulated discipline for their students by modeling appropriate behavior, support, and supervision.

Teachers can work with parents to establish learning environments inside and outside of school. Communicating with parents and making them feel like a part of the classroom facilitates a stronger connection to the students' success for both the student and the parent. Finally, teachers should seek parental support in setting and maintaining high expectations for their students' academic and social success.

### **Child Abuse**

Child abuse is defined as physical or sexual abuse; mental or emotional injury; and/or the neglect of a minor by a person responsible for their care and well-being such as a parent or caregiver. Abuse by other adults is legally considered assault (English, 1998). Exact statistics on the prevalence of abuse are difficult to establish, due to different standards. What constitutes corporal punishment to one researcher may be viewed as physical abuse by another. Most recent studies estimate that approximately one million children suffer from some form of child abuse each year in the United States (Meece, p. 504, English, p.39). Child abuse is thought to be underreported. Only the most serious cases, where there is injury or other noticeable damage to the child, tend to attract attention.

The exact definition of abuse varies from state to state. Police and social workers struggle to investigate allegations of abuse because of the broad definition of abusive behavior. Currently, there is controversy over whether or not child endangerment can be considered abuse. Endangerment is "behavior that threatens but has not yet caused observable harm" such as dangling a child from a window but not dropping the child (English, 1998, p. 41). A narrow definition of child abuse that did not include

endangerment would legally permit this, despite the potential emotional trauma to the child.

The most common form of child abuse is neglect. Meece reports that fifty percent of abused children are neglected (2002, p. 504). Some examples of neglect are abandoning a child, failing to provide basic human needs, refusing health care, and failing to supervise a child. Neglected children are often passed over by social workers, who focus primarily on physically and sexually abused children, even though studies have found that the effects of long term neglect can be “more damaging and pervasive than bruising or broken bones” (English, 1998, p. 51). If children’s basic needs are not met, their physical and mental development may be impaired, harming them for life. Studies show that neglected toddlers’ ability to trust others is impaired, and is likely to inhibit the development of normal social skills (English, 1998).

Physical abuse results in physical harm to the child, and includes hitting, kicking, shaking, burning, or stabbing. The most serious form of physical abuse is known as battered child syndrome, where abuse is “predetermined and can be likened to torture” (Wall, 1976, p.222). In many instances, the abuser of a battered child is mentally ill (ibid). More than fifty percent of the children who are physically abused are under six years of age (Wall, 1976). Young children are most likely to sustain severe or life threatening injuries from physical abuse because they are less able to escape or defend themselves (ibid). Boys are more likely to be physically abused when they are young, while girls are more likely to be abused during puberty. Children who are physically abused often become more aggressive, may try to abuse other children, and have difficulty feeling empathy for others (English, 1998). Children who qualify as battered

may suffer such severe physical and emotional injuries from the abuse that they may never develop normally, despite interventions (Wall, 1975).

Any act designed to provide sexual gratification for the perpetrator is considered sexual abuse. Sexual abuse includes, but is not limited to, penetration, molestation, or sexual exploitation (i.e. child pornography) (English, 1998). Again, young boys and pubescent girls are more likely to be abused (Wall, 1976). Sexual abuse can affect child development by making the child withdrawn, or it can cause the child to become prematurely interested in sexual topics. Girls who have been sexually abused are more likely to engage in sexual activity at a younger age and have unplanned pregnancies (Helpguide, 2006).

Emotional or mental abuse is the most difficult form of child abuse to identify and prosecute as it does not leave any physical evidence on the child. Emotional abuse is most likely to be found in conjunction with other forms of abuse (Helpguide, 2006). Common forms of emotional abuse are ignoring the child, verbal abuse, exposing a child to domestic violence, terrorizing the child, or deliberately depriving the child of necessities such as sleep, food, and clothing. Emotional abuse can lead to withdrawal, distrust of others, difficulty forming relationships, and depression (Watkins & Bradbard, 1982) in addition to the physical effects of deprivation.

Research shows that negative attitudes towards parenting and a lack of knowledge of child development are contributing factors to abuse (English, 1998). Child abusers “typically have unrealistic expectations for their children and poor behavioral management skills” and tend to misinterpret their children’s actions as “willful

disobedience” (Meece 2002, p. 504). Because abuse can impair child development, these children tend to fall behind, further angering their parents, leading to more abuse.

The effects of abuse are most severe when the abuse is long-term. An isolated incident, however severe, has less effect on a child’s development than years of chronic neglect and abuse (English, 1998). Abuse can have the greatest impact on the development of very young children (ibid). Adolescents who were or are being abused are more likely to commit crimes, abuse alcohol and drugs, develop eating disorders, become depressed, and do poorly in school (ibid).

Teachers and schools are instrumental in detecting and preventing child abuse (Wall, 1975). Teachers should watch for indicators of abuse at all times. There are laws in place making all school staff mandated reporters, meaning that if there is any suspicion of abuse they are legally required to report it to the police and Children’s Services. Most schools have training programs on how to recognize abuse and approach the victims. Unexplained injuries and bruising, particularly if there are multiple bruises at different stages of healing, are likely indicators of physical abuse (Meece, 2002, p. 505). Another warning sign of physical abuse is if the child and the parent give different explanations for an injury. Neglected children may come to school dirty, without seasonally appropriate attire (i.e. a winter coat), and may feel poorly as a result of not getting enough food or medicines they need. Other warning signs of neglect are children who cannot see well, yet lack glasses, or visibly need dental care. Children who are sexually abused may take a precocious interest in sexual matters, or they may display no symptoms until they reach adolescence and begin acting out sexually (Kruttschnitt et al, 1994). Abused children may exhibit changes in behavior, such as acting out, becoming

exceedingly fearful, or becoming aggressive. Academic performance usually suffers when a child is maltreated.

Some children are more resilient to abuse. English hypothesizes that these children have personal characteristics such as “optimism, high self-esteem, high cognitive ability, or a sense of hopefulness” or have a relationship with a trusted, supporting adult (1998, p. 48). As educators, we can be that trusted adult, and make the school environment a safe and supporting place.

### **Poverty**

Poverty is a significant factor affecting children in America today. Although poverty rates have fluctuated over the last couple of decades, children continue to represent a large portion of the poor population (Meece, 2002, p. 19). In fact, nearly one in every five children in America grows up in poverty. It is also important to note that poverty affects both urban and rural children in very similar ways (Evans & English, 2002). As educators, it is important that we can identify and understand children who are at-risk due to their experience of living in poverty, so that we can help support their growth and development (Effects, 2006).

Children living in poverty are often exposed to multiple stressors. These stressors include a combination of physical stressors, such as substandard housing, noise, and crowding, and also psychosocial stressors, such as family turmoil, early childhood separation, and community violence. These children also tend to display greater difficulties in self-regulatory behavior, such as delayed gratification (Evans & English, 2002).

The length of time a child lives in poverty also impacts the child's cognitive and social development. Children who live in persistent poverty show "less favorable cognitive and social development and poorer physical and mental health than do those who live in transitory poverty" (Duration, 2005). This may be due to a less stimulating home environment, prolonged stress, and numerous other factors. Not surprisingly, the quality of the home environment improves when a family moves out of poverty (Duration, 2005).

Schools are also directly affected by poverty. The level of poverty of a school is often determined by the number of children receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Children who are eligible for this program are often at higher risk for academic failure. Studies have shown that low-income students tend to score better and show more progress when attending low-poverty schools. Also, higher-income students attending high-poverty schools tend to show lower achievement than their peers at low-poverty schools. One of the reasons for this achievement gap is due to the availability of skilled teachers. Also, high-poverty schools tend to have a slower pace of instruction and teach lower skill levels, which in fact may hinder student motivation and achievement (Impact, 1999).

Teachers need to become more aware of who the at-risk students are in their classroom, as these are the students who are likely to fail in school because of their social circumstances (Effects, 2006). Students coming from a background of poverty have different learning styles than students who come from middle-class families, and teachers need to learn how to reach out to both groups. Unfortunately, schools typically operate on middle-class norms and values, which is not beneficial for lower-income students.

Also, “most teachers are middle-class white women, and most kids are not” (Kollali, 2006).

There are several academic and behavioral factors that can indicate that a child is at risk for academic and social development problems, such as a delay in language or reading development, aggression, social withdrawal, substance abuse, and irregular attendance. There may be other indicators as well that are caused by poverty-related circumstances at home, such as a student not completing assignments on time, arriving at school unprepared to learn, and being unwilling to interact with peers or adults in school. Unfortunately, these problems not only affect the child of poverty, but can also affect the learning of other children in the class (Effects, 2006).

There are numerous ways that educators can positively impact the lives of children living in poverty. First, children need to be able to relate to the content of a lesson, using their own prior knowledge and experiences to make those connections. In order for this to happen, teachers need to know and respect the diversity in their classrooms, and present content in a variety of ways that meet the needs of all the diverse students. Second, teachers need to be nonjudgmental and hold the same high standards for children of all income levels; therefore, the curriculum content needs to be high-quality and culturally relevant. It is also beneficial to allow students to use problem-solving techniques, which may help them deal with some of the issues they face in their lives. Although there are multiple other ways that teachers can impact the lives of children living in poverty, a third way is to foster motivation for children to learn and create a positive self-image. Children of poverty are often emotionally drained and have a negative self-image. Educators can help to change these negative factors by simply

creating positive and respectful relationships with the child. Educators need to help children by focusing on their positive traits; teaching coping skills; communicating guidance; and most importantly, truly believing in them (Effects, 2006).

Children living in poverty tend to focus on basic survival and often times start school delayed in social and cognitive development. Educators must make adaptations to their curriculum in order to meet the varying needs of all students, including those from low-income families. Educators must also set high expectations for all students; provide support for students and their families; create an environment that fosters mutual respect and self-esteem; develop relationships with at-risk children to help identify their needs; promote acceptance of diversity; make learning relevant to all students; and emphasize that each student is unique and has different talents and abilities (Effects, 2006).

Although this seems like a long list, several of them are little things that will make a huge impact on the lives of the children in their classrooms that are living in poverty.

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