Babies, Brains, and Relationships: Addressing the Mental Health Needs of Young Children in the Child Care Setting

Building a Culture of Health Conference
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The Nicholson Foundation is dedicated to improving the health and well-being of vulnerable populations in New Jersey.
Our Focus Areas

Health

Early Childhood
Why Early Experiences Matter

Newborn Brain
Average weight
333 grams

2 Year Old’s Brain
Average weight
999 grams
700 new synapses created each second in the early years!!

Newborn 1 month 6 month 2 years
Stress

POSITIVE
Brief increases in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels.

TOLERABLE
Serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships.

TOXIC
Prolonged activation of stress response systems in the absence of protective relationships.
Poverty
Life & Death Consequences of Poverty

- Increased infant mortality
- Low birthweight & subsequent problems
- Chronic diseases, such as asthma
- More food insecurity, poorer nutrition & growth
- Poorer access to quality health care & healthy food (transportation, food deserts)
- Increased accidental injury & mortality
- Increased obesity & its complications
- Increased exposure to toxins (i.e., lead) & pollutants
Life & Death Consequences of Poverty

- Increased exposure to toxic stress
- Poorer educational outcomes:
  - Poor academic achievement
  - Higher rates of HS dropout
- Less positive social & emotional development
- More problem behaviors leading to:
  - Early unprotected sex with increased teen pregnancy
  - Drug & alcohol abuse
  - Increased criminal behavior as adolescents & adults
- More likely to be poor adults (low productivity and low earnings)
- Especially if deep poverty (<50% FPL), long-term poverty, or poverty in early childhood
New Jersey Child Demographics (2015)

Children < 18: 1,998,865
Children < 5: 529,254
New Jersey Low-income Children (2015)

• Nearly 1 in 3: \( \leq 200\% \) of *federal* poverty level (FPL)

• 200% of FPL for family of 4 = $48,072

• 200% = Low-income
Low-Income Children by Race/Ethnicity

- Asian/Pacific Islander: 17 percent (~ 32,000)
- White, non-Hispanic: 18 percent (~ 166,000)
- Two or More Races: 37 percent (~ 42,000)
- Black/African American: 51 percent (~ 141,000)
- Hispanic or Latino: 56 percent (~ 281,000)

Total = 633,000 (32%)
Disparities Begin Very Early

![Graph showing cumulative vocabulary growth by age of child (in months) for different socioeconomic groups: Professional, Working class, Poor.](Image)
30 Million Word Gap

Language Experience

Estimated cumulative words addressed to child

Age of child in months

0 12 24 36 48

50 million

Professional

Working-class

Welfare

0 10 million

20 million

30 million

40 million

50 million
Poverty & Child Development

• Decreased school-readiness & finishing school

• Increased behavioral health problems, lifelong

• Increased physical health problems, lifelong
Evidence-based Programs (Examples)

• Parent-Child Home Program

• Reach Out and Read

• ReachUP USA
Initiative: Right From the Start NJ

By 2022:
All children, birth to 3, have opportunity for early relationships, environments & experiences needed to support healthy growth & development.
Discussion