

“Research Note”

CHILDREN’S ADJUSTMENT IN LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

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Abstract

This paper investigates socio-economic conditions and their impact on children. It investigates how low income might be the lead to marital tensions and in turn negatively impact parenting style which affects adolescents’ adjustment in their families, their relationship with their parents as well as their health and social development. Supported by previous empirical studies, the article concludes with implications for policy makers.

Keywords: Children, Families, Low Income, Adolescents, Adjustment.

Discussion

The term *low income* clearly refers to families whose income is at or below the line of substance. Families with this economic status suffer from trying hard to make ends meet; they struggle with making available the necessities of life (Mackereth & Milner, 2007). Children and adolescents are affected by their family’s economic difficulties. Adolescent family members are the focal point of this topic as their experience relates to low-income families and health, both physical and physiological (healthy relationships among the family members). Mackereth and Milner (2007) have suggested that this ability distinguishes a controlled family from an individualistic family, whose members are essentially separate units.

Studies have found that the economic status of families impact adolescents’ adjustment in their families. DeCarlo Santiago and Wadsworth (2009) studied adolescents’ (from low income families) coping mechanism with conflict. DeCarlo Santiago and Wadsworth (2009) found that family conflict was related to the internalization of symptoms among adolescents in poverty. Further, Conger et al, (1992) examined family’s economic difficulty and how it affects male adolescents’ adjustment. Conger et al. (1992) found economic instability reflects in the parents’ emotions and behaviors leading eventually to marital tensions, which in turn affect their parenting style, which in turn affects the adolescents’ adjustment. Conger et al. (1992) also found that these emotions were equally for father and mother affected by financial strain. Furthermore, Pinderhughes et al, (2001) assessed the influence of two socioeconomic factors (poverty and neighborhood) on parenting style and its influence on children. Nix et al, (2001) found that when families lived in poverty and in a poor neighborhood, the disaffection with quality of life reduced the level of warmth and intensified the harshness of treatment.

Moreover, another study by Conger and Patterson (1995) examined parental stress and adolescent adjustment. Conger and Patterson (1995) found that parental stress was associated with adjustment through stress-related parental depression, which was, in turn, related with disruptions in their discipline practices and mediation of the influence of economic stress on adolescent development. Moreover, Gutman et al, (2005) found that financial strain influenced paren-

tal psychological distress and had a positive and negative effect on parent-adolescents relations. Gutman et al, (2005) found that psychological stress increased the negative parent-adolescent relations and decreased the positive parent-adolescent relations.

There are other factors associated with growing up in poverty that may impact adolescents' mental health, including the following: poor adolescents are more likely to be exposed to violence; and they are more likely to feel alienated from school and to be exposed to high levels of stress (Felner, 1995). Other studies have found that adolescents who experienced chronic poverty also exhibited difficulties that are more academic, behavior problems, and higher rates of depression and suicidal thoughts (Unger et al, 1997). Moreover, according to Mackereth and Milner (2007), low income is associated with poor nutrition. Mackereth and Milner (2007) also maintained that low income leads to health problems. Both fast foods and decreased intake of healthy nutrition are leading factors in the development of disease and are causes of premature death in low-income families. From a different perspective, Headey (2008) argued, in his study, that the poverty line is reflected not only in the amount of income brought into homes but also in the healthy and unhealthy choices one makes in matters of consumption. Mackereth and Milner (2007) contended that low-income families are at risk of malnutrition, which could lead to afflictions such as heart disease, stroke, and cancer, which lower life expectancy more so than that of families in the middle or upper classes. However, Mackereth and Milner (2007) argued for the hypothesis that making healthy choices in shopping for groceries and healthy eating habits is equitable to budgeting. Moreover, the controlled and individualistic families pose two differences of family relationship and parenting styles. A study by Vereecken et al, (2009) focused on parenting styles, among them authoritative parenting: the kind of parenting observed in the controlled family, and authoritarian parenting as it manifests in individualistic parenting. In comparison, the individualistic family cites its lack of financial resources as being a major reason for not eating proper food. The members of such families believe it is cheaper to consume convenience food.

Adolescents (males and females) are affected by their family's economic problems. For girls, according to Elder and Van Nguyen Caspi(1985),economic stresses are demanding for their maturity and increased responsibility in the family. For boys, in contrast, according to Elder, Van Nguyen Caspi(1985), the economic stresses factors in increased conflict, especially with boys whose fathers have been laid off, who may lose respect for the fathers and challenge their ability.

The family climate created by economic strain puts adolescents at risk for a variety of problems. Cummings et al, (1991) found that adolescents who are exposed to harsh parenting are at risk for psychological and behavioral problems. When adolescents are repeatedly exposed to marital conflict, especially when it is not resolved, they are more likely to become aggressive and depressed. Conger and Conger (1994) found that adolescents who see themselves as recipients of aggressive parenting reflect in their relationships with their siblings and later their spouses and children.

To top it off, children are the responsibility primarily of their parents and secondarily of society. As one illustration of this fact, parents have to be able to support their children economically. To do that, the individual must be a member of a larger unit, the society. According to Schokkaert and Sweeney (1999), a society is composed of individuals living together for their mutual benefit, bound together by shared beliefs, values, and collective hopes and goals. In other words, society consists of individuals formed into one unit by a shared understanding of the world. The individual works for the society's advancement (and, of course, for the income needed to live comfortably). Looking at a society, one sees a unity among individuals tied together by their shared beliefs and goals. So, the individual in his or her work contributes to the advancement and service of his or her society. The individual's skills serve the society.

Now, there are various kinds of job insecurity, which are compounded by the complicated economic systems of modern competitive societies. The individual, through no fault of her or his own, could lose her or his job. The job is the primary source of income, but its loss means losing more than income. Leaving alone the ensuing psychological impact, such as destroyed ambitions and sense of self-worth, the individual could become homeless, unable to support his or her children. According to Seccombe (2007), poverty is a characteristic setback caused by the market cycle. The market brings some people up and at the same time brings others down. In the latter case, society should take responsibility for those of its members who are victimized by the market system. In doing so, in the view of Minujin et al, (2006), society recognizes that this could happen to anyone that it preserves itself by preserving its members, and that it ensures its continuity and prosperity by investing in the children who will lead it in the future.

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