



Helping Parents Give Children a Healthy Start

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Starting even before birth, children are powerfully influenced by parents and conditions at home. That is why many experts call for “two-generation” programs to serve disadvantaged parents and children at the same time. If such dual interventions are well done, they can be more effective – and possibly more cost effective – than programs that separately target adults and children.

But of course we have to understand what matters in order to make improvements. In the spring 2014 issue of *Future of Children*, scholars assess the effects of various parental and home influences and ask how policies affecting such factors can best further the well-being of children. Here, we focus especially on home conditions and policies relevant to parental employment.

The Impact of Parents’ Jobs on Children

Public policies that encourage low-income parents to work, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, are well-entrenched in the United States. The benefits seem obvious, because employment raises parental incomes and working parents can be positive role models for their children. But there can also be downsides from parents’ work – especially when mothers work outside the home. Researchers have found that severe stress in young children’s lives – whether from violence, harsh parenting, or the daily burdens of poverty – can undermine their neurobiology in ways that undermine health, social competence, and ability to succeed in school and adult life. And certain features of parental employment can contribute to chronic stress in poor children’s homes, in several ways:

- When parents work long or nonstandard hours at stressful, low-paying jobs, they bring anxieties home – which harm relationships with children and other adults in the household.
- Parents whose workplaces have inflexible schedules may be unable to leave work to care for sick children, unless they are willing to lose income or risk being fired.
- Parents who work inflexible hours for low wages may be forced to place their children in substandard child care, another source of stress.
- Parents employed in workplaces without provision for family leave may miss crucial opportunities to bond with their young children – and new mothers in such jobs may have to stop breastfeeding early or forego breastfeeding altogether.

Such worrisome side-effects of parental employment are, in fact, increasingly common. They follow predictably from the proliferation of low-wage U.S. jobs with irregular work hours, job insecurity, workload strain, and lack of paid family leave and other family-friendly benefits. Such jobs not only directly contribute to stress for children, they are also associated with adult disorders such as anxiety and depression that reverberate through families. Parents’ mental health influences children’s mental and physical health and prospects at school.

Mitigating Stress at Home

We should be deeply concerned that the parents who are most at risk of seeing negative effects spill over from work are the U.S. workers who are least able to take leave, cut their paid work hours or schedule work hours to accommodate their children’s needs. Public policies can address this problem by providing tax incentives that encourage employers to improve workplace flexibility and offer better benefit packages. In addition, the federal government or state governments can enact family and medical leave policies that include paid leave when a child arrives or sick family members need help. Governments can also help low-income parents train for, find, and keep well-paying jobs with benefits and flexibilities that families need.

When children must grow up in difficult home environments, steps can be taken to minimize stress and predictable sources of harm. Adults – including teachers as well as parents and foster parents – can be trained to give children more sensitive, warm, and consistent caregiving. Well-designed home visiting programs can support parents' efforts to help children. And high-quality preschool programs can counteract stress and positively affect children's cognitive development. Disadvantaged children especially benefit from such programs. Nevertheless, the United States currently invests less than other developed countries in public childcare and has the lowest share of children enrolled in formal programs.

Payoffs from Two-Generation Programs

Educating parents is perhaps the best way to boost children's well-being. More educated parents are known to raise children who themselves become healthier and better-educated, flourishing in almost every way compared to offspring of less educated parents. Contributors to the *Future of Children* compilation highlight the especially positive potential of two-generation programs. At their best, these programs reach both parents and their children in reinforcing ways. They ensure services of equal duration and intensity to both generations, and incorporate the latest research about what works to boost education and preparation for current and future jobs.

If two-generation programs can help disadvantaged parents find jobs with more security, higher wages, and greater flexibility for family responsibilities, then the children of such parents may very well reap extra benefits – beyond the obvious gains from improved family incomes. Evaluations of two-generation programs currently underway will give policymakers important evidence to assess exactly how much bang for the buck these special programs bring for society as a whole – in addition to the specific benefits they bring to the disadvantaged parents and children directly served.

Income inequalities have skyrocketed in the United States, and one contributing factor is the sharp difference between what affluent parents and less privileged parents can do for their children. To reduce gaps in decades ahead, we need more aggressive public policies to invest in the healthy development of children at the bottom rungs of the income ladder. Americans cannot afford to let stagnating wages and deteriorating work conditions for poor parents undercut the futures of so many of the children on which our shared future depends.

Read more in Jonathan D. Wallace, editor, *The Future of Children* 24, no. 1 (2014), produced through a collaboration of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University and the Brookings Institution.