Strengthening Adult Capacities to Improve Child Outcomes: A New Strategy for Reducing Intergenerational Poverty
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Achieving sustained prosperity in any society depends on building a strong foundation in all children in order to help them fulfill many roles: successful learners, healthy and productive workers, contributing members of their community, and effective parents of the next generation. Early childhood policies and programs contribute to these goals by providing enhanced learning experiences for children living in poverty, as well as parenting education and supports for their families. But while these policies and programs have produced long-term benefits for individuals and society, the quality of implementation and magnitude of impacts have been inconsistent at best.

If we want to do better for our children, we must aim higher.

It’s clear that high-quality early childhood programs can make a measurable difference for children in poverty, but we must do more. Advances in neuroscience, molecular biology, and the behavioral sciences provide the evidence needed to build on best practices and to forge new ideas that can address the factors that contribute to intergenerational poverty. One promising path is to focus on fostering the skills in adults that allow them to be both better parents and better employees.

Science tells us that children who experience significant adversity without the buffering protection of supportive adults can suffer serious lifelong consequences. Such “toxic stress” in the early years can disrupt developing brain architecture and other maturing biological systems in a way that leads to poor outcomes in learning, behavior, and health. These incur enormous costs to individuals and society—from failure to complete high school and greater probability of incarceration to the increased risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, depression, and substance abuse.

The complete elimination of stress from the lives of children is not a reasonable goal; manageable levels of adversity provide opportunities to develop the coping skills needed for resilience. Rather, the goal is to prevent or mitigate the consequences of toxic stress by buffering young children from abuse or neglect, exposure to violence, parental mental illness or substance abuse, and other serious threats to their well-being.

Success in this area requires adults and communities to provide sufficient protection and supports that will help young children develop strong, adaptive capacities. Since many caregivers with limited education and low income have underdeveloped adaptive skills of their own, interventions that focus on adult capacity-building offer promising opportunities for greater impacts on children.

One area of development that appears to be particularly ripe for innovation is the domain of executive functioning. These skills include the ability to focus and sustain attention, set goals and make plans, follow rules, solve problems, monitor actions, delay gratification, and control impulses. The quality of experiences that families and communities provide for young children can either strengthen or undermine the development of these building blocks of resilience. They are built over time, not hardwired at birth.

The most rapid growth of executive function skills occurs between ages three and five, followed by another period of accelerated development in adolescence and young adulthood. This second window provides an important opportunity for skill-building in young parents and other caregivers whose own development was undermined by early-life adversity. When their own core capacities
and mental health needs are addressed, adults are better equipped to promote the development of competence in the children who rely on their care.

Research indicates that a child's executive function skills develop through structured play and caregiver modeling, while adult capabilities are strengthened through mentoring or coaching—and both get better with practice. Early childhood services and workforce development programs are well-positioned to capitalize on this knowledge. Greater impacts could be achieved by innovative "two-generation" programs that devise effective strategies for building the common core of adult capacities that are essential for success both at home and at work, while also increasing the development of these skills in young children. As families strengthen these skills, they are more likely to possess the tools needed to achieve self-sufficiency, as well as healthy, secure lives.

The possibility for substantial progress in our ability to address what some consider intractable problems is real, but success will require a fundamental shift in our willingness to take risks, try new things, and learn from failure. Breakthrough impacts will not be achieved in an environment that invests only in evidence-based programs whose effectiveness has already been documented, particularly when the magnitude of those effects is not sufficiently high.

Advances in the biological and behavioral sciences provide tremendous opportunities for policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and philanthropists to transform the way they think about helping vulnerable children and their families. By building the skills and capacities of adult caregivers, creative new interventions could aid children whose developmental needs are not being met. Current best practices must be viewed as a starting point, not a destination. The failure to aim higher is not an acceptable option.

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