The Impact of Poverty on Attachment
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Partially addresses the following NMAIMH competencies:
Theoretical Foundations
- pregnancy & early parenthood
- family relationships & dynamics
- cultural competence
Systems Expertise
- service delivery systems
Direct Service Skills
- safety
Working with Others
- empathy & compassion

The federal government defines poverty in terms of income. And although there are situations where a sense of community and the accompanying social support can lessen the effect of many of the negative outcomes we typically associate with poverty, several studies suggest that income is nevertheless, significant (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011). Low income means that families often are forced to live in neighborhoods or areas that tend to be less safe, and where access to quality education, health care and other resources is harder to come by. In addition to a lack of resources, the effects of poverty also filters down to infants and toddlers because of the stress parents feel when they are worried about finances, safety and other concerns related to a lack of resources.

Aber, Bennett, Conley and Li (1997, p. 476) put it quite bluntly: “Research results suggest that owing to the chronic stress of poverty, parents are more likely to display punitive behaviors such as shouting, yelling, and slapping, and less likely to display love and warmth through cuddling and hugging.” While society often blames parents, that stance ignores what we understand about the role of stress.

Stress affects our ability to focus our attention (on our children), our motivation to spend time with our children and even our ability to find it rewarding. This occurs because when we are feeling stressed the higher parts of our brain (the frontal lobe in particular) are less available and we rely (unconsciously) instead on the lower portions of the brain. The lower portion of our brain functions more automatically, and is more reactive. A parent who is feeling quite stressed, for example, is much more likely to shout angrily at
his infant or toddler because impulse control, reasoning and the ability to calmly respond, all of which are higher brain functions, are less available. As we become increasingly stressed, then, the characteristics or qualities we associate with “good enough” parenting become harder to access.

We also know that “psychological factors such as uncertainty, conflict, lack of control, and lack of information are considered the most stressful stimuli” (De Kloet, 1992, p. 358) and readily activate our stress response system. A lack of resources often creates a sense of unpredictability and a sense of powerlessness to change our circumstances. This adds a whole other dimension so that in addition to stress associated with concerns about putting food on the table, for example, there is an added layer related to a lack of control and uncertainty about the future.

When parents experience chronic stress that is often associated with living in poverty, it becomes much more challenging to provide a secure base from which a young child can explore their world, or a safe haven to return to when they become upset or just need to know a parent is there. A loss in either or both realms has the potential to lead to attachments where both children and parents struggle. And instead of a mutually pleasurable relationship where both parent and child discover comfort, joy and competence, an infant or toddler’s demands can be experienced as yet another source of stress.

Addressing both concrete needs (for example, food, safety and shelter) as well as the emotional needs of the infant or toddler can occur simultaneously. Additionally, something as seemingly little as learning how to make their baby smile can lead to lower levels of stress because the parent has gained control over some portion of their life. And the more confident and competent they feel, the more that feeling is likely to spread into other areas of the parent’s life.

Talking points for supervisors

- How does the home visitor understand the role of stress associated with poverty?
- How can the presence of stressors, especially those associated with poverty, inform interventions that the home visitor might want to consider?
- Is the home visitor able to find a balance between assisting families to access resources and a focus on the parent-child relationship?

References/Additional Resources

