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## **Socioeconomic Status and Mental Health of Children**

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## **Socioeconomic Status and Mental Health of Children**

In the United States, mental health disorders are an issue that is quickly becoming more prevalent. This is especially true in children between ages three and seventeen. According to the article “Children’s mental health” by Ashley Abramson, approximately one in five of these children have a mental health disorder, and these rates have been worsened by the recent pandemic. (Abramson, 2022) Besides events such as a pandemic, a child’s family’s income level can have an impact on their mental health. It is important to know how the socioeconomic status of children and their families influences their chances of developing depression or anxiety. Understanding how parental stress, financial stress, and living conditions affect children’s mental health allows for intervention for those children. According to the article “Prevention and early intervention in youth mental health” by Marco Colizzi et al., having early intervention for these children can improve academic performance and decrease the risk of developing mental health issues. It also has long-term benefits, such as decreasing the likelihood of developing substance abuse and behavioral health problems. (Marco Colizzi et al., 2020)

Children with low socioeconomic status have a higher chance of being exposed to trauma, which can be detrimental to their mental health. Matthew Peverill, et al. in “Socioeconomic status and child psychopathology in the United States” states that “Exposure to trauma is more common in children from lower-SES families than their higher-SES peers. Children exposed to trauma identify potential threats with less perceptual information, exhibit elevated emotional reactivity, and have more difficulty effectively regulating these emotional responses.” (Matthew Peverill, et al., 2021) This article uses the words trauma and threats, both terms that create a sense of danger or hurt. The idea that these children have more “emotional reactivity” suggests they are acting more sensitively, which leads them to have a bigger chance

of developing mental illnesses. They also “identify potential threats” with “less perceptual information”. Even though events or people might not be threats, low-SES children may perceive them as one due to their previous traumatic experiences. Due to their higher likelihood of seeing something as a threat, they may be constantly stressed and defensive. According to Colizzi, constantly being in this state can unfortunately lead to worsening anxiety and emotional instability. (Marco Colizzi et al., 2020)

Another way socioeconomic status affects children’s mental health is through their parents. Peverill, et al. states that “Investment refers not only to investment of resources in material necessities such as food... but also the investment of time in child rearing. Raising a family without sufficient financial resources places increased demands of many kinds on parents, which may divert time and attention away from supervision and towards efforts needed to provide for the family's basic needs.” (Matthew Peverill, et al., 2021) The fact that they need to focus on the “family’s basic needs” first creates an idea of constant stress; they need to be thinking of how to feed their family rather than spending time with them, or promoting their education. “Supervision” and “efforts” also give a sense of control and responsibility which makes it seem as though parents are mostly at fault for the consequences their children face, due to their lack of control over their children. The word investment creates a sense of care, in this case, towards children. By repeating the possibly insufficient “investment” present in these families, the author emphasizes that low-income families might not have the ability to give proper care to their children. This is due to the fact that parents need to take extra jobs and/or are mentally stressed by financial hardship. The idea of “material necessities” emphasizes that they are mostly focused on physical items needed for survival. This prevents them from focusing on

the emotional or educational needs of their children. Even though the parents are not purposefully ignoring their children, it could seem neglectful or traumatic to the children.

Another consequence of parental stress due to SES is harsher parenting styles. According to Aileen Garcia et al., “heightened levels of parenting stress have negative repercussions on the family...stressed parents may tend to take on a more authoritarian parenting style, become significantly less responsive to the child, and employ a more punitive discipline style.” (Aileen Garcia et al., 2017) The phrase “negative repercussions” emphasizes the harm that parents’ increased stress can have. Repercussions is a term typically associated with consequences or punishment, which the children may be facing in different forms. The article does not specify what form this harm comes in, but it can be implied that it is both physical and psychological. For example, this quote states that this can lead to authoritarian parenting and for parents to become “significantly less responsive”, implying that stress can create a controlling environment for children and suggests a feeling of neglect. Parents may also use a “punitive discipline style” which in severe cases can lead to physical harm. Physical punishment can be especially damaging to children. In the study “Physical punishment of children: lessons from 20 years of research” by Durrant J. et al, it states, “Physical punishment is associated with a range of mental health problems in children... including depression, unhappiness, anxiety, feelings of hopelessness, and use of drugs and alcohol”. (Durrant, J., & Ensom, R, 2012) This shows that these childrens’ inferior conditions and exposure to parental punishment lead to a higher chance of developing mental health issues.

Besides children having a greater likelihood of developing depression and anxiety due to their parents’ stress and resulting repercussions, their parents are more prone to stress due to their financial situations and poor living conditions, too. In the article “Influence of Child Behavioral

Problems and Parenting Stress on Child-Parent Conflict among Low-Income families” by Aileen Garcia et al., they state “low-income parents are especially susceptible to experiencing pressure caused by poor socioeconomic and neighborhood conditions...They experience increased anxiety in worrying about finances, job security, and the future.” (Aileen Garcia et al., 2017) The phrase “especially susceptible” implies that this group of parents are more likely to be affected or harmed by pressure. The term “susceptible” is generally related to disease which could create a feeling that this pressure is psychologically harmful. These definitions apply because they are referring to the “socioeconomic and neighborhood conditions”; low SES parents have more stress because they lack financial resources and have a poor quality of life. This stress does not only affect the children; it is also detrimental for the parents.

Since lower-SES families might have to direct most, if not all of their financial resources and time to maintain their basic necessities, they have little to no money that can be saved or used in other ways. As a result, these families might be unable to leave poor and disadvantaged neighborhoods they might live in. In the article “Continuity and change in neighborhood disadvantage and adolescent depression and anxiety” by Christian King et al., they state “adolescents who consistently lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods had greater levels of depression and anxiety. Adolescents who no longer lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods did not have different levels of depression and anxiety than those who remained in non-disadvantaged neighborhoods.” (Christian King et al., 2022) The term “consistently” means that these people have faced the stressors of “disadvantaged neighborhoods” for quite a while. It then compares it to the people “who no longer lived” in these areas, meaning they are away from the stressors and violence of those neighborhoods. Even though they previously lived in these disadvantaged neighborhoods, they did not develop greater levels of depression and anxiety. This

implies that continuously living in these environments causes higher levels of mental health issues. Since low-SES families are less likely to be able to escape these neighborhoods, they can face more exposure to traumatic and dangerous events, putting them at a higher chance of developing depression and anxiety.

Besides facing trauma and its mental health consequences, housing instability is another source of stress that low SES children face. Their families may need to move often in order to find work or to find cheaper living areas. According to Peverill, et al., “These material hardships may influence psychopathology in numerous ways. For example, housing instability may increase psychopathology risk by disrupting children's social support networks.” (Matthew Peverill, et al., 2021) “Disrupting” means to interrupt or cause a disturbance; in the context of relationships, this can be very detrimental because healthy relationships require interaction. More importantly, strong relationships typically require consistent and in-person interaction. According to the article “Family and Housing instability: Longitudinal Impact on Adolescent Emotional and Behavioral Well-being” by Patrick Fowler et al., these social support networks can include school peers, teachers, and extended family. Especially for children attending school, classmates and school friends may have a larger impact on them compared to their parents. There is a “powerful effect of moving, given the potential disruption of social connections outside the home.” (Patrick Fowler et al., 2015) Children with low-SES often already do not have enough support and investment from their parents. If they are unable to find a trusted adult or a strong social support network due to frequent moving, they could lack much needed support, whether it be academically or emotionally.

As mentioned before by Peverill, these children face “instability”, which typically means they are in a situation that is unpredictable and changing. Generally, being in a constantly

changing environment leads to higher stress levels because of the need to address or adapt to stressors and surroundings. (Matthew Peverill, et al., 2021) This type of instability, such as moving living locations often, can be considered a form of trauma. These children might be abruptly broken away from relationships or have to constantly adapt to a new environment. In new neighborhoods, they might see others as threats easier due to their unfamiliarity and previous traumatic experiences. In the article “Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University”, it states that children might have worse social skills due to the lack of long-term and stable relationships with friends and caregivers. Decreased attention from friends and caregivers can put them at higher risk of anxiety, depression, and personality disorders. (“Neglect”, 2017)

These studies of low-SES children indicate that early intervention is necessary to reduce the chances of them developing mental health issues. The lower a family’s socioeconomic status is, the more prone their children are likely to experience depression and anxiety. All of these causes stem from the fact that these families are low SES and do not have sufficient financial resources. The government can address this issue in multiple ways, one of which involves developing programs that increase social mobility for these families. This could come in the form of cheaper high-quality education for children, professional opportunities for parents, and rent support. In addition, there are already government programs that have seen success. For example, the article “Policymakers should expand Child Tax Credit” by Marr et al., states that the recent Child Tax Credit expansion due to the pandemic significantly reduced child poverty rates between 2020 and 2021. It reduced child poverty by 40 percent and brought it to the low of 5.2 percent. (Chuck Marr, et al., 2022) As shown before, families in poor financial conditions can affect children’s mental health by limiting their parents' investment in them or exposing them to trauma. So, reducing poverty will be a big step in addressing this issue. Besides addressing

these current families, it would be more beneficial to create programs that prevent people from falling into extreme financial stress in the first place.

However, these studies are not exempt from limitations or biases that might limit who this correlation of children with low-SES and mental health is generalizable to. A limitation seen in the articles by King and Peverill is lacking a representative study population. For instance, the article written by Peverill mentions in the limitations that the children in the study were only classified by “Non-Hispanic White” and “Black”, significantly misrepresenting the target population of children in the United States. In the article “Continuity and change in neighborhood disadvantage and adolescent depression and anxiety” by King et al., the study population makeup is provided, and they are represented by percentages. However, there are also very few categories regarding race, such as White, Black, Hispanic, and Others. These categories, especially “others”, are too general and therefore may not be useful. Unfortunately even if the study population’s makeup is provided, the percentages are likely not representative of the entire population. In addition, similar articles may address the fact that ethnicity and race can have influence on a family’s SES. However, this is usually only stated in the introduction or limitations of the article, and these populations are not included in the actual study.

Addressing possible relationships between race, SES, and mental health can show if specific communities or people need more attention. If it is clear a certain group is impacted more, more resources could be directed to address their needs. A possible solution to address these limitations is by controlling the study population. Researchers can select a certain number of participants so that the study population closely represents the population they are generalizing to. It would also be helpful to define the actual makeup of the study population as a reference.

Peveerill's article is limited by having insufficient information about the study populations' racial and ethnic makeup. However, another limitation found in Peveerill's article was not having clear definitions for socioeconomic status. Even though his article focused heavily on SES levels and its impact on childrens' mental health, low-, middle-, and high-income families are not clearly defined. Since there is not an income range or objective way to define these families, their true SES could be inaccurate. Some families in the study could be below the poverty line while others are closer to a middle SES and both be described as a low-SES family. This could create an inaccurate study population and misrepresent results. The articles by Peveerill and King also do not compare the depression and anxiety rates to middle and high SES children. Providing this information could help better the understanding of how the likelihood of mental illnesses of children increases towards lower SES, if any relationship exists. Disregarding information about higher SES can inaccurately describe the impact of having low income and mental health. These limitations can be overcome by doing a new study with SES based on income brackets, preferably defined by government tax or poverty levels. In addition, this study could include middle and high SES populations, ensuring that relationships found in these studies are not misleading or exaggerated. Therefore, further studies with consideration of these limitations would provide a better idea of the relationship between socioeconomic status and mental health in children.

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