

Examining the impact of low socioeconomic status on the well-being of children

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of low socioeconomic status (SES) on the well-being of children, particularly in terms of mental health. It highlights how factors such as family income, parenting styles, and the broader social environment influence a child's development. The family stress and family investment models are utilized to understand how economic pressures and resource allocation within families can affect children's emotional and behavioral outcomes. Additionally, the paper discusses the role of government and community interventions in supporting children from low SES backgrounds, emphasizing the importance of resilience, strong parent-child relationships, and early help services. While low SES poses significant challenges, it is not deterministic, and with appropriate support, children can achieve positive developmental outcomes.

Key words: low socioeconomic status; child well-being; mental health; family stress model; family investment model; parenting styles; resilience; early intervention

1 Introduction

The World Health Organization (2018) underscores the critical role of mental health as a cornerstone of overall health, defining it as a state in which individuals can reach their potential, manage everyday stresses, work productively, and contribute to their community. The mental health of children is of particular importance, as research indicates that 50% of all lifetime cases of mental illness begin by the age of 15, and approximately one in ten children aged 5 to 16 are diagnosed with a mental disorder. These statistics are alarming and highlight the necessity of early intervention and sustained support to prevent the deterioration of children's mental health. Without such support, mental health issues can intensify, leading to severe, long-term consequences. Among the various factors that influence children's mental well-being, low socioeconomic status (SES) stands out as a significant determinant. SES encompasses more than just financial hardship; it includes access to resources, social support, and environmental conditions, all of which profoundly affect a child's development. This paper delves into the impact of low SES on children's mental health and offers strategies to enhance support systems for these vulnerable populations.

2 Socioeconomic status and mental health

Socioeconomic status (SES) is a comprehensive indicator of economic and social standing of an individual or family, typically determined by income, educational attainment, and occupational status. The link between low SES and mental health problems is well-documented, with research showing that individuals in the lowest SES brackets are two to three

times more likely to suffer from mental health issues compared to those in the highest SES groups. This disparity is not just a matter of income but extends to the stability and quality of life that a family can provide. The family stress model elucidates how financial pressures, such as debt, unemployment, and low income, can lead to chronic stress within the household. This stress often manifests in emotional and behavioral problems in children, as parents under financial strain may struggle to provide the emotional support and consistent parenting necessary for healthy child development.

Moreover, the chronic stress associated with financial instability can disrupt family dynamics, leading to increased conflict and reduced emotional availability of parents. This, in turn, can create an environment where children are more likely to develop mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders. The effects of low SES are not limited to the immediate family environment; they extend to the broader social context, where children from low SES backgrounds may face additional challenges, such as living in disadvantaged neighborhoods with limited access to quality education, healthcare, and social services.

3 Parenting styles and child development

Parenting styles play a crucial role in shaping children's well-being and development. Research indicates that authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and clear boundaries, is more prevalent among higher SES families and is associated with positive developmental outcomes for children, including higher self-esteem, better academic performance, and stronger social skills [1]. In contrast, authoritarian parenting, which is more common in lower SES families, tends to involve stricter discipline, less communication, and less emotional support, leading to adverse outcomes such as lower self-esteem, poorer academic achievement, and higher levels of anxiety and depression in children [2].

The family investment model provides further insight into how SES influences parenting practices. Families with greater economic resources are better positioned to invest in their children's education, extracurricular activities, and overall development. This investment extends beyond financial means; it includes time, attention, and emotional support, all of which contribute to a child's cognitive, social, and emotional development [3]. Conversely, families with limited resources may struggle to meet even the basic needs of their children, let alone invest in their long-term development. This disparity in resource allocation can perpetuate cycles of poverty and disadvantage, as children from low SES families may enter adulthood with fewer skills, lower educational attainment, and limited economic opportunities.

4 The impact of family structure and environment

The structure of a family, particularly in low-income households, significantly impacts children's mental health and overall well-being. Single-parent families, especially those headed by single mothers, are at a higher risk of experiencing financial hardship, which can exacerbate the psychological distress experienced by both the parent and the child [4]. Children in single-parent households are more likely to live in poverty and are often exposed to high-stress environments where the parent may be overwhelmed by the dual responsibilities of earning a livelihood and raising a child.

In addition to family structure, the broader environment, including the neighborhood and community in which a child grows up, plays a critical role in their mental well-being. The Good Childhood Report (2017) highlights that children living in disadvantaged areas are more likely to be exposed to negative environmental factors such as crime, poor housing conditions, and limited access to recreational facilities. These factors contribute to a heightened sense of insecurity and stress, which can adversely affect a child's mental health. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a framework for understanding how these environmental factors interact with family dynamics to influence child development. According to this theory, a child's development is shaped by multiple layers of influence, ranging from the

immediate family environment (microsystem) to broader societal factors such as cultural norms and government policies (macrosystem) [5].

5 Resilience and support systems

Despite the significant challenges posed by low SES, resilience can play a crucial role in helping children overcome adversity and achieve positive developmental outcomes. Resilience is not merely the absence of mental health problems; it is a dynamic process that enables individuals to adapt successfully to challenging circumstances throughout their lives. Protective factors that strengthen resilience include strong parent-child relationships, positive school experiences, and supportive community networks. When these protective factors are present, children are better equipped to cope with the stressors associated with low SES.

Governments and communities also have a vital role in supporting children from low SES backgrounds. Early intervention programs that provide targeted support to disadvantaged families can help mitigate the impact of low SES on children's mental health. For example, programs that offer parenting support, mental health services, and educational resources can significantly improve outcomes for children at risk of developing mental health problems. The Good Childhood Report (2017) emphasizes the importance of multi-agency support, with various services working together to provide comprehensive care for children facing multiple disadvantages.

6 Conclusion

Low socioeconomic status has a profound impact on children's mental health and overall well-being, influencing every aspect of their lives, from family dynamics to educational opportunities and social relationships. However, while low SES presents significant challenges, it does not dictate a child's future. With the right support systems in place, including positive parenting practices, strong community networks, and early intervention programs, children from low SES backgrounds can develop resilience and achieve positive developmental outcomes. This paper underscores the importance of a holistic approach that considers the complex interplay of factors affecting children's mental health and calls for concerted efforts by families, schools, communities, and governments to support the well-being of all children, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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