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The impact of homelessness on child development

by Chloe Learey

Children who are homeless are at risk for experiencing many complicating issues that impact their physical and emotional health. Unfortunately, this impact can have long term, cumulative effects over the course of a lifetime. The earlier we can support successful interventions to prevent or end homelessness, the better the outcomes will be for children and their families.

The impact of homelessness on child development occurs before a child is born. Pregnant women who are homeless are at higher risk of experiencing a lack of prenatal care, poor nutrition, and chronic stress; all of which can impact the development of their baby. These infants are more likely to have a low birth rate, to not receive regular check-ups and immunizations, and to live in a stressful environment. All of these are risk factors for a child not developing optimally, particularly the elements of a stressful environment, and can have an adverse impact on brain development. A child's brain is developing very rapidly in the earliest years; 80% of brain development happens by age 3 and 90% by age 5. Having children in positive environments that support that development creates the strong foundation they need to be successful in school and beyond. Children who are homeless are more at risk for not having adequate food, for being exposed to or directly experiencing violence, for being separated from their families and placed in foster care, a system that is not ideal for child development. These experiences create chronic stress and produce a physiological response that weakens the ability of children to develop optimally. A report from the Family Housing Fund, "Homelessness and its Effect on Children," notes that by 18 months, children who are homeless often begin to demonstrate a regression in speech and toilet training, and ultimately 75% of homeless children under the age of 5 have at least one major developmental delay, while 44% have 2 or more major developmental delays. These children are also less likely to be enrolled in an early education program that is one of the environments that could counter some of these negative effects. Clearly homelessness is not good for children.

Last year the state of Vermont implemented a two-year pilot program in three areas – Brattleboro, Burlington, and Rutland – to help homeless families with young children ages 0 to 6 find and maintain housing. The Family Supportive Housing (FSH) program provides services and supports to families to help them identify what they need, make goals towards getting those needs met, and access resources towards achieving those goals with the outcome of stable housing as a primary objective. The Winston Prouty Center has two case managers for FSH and works closely with community partners such as

Brattleboro Housing Authority, Windham and Windsor Housing Trust, Morningside Shelter, and the Brattleboro Area Housing Review Team to implement this program. There are many challenges families face in finding and maintaining housing, and it takes sensitivity, creativity, persistence and a willingness to take risks in order to support people to make a difference in their lives. While the program has only been up and running for a year, we have seen some real success stories. The state has expanded the program in two more regions and will hopefully continue it as we see positive results.

Finding housing is not enough. Supportive services are also important. The risk factors associated with homelessness do damage to families, not just children, and it is critical that we work to offset those damages to create the positive environments necessary for children to develop optimally. We believe that all families want to do what is right for their child. Understanding what children need to learn and grow will help families provide that environment. Certainly stable housing is part of that foundation, but there are other services needed as well, including: long-term supportive housing (not just two years), substance abuse treatment, parenting education specifically for families who may not have experienced a supportive childhood, after-school and academic support, and nutritional support. The report from the Family Housing Fund outlines several strategies for maximizing those services.

Supporting early childhood development means supporting family development as well. We cannot separate services for young children from services for families and hope that those children will develop optimally. There are several points along the continuum of development where we might invest in interventions to make a difference in the life of our youngest citizens – from pre-natal care to early education to academic supports in school like special education to activities for teens and young adults. While these are all important, an investment in the earliest years, such as Family Supportive Housing, may make the biggest difference for children and families.

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