

An Informed Approach for Teaching Children Who are Living with Poverty

by Ileen Schwartz-Henderson

The Children's Defense Fund *State of America's Children 2012 Report* reveals disturbing statistics:

- An estimated one in 45 children — or 1.6 million — children was homeless in America each year between 2006 and 2010, and the numbers are growing.
- Approximately 40% of those children, or 640,000, who were homeless, were five years or younger.
- From 1967 to 2010, the poverty rate for young families with children soared from 14.1% to 37.3%.
- There were over one million children and youth who were homeless enrolled in public schools during the 2010-2011 academic year.
- In 2010, one in nine children — 16 million in total — were in households that struggled to ensure that their children did not go to sleep or to school hungry.
- Children who are homeless are twice as likely as other children to repeat a grade in school, be expelled or suspended, or drop out of high school.
- Poverty is linked to a number of negative outcomes for children, including completing fewer years of schooling, working fewer hours and earning lower wages as adults, and a greater likelihood of reporting poor health.

Reading the statistics from the CDC report for children can be deeply troubling. As early childhood educators and advocates, we need to understand the effects of poverty on the child and learn how we can have the most impact on our vulnerable young citizens.



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Meet Thomas

Thomas is one of the 16.4 million children living in poverty in the United States and one of the 7.4 million who lives in extreme poverty. He was born addicted to heroin and spent his first three years in five foster homes. At three his mother returned, and he lived in a shelter for a year until they moved into his mother's boyfriend's apartment with his two brothers and his sister. At four he watched as this boyfriend severely beat his mother, and they moved back to the shelter for his fifth birthday.

Many life events cause stress. Researchers generally agree that a certain degree of stress is a normal part of our response to the inevitable changes in our physical or social environment. This stress can build resilience and actually make the child better able to cope with the next stressful experience.

On the other hand, toxic stress response is caused when a "child experiences strong, frequent, or prolonged adversity, such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship — without adequate adult support" (Kathuri, 2012). Studies have shown that high levels of toxic stress can change the architecture of regions of the brain that are essential for learning and memory, and can even result in the development of a smaller brain. Children like Thomas who are homeless and/or living in poverty experience multiple events in their lives that can cause a toxic stress response.

Children who are homeless have three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems of children with homes. This is why it is so important to understand the reasons for the behaviors you may see when working with these children. Thomas has been through so much that the behaviors he developed to cope with the physical and emotional problems in his life could reflect the serious damage that may have occurred to his brain architecture.

Studies show that:

- 47% of children who are homeless are anxious or depressed.
- 20% of preschoolers have emotional problems requiring treatment by age eight.
- 33% have at least one major mental disorder.

It is also important to remember that often a child's parent — like Thomas' mom — has been the victim of trauma herself. In a study by Bassuk et al. (1998), it was found that the rates of PTSD were higher in mothers who were homeless than with mothers with homes. They had four times the rate of major depressive disorders and twice the rate of drug and alcohol dependencies. These challenges often lead to the adoption of high-risk behaviors, severe and persistent health and social problems, and a greater risk of early death.

Given this intense and early exposure, it is important to understand the effects of toxic stress on the body and its impact on a child's growth and development.

Thomas is always on high alert; this comes from his natural fight, flight, or freeze response to stress. In addition, his relationship to his mother is impacted. He often finds she lacks emotional or physical availability because of her own stress and life events. She behaves unpredictably, and he lacks a sense of safety and security. His experiences have created a diminished ability to develop trusting relationships and coping skills, and he is struggling with a poor sense of self.

Some of the most thought-provoking developments in understanding the impact of poverty and resulting stress is being done at Harvard's Center for the Developing Child by Dr. Jack Shunkoff's team. One serious and profoundly relevant finding from this work is the identification of the impact of toxic stress on executive function. Executive function is the ability to multi-task, prioritize, and follow through on an objective. It is a proven marker of success in life. Damage to this brain function has great implications in the discussion of how homelessness and poverty impact the lives of young children.

Imagine Thomas walking in to the first day of school, a situation that requires high levels of executive function. He is filled with new sensory impressions and his brain needs to

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focus, hold, and work with information while filtering distractions. He must switch gears and manage multiple tasks, as well as understand the motivations of others, focus on multiple streams of information at the same time, monitor errors, make decisions in

light of available information, revise plans as necessary, and resist the urge to let frustration lead to hasty actions. Like many children who are homeless, Thomas is not equipped for this first day and he begins a series of difficult and frustrating school experiences.

So How Can We Help Thomas and Children Like Him?

Brain research reveals that a *strong supportive relationship* can provide our brains with important protection from the effects of toxic stress. The best way to support Thomas and other children in his situation is to help his teachers develop programming that encourages trusting relationships while building his skills and identifying his current strengths. We also know that positive, trusting relationships have a stronger influence on resilience the earlier in life these are experienced. It is important to remember that research clearly shows strong, responsive and supportive adult relationships are the strongest predictors for mitigating the impact of chronic and toxic stress on children.

Trauma-Informed Teaching and Caregiving

It will be important for Thomas' teachers to understand trauma when working with him. One aspect of this work is identifying "triggers": reminders of past traumatic experiences that causes the 'thinking brain' to shut down and be replaced by the 'feeling brain,' which has a fight, flight, or freeze reaction. These feeling brain reactions often appear to us as unexplained misbehavior. Being trauma-informed can sensitize you to what is going on inside Thomas' head and to understand that his behavior may not be a result of noncompliance or a lack of intellectual ability. This awareness can increase your insight of certain sensory cues that increase these behaviors. When his old traumatic experiences are triggered by being asked to do something that he doesn't understand, he is left feeling helpless, vulnerable, and out of control. For a child experiencing a trigger, it is difficult to have a conversation or to problem solve as that part of their brain is not accessible. When Thomas puts his head down on his desk, it will seem inappropriate, but given

his prior experiences this reaction is purely self-protective.

Provide a Safe and Secure Place

To heal, children must feel safe in their bodies and have a connection to a safe and available adult. It is important to promote a safe environment. The most effective way to do this is to provide stable, buffering relationships with adults. Thomas' past interactions may have been unpredictable and confusing. Being aware of the messages we are sending through our tone of voice and body language will assist Thomas in building a sense of personal safety through consistent and predictable interactions.

Share Power

Children need to feel that they are competent as learners. We help when we provide children with choices of play experiences that are developmentally appropriate. Often children in crisis will act out through disruptive behaviors to take control back in the only way they know. Allow them to make decisions, choose their play experiences, and avoid confrontation. Coping with stress and trauma will have an impact on the way children respond to new situations. Although Thomas may withdraw, others may have few boundaries and will hug and engage without discretion. Show those children how to shake hands with someone they have just met. This gives them the opportunity to engage, but sets an appropriate boundary that is important for them to learn. Encourage the shy child to make good eye contact with others while engaging in activities and sharing toys. Allow a child like Thomas space to make his own decisions about when, what, and who to play with.

Holistic Approach

Use a holistic perspective and see a child as part of a family, recognizing that a parent is also an individual. It's important for Thomas' family, friends, and community to intervene with support, services, and programs that address the source of the stress and the lack of stable relationships

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in order to protect him from their damaging effects.

Include parents in activities if possible. Thomas' mother never had the ability to play and experience a normal childhood herself, so she may enjoy activities that are geared for her children.

Welcome her and model ways to include Thomas while still participating herself. Sharing power and decision making with Thomas' mother will let her know she is in charge of her children and that she can make the decisions that are right for her family. Your warmth and undivided attention to a parent or a child will make an important impression.

Focus on Success

Most importantly, focus on Thomas and his mother's strength and resilience. Point out the abilities you see in all parents and children while you provide opportunities for success, celebrating even the small steps toward positive outcomes.

Thomas' story does not have to end badly. Your sensitive engagement can provide the strong, supportive relationship that can be protective and life-affirming. Understanding his needs and family history without judgment can provide the interventions and skills that will help him to heal and understand that the world can be a better place for him and his family.

References

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