How can caring grown-ups help children overcome adversities?

Abstract

Many children live in homes where they don’t have what they need to do well in life. These children who face a lot of difficult things might not grow up to be all that they could be. Studies show that a hard life can slow down brain development. We wanted to know how parents and other caregivers could protect children’s brain development, even in tough conditions.

Introduction

What did you need from your parents or caregivers when you were little? Children depend on adults to make sure they have enough to eat, a safe place to live, and ways to learn about the world. They also need adults to talk with and listen to them. In other words, children need nurturing care.

Children can often handle a few scary or upsetting things, but recovering from lots of bad things at once is harder. Adversities are painful life experiences, such as poverty, not enough food or bad treatment. When a child experiences many adversities, they don’t grow as much or as fast as they should. They can have a harder time getting along with other people, and their brains don’t develop as fast as they should. When they grow up, they are less able to take part in the world around them in a positive way – and they are less happy.

Some adversities, like extreme poverty, are huge problems that take a long time to get fixed – if at all! Parents and caregivers can’t wait until poverty disappears before raising their children. That’s why it’s important to know what parents and caregivers can do to help children grow up healthy despite adversities. Scientists have found that nurturing care can protect children’s brains from tough life situations. But what happens when the child grows into a teenager? Does the effect last?
Methods

We studied data from two big projects in Brazil and South Africa. Children in the Pelotas Birth Cohort were born in Pelotas, Brazil. Children in the South African Cohort were born in Soweto, South Africa.

Each project tracked the development of children from birth up until adulthood. In fact, many of the now grown-ups are still being tracked! The researchers visited each household when the children were little. They met the children many times afterwards as well. At each home visit, they asked the family and the children questions and made observations (see Table 1). Here are some of the things they measured in each family home:

- Adversities (difficult life situations the child and family faced)
- How parents or caregivers took care of their children, played with them, and helped them learn

Table 1: Questions and observations researchers made while visiting homes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ADVERSITIES</th>
<th>CARE</th>
<th>LEARNING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Does the family have enough money for what they need?</td>
<td>✓ Does the child seem happy around the parents/caregivers?</td>
<td>✓ Do the parents/caregivers read stories with the child?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Do they have enough food?</td>
<td>✓ Do the parents/caregivers pay attention to the child?</td>
<td>✓ Are there toys or other play materials available for the child to play with?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Does the mother feel emotionally strong, rather than stressed or depressed?</td>
<td>✓ Do the parents/caregivers and the child talk to each other in a pleasant and loving manner?</td>
<td>✓ Can the parent/caregiver describe teaching the child something, like words or a song?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Was the mother able to finish school?</td>
<td>✗ Was the child's birth weight healthy, rather than smaller than average?</td>
<td>• Intelligence (measured with an IQ test)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Was the child's birth weight healthy, rather than smaller than average?</td>
<td>✓ Is the child getting taller and heavier as expected?</td>
<td>• Social skills and happiness (based on a questionnaire)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Is the child getting taller and heavier as expected?</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Height (measured by researchers)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We studied records of interviews and clinic visits from the projects. In total, we included more than 500 children from Pelotas and more than 1,000 children from Soweto in our study. We reviewed what other researchers had learned about the children’s home lives. We then connected this information to three measurements from when they were teenagers:

- Intelligence (measured with an IQ test)
- Social skills and happiness (based on a questionnaire)
- Height (measured by researchers)

Results

We had four important findings:

1. Children who received responsive caregiving and learning opportunities had higher IQ scores as teenagers. They also got along better with other people and were more likely to reach about the same height as other teenagers.

2. Children who faced many adversities had lower IQ scores, worse social skills, and were shorter than other teenagers.
Discussion

Our results show that when parents or caregivers are responsive to their children and help them learn, they protect them from the effects of tough life situations. Responsive caregiving during early childhood doesn’t just help children when they are little. It helps them grow into healthy teens and adults who are able to care for themselves and others. It allows them to become people who can contribute to their communities. Children from these families may be better at overcoming challenges throughout their lives.

Children don’t choose to have hard lives. It’s unfair that adversities in early childhood (and even before they were born) can have long-lasting effects. Our results show how important it is to support families to provide responsive caregiving and learning opportunities. Children also need other aspects of nurturing care, including enough food, protection from harm, and health care. Community or governmental programs that support nurturing care could help children grow up to reach their full potential.

Conclusion

Do you have young children around you in your home, wider family, or community? How do you and your family care for them? Adults are mainly responsible for providing care, but older siblings and other relatives can help too! Which parts of nurturing care can you help with?
Glossary of Key Terms

**Adversities** – Very difficult experiences, such as poverty, shocking and scary events, or caregivers (e.g. parents) not looking after their children properly.

**Cohort** – A group of people that experienced an event that links them together, such as being born at the same time or graduating from school at the same time.

**IQ test** – Intelligence quotient test. This test provides a score that psychologists use to measure intelligence.

**Nurturing care** – The conditions children need to grow up to reach their full potential. Nurturing care includes good health care, adequate food, responsive caregiving, opportunities for learning, security, and safety.

**Responsive caregiving** – When parents or caregivers recognize what children need or are trying to communicate, and they respond promptly, in a pleasant and loving manner, and with actions that are appropriate for the child’s age and situation. Responsive care is one part of nurturing care (see above).

Check your understanding

1. Name a few examples of things that children need in order to develop in a healthy way.

2. What are some possible results of facing many adversities as a child?

3. Why is it important for children to receive responsive caregiving?

4. What factors in society contribute to nurturing care?

5. How might supporting families who provide nurturing care help make society fairer?

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