

# Improved parenting may fortify low-income kids against poverty effects

July 22 2014, by Melissa Healy, Los Angeles Times

---

For children growing up in poverty, the seeds of poor health in adulthood appear to be sown early. But a nurturing parent may be able to foster a child's resilience to such conditions as allergies, diabetes, heart disease and some cancers, says a new study.

To gauge the lasting health effects of good parenting, the latest research returned to rural Georgia eight years after researchers completed their first clinical trial of a seven-week program called the Strong African American Families Project. Of the 667 African-American mothers and their children who participated in that trial, researchers returned to 272 of the child subjects, who were by now 19 to 20 years old. They collected blood samples and measured those samples for signs of systemic inflammation.

The researchers were looking for levels of six immune system proteins that set the stage for chronic, low-grade inflammation in a body, which in turn contributes to such conditions as obesity, insulin resistance, coronary [heart disease](#), depression and drug abuse. They wondered whether the children of mothers who had gotten the seven-week [parenting program](#) had lower levels of these inflammatory markers than did the offspring of mothers who had been assigned to the clinical trial's control group. Those moms received only a family assessment, but got none of the training in limit-setting, problem-solving and communication with their preteen child that mothers in the intervention group got.

Eight years after their mothers had participated in the trial, the [young](#)

[adults](#) whose mothers had received the parent training had levels of [inflammatory markers](#) that were significantly lower than those of mothers who got no such training. The difference was most dramatic in the young adults whose families were most disadvantaged. And the gap was most striking when the parenting of the participating mother had been judged highly improved by the training.

All of this suggests not only that a [positive parenting program](#) makes parents better at listening and responding to a child: as that child grows into adulthood, his mental and physical health alike may be improved by having had a better parent.

The authors underscore, of course, that they have fallen far short of proving that better parenting drives down the heightened risk of heart disease, metabolic abnormalities and psychiatric disease among those who grew up poor: that would take many more years of study to discern. But since the inflammatory biomarkers they measured contribute to such ills, they reason, anything that drives those levels down is likely to improve health outcomes down the road.

After a decade during which rates of childhood poverty in the United States have risen steadily, an estimated 16 million American kids - 22 percent of all children in the U.S. - live in families with incomes below the [federal poverty level](#) (\$23,550 for a family of four). Helping parents struggling to feed and clothe their children to be caring and attentive as well would seem to be a good idea to begin with; if such efforts made children more likely to live free of chronic diseases, that "could pay long-term social, public health and economic dividends," the authors wrote.

The article was published Monday in the journal *PNAS*. Among its authors are Gene H. Brody, director of the University of Georgia's center for family research, who helped devise the Strong African American Families Project, whose curriculum has been adopted by

agencies in Georgia, California, Colorado, Pennsylvania, Iowa and Washington, D.C.

©2014 Los Angeles Times

Distributed by MCT Information Services

Citation: Improved parenting may fortify low-income kids against poverty effects (2014, July 22) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-07-parenting-fortify-low-income-kids-poverty.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--