

Strong parent connections enhance children's ability to develop healthy response to stress

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Children in low-income families have an increased chance of thriving when their caregiver relationships include certain positive characteristics, according to new research from the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. Using data from more than 2,200 low-income families surveyed as part of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, NCCP researchers found that school-age children who reported high levels of parent involvement and supervision were more likely to report behaviors associated with positive emotional development and social growth.

According to *Strong at the Broken Places: The Resiliency of Low-Income Parents*, an estimated 14 million families with at least one child earned below 200 percent of the poverty threshold in 2015 - a total of 65 percent of low-income families. Research has found that living in poverty can produce environmental stressors that lead to negative behaviors in [children](#), such as inattention, impulsivity, aggression, withdrawal, depression, anxiety, or fearfulness. Furthermore, children living in [poor families](#) are significantly more likely to have trouble developing social-emotional competence—the ability to manage emotions, express needs and feelings, deal with conflict, and get along with others.

"Too often, when poor families are discussed, the focus is on deficits," said Renée Wilson-Simmons, DrPH, NCCP director and a co-author of the report. "And chief among those deficits is what's seen as parents'

inability to successfully parent their children." Dr. Wilson-Simmons challenged the deficits focus, adding that despite the multitude of obstacles that low-income parents face, many of them succeed in helping their children flourish. "They raise children who possess the social-emotional competence needed to develop and keep friendships; establish good relationships with parents, teachers, and other adults; and experience a range of achievements that contribute to their self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. These families have something to teach us all about thriving amidst adversity."

Available online at <http://www.nccp.org>, Strong at the Broken Places presents findings from the survey responses of 2,210 nine-year-olds who lived in low-income families for three to five years. The report also cites additional research involving low-income families from diverse backgrounds and geographic areas showing certain common attributes among parents who are able to function well when faced with challenges. Those effective protective factors range from exhibiting a positive outlook, establishing [family](#) routines, and spending sufficient family time together to having good financial management skills, an adequate support network, and the willingness to seek help.

The major finding presented in the report is that low-income parents who provide their children with warmth and nurturance as well as rules and consequences are helping them develop both socially and emotionally in ways that will serve them well as they move from childhood to adolescence to young adulthood:

- Low-income parents who know which friends their children hang out with were twice as likely as parents rated as low in parental supervision to have children who do not engage in problem behaviors.
- Those who attend events important to their children were twice as likely to have children who do not engage in negative

behaviors as those who rarely attend important events.

- Caregivers who treat their children fairly were twice as likely to have children who did not engage in [negative behaviors](#) as those whose children felt that they are treated unfairly "often" or "always."

Overall, most of the nine-year-olds surveyed rated their caregiver high on all of the factors NCCP researchers used to measure resiliency in low-income families:

- 68 percent reported that their primary caregiver (most often their mother) had knowledge of what they did during their free time and the friends with whom they spent time
- 74 percent said their mother "always" or "often" spent enough time with them, and 76 percent said they talked about things that matter "extremely well" or "quite well"
- 92 percent rated their relationship with their mother as "extremely close" or "quite close"

"The good news is that parents who struggle financially are still finding ways to have the kinds of interactions with their children that help them to develop socially and emotionally, despite the many external stressors competing for their attention," said co-author Yang Jiang, PhD, who led data analysis. "Since we know that children do better when their families do better, it's important that advocates and policymakers bolster families' efforts by supporting policies and programs that help parents develop strong connections with their children."

To promote family resiliency, NCCP researchers also recommended two-generation approaches that enhance the well-being and life opportunities of both parents and their children. The following policy strategies, outlined in *Strong at the Broken Places*, help stabilize low-income households so that parents are better able to engage with their children:

- Increase [parents'](#) access to health and mental health care, including depression screening and treatment
- Invest in training for providers of evidence-based parenting and parent-child programs and expansion of these programs
- Strengthen safety net policies (e.g., unemployment insurance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, housing assistance) to reduce extreme adverse circumstances that can overwhelm families and reduce their chances of escaping poverty and ensuring their children's success
- Expand two-generation programs that connect [low-income families](#) with early childhood education, job training, and other resources, helping them break the cycle of poverty

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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