

# Coping skills program for disaster survivors tested with children living in chronic poverty

December 10 2018, by Sharita Forrest

---



In a recent study, social work professor Tara M. Powell found that a social-emotional skills program developed for youths who have symptoms of trauma after experiencing natural disasters showed promise at improving the coping skills of young children from rural families affected by chronic poverty. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

An emotional coping skills program developed for natural disaster survivors appears to help young children deal with the traumatic experiences associated with living in chronic poverty, a new study found.

University of Illinois social work professor Tara M. Powell pilot tested the program, Journey of Hope, with more than 100 [children](#) attending high-poverty elementary schools in Tennessee.

According to assessments completed by the children's teachers, conduct problems, hyperactivity and aggression declined and [prosocial behaviors](#) increased while the students participated in the [intervention](#).

Developed by the nonprofit Save the Children, Journey of Hope's curricula is designed to reduce trauma symptoms such as anxiety and aggression by teaching children how to identify, understand and express various emotions in positive ways. Children learn positive coping strategies through activities such as discussions, literary activities, art, dance and cooperative games.

The eight-week Journey of Hope intervention was tested at four [school districts](#) that also were implementing an afterschool literacy program created by Save the Children, which provided part of the funding for the study. The intervention was delivered in eight one-hour sessions for children in pre-kindergarten through third grade at the participating schools.

"The intervention had significant positive impacts on the children for the duration that they were participating in Journey of Hope," Powell said.

While these results were encouraging, assessments completed by the teachers six months after the children finished the program indicated that their behavior appeared to return to baseline levels—a finding that, although disappointing, is not uncommon among participants in

behavioral interventions, Powell said.

"The effects of early intervention programs generally decrease over time for [young children](#)," Powell said. "Many studies have noted that it's critical to address not only the individual child but all the elements that affect the child's well-being and development, including the family and community.

"If you don't have additional training for parents, teachers and [school](#) staff members, the results may not last because none of the skills that children learn are reinforced after the program ends—and that's exactly what we found."

To reinforce the positive coping behaviors that children learn through the program, Powell suggested that a continuum of services is needed, with the intervention provided over multiple semesters, bolstered by supplementary training for teachers, parents and school administrators on supporting trauma-exposed children.

Powell said she is exploring potential sources of funding to conduct a second trial of the intervention that would include training for parents and educators on healthy child development, the impact of trauma exposure on young people and their potential reactions to distressing events.

The trial in Tennessee was the first time that Journey of Hope had been tested with children whose trauma exposure was not related to natural disasters.

However, many clinicians have begun to view living in poverty as traumatic in itself. Children growing up in families with legacies of intergenerational poverty may be exposed to myriad traumatic events and pervasive stressors, such as food insecurity, violence, homelessness

and abuse, Powell said.

In [rural areas](#), where behavioral health providers are few, communities' geographic isolation and lack of public transportation make access to the few providers that are available even more difficult, Powell said.

Schools are one of the most common venues for delivering social-emotional services to high-risk children and youths, and nearly two-thirds of youths who receive such services obtain them through their schools, according to the study.

"Given the risks of adverse outcomes for children in rural poverty, it is crucial that interventions designed to build protective factors be available to mitigate the potential negative short- and long-term risks these children face," Powell said.

Save the Children developed Journey of Hope in 2005 to address the social-emotional needs of youths in New Orleans who participated in a gang fight at an urban middle school. The fight was believed to have arisen from these youths' complex reactions to multiple traumatic events, including those associated with Hurricane Katrina, as well as their ongoing experiences with neighborhood violence and physical or sexual abuse.

**More information:** Tara M. Powell et al, Addressing the social emotional needs of children in chronic poverty: A pilot of the Journey of Hope, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2018.11.010](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chidyouth.2018.11.010)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Coping skills program for disaster survivors tested with children living in chronic poverty (2018, December 10) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-12-coping-skills-disaster-survivors-children.html>

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.