

The impact of economic disparities on children's development

April 22 2019, by Billy Morgan



Parental engagement is one of the most important factors in a child's development, yet it varies dramatically based on socioeconomic advantage.

A leading [developmental psychologist](#), Prof. Ariel Kalil in her research examines the historical evolution of income-based gaps in parenting

behavior and children's skills. Kalil recently sat down with the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy to discuss the science behind parental decision-making and talk about her innovative work as co-director of the Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab.

You've written about the impact that economic disparities can have on children's development. How have these disparities changed the last five years?

While it's important to look at external factors when assessing disparities—such as stable housing, fair wages, [health care](#), etc., I'm especially interested in the gaps in children's home learning environments and the big differences in what [parents](#) can do to promote this development.

Overall, the home learning gaps between richer and poorer families have slowed down in their divergence that was very characteristic of the past 25 years. But the bottom line is that they remain quite sizable. All parents are investing more in their children's development—lower- and higher-income families alike—so we still see a lot of inequalities in children's early opportunities. The corollary is that we then see big gaps in early skills development because the [lower-income families](#) simply can't catch up.

Are there ways in which this gap can be mitigated for low-income families?

Because we just keep raising the bar for these families, we should capitalize on the fact that low-income parents have very high aspirations and do change their behavior in response to incentives. We need to figure out how to support them in ways that will allow them to do the same kinds of things that middle- and upper-class families do because they want to and, in many instances, they have the ability to.

The challenge is that the ground we need to cover is so much greater for this population, and the stakes so much higher. The longer it takes, the further behind these children will fall, and they could likely be playing catch-up for the rest of their lives.

Are there policy solutions we should consider as part of this effort?

While there are macro-level policies that ought to be in place so no parent has to choose between working and taking care of their kids—like high-quality child care or paid leave—we also need support at a more micro level. Research shows that the things that help promote kids' development over the long run are small adjustments and small matters of habit that happen regularly. For example, reading to children for 15 to 20 minutes every night. This activity alone has been shown to achieve incredible outcomes in children's cognitive and social development. What we need to do is complement any big macro policies with support for families to succeed in making steady, modest investments in their children's early learning.

Do you have any examples you think could work?

One approach I created with my colleagues in the Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab has shown promise. It is a program with a simple goal: promote book reading with low-income parents using digital tools designed to help manage better decision-making and mitigate against procrastination. Called PACT—or the Parents and Children Together experiment—we incentivized parents to commit to weekly reading goals. It has been hugely successful. We found that parents had a hard time seeing the future benefit—like kindergarten readiness—from reading to a child who is only 15 months old. But by setting small, attainable goals, it allows parents to feel that they are accomplishing something, and it's

valuable and meaningful for their children's development now and into their schooling years.

How does it work?

It sets reading goals for parents for the week ahead and, via text messages, provides them feedback on their progress, awards them digital badges for meeting their goals and reminds them of their goals throughout the week. We ran the program for six weeks and found that the participating parents dramatically increased their reading time over this time period.

Do you think that PACT could help families on a broader scale?

It's not a silver bullet—we know we can't text message somebody out of poverty. But we have now done multiple field experiments along these lines that have shown positive outcomes. In fact, we just did a very similar one where we were trying to tackle the problem of chronic absenteeism among pre-school children of low-income families. We used a very similar approach and theoretical framework as PACT and were able to reduce chronic absenteeism by 20 percent.

How is economic inequality affecting outcomes for certain populations of children?

We know that these income-based gaps in children's skills that are observable at age two or three, long before they reach formal schooling, tend not to close or shift over the course of the schooling years. So the low-income kids who at age three show lower scores on early skills development are going to be same kids who graduate from high school at lower rates. Drawing the causal link between all of those things is

tenuous, but we know that kids who start behind will rarely catch up.

Is there any hope for these kids?

The hope is that we find new ways to address this problem. We cannot assume schooling is going to be the great equalizer and close all of these persistent gaps. Schools are important, of course, but [children](#) don't spend all of their waking hours in school. They spend many hours each day in their home environment with their parents or in an environment that their parents select for them. If that environment is low quality, the consequences are significant.

We have seen a very strong correlation between early markers of inequality and later inequality in life outcomes. In other words, most kids who are born into low-income families will be at the lower end of income distribution as adults. This is not an absolute, but in order to stave off the possibility of continuing this trend, we need to support [low-income families](#) with meaningful learning opportunities in their own home environments designed to really improve outcomes. They don't have to be expensive or complicated, but they do need to be able to dramatically change the trajectory for their kids.

Provided by University of Chicago

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