

How Devoted Moms Buffer Kids In Poverty

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Children raised in poverty often grow up to have poor health in adulthood, from frequent colds to heart disease. But there's one thing that might buffer them from that fate: a good mom.

That is the conclusion of a new study by a multidisciplinary team led by University of British Columbia psychologist Gregory Miller. The findings will be published in an upcoming issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

Much research shows that the stresses disadvantaged children undergo affect their physiological development, making them permanently vulnerable to infection and disease. One common outcome in adulthood is metabolic syndrome, a cluster of signs, including high blood pressure, impaired regulation of blood sugar and fats, and fat around the waist, that can precede chronic diseases such as diabetes and heart disease.

But a significant minority of children from low-income families become healthy adults. What accounts for the difference? The new study looked at two often-cited explanations of this resilience—upward mobility and early parental nurturance—and their correlations with later metabolic syndrome.

The findings: More advantages in adulthood didn't make a difference in developing the health problems. "But those greater risks later in life seems to be offset if the mom paid careful attention to the children's emotional wellbeing, had time for them, and showed affection and caring," says Miller, who collaborated with Edith Chen, also of UBC; Margie E. Lachman of Brandeis University; and Tara L. Gruenewald, Arun S. Karlamangla, and Teresa E. Seeman, of University of California/Los Angeles.

The study analyzed data from 1,215 adults (mean age 46) who participated in the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) in 1995–1996; more than 1,200 of them returned about a decade later to a clinic for physical exams. In these surveys, socioeconomic status was inferred from parents' educational attainment. Parental nurturance was assessed by a questionnaire, in which participants rated both parents on seven factors, including how understanding they were and how much attention they gave the child. For those who had the physical examinations, metabolic syndrome was measured by waist circumference and blood pressure, glucose, and lipids. The recent study controlled for current age, sex, race, and income.

As expected, the better off the child's family, the better the adult's health: Children who grew up in households where neither parent had a high school diploma were 1.4 times as likely to have metabolic syndrome as those raised by two college graduates. The exceptions: the people with nurturant mothers.

The mechanism appears to be related to reducing and managing stress in childhood and afterward. "There is a lot of evidence that nurturant moms"—or grandparents, teachers, or (though this study didn't show it) fathers—"can help buffer vulnerable kids from all sorts of negative outcomes," says Miller.

“Adults can teach kids to cope with stress more effectively, model more appropriate emotional responses, or give them a sense of the world as generally a safe place.

“We can do lots to help kids get through tough times,” says Miller. And that help can last, in body and soul, a lifetime.