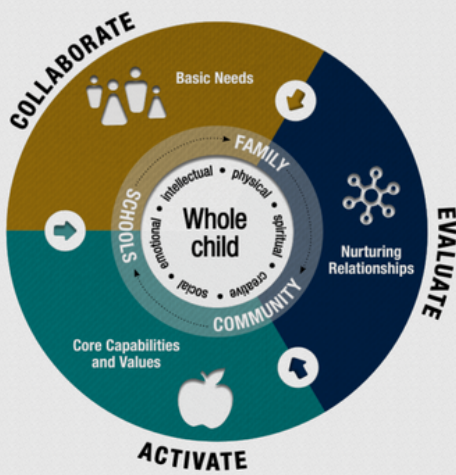


REDEFINING CHILD DEVELOPMENT: A VITAL SHIFT TOWARDS WHOLENESS

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In low-income and crisis settings worldwide, millions of children face numerous challenges that hinder their overall well-being and access to quality education. Rather than investing in isolated programs addressing singular problems, adopting the Whole Child–School Community approach offers a more comprehensive solution, considering the various facets of a child’s development for lasting results.

What’s At Stake

Children in low-income and adverse settings often confront a variety of obstacles, including limited access to quality education, poor health and sanitation, psychological and physical violence, malnutrition, and displacement. Traditionally funds and resources have been allocated towards narrow, issue-specific initiatives that target one of these problems, such as child malnourishment. While these programs have been undeniably effective in addressing the singular issue they are designed to confront, they rarely result in transformative change in the life trajectory of the child. These types of interventions, while crucial, remain confined to a single facet of the **complex and interwoven challenges** children in such circumstances endure.

333 million children live in extreme poverty globally.

WORLD BANK, 2016

Taking a whole-child approach when implementing child development and poverty reduction programs is essential for substantial **change** to occur not only for the **children** themselves but also for their **families, communities, and nations** (Carneiro and Heckman, 2003). A whole-child approach functions by strengthening the relationships between and within the child’s home, school, and community environment and focusing on the holistic development of the child. “The whole child approach identifies how children can be supported to attend and participate in school, obtain knowledge and skills, and achieve academic goals despite the adverse environments in which they live.” This integrative approach promotes a supportive environment in which the child can flourish and foster resilience for ongoing and future challenges, offering a pathway out of poverty and adversity. This kind of transformation is crucial given the fact that there are 333 million children living in extreme poverty globally (World Bank, 2016).

What does the research say?

Jamaica Study

The researchers in this study examined the impact of early childhood psychosocial stimulation, primarily through play, coupled with nutritional supplements, on a cohort of stunted children in Jamaica. This study involved a comparison between children who were stunted and did not receive early stimulation to those who were stunted and received early stimulation.

They found that stunted children who did not receive early psychosocial stimulation exhibited notably lower scores on cognitive tests compared to their stunted counterparts who did receive early stimulation. This discrepancy underscores the stark reality that nutritional supplementation, while undoubtedly indispensable for a child's physical development, alone is insufficient to profoundly alter the trajectory of a child's life. Instead, **focusing on both early stimulation, which enhances social and emotional learning and cognitive development, and nutrition is much more effective for long-term change.** To foster enduring transformation and unlock the full potential of children, it is essential to focus not just on nutritional needs but also on the critical role of early stimulation, which enriches social and emotional learning in addition to cognitive development (Walker et al., 2005).

Reach Up Early Childhood Parenting Program

This program was also developed in Jamaica however since its development it has been implemented in several other countries such as Bangladesh, Brazil, India, and Peru. This program works to foster resilience in early childhood through parent-focused home interventions. Health workers from local communities are sent to visit homes where they teach parents strategies to intentionally engage with their children. Because health workers work one-on-one with the families, they can identify and promote engagement

with the child through the resources that are already available to the families, highlighting the importance of understanding local contexts when taking a holistic approach. The program functions through its six core principles which include work through caregivers, the use of a structured curriculum, the building of caregivers' skills including self-esteem, the use of an interactive approach, training of home visitors, and an emphasis on praise for both the caregiver and the child.

Program evaluations from different cohorts in a range of countries including Jamaica, Bangladesh, and Colombia show that the **children who participated in the program were happier, did better in school, had higher IQs as adults, experienced better mental health, demonstrated less violence, and earned more money than children who were not a part of the program.** The results of this program show that fostering and strengthening the relationship between the caregiver and child while also improving parenting skills can lead to long-term substantial change in the child's life including their well-being and health (Walker et al.).



Case Studies

- ▶ Jamaica study: early stimulation complements nutrition for stunted children.
- ▶ Reach Up: fostering resilience in early childhood through parent-focused home interventions.

Policy Recommendations and Implications

Resource and fund allocation to Whole Child Development programs

- ▶ Resources and funds are typically allocated to programs that address singular issues that children in low-income and crisis settings face. However, research shows that dedicating resources to the comprehensive well-being of children offers a well-established route out of challenging circumstances. The whole child school community approach would be better as it takes into consideration the many factors of a child's development, and will yield better and lasting results.

Critical Understanding of the multifaceted problems that children face

- ▶ Without an in-depth understanding of the context of the child including the many problems they may face, programs may fail to cause effective change in the child's life. One must understand the web of obstacles that a certain child is facing to create a program that would allow children to effectively overcome these obstacles.

Fostering relationships between the school, community, and home

- ▶ These are the three environments in which the child's development occurs and is influenced. Through fostering relationships between these three domains, the school, community, and home can work together to create a supportive environment for the child which is central to the lasting well-being of the child. Understanding how these domains can work together is crucial as the child develops.



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