

SundayReview | OPINION

# To Help Kids Thrive, Coach Their Parents

By PAUL TOUGH MAY 21, 2016

IN 1986, in a few of the poorest neighborhoods in Kingston, Jamaica, a team of researchers from the University of the West Indies embarked on an experiment that has done a great deal, over time, to change our thinking about how to help children succeed, especially those living in poverty. Its message: Help children by supporting and coaching their parents.

The researchers divided the families of 129 infants and toddlers into groups. The first group received hourlong home visits once a week from a trained researcher who encouraged the parents to spend more time playing actively with their children: reading picture books, singing songs, playing peekaboo. A second group of children received a kilogram of a milk-based nutritional supplement each week. A control group received nothing. The interventions themselves ended after two years, but the researchers have followed the children ever since.

The intervention that made the big difference in the children's lives, as it turned out, wasn't the added nutrition; it was the encouragement to the parents to play. The children whose parents were counseled to play more with them did better, throughout childhood, on tests of I.Q., aggressive behavior and self-control. Today, as adults, they earn an average of 25 percent more per year than the subjects whose parents didn't receive home visits.

The Jamaica experiment helps make the case that if we want to improve children's opportunities for success, one of the most powerful potential levers for change is not the children themselves, but rather the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of the adults who surround them.

More recent research has helped to uncover exactly how that change can take place. Psychologists including Mary Dozier at the University of Delaware and Philip Fisher at the University of Oregon have studied home-visiting interventions in which parents of infants and young children are provided with supportive, personalized coaching that identifies and reinforces the small moments — such as the face-to-face exchanges sometimes called “serve and return” interactions — that encourage attachment, warmth and trust between parent and child.

The impact of this coaching can be powerful. In one series of experiments, infants and toddlers whose foster parents received just 10 home visits showed fewer behavior problems than a control group and significantly higher rates of “secure attachment” (a close, stable connection with the adults in their lives). The children's ability to process stress improved, too. In fact, the daily patterns in their levels of cortisol, a key stress hormone, came to resemble those of typical, well-functioning, non-foster-care children.

These positive influences in children's early lives can have a profound effect on the development of what are sometimes called noncognitive skills. In our current education debates, these skills are often talked about in morally freighted terms: as expressions of deep-rooted character, of grit and fortitude. But in practice, noncognitive capacities are simply a set of emotional and psychological habits and mind-sets that enable children to negotiate life effectively inside and outside of school: the ability to understand and follow directions; to focus on a single activity for an extended period; to interact calmly with other students; to cope with disappointment and persevere through frustration.

These capacities may be harder to measure on tests of kindergarten readiness than skills like number and letter recognition, but they are inordinately valuable in school, beginning on the first day of kindergarten. Unlike reading and math skills, though, they aren't primarily developed through deliberate practice and explicit

training. Instead, researchers have found, they are mostly shaped by children's daily experience of their environment. And they have their roots in the first few years of life. When children spend their early years in communities and homes where life is unstable and chaotic — which is true of a disproportionate number of children growing up in poverty — the intense and chronic stress they often experience as a result can seriously disrupt, on a neurobiological level, their development of these important capacities.

This is why interventions such as home visits with parents can be so effective. When parents get the support they need to create a warm, stable, nurturing environment at home, their children's stress levels often go down, while their emotional stability and psychological resilience improve.

Though interventions in the homes of infants and toddlers are especially effective, the principle that intervening with adults can help children seems to hold true in schools, as well. The Chicago School Readiness Project, a program developed by Cybele Raver, a psychologist at New York University, trains prekindergarten teachers in high-poverty neighborhoods in techniques intended to create a calm, consistent classroom experience for children: setting clear routines, redirecting negative behavior, helping students manage strong emotions. Mental-health professionals are also assigned to work in each classroom, but they are concerned as much with the mental health of the teacher as with that of the students.

Dr. Raver calls this approach “the bidirectional model of self-regulation,” by which she means a kind of virtuous cycle. If from the beginning of the year the classroom is stable and reliable, with clear rules, consistent discipline, and greater emphasis on recognizing good behavior than on punishing bad, Dr. Raver believes that stressed-out students will be less likely to feel threatened and better able to regulate their less constructive impulses. That improved behavior, combined with the support and counsel of the mental-health professional assigned to the class, helps teachers stay calm and balanced in the face of the inevitable frustrations of teaching a group of high-energy 4-year-olds.

The evidence from Dr. Raver's experiments indicates that the program's effects go well beyond classroom climate. The results of a recent randomized trial showed

that children who spent their prekindergarten year in a Head Start classroom of the Chicago School Readiness Project had, at the end of the school year, substantially better attention skills, impulse control and performance on memory tasks than did children in a control group. They also had stronger vocabulary, letter-naming and math skills, despite the fact that the training provided to teachers included no academic content at all.

The students improved academically for the simple reason that they were able to concentrate on what was being taught, without their attention being swept away by conflicts and anxieties. Changing the environment in the classroom made it easier for them to learn.

Nurturing the healthy development of infants and children, whether in the home or in the classroom, is hard and often stressful work. What we now understand is that the stress that parents and teachers feel can in turn elevate the stress levels of the children in their care, in ways that can undermine the children's mental health and intellectual development. The good news is that the process can be reversed, often with relatively simple and low-cost interventions. To help children living in poverty succeed, our best strategy may be to first help the adults in their lives.

Paul Tough is the author, most recently, of "Helping Children Succeed: What Works and Why," from which this essay is adapted.

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