

General Effects:

Life expectancy and Health: Children raised in poverty are more likely to have health conditions (asthma, allergies, low-immunity) and vaccination rates are lower for poor children. As a result, children living in poverty may be sick more often.

Development: Poverty significantly affects a child's brain development, function and IQ. A study comparing the brains of 9-10 year-old children showed that the prefrontal cortex was less developed in children from low income families. This area of the brain is essential in controlling problem solving and higher-order thinking. As a result, poor children may have issues with impulse control and critical thinking. Researchers have also discovered that poor children's language development, ability to remember details and ability to pay attention in school was also affected. By the age 3, a middle class child has twice the working vocabulary as a low-income child.

School performance: National statistics indicate that children who live in poverty are almost 1.5 times more likely to develop a learning disability and have lower gains in math and reading as a result of growing up poor, compared to non-poor students. Children from low income families tend to do poorer on tests, have a lower graduation rate, and are less likely to attend and complete college. Low self-esteem may be a result of poverty as well.

Behavior: Poverty's profound effect can result in permanent physical, emotional and cognitive impairment in children, which can lead to behavioral problems. National statistics indicate that low-income parents are twice as likely to be depressed, with negative effects on their children. Children under 6 years old whose parents are depressed or who are exposed to domestic violence or substance abuse are two to five times more likely to become homeless or to be placed in foster care. Children from low-income homes have more emotional and behavioral problems than non-poor children as a result. Children from low-income homes are at higher risk for becoming teenage parents and participating in violence; as adults, they experience more unemployment and earn less than those who didn't live in poverty as children.

Advice for Mentors:

Financial:

- While a Big may know that a family is struggling with finances, they should not feel responsible for payments or purchases. Even good intentions can demonstrate a lack of respect for a guardian's financial standing. A guardian's ability to contribute financially is not a reflection of their skills, support or role. Speak to guardians about what they can offer and what they would like you to offer for the child. Ensure that they are comfortable with all activities you are doing. A guardian can contribute in ways that are non-financial, such as snacks or packed lunches and transportation. Bringing up the topic of money can be difficult, so please speak to your Match Advocate in advance for support and guidance.

Academic performance

- While it is not your job to help them academically, it may be nice to help your Little develop a love of learning. Show your Little that you have confidence in their ability to achieve through hard work and talk about things you're passionate about. If a Little struggles with reading, find a game that will allow them to practice reading without making it a lesson. Allow your Little to feel good about what they are doing. This may help make them a Little more confident in school. Listen and ask questions when your Little opens up to you about struggles at school, instead of trying to fix the situation.
- Create a sense of trust. Allow your Little to understand that they can come to you with any questions or concerns. If your Little knows they have someone to talk to, they may feel more secure in other areas- i.e. academics.
- A Little living in poverty may not think about a career path until a late age. While it is not the Big's responsibility to teach a Little this, it may be helpful to do a playful activity that allows a Little to think about their passions, desires, and goals. Be sure conversation remains developmentally and age appropriate when discussing these ideas. This can be as simple as asking a Little what they might like to be when they grow up.

Self Esteem: A child living in poverty may not have a very good sense of self.

- Encourage your Little to participate in things they are interested in and compliment them on what they do well. This will allow your Little to understand positive self-worth and a sense of competence.

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- Expose your Little to new experiences and broaden their horizons. Take advantage of ticket opportunities through BBBSMB, explore local events, festivals or farmers markets, perhaps show your Little your school/work.

Support and commitment:

- Respect closeness between child and guardian. Understand your role as a secondary figure. In a poverty-stricken household, guardians are experiencing a number of stressors. If a child expresses frustration, be supportive of him/her and help to alleviate the pressure by giving the child the opportunity to talk about it or focusing on other enjoyable activities. Always remain positive. Never feel the need to “take a side” or agree with a child who expresses frustration about a guardian. You can be a supportive listener without taking sides.

Consistency:

- Children in poverty may be more susceptible to illness, and, as a result, may require outings to be rescheduled. A Big should understand this, but also work to schedule a missed or rescheduled outing as soon as possible.

Safety:

- Children living in poverty may have issues with impulse control and high-level critical thinking. A Big should be proactive in setting expectations, creating a game plan and letting a Little know what to expect/what is expected in terms of behavior.
- If your Little is struggling with impulse control, a Big should remain patient and strength-based. Be sure to point out strengths and ask a Little what you can do to help. Engage your Little in thinking about what they may need to be successful and provide support.