INTEGRATING THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF EARLY DEVELOPMENT INTO THE CARE AND EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN

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Motivating Questions

How is the child who is born with a tendency to be rather overactive, oppositional, and impulsive subsequently trained by the world to behave well or coerced into behaving badly?
(M. Rutter)

Why do some children have lives of disproportionate misfortune?
(T. Boyce)

Your Brain on Poverty

Healthy development requires the provision of enriched learning experiences for every child AND Prevention of and protection from the consequences of disruption, exclusion, and the toxic stress they bring into children’s lives

“...protecting brains, not simply stimulating minds”
J. Shonkoff, 2011

What does stress take offline?

- Executive functions
  - Follow directions and remember instructions to achieve a goal
  - Resist temptations/control impulses
  - Pay attention and shift attention
  - Ability to alert to mistakes & corrective feedback
    - Emotional regulation
    - Perception of and response to social threat
    - Immune functioning
      - LEARNING
      - DEVELOPMENT

Broader Context

- Historically diverse generation of children born in the trough of an economic cycle
- Social/economic exclusion as salient issue
- Need for stability and security slipping away from families’ control
- Pathways towards “diverging destinies”
- New understandings about what undermines development
- Thus, urgent need to appreciate “what is at stake” to influence policy and practice
Why Instability?

- Signature feature of poverty and, increasingly, of families with incomes above poverty
- Brings a “developmental”, dynamic lens to the foreground; cascades of events
- Gets closer to what brings chronic stress into children’s lives
- May capture developmentally meaningful elements of adversity beyond more static notions of risk

Evans & English, 2002

Social Exclusion

The Costs of Social Exclusion

Boyce, Focus, 2012
Summary and Implications

- Social stratification/exclusion and chaos/instability are a salient feature of child and family life for a growing share of our population.
- Impacts operate through neurobiological pathways, and begin early in life.
- Social exclusion and instability affect early learning (and health) and are likely active contributors to disparities in life outcomes linked to SES.
- Instability and disruption are overwhelming the capacity of schools, health systems, other programs, and policies to meet the needs of young children.

Summary and Implications

- Early education settings need to be viewed as engines of opportunity, as well as models of inclusion and sources of security/stability for all children.
- Teachers and other practitioners establish the “environment of relationships”…
  … in environments with ever increasing numbers of children from immigrant families, DLL children, and children with disabilities.

Summary and Implications

- Responses need to attend to continuity of programs and benefits, as well as social/institutional ties
  - New policies from U.S. Office of Child care
  - Early Head Start Child Care Partnerships
  - McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act
  - U.S. Military and Children with Special Needs
- Responses need to tackle explicitly the pressing need to build tolerance among children in the U.S.
  - Require PD in effective approaches to fostering tolerant, inclusive peer relationships
  - Pay explicit attention to issues of tolerance and inclusion in state ELS
  - Comply with new policy statement (DHHS, DEd) on expulsion and suspension practices in early learning settings

Thank you