Early child development is an imperative, due to the inherent value of creating environments to support children’s happiness and health, and also due to its effects on well-being in later life. A large body of literature provides evidence for the notion that early childhood exposures to factors rooted in the social world have significant effects on cognitive and schooling outcomes, physical health, and future determinants of health (such as economic success) in later life. This suggests strongly that nurturing the factors that support children during their early years will provide immediate returns, and will also be a marked determinant of the success of societies in the future.

There are three main mechanisms through which early social experiences (both positive and negative) are thought to influence outcomes in later life.

1) Latency – the effects of early experiences affect outcomes in later life, regardless of intervening factors;
2) Cumulative – multiple exposures from early in life and over the life course have a combining effect on health status in later life; and
3) Pathway – this is a dependency model, in which early experiences influence the probability of later social destinations, which in turn affect health.

The overall evidence suggests the following. In terms of physical health, early life experiences (through each of these pathways) affect physical health outcomes at later points in an individual’s life course trajectory, including through adulthood. For other domains of ECD (i.e. language/cognitive and socio-emotional development), we have less direct evidence, but are able to use the strong combination of findings from different points in the lifespan to draw inferences. The accumulation of research indicates that from birth to death, there are numerous outcomes for which exist ‘socioeconomic gradients.’ The implication of this vast body of work is that gradients in early life outcomes persist as gradients for outcomes throughout the life course.
In infancy, for both majority and minority nations there are socioeconomic gradients in birth weight, as well as in mortality. During the childhood years however, the trends start to diverge. In the majority nations, socioeconomic inequalities in morbidity and mortality become stronger, while in the minority nations, the antithesis is observed, with gradients for physical health outcomes largely disappearing.

The disappearance of morbidity gradients has been used to discredit the notion that early socioeconomic influences affect later outcomes; however this phenomenon is more likely attributable to the relative paucity of childhood morbidity in minority countries. Further, evidence from minority countries suggests that in childhood, gradients in physical growth and measures of cognitive and behavioral development begin to widen as gradients in morbidity compress. In other words, early childhood socioeconomic circumstances have show effects on outcomes in later childhood, if in other domains. In the majority nations, evidence on socioeconomic inequalities in the cognitive/language and socio-emotional domains of ECD is largely absent.

In the minority world context, a framework for investigation has been forwarded in order to understand the effects of the socioeconomic environment on health and development outcomes throughout the life course. This model views an individual traveling over the course of her/his lifespan through society, which itself is seen as a set of concentric circles. At the most intimate level, there are one’s personal social networks. Expanding outward, the next level of social organization is civil society at large. Both of these, in turn, are embedded in the metropolitan/state/national/global socioeconomic environment. The notion, then, is that the effects of these factors operate through each of the three aforementioned pathways.

With respect to child development, the inner most concentric circles have largely been the focus of research. Factors that have been studied in the outer levels involve how well a society protects its families and children from the rigors of the free market and the degree of cohesion of communities with respect to their children. Similar studies have not been conducted in the majority nations to understand how the broader society influences early child development. In fact, for many nations, attention to ECD itself is highly underdeveloped.

There are several important directions for future research. The first, more direct evidence is required in both minority and majority nations regarding the effects of early life experiences on a multiplicity of outcomes throughout an individual’s life course. In other words, studies must be conducted to test the effects of the socioeconomic environment during the early years on the birth through death outcomes that occur during a human lifespan. As well, socioeconomic gradients in the cognitive/language and especially the socio-emotional domain of development must be given greater attention both in minority and majority nations. Finally, there must be a greater emphasis on the large macro-economic and macro social factors (particularly those amenable to policy change) that are so critical for early child development and throughout the human life course.
References:


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