10.1: Introduction

Socioeconomic status (SES) is another form of diversity that has an impact on children's learning. SES is an economic and sociological combined total measure of a family's (or individual's) economic and social position in relation to others. When analyzing a family's SES, the household income, earners' education, and occupation are examined, as well as combined income. However, SES is more commonly used to depict an economic difference in society as a whole.

Socioeconomic status is typically broken into three levels (high, middle, and low) to describe the three places a family or an individual may fall into. When placing a family or individual into one of these categories, any or all of the three variables (income, education, and occupation) can be assessed.

Education in higher socioeconomic families is typically stressed as much more important, both within the household as well as the local community. [121] In various cultures, well-educated and higher-income parents have the information, the time, the financial resources, and the social connections to achieve family goals. [122]

In areas that are more impoverished, where food, shelter, and safety are priority, education can take a backseat. Children and youth in families and communities that are impoverished are particularly at risk for many health and social problems in the United States. [123]

Approximately 20 percent of children in California under the age of five live in families whose income is below the poverty level. Compared with other states, California ranks 20th in the nation in the number of children under age eighteen living in poverty. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, younger children (birth to six years) are more likely to live in an economically disadvantaged household. Young children of immigrant parents are 20 percent more likely to live in a household that is economically disadvantaged compared with children with native-born English-speaking parents. Young Black, Latino, and Native American children in California are also more likely to live in families that are impoverished compared with white children. [124]
Although early childhood educators cannot change the conditions of families in poverty, gaining an understanding of the challenges created by poverty makes it possible to take action to mitigate its negative effects. And they should keep in mind that families want the best for their child and family and may be doing the very best they can in that moment. Using a strengths-based approach without negative assumptions or judgment increases the chances of developing a trusting relationship that a family finds helpful and supportive.

Family Strains that Are Often Related to Socio-Economic Status

It is important to note that we are not trying to say that experiencing economic strain (often labeled as poverty or being poor) is bad. The message we are hoping to share is that it is difficult and often creates inequity. And most issues linking poverty and stressors for young children point to noncultural sources such as lack of health insurance and access to health care professionals.

This means inadequate or no prenatal care and then insufficient well-baby care, since poor families often depend on hospital emergency care, sometimes travel long distances from home, and see less-experienced doctors after waiting for hours in crowded emergency rooms. Studies have found that in poor neighborhoods food is often of inferior quality and more expensive. No matter how loving and skilled the family is, the reality of poverty creates sometimes insurmountable barriers to optimum child rearing.

Other factors may interact with poverty to add to these challenges. In the current political climate facing immigrants—especially undocumented immigrants—families may have no access to social services and health institutions that help support the family’s quality of life. Families of all backgrounds, headed by a single mother, are more likely to live in poverty than are all other kinds of families. Poverty in rural areas is also an increasing reality, regardless of racial or ethnic background.
Homelessness

Experiencing homelessness means being unable to acquire and maintain consistent, safe, secure, and adequate housing or lacking a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. People, including families, experiencing homelessness often live in temporary placements, such as hotels, shelters, parks, with family members, and in abandoned buildings.

Pin It! Language Matters

"Homeless" describes a situation; it does not define the people in that situation. We show families respect by speaking of "children and families experiencing homelessness" rather than "homeless children and families." People-first language acknowledges the individual before the situation they may be experiencing.

Homelessness is a circumstance that families may experience when they are faced with such challenges as extreme poverty and lack of affordable housing. It can also occur when a family’s current living situation becomes unsafe or unstable.

Homelessness is a reality for many families with young children in our country. In 2015, a third of all people who stayed in a shelter were in families with children and nearly half of children served by HUD-funded emergency/transitional housing providers in 2015 were age five or younger (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD),...
2016). Furthermore, children under age 1 comprise less than six percent of the overall child population in the United States, but more than 10 percent of the child population served by HUD-funded shelters (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015; HUD, 2016). In 2015, of the 3,007,598 children under age 6 in California, 220,940 experienced homelessness. That is one out of every 14 children.

Homelessness is also a state of vulnerability for children and families. It exposes families to physical, mental, and developmental risks. Families experiencing homelessness often keep their situation and circumstances hidden from friends, professionals, and others because they feel ashamed or embarrassed.

What Programs Can Do to Support Families Experiencing Homelessness

It is important that families experiencing homelessness see your program as a source of support. Programs can partner with families to minimize the daily stress and uncertainty that may be a result of homelessness. Programs can create an environment where families are able to choose how they feel best valued and supported.

Families experiencing homelessness and extreme poverty face challenges beyond the natural stressors associated with raising a family. Families experiencing homelessness may be focused on survival and urgent issues. They need to prioritize what should be addressed first so they can make progress toward a safe and healthy living environment. Families may appear distant. It can be lengthy, demanding, and challenging for families to access supports.

Families may be particularly concerned about the effects of homelessness on their child's wellbeing and learning. Programs can work with parents to create some stability and relief for children experiencing stress.

Understanding Issues Facing Families

A group of teachers in a program providing service to children from low-income families complained about parents. “Some parents just don’t care about their children,” one said. They all agreed. A social worker overheard the conversation and asked them to elaborate on why they thought some parents did not care about their children. They were quick to reply: “They don’t come to open houses.” “They never volunteer in the classroom.” “They don’t
volunteer for field trips, either.” “They skip meetings, even when it’s a parent–teacher conference.” The social worker asked, “So why do you think they behave that way?” Their answers were: “They just don’t care” or “they are too lazy.” The social worker asked another question: “How did you get to work today?” It turned out that almost all of them drove their cars except for a couple of them who lived close to each other and took turns driving.

The social worker’s next question was, “How many of those parents that you’re talking about have cars?” The teachers were silent. The social worker knew some facts that they were ignoring—(1) Few of the families owned a car, and the vehicles they owned were subject to frequent breakdowns; (2) the bus system was inadequate. The social worker had more questions. “How many of you can get off work during the day to go to your child’s school?” That started a big discussion among the teachers about the problem with coverage, issues with substitutes, and program policies. The conversation ended with the teachers reconsidering their earlier complaints. They had a greater understanding of some of the issues facing the families in the program.

Think About It…

What other reasons might families have for not being able to volunteer or come to meetings in the middle of the day? What might programs consider to make these opportunities more inclusive of all families?

Other Family Strains May Contribute to Economic Hardship

While not necessarily related to socioeconomic status, families face other strains. Some, such as long-term parental absence, can make it harder for families to maintain economic stability and are stressors for families. It’s important to recognize the stressors have a cumulative effect or snowball effect. The effect of multiple stressors is more than just the sum effect of the individual stressors.

Long-Term Parental/Caregiver Absence

Many families experience the separation of a parent/caregiver from the home for periods long enough to have an impact on the child’s life. These events can have an adverse effect on the parent/caregiver’s meaningful involvement in the child’s life and the parent/caregiver–child relationship and interfere with the parent/caregiver’s connection to the family. The separation may be voluntary or involuntary and due to diverse causes:

• Incarceration
• Military deployment
• Hospitalization
• Migration for the purposes of employment

Children may experience confusion, sadness, loneliness, bereavement, and feelings of abandonment as a result of this
separation. The nature of the impact will depend greatly on how the family interprets the separation to the child and the steps taken to maintain the connection to the missing parent. [140]

What Programs Can Do to Support Families Experiencing Long-Term Parental/Caregiver Absence

Child care programs can play a facilitative role in helping families to cope with long-term separation by providing the child with ways to reach out to the distant parent/caregiver. The first goal of such intervention would be to give the child multiple opportunities and venues through which to express feelings and beliefs about the separation. The child may have worries about the safety and well-being of the parent/caregiver and should be allowed to express them. Teachers can provide support in correcting misperceptions and providing reassurance that the child is loved, cherished, and will be protected. Through letters, drawings, or other means, children can be given opportunities to express their love and affection for the parent/caregiver.

![Figure 10.4: A child separated from a parent or caregiver can use writing/drawing to express their feelings.](image)

The goal is to help the family maintain the child’s connection with the parent and help the parent to remain a part of the child’s life. This connection can be maintained by keeping the parent informed about the child’s activities and newly acquired skills. The child’s artwork and photographs could be sent to the parent along with notes that teachers help the child to “write.” If more sophisticated technology is available (such as digital audiotape and video recordings), the child could record messages, and videos of the child’s activities could be made to keep the absent parent connected. [142]

Partnering with Families to Minimize Stress

To serve a child effectively, program staff members need to be aware of disruptions in the child’s life due to economic conditions and other difficulties the family faces. In these situations, program staff members may need to go beyond the typical methods for reaching the family to make sure they establish contact with families who are difficult to reach. They should reach out to parents when they see changes in the child’s behavior, fatigue level, grooming, and disposition. When the family is in distress, program staff members should do everything possible to keep the child in the program. The program may be the one place in the child’s life that is free of turmoil and may make a significant contribution to the child’s ability to cope with family distress.

Offering material help such as clothing, food, and transportation can be helpful for families experiencing stress related to...
poverty and homelessness. Demonstrating flexibility and understanding may remove additional stress and help families feel less isolated and overwhelmed. Depending on the availability of resources and the program's structure, professionals can connect families with community partners and help with access to services. [143]