



## **Effects of Malnutrition on Child Development**

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Food insecurity often accompanies homelessness and leads to adults and children alike being malnourished. In recent years, the number of households that have suffered food insecurity due to financial hardships has skyrocketed, with reported numbers of families experiencing food insecurity in the United States being the highest it has ever been since regular monitoring first began in 1995 (Howard, 2011). Additionally, over eight million families with children, which is 21% of all families with children, reported experiencing food insecurity (Howard, 2008). Food insecurity results in children lacking the nutrition necessary for

development, whether it be because they aren't getting enough food intake or because their parents begin to purchase cheaper but less nutritional meals.

Malnutrition has particularly adverse effects on children, as it can affect both their mental and physical wellbeing. Good nutrition is essential for the physical growth of a child, and bad nutrition can have irreversible effects if left untreated. For instance, when a child doesn't get enough food, or enough good quality food they can be lacking several vitamins that are essential to their growth. Vitamin D, for instance, is essential to bone health, and when a child experiences deficiency they may suffer from a condition called rickets, in which the bones are too soft to support the weight of the growing child and causes bow leggedness. Malnutrition can also cause a child to be overweight as a result of poor quality food that is lacking in nutritional value. When children are overweight or obese, they are also at greater risk for other health issues such as high blood pressure and high cholesterol, and other conditions such as asthma, sleep apnea, and type 2 diabetes (Belsky et al., 2010).

Malnutrition can also have adverse effects on cognition as well as mental health. Those same vitamin deficiencies that cause physical health problems can also hinder the development of the brain in growing children. For instance, children who are malnourished are more likely to perform poorly in school, to repeat a grade, and also show deficits in working memory as well as selective attention (Belsky et al., 2010). Malnourishment can also lead to a number of emotional and behavioral disorders in children. For instance, higher rates of anxiety and depression are found consistently in children that are experiencing food insecurity (Belsky et al., 2010). While these could reflect the stress of being in an impoverished family, however, the effects are exacerbated by poor nutrition. For instance, serotonin is a neurotransmitter that regulates mood and is commonly known as the happy hormone. In order to produce serotonin, the body must

have an adequate amount of carbohydrates. When children don't get the carb intake they need, it can cause serotonin deficiency which can have adverse effects on mood and result in several disorders such as anxiety, depression, and increased aggression and irritability.

Food insecurity can also have an effect on children's social development. The emotional and behavioral disorders that many children develop as a result of malnutrition also make it difficult for children to navigate social situations among their peers (Howard, 2011). For example, children who suffer from anxiety often struggle with making friends in school, and it can lead to feelings of isolation and depression. Additionally, malnourished children who are overweight may experience low self esteem attached to feelings about their physical appearance, which can also result of feelings of insecurity and self-consciousness.

#### Works Cited

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