Chapter 7
Inequality Begins Outside the Home: Putting Parental Educational Investments into Context

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Abstract The highly concerning phenomenon of a widening income–education gap in the USA is addressed by Kalil (Chap. 5). We offer a contextual developmental perspective on the effects of poverty on families, parents, and children. There is little doubt that parenting matters for children's health and development. However, we argue that analysis of how parenting matters to children's educational outcomes, and why parenting differs between economic and educational strata, is best conducted once parenting is put into context. In support of this argument, we briefly address three topics. First, we present strong evidence that parenting is a mediating factor in explaining children's diverging academic destinies. Second, we compare a behavioral economics perspective on parental educational investments in more and less advantaged households to developmentally informed theory and research on the topic. Finally, we consider the utility of a behavioral economics solution to the problem of educational disparities in this country.

Parenting as a Mediator

Views of parenting as the root cause of the pronounced achievement gap in the USA are based on the supposition that poor-quality parenting is a personal characteristic of poor parents rather than a by-product of living in a certain context that places unique demands on one's parenting. The substantial body of research showing that parenting mediates the relationship between economic disadvantage and child outcomes suggests that there is something about living with poverty that affects one's parenting behaviors. The role of parenting as a mediator between

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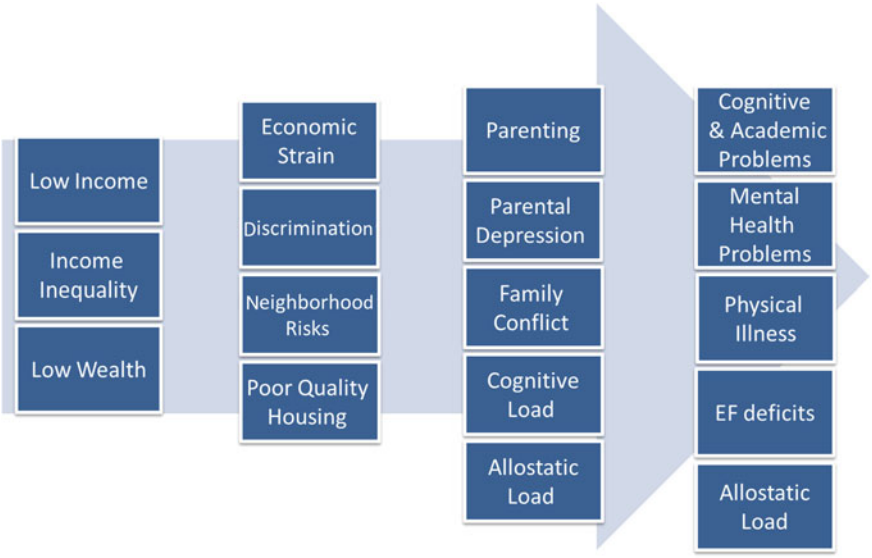

Fig. 7.1 Conceptual model of the effects of poverty and inequality on children's developmental outcomes

parental SES and child educational outcomes is also evident in the research literature on parental educational investments (Henry et al. 2011).

A corpus of work by scholars from various disciplines who have grappled with the question of how poverty and low family income take a toll on children's health, well-being, and life chances (e.g., Evans 2004) is summarized in Fig. 7.1. There is a well-documented cascade of direct and indirect effects of the context generated by poverty on child functioning—both via effects on parents and via direct effects on children's executive functioning, physical illness, mental health, and cognitive problems (Yoshikawa et al. 2012). Research has demonstrated robust effects of economic hardship on child depression, antisocial behavior, and academic outcomes resulting from a cascade of effects, including economic strain, its effects on marital conflict and parental depression, and ultimately through the mediator of harsh and inconsistent parenting (e.g., Conger and Donnellan 2007; Conger and Elder 1994). Our own research has illuminated direct effects of economic strain and family conflict on children's mental and physical health outcomes as well as indirect effects through compromised parenting (e.g., Wadsworth and Compas 2002; Wadsworth et al. 2008).

Direct effects of cumulative poverty-related risks on children's and adults' allostatic load (a compilation of unhealthy biomarkers; Evans and English 2002), and of social class discrimination on physical health outcomes (e.g., Fuller-Rowell et al. 2012) have been shown. In addition, mediated effects via parenting, including cognitive stimulation, have been demonstrated (e.g., Evans and Kim 2007, 2010; Evans and Schamberg 2009). Similarly, Blair and Raver's work has documented

direct effects of poverty on children's executive functioning (EF) and indirect effects on child EF via parenting (e.g., Blair 2010; Blair Granger et al. 2011; Blair et al. 2011; Raver et al. 2013). It is also worth mentioning that children's functioning in one domain (such as socioemotional health) affects their own functioning in other domains (such as academics).

It is clear from this model that parenting matters. It is also clear that parenting is one of many mechanisms by which poverty confers risk. This tremendous body of evidence also links proximal parent and family variables to more distal aspects of the environment, including the context of stress and strain created by poverty (McLoyd 1990), living with racial and social class discrimination (Evans et al. 2012), facing numerous threats to the safety and well-being of one's children in the larger neighborhood context (Ceballo et al. 2012), and the day-to-day toxic effects of living in dilapidated, inadequate, and unhealthy housing (Evans and English 2002). The models also generally link these distal factors directly to economic conditions of the family and larger society. Given these various constraints and processes operating in the lives of disadvantaged families, including parents' own lack of education, as well as mental health issues, it is not terribly surprising that poor parents' educational investment strategies look different from those of more educated and affluent parents.

This very substantial body of empirical work renders single-variable explanations of complex phenomena such as the income–education gap untenable: studying one domain of parenting behavior, out of 176 contexts, and using results to infer that poor parents are not invested in their children's educational futures is not warranted. Making a compelling case for the importance of parenting in diverging academic destinies of children growing up in advantaged and disadvantaged homes does not require that parenting be placed at the causal end of the model. Parenting obviously matters, but in an empirically validated conceptual model of the effects of poverty and economic inequality on children's developmental outcomes, it is clearly a mechanism of poverty's pernicious effects, not the root cause.

Parental Educational Investments and the Socioeconomic Context of Parenting

The influential distinction by Lareau (2003) between "concerted cultivation" and "the accomplishment of natural growth" provides a theoretical rationale to explain why more advantaged parents exhibit the former pattern of investment in their children and less advantaged parents endorse the latter strategy. Lareau's theory explains class-specific parenting strategies as being grounded in different clusters of "dispositions, preferences and perceptions of opportunity" (Bodovski and Farkas 2008, p. 916) that are largely shaped by social class and education. According to Lareau, understanding why parents invest in their children as they do requires that specific parenting behaviors be considered in the context of "cultural logics" of child rearing. As Cheadle and Amato (2011) explain, "it is not specific parenting

behaviors that have consequences for children. Instead, it is the organization of these behaviors into logically coherent configurations of beliefs and practices that facilitate children's attainment" (p. 682). Unfortunately, Lareau's theory fails to consider that class distinctions in parenting may stem from unequal access to the resources required of concerted cultivation rather than parents' commitment to one of the two opposing cultural logics (cf., Cheadle and Amato 2011). While both more and less advantaged parents are motivated to invest in their children's educational development, lower-income parents' lack of financial resources, work flexibility, and human, social, and cultural capital hamper their ability to engage in concerted cultivation (Chin and Phillips 2004).

The role of parenting in diverging educational destinies among children in the United States has been tested in recent quantitative studies that have operationalized Lareau's concept of concerted cultivation (e.g., Bodovski and Farkas 2008; Cheadle 2009; Cheadle and Amato 2011; Greenman et al. 2011; Martin 2012). Such studies tend to investigate parenting practices as a mediator of the effects of social class and education on children's educational achievement. These studies offer quantitative evidence that advantaged parents are more likely to use concerted cultivation than less advantaged parents and that this type of parenting is associated with higher educational achievement and higher income. However, these studies do not provide evidence supporting that a lack of motivation among disadvantaged parents is the reason that poor parents engage less in concerted cultivation. A more parsimonious and empirically supported explanation lies in the effects of economic disadvantage on parents, as shown in Fig. 7.1.

A behavioral economics perspective on *why* and *how* parents "invest" differently across economic/educational lines is a contextual, as it does not consider how the context caused by economic affluence or lack thereof, shapes parenting. In the context of poverty, a different approach to parenting may be a wise investment. So, compared to advantaged parents, why might disadvantaged parents be harsher, more punitive, less consistent, more focused on teaching obedience, and parent in ways that reflect the cultural logic of the accomplishment of natural growth (Lareau 2003)? Research suggests that providing for their children's physical needs and personal safety are more pressing parenting concerns and that working multiple jobs, scrambling to put food on the table, and managing an inadequate household budget take priority. Raising children in economically deprived conditions erodes parents' time and ability to engage in concerted cultivation of their children even when they are motivated to do so.

The most recent report by the USDA, for example, showed that 20 % of households with children are characterized as food insecure, meaning that the members of those households are unable to consistently access an adequate amount of nutritious food necessary for a healthy life (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2011). Similarly, poor families are more likely to live in dangerous neighborhoods where effective parenting strategies include strict and intensive monitoring of children's activities, social networks, and whereabouts, as well as actively limiting children's contact with others in the neighborhoods—such lifesaving parenting strategies are time-consuming (Ceballo et al. 2012). Finally, recent experimental research has

demonstrated that "poverty-related concerns consume mental resources, leaving less for other tasks" (Mani et al. 2013, p. 976), especially cognitively demanding tasks such as parenting and concerted cultivation. As Evans' work on cumulative risk reminds us, these difficult aspects of the parenting context do not operate in isolation (Evans et al. 2008; Evans et al. 2007). A poor parent is often dealing with all of these and more simultaneously, and these competing demands take their toll on parents.

Lessons from Prevention Science: Child and Parent Interventions

To understand how a broader contextually and developmentally informed approach maps onto what prevention science would recommend, we quickly review some of the fundamental and founding principles of the science. Prevention programs need to address fundamental causal processes, attack multiple domains when possible, build on solid developmental research, try to eliminate or reduce children's exposure to toxic causal agents, and strengthen the host, in this case the children (Coie et al. 1993).

As our brief review highlights, we *do* know quite a lot about why poor parents "invest" in their children in a way that is different from more affluent parents. Research also demonstrates how those different parenting "investments" encourage different educational (and other) outcomes for more and less affluent children. What is less clear is whether it is possible or even advisable to encourage poor parents to focus on concerted cultivation like their more affluent/educated counterparts. There is evidence showing that such an approach can in fact increase parental stress and further damage family functioning (Ceballo et al. 2012).

A behavioral economics model of motivation and self-control could certainly be applied to help parents engage more fully in existing parent-focused intervention programs. Research on why parents drop out or do not enroll in parenting programs, however, does not support the idea that motivation and self-control problems are the source of poor uptake of parenting interventions. Rather, evidence documents that the very contextual constraints identified in our model are linked to participation. For example, outcome research conducted with the Incredible Years Intervention and Parent–Child Interaction Therapy identified the following reasons for attrition from interventions: logistical problems (transportation, child care, work schedules), treatment effects too slow, dislike of treatment approach or techniques, parental depression, and parenting stress (e.g., Boggs et al. 2004; Nock and Ferriter 2005; Nock et al. 2007).

The work that we (and many others) have conducted hits several of the core prevention science principles reviewed above (e.g., Raviv and Wadsworth 2010). For example, our family-strengthening interventions build directly on Conger and Elder's (1994) Family Stress Model to target several proximal risks created and

exacerbated by poverty. We focus on reducing exposure to parental depression, family conflict, and problematic parenting, by first and foremost targeting stress, which plays a critical role in so many of the models (e.g., Rienks et al. 2011).

Similarly, in our FRAME intervention, we directly target skills that will support parents' ability to function in multiple realms. Stress, stress management, coping skills, and social/community support are directly targeted. We teach skills to reduce conflict in intimate relationships so that relationships can serve as more of a source of strength than a source of stress. We also emphasize principles of child-centered parenting and the importance of seeking out parenting support. So far, we have had very little attrition from the intervention and follow-up research (retention rate > 93 %), and we have found positive effects in a randomized control trial on several core parental skills and outcomes (e.g., Rienks et al. 2011; Wadsworth et al. 2011)—skills and outcomes that predict better subsequent child outcomes (Wadsworth et al. 2013).

Where does this leave us? First, in line with prevention science principles, we need a multi-pronged approach that targets multiple outcomes. Sadly, there is no "magic bullet," so the challenge lies in learning how to "strategically target multiple interventions on multiple risk factors and mediating mechanisms and how to effectively coordinate these multiple strategies for optimal effect" (Yoshikawa et al. 2012, p. 281). Academic achievement does not develop in isolation, nor is it the only important child outcome. Second, we cannot just focus on parents. We have good interventions for children that work. The need for early childhood education (ECE) is as high as it has ever been. ECE works, especially when it is implemented as designed—usually with college-educated, highly skilled teachers in the classroom (Duncan and Magnuson 2013). When we water down these interventions, we water down the effects. So, our recommendation regarding ECE is keep it, make it universal, and ensure the quality is high. Third, promoting children's prosocial behavior is critical. In other words, we should not focus exclusively on a single domain such as cognitive/academic development (Biglan et al. 2012). We should also consider interventions that build prosocial skills and skills for coping with the tremendous burden of stress poor children face.

Finally, the prevention science approach suggests we need to intervene at multiple levels, target multiple domains, and of course, take context into account. Poor parents love their children and want the best for them; they value education and know it is important for their children (Ceballo et al. 2012). We argue that an intervention policy that takes parental behavior out of context oversimplifies a very complex, systemic problem. It is quite possible that such an approach could actually add more stress to parents' plates, introduce more chaos, and ultimately place poor children at increased risk. Hence, interventions must be based on the best available scientific evidence and recognize the cascade of direct and indirect effects of the context generated by poverty on child functioning.

Conclusion

Developmentalists can contribute to behavioral economics by "highlighting assumptions that seem particularly implausible in light of what developmental science reveals about children and their families," argued economist Michael Foster (2002, p. 1912). Such was our intent in this chapter. Our efforts in this chapter have therefore been to highlight the very rich developmental research on poverty and family functioning that renders single-variable explanations of the complex social phenomenon of family life implausible.

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