

Hunger: Its Impact on Children's Health and Mental Health

Weinreb L, Wehler C, Perloff J, Scott R, Hosmer D, Sagor L, Gundersen C. Hunger: its impact on children's health and mental health. *Pediatrics*. 2002 Oct; 110(4):e41. doi: 10.1542/peds.110.4.e41. PMID: 12359814.

Working in a pediatric hospital, child life specialists meet with families of all socioeconomic backgrounds and with a wide spectrum of mental health diagnoses. In order to provide the most beneficial, tailored care to patients and families, child life specialists must consider how inadequate access to food can affect the coping of the entire family unit.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Food and Nutrition, more than 14 million families experience food insecurity. This insecurity can be presented as the intermittent inability to access food or chronic poverty which results in long-term hunger. Past research has shown the ways in which hunger affects mental health outcomes. This current study focuses on the health, internalization of problems, and anxiety/depression of families experiencing food insecurity.

Out of the children research participants, approximately one quarter experienced emotional problems, one fifth had a learning disability, and one tenth were diagnosed with a developmental delay. Severe child hunger was able to be connected to an escalated rate of child anxiety— more than double that of children without hunger— as it was reported by the child's mother. Anxiety and depressive symptoms increased in hungry children. Previous literature indicates that hungry children have impaired psychosocial functions which, in turn, increases the probability of behavioral difficulties. This research study added to that literature by showing that distress of the mother and stressful life events also feed into children's emotional impairments.

This study digs deeper into the additional effect of hunger on children's mothers. The mothers of severely hungry children had an increased likelihood of posttraumatic stress disorder or substance abuse. Interestingly, mothers of younger children had higher rates of depression, PTSD, and anxiety than the mothers of older school-aged children. Also, the study found that the mental health concerns of mothers can impair their ability to use successful coping strategies while in poverty. Likewise, these mothers may also be unable to teach coping methods to their children.

With these considerations, child life specialists may find hospitalized families already at a coping deficit and now facing the additional stressors of a medical encounter. Furthermore, one may be mindful of how a child and family suffering from severe hunger might respond to an NPO diet order or a new diagnosis which requires specific diet restrictions (such as celiac disease, diabetes, or IBD). This research presented by Weinreb et al is beneficial for gaining insight into how both mild and severe food insecurity can affect each member of the family and their ability to function in stressful situations.