

Screening for Social Determinants of Health Among Children and Families Living in Poverty: A Guide for Clinicians

Twenty percent of all children in the United States live in poverty, and because of this, pediatric providers must familiarize themselves with the associated social determinants of health.

Below are several key social and environmental issues to look for among pediatric patients. This list is not all-encompassing — nor do these challenges solely reside in homes that are below the national poverty level. But this resource and the underlying research from Esther Chung, Benjamin Siegel, Arvin Garg, et al. serves as a solid starting point for anyone treating young patients in ensuring health in all aspects of their lives.



CHILD MALTREATMENT

Physical, sexual and psychological abuse, along with child neglect, are adverse childhood experiences (ACE) that are associated with long-term health effects.



FAMILY FINANCIAL SUPPORTS

Many families living in poverty have difficulties meeting basic financial and social needs. These unmet needs have known detrimental effects on children's physical and mental health.



PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

The physical environment in which a child lives — including the home and exterior (parks/green spaces and outdoor play areas) — has a direct impact on health. Children whose families spend more than 30% of their income on housing are at risk for malnutrition and growth challenges. More broadly, housing challenges are associated with physical, psychological and emotional problems.



FAMILY SOCIAL SUPPORTS

The prevalence of children living in married, two-parent family households has decreased significantly. Exposure to divorce is known to negatively impact economic and mental health outcomes for children.

CHILD CARE AND EDUCATION



It is well-established that early childhood education has lasting positive effects into adulthood. One in four US preschool-aged children currently lives below the federal poverty level, and half of these children have below average reading skills when they reach fourth grade.

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE



Approximately 15 million children are exposed to intimate partner violence in the home each year, especially among children under age six. Exposure to violence increases the risk of child abuse and has been linked to other physical and mental health problems in children.

MATERNAL DEPRESSION AND FAMILY MENTAL ILLNESS



Mental health significantly affects family dynamics, as well as a children's overall well-being. Maternal depression is also known to have a damaging impact on child health and developmental outcomes.

HOUSEHOLD SUBSTANCE ABUSE



Tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs are prevalent in many households. Overexposure to substance use is linked with negative health outcomes in children.

FIREARM EXPOSURE



Firearm injuries remain one of the most alarming and preventable causes of death among children age two and under. The presence of a gun in the home is associated with an increased risks of suicide and homicide.

PARENTAL HEALTH LITERACY



Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to access and understand information about their family's overall health — a critical skill for parents and guardians.