Going Back to Childhood: Early Experiences Matter

May 4, 2010 By David Evans

Scientists say that experiences in the first days, weeks and months of life can have profound influence on a person's physical, emotional and mental health when they reach adulthood. Now an editorial and a series of studies published in the May 5 issue of the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, establishes that intervening in childhood can prevent or reverse negative outcomes, such as substance abuse or depression, later in life.

Like most kids, my childhood was a mixed bag. On the one hand, I had loving parents who sought to provide a good home and to nurture in my sister and me a good sense of right and wrong. On the other hand, I was adopted and I have no idea what my care was like during my first month of life. There were also circumstances at home and at school that instilled in me--always an overly sensitive child anyway--a deep fear that the world and the people in it could unexpectedly threaten my well being.

I was never abused or neglected, however, and I can't even imagine what my life would have been like if I had. It's my opinion that I probably had some genetic cards stacked against my chance for psychological well being. If I'd also been physically or emotionally abused, or neglected due to parental drug addiction, I'm not sure I'd still be alive. Even if I had grown up in that kind of environment though, several articles in the *Archives* found that some simple interventions would have improved my chances of turning out O.K.

Three studies found that swift action makes a difference, whether by providing nurse visitation programs, or quickly placing children in home-based care. Interestingly, despite the horror stories that abound about foster care, one study actually found that children who were placed in foster care had lower amounts of stress than children who were left in their abusive homes.

The editorial in the *Archives*, by Dimitri Chistakis, MD, MPH and Frederick Rivara, MD, MPH--both from the University of Washington in Seattle--makes the point that in the midst of this terrible recession, these data point to the urgency of not cutting programs that protect children early in life:

“Taken together, the research in this issue has clear implications: early experiences matter, and changes in those experiences are achievable and pay dividends. This research needs to be translated into action. In the new austerity that has been spawned by the national fiscal crisis, states are cutting back broadly on services. In many cases, children are being hit the hardest. Given the importance of early childhood experiences on the entire life course, we can only hope that the people who make decisions about where monies are saved are mindful of the effect those decisions can have.”

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