



# How Poverty Affects Learning Needs & Behaviours

Inclusive Education Inquiry Presentation  
From “How Poverty Affects Classroom Engagement” by Eric Jenson



# Introduction

In 2016, Nanaimo's Child Poverty rate rose to 24.6%

*(State of the Child Report, Greater Nanaimo Early Years Partnership)*

Students that come from low income families are more likely to struggle with school engagement for 7 reasons, but without a relationship of respect and trust, none of these strategies will make a difference.

# Health & Nutrition

- Health related factors can affect attention, reasoning, learning, and memory
- Poor diet affects behaviour
  - Low energy = listless, tuned out
  - Sugar high = hyperactivity, outbursts

## What can we do?

2 primary “foods” for the brain = oxygen & glucose

- Slow stretching and slow deep breaths can increase oxygenation (Yoga, brain breaks)
- Recess and P.E. (Don't use withholding recess as a disciplinary measure)
- Increase the use of games, movement, and drama in your teaching to trigger the release of glucose.

# Vocabulary

- Children from lower income families are exposed to 3x less words by age 4 than those coming from higher income families.
- This affects understanding of material and confidence (fear of looking “stupid”), leading to decreased participation.

## What can we do?

- Vocabulary building must form a key part of enrichment activities in your class
- Be relentless about **introducing** and **using** new words
- Vocabulary practice incorporated into daily routines

# Effort

- Often mistaken for laziness, students coming from poverty experience a **lack of hope and optimism**
- **Learned helplessness** from adults in their life
- It has been found that a primary factor in student motivation is the school and the teacher over the home environment.

## What can we do?

- **Effort can be taught.**
- Invest in students and build relationship - reveal more about yourself, learn more about them
- Utilise buy-in strategies
- Offer choice and student input in class decision making
- Make connections to the students world to help them see why they should participate
- Affirm every day in class (more + than - optimizes learning and growth)
- Set high goals and sell students on their capacity to reach them (Tell success stories)
- Provide **daily** feedback.

# Hope and Growth Mindset

- Lower socioeconomic status is associated with viewing the future with more negative events than positive ones (helplessness)
- Mindset is a key factor in performance
- Their expectations as well as **our** expectations matter.

## What can we do?

- Teach about Growth Mindset
- Provide better quality feedback (prompt, actionable, and task-specific)
- Focus on affirming and reinforcing effort
  - Guide them in making smarter strategy choices and cultivating a positive attitude

# Cognition

- Short attention spans, higher levels of distractibility, difficulty monitoring quality of their work, difficulty generating new solutions to problems
- Students who struggle cognitively often act out or shut down

## What can we do?

- Teach core cognitive skills
  - 1st: Core Academic skills (how to organize, study, take notes, prioritize, remember key ideas)
  - 2nd: Problem solving, processing, working memory skills
- Start small, build on the foundation
- It will take lots of encouragement, positive feedback, and persistence

# Relationships

- When a child's early experiences are chaotic (1 or both parents absent) their developing brains become insecure and stressed, mistrust in adults develops.
- Relationships can be difficult for children who lack role models and sufficient support.
- Lower income parents are often less able to adjust their parenting to the demands of their higher needs children.
- Misbehaviour increases due to not having in-home stability or necessary social-emotional responses for schools.
  - Inappropriate language, impulsivity, and disrespectful behaviour will continue until you teach them more appropriate social-emotional responses.

## What can we do?

- These students need strong, positive, caring adult role models.
- **Stop telling students what to do and start teaching them how to do it**
- Never embarrass a student in front of the class, talk to them privately and model/demo the appropriate behaviour
- Take the time to teach when a given response is appropriate and what it should look like.



# Distress

- A small amount of stress is healthy, acute and chronic stress (distress) is toxic.
- Affects brain development, academic success, and social competence.
- Impairs behaviour, reduced attentional control, boosts impulsivity & impairs working memory.
- Can result in assertive (in your face) or passive (leave me alone) behaviours.

## What can we do?

- Address the real issue (distress) and the symptoms will diminish with time
- Build stronger relationship to help alleviate stress
- Lower stress by embedding more classroom fun into academics
- Offer temporary cognitive support with activities that release glucose
- Don't try to exert more control over students life
- Give them more control over their own daily lives at school (responsibility and leadership)
- Teach ongoing coping skills

## Based on the article:

Jensen, E. (2013). How poverty affects classroom engagement. *Educational Leadership*, 70(8), 24-30.

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[https://www.shastacoe.org/uploaded/Dept/is/LCAP-Local\\_Control\\_Accountability\\_Plans/Annual\\_Update\\_Training\\_4-15-15/2015-16/3-21-16/22\\_How\\_Poverty\\_Affects\\_Classroom\\_Engagement.pdf](https://www.shastacoe.org/uploaded/Dept/is/LCAP-Local_Control_Accountability_Plans/Annual_Update_Training_4-15-15/2015-16/3-21-16/22_How_Poverty_Affects_Classroom_Engagement.pdf)