In decades past, the causes of poverty were perceived in various ways by the general public. Topping the list were reasons such as lack of personal initiative on the part of the poor, a generational culture of poverty, or the abuse of drugs and alcohol. However, the present worldwide economic crisis has enveloped individuals and families across all demographics. Rampant unemployment levels and rapid evaporation of savings and assets has caused many who were prosperous only a short while ago to find themselves suddenly in dire circumstances. A global monetary downturn has caused thousands of families in the United States to experience a reversal of economic gains that took them decades to achieve.

With personal net worth falling at unprecedented rates, many parents in both urban and rural settings find themselves struggling to find their footing in a new financial environment unlike the one with which they and their children had become comfortable. Often adults who have lost a lucrative position must accept employment which pays far less. Politically-correct terminology such as “down-sizing” or “corporate restructuring” does little to veil the harsh fact that millions of people who have lost their income also have lost their previous standard of living.

A prime indicator of the severity of the problem is homelessness. A surge in the numbers of newly homeless has resulted in a shortage of low-cost housing units, and availability simply cannot keep up with demand. Of an estimated 3.5 million homeless individuals in the United States, families with children comprise one-third of that number. Over a half-million children under the age of six years old have experienced homelessness.
Uprooting’s Effect upon Young Children

The ramifications of such a lifestyle change have a very real effect upon the young. Children from middle-class backgrounds may once have lived in a modern house with ample room for all family members to enjoy their own personal space. Yet without warning they find themselves uprooted, living in smaller cramped quarters or moving in to share housing with extended relatives. Whereas once they freely rode their bicycles on wide sidewalks, they may find themselves living in areas where it isn’t safe to go outside to play. Visits to a pleasantly-designed pediatrician’s office might be replaced by hours spent in long lines at a crowded free clinic. The family’s expensive SUV with cartoon videos playing on the screen may only be a memory. Activities that once were commonplace, like outings to the zoo or beach, birthday skating parties with dozens of little friends, or theme-park holiday vacations have been curtailed or eliminated altogether.

Traumatic lifestyle changes for the young involve more than recreational activities. Before their parents’ financial downturn, they may have attended schools that were fully-equipped with the latest technology and materials to enhance learning. Sudden changes in living accommodations may mean they could find themselves in a setting that does not have as many technological educational resources. There also could be a perception of different expectations for student behavior and academic achievement. They might be subjected to cruel teasing or excluded from play if their speech patterns, type of clothing, or knowledge base are evidences of being from a different social class. Although exemplary educational programs can and do exist everywhere, there are research indications that more challenges are found in neighborhoods where social problems are rife.

Young children who experience being uprooted may demonstrate the same insecurities as those whose entire lives have been characterized by lack. Even if their parents try to explain the causes for their problems on a child’s level, little children are seldom capable of comprehending intricate adult matters. They simply see drastic changes in lifestyle.

Very young children may experience physical and emotional upheaval as the adults in their lives struggle with financial unrest. Within the home there may be not only a half-bare pantry and fewer opportunities for entertainment, but there also may be escalating tension and heated debates over bills and perceptions of blame. Volatile atmospheres can be felt by younger children who can neither understand nor verbalize their heightened level of stress. All of this may lead to emotional feelings of insecurity, fear, anxiety, guilt, depression, and low self-esteem.

Unfortunately, emotions that are suppressed at home have been known to surface in the schoolroom, manifesting through oppositional behaviors such as aggression, stealing, lying, and blatant disobedience. Other indicators may manifest as full silent withdrawal or uncontrollable hyperactivity. Teachers can help by developing sensitivity as young children navigate unfamiliar emotional waters.
The Expanding Role of Educators

In light of the pervasive and negative impact of poverty on educational outcomes, teachers and administrators are expanding their role in ameliorating the effects of uprooting upon the young child’s success in school. These are a few important strategies that teachers can follow which may prove to be beneficial.

• Keep in mind that poverty among the newly poor is not always immediately obvious through outward appearance alone. Seek to learn more about the living conditions of the children in classrooms.
• Be certain that the children are included in group activities daily. Help them to form friendships. Be culturally-sensitive.
• Look for opportunities to raise their self-esteem and to provide a less stressful experience. Intentionally build additional opportunities for success into their lessons and activities each day.
• Recognize the importance of support for parents who are experiencing poverty for the first time. Have a message board in the office for exchange of services. Post a list of community-based organizations in their neighborhood that offer emotional, financial, and health resources. Provide networks and classes.
• Encourage participation in after-school clubs such as arts and crafts, sports, music, and other areas to give children a chance to take part in familiar pastimes which their parents can no longer afford.
• Help parents realize the necessity of emotional support for their vulnerable young children in all areas.
• Provide workshops for parents to teach them techniques for helping their children with academic work. Enable them to recognize their abilities in this area.
• Help other teachers, administrators, and community members become aware of both the short and long-term societal costs of failure in school caused by perpetuating the cycle of poverty for young children.
• Seek outside funding from local groups in order to give all students a fair opportunity to participate in school events. Groups that validate cultural heritage can be among the important and effective resources.
• Become an advocate by supporting organizations that are working for young children in poverty.
Hope for the Future

The school always has had a pivotal part in providing a safety-net for children in the midst of societal turmoil. In light of the magnitude of evidence which proves the pervasive and negative impact of poverty on educational outcomes, teachers and administrators are expanding their role in ameliorating the effects upon the student’s potential for success in school. Important strategies have been found and new ones are being sought. Educators are reaching out in beneficial ways in order to help young children as they experience the effects of suddenly being uprooted from their previous way of life.

Across the nation there is a concerted movement to address the needs of children in poverty. Extended families, churches, community organizations, politicians, health practitioners, philanthropic groups, private individuals and other stakeholders have stepped forward to provide money, rent, transportation, food, clothing, books, and school supplies to help under-resourced families. As America’s communities ride out the global financial crisis, teachers and administrators will do their part to formulate new and better ways not only to bring necessary resources, but also to bring hope and light and laughter to children in their early years.

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