

Opening Welcome to the 19th National Health Equity Research Webcast, June 4, 2013

My name is Sam Odom and I am the Director of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, which we call FPG. I want to welcome you to the 19th National Health Equity Research Webcast. This distinguished series has for many years been a forum for addressing the disparity in health outcomes that exist in this country, often falling along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. This year, the webinar is entitled Early Childhood Development: Investing in Our Children and Our Future.

As you can tell from the title, the theme is based on the belief, backed by some evidence, that providing good developmental and health care in children's early years, especially for children experiencing the risks related to poverty, are likely to pay dividends later in life, both for individual children and for our nation.

The physical health of children and their early development goes hand in hand. As an educator or parent, if you have ever tried to read a story to, draw a picture with, or do a finger play with a child who is hungry, a child with a fever, a child with an ear infection, or a child whose teeth are hurting, you know you are not going to get very far. Poor health diminishes the capacity to attend, learn, and think...while the reverse is true for children in good health.

So how does poverty enter the picture? For both development and health, the gap begins early and broadens. Tamara Halle and colleagues from Child Trends have highlighted the disparity in poor children's cognitive and language development (as compared to children from more well-resourced families) that begins as early as nine months and grows across the early childhood years. In their study of health disparities between poor and nonpoor children in the United States, Seith and Isakson (2011) found marked differences in five domains:

environmental health, health insurance coverage, access to health care services, behavior, and health outcomes. They noted: “the relationship between socioeconomic status and health is one of the most robust and well documented findings in the social sciences...poverty detracts from resources used to maintain health, while poor health detracts from the educational and employment paths to income mobility.”

So, what do we do about it? Over 40 years ago at FPG, an important study called the Abecedarian Project provided high quality early child care and education to children who were African American and poor. The program began when children were infants, extended up through school-age, and while focusing on early cognitive and language development, also included a significant health care component. Significant developmental difference between children in the Abecedarian program and the control group were found at the end of the program, and now have extended across 30 years. This study, along with other significant studies occurring at that time, has documented the cost-effectiveness of providing early developmental care, and I would say health care also. They go hand in hand. Early developmental and health care are good investments in children and in our future.

Now 40 years after the Abecedarian study, what are we doing about health and developmental care for young children? The planning committee has chosen wisely in inviting these presenters today. Head Start historically has provided health services for poor children-- which is a significant feature of its program, and distinguishes it from other forms of early child care. Educare, in providing an interdisciplinary and comprehensive model of care would include health as one of their goals for children attending their program. The National Indian Child Welfare Association has clearly identified in its mission statement the goal of promoting the health and wellbeing of children. Today you will hear from these stellar programs in the US,

which are taking proactive approaches to blending the emphases of health and developmental care.

Again, I welcome you to this impressive webinar and look forward to the presentations by each of the presenters.

References

- Halle, T., Forry, N., Hair, E., Perper, K., Wandner, L., Wessel, J., & Vick, J. (2009). *Disparities in Early Learning and Development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)*. Washington, DC: Child Trends. Retrieved at: http://www.elcmdm.org/Knowledge%20Center/reports/Child_Trends-2009_07_10_FR_DisparitiesEL.pdf
- Seith, D., & Isakson, E. (2011). *Who are America's poor children? Health disparities among children in the United States*. New York: National Center on Poverty. Retrieved at: http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_995.pdf