

# A HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT MEANS HEALTHY CHILDREN



*“The effects of poverty on child development are mediated by both parenting and the home environment.”*

**Good parenting is crucial to raising happy, healthy children. But what makes a good parent? It turns out that the society in which we live plays an important role in how well we care for our little ones, which in turn directly affects their brain development, resulting in measurable effects on their health and intellect.**

**D**r. Michael Meaney of McGill University, an expert on the psychobiological impact of parenting, collaborated with experts in neuroscience and society from the University of Pennsylvania to produce a review paper on how socioeconomic status affects brain development early in life.

## **IMPORTANCE OF PARENTING AND THE PARENTING ENVIRONMENT**

*“Parenting and family function occur within a context,” says Dr. Meaney. “Punitive, or even abusive parenting, most often occurs in a context of parents who are themselves carrying a mental health burden. That mental health burden is often associated with the conditions of their life, and the most prevailing and profound condition that alters parenting is poverty.”*

Two bodies of science support this notion. The first is child development research showing that the effects of poverty on child development are mediated by both parenting and the home environment. The second source of evidence comes from evolutionary biology, studies which reveal that the quality of the prevailing environment, defined by availability of resources and threat of predation, can alter parental signals to their offspring in a way that changes the behaviour of that offspring. These are universal biological mechanisms, affecting not only humans but also plants, insects, reptiles, and birds.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY**

These findings have important implications for public policy. *“There is indeed a biological basis for the link between society, family function*

*and child development,” says Dr. Meaney. “This would strongly endorse the ongoing discussion in Canada about creating a minimum level of income for every family. People will, quite rightly, question whether throwing money into families really changes their circumstances... And the evidence now is yes, it will... This also supports movements towards high quality daycare.”*

According to Dr. Marni Brownell, an expert in the social determinants of health at the University of Manitoba, *“We’ve known for years that there’s a socioeconomic gradient in health, and the lower your socioeconomic status, the poorer your health outcomes. That gradient occurs in kids, not just in health but also in school performance and emotional and social development. What’s important about this research is it provides that link between socioeconomic status and mental health and between socioeconomic status and school achievement. And that link is that the environment alters brain development.”*

*“What this research helps to do is provide some specifics on which poverty reduction strategies may work best and why they work,” says Dr. Brownell. For instance, a Manitoba-based initiative that provides income supplements for poor pregnant women has reduced the risk for low birth weight and prematurity in infants. “This research suggests that perhaps these children will also have better longer-term outcomes because the supplement reduced stress in the mother during pregnancy and provided better nutrition, and those things actually have an impact on brain development.”* 🐾

**BY ALISON PALKHIVALA**