

Financial instability taking its toll on children's mental health

By Rebecca Ruiz, Huffington Post

Drew McWilliams, a clinician and the Chief Operating Officer at Morrison Child and Family Services in Portland, Ore., suggests that amid the underwater mortgages, chronic unemployment and other fallout of the recent recession, a less obvious but equally worrying phenomenon has emerged: the troubled minds of children.

Since the financial collapse of 2008, McWilliams said his clinic has seen an increasing number of children suffering anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Of the 6,000 children that the center treats through in- and out-patient programs, McWilliams said many are trying to cope with the stress borne of persistent financial insecurity.

"Parents are struggling with their own issues and that spills over to their kids," he said.

Most parents don't think children are affected by financial burdens. In a 2010 survey, the American Psychological Association found that 69 percent of parents said their stress had little or no impact on their kids, while 91 percent of children said they saw the effects in their parents' behavior, which included yelling and arguing. The young respondents who noticed their parents' tension reported feeling sad, worried and frustrated.

The developing brain is also more vulnerable to chronic stress than most parents may realize. New and emerging research hints at how the constant barrage of stress hormones can change the way the brain develops, causing behavioral and psychological

disorders and putting children at risk for mental illness later in life. While the brain's malleability may be worrisome, it also means positive changes can occur with the right interventions.

"Kids who face adversity have highs and lows, strengths and weaknesses," said Christopher Sarampote, a program officer at the National Institute of Mental Health who focuses on trauma and anxiety disorders. "Parents can really be strong agents of change."

It may not always feel that way to the millions of parents who have struggled since the recession. In addition to the middle-class families that have experienced unemployment, the number of children living in high-poverty areas increased by 25 percent to nearly 8 million in the last decade, according to a recent report. Last month, the child advocacy group First Focus reported that the foreclosure crisis has affected 8 million children, 2.3 million of whom have lost their homes.

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