



FINDING “HIDDEN TALENTS” IN CHILDHOOD ADVERSITY

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Substantial research indicates that children who experience social and economic adversity (SEA) will have poor health and lower levels of achievement (Duncan, Kalil, Ziol-Guest, 2010). These children score lower on standard test of intelligence, memory, language, inhibition, among others suggesting impaired cognition (Frankenhuis & Weerth, 2013). This is evident early in their educational career and the gap in achievement between them and their low-SEA peers continues to grow through the years (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). Our current education system uses the deficit model to reduce and repair the damage caused by high-stress backgrounds. The deficit model focuses on what these children lack and tries to compensate for their shortcomings.

Recently, evidence has emerged that suggests children who come from high-SEA environments develop specialized cognitive abilities that have been adapted to cope with their stressful upbringing. In fact, adults who had unpredictable childhoods performed worse on inhibition tasks, but performed better on shifting between tasks (Mittal, Griskevicius, Simpson, Sung, & Young, 2015). Instead of using the deficit model, an adaptation-based approach to resilience can be used to focus on the strengths to promote higher levels of attainment (Ellis, Bianchi, Griskevicius, & Frankenhuis, 2017). Current research suggests two cognitive skills, working-memory updating and attention shifting, are enhanced in high-SEA students. Additional research is required to understand the mechanisms that underlie these adaptations and how they can be used in favor, instead of against children from high-SEA backgrounds.

Dr. Ellis seeks to uncover these “hidden talents” in hopes of improving our education to help children from high-SEA backgrounds learn in a way that embraces their strengths. Youth of ages 13-19 at Boys and Girls Clubs will be interviewed about their childhood experiences and asked to perform cognitive tasks on a computer. Current literature suggests the surfacing of these stress-adapted cognitive skills occurs when participants are tested in situations where current conditions are uncertain (Mittal et al., 2015) Testing the adolescents in their lived environments will give researchers insights to the impact it may have on their cognitive abilities. The findings of this study have the potential to change the way “at-risk” youth are perceived. Using a strength-based approach, a new curriculum can help educators recognize the needs of these high-SEA students and capitalize on the unique abilities they possess to help them succeed in school. The findings of this study have the potential to create long-term benefits and improve the quality of life of these youths.

References

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