

4117.0: Tuesday, October 23, 2001 - Board 8

Abstract #29717

A shelter based reading program to promote optimal development in homeless children

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Studies have shown that the negative impact of risk factors (medical, psychosocial, historical) is cumulative, often leading to early developmental delay (Sameroff et al., 1990, Bassuk et al., 1986). Homeless preschoolers often exhibit behavior problems including shyness, anxiety, aggression, and poor attention span. Because of the transience of homeless families, few of these children are able to use school or other child-care to help them overcome their vulnerability. Their educational experiences are often characterized by sporadic attendance, delayed requests for special services, and frustrations associated with the changing demands of different settings (Benn & Garbarino, 1992). Socioeconomic risk factors (homelessness) are associated with early developmental delay and subsequent academic problems. Many homeless children are not provided with an appropriate foundation and/or the necessary tools and support to reach their optimal academic achievement. Likewise, their parents often are not taught about age-appropriate developmental milestones and may have inappropriate expectations. To ameliorate these problems, we designed a shelter-based program, based on the national Reach Out And Read model, for homeless parents to increase emergent literacy in their children and to encourage activities in daily routines to develop literacy skills. Also, the program is intended to improve parental understanding of their child's developmental needs, and enhance the quality of parent-child verbal interaction which is known to improve developmental outcomes (Letourneau, 1998). The program includes book distribution and models reading activities to introduce these concepts and new behaviors to the parents and children. This developmental initiative is linked to a comprehensive primary pediatric program.

**Learning Objectives:** At the conclusion of the session, the participant (learner) in this session will be able to: 1. Recognize the risk factors that influence the academic success of homeless children. 2. Identify the impact a strong academic foundation using books and book-related activities has on homeless, at-risk children. 3. Understand the importance of teaching appropriate parent/child interaction and appropriate expectations from their children.

**Keywords:** Homeless, Literacy

The 129th Annual Meeting of APHA