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Socio-economic status & health inequalities: a review & the implications for health promotion

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Socio-Economic Status & Health Inequalities: A Review & the Implications for Health Promotion

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Presentation for HPU Staff (November 2000)

“The issue of socioeconomic status is by far the most overwhelmingly significant risk factor for health and wellbeing.

It has always been so and it remains so today”

Len Syme, UCLA-B

What are SES Health Inequalities?

Review of >200 Australian studies:

- **lower SES people:**
 - have higher rates of most diseases
 - have higher rates of mental health problems
 - have higher disease-related morbidity
 - have higher mortality rates
 - die younger

Turrell G et al (1999)

Why are there SES Health Inequalities?

- **Much research exploring “HOW”:**
 - biological factors
 - environmental stressors
 - health risk behaviours
 - psychosocial factors
- **Within Health Promotion ... increased morbidity & mortality traditionally attributed to lower SES people:**
 - having poorer knowledge about / attitudes towards health & health behaviours
 - engaging in more health risk behaviours
 - engaging in less health promoting behaviours

Turrell G et al (1999)

Trying to Reduce SES Health Inequalities

- **Interventions aimed at:**
 - improving health-related knowledge / attitudes
 - warning against health risk behaviours
 - encouraging health promoting behaviours
- ➡ **Some success BUT better among higher SES**
- ➡ **Increased SES health inequalities**

Rethinking SES Health Inequalities

- **Lower SES people have reduced psychosocial wellbeing:**
 - lower perceived control
 - lower self-esteem
 - more negative attributional styles
 - more pessimistic thinking
 - lower self-efficacy
 - more feelings of powerlessness
- ➡ **Less “empowered”**
 - ➡ Potential barrier to HP messages
 - ➡ Potential mediator of poor physical health outcomes

Empowerment & Health Inequalities

- **Lack of “empowerment” associated with:**
 - reduced physical wellbeing
 - increased mortality
 - less health promoting behaviours
 - more health risk behaviours
 - reduced mental wellbeing
 - reduced cognitive functioning / academic achievement
 - more anti-social / criminal behaviour

Alternative Intervention Strategy?

**Increase individuals' feelings of "empowerment" /
psychosocial wellbeing**



Improved health-related knowledge / attitudes

More health promoting behaviours

Less health risk behaviours



Less morbidity

Less mortality

Psychosocial v SES factors in Health Outcomes

- **Big literatures on both but less studies have explored both simultaneously**
- **But, those that have suggest:**
 - Psychosocial factors are the stronger predictors, explaining $\frac{1}{2}$ variance attributed to SES
 - Psychosocial factors are independent predictors, even controlling for poorer initial SES, health status and risk factors

Can psychosocial factors be changed? (1)

- **YES - many studies, across all age-groups:**
 - Len Syme's Wellness Guide for new low-SES mothers:
 - practical handbook for life's challenges / choices
 - ↑ women's problems-solving skills (N & creativity)
 - for issues in Guide & not in Guide.
 - Although health outcomes not measured directly, likely to have improved due to ↑ in empowerment

Can psychosocial factors be changed? (2)

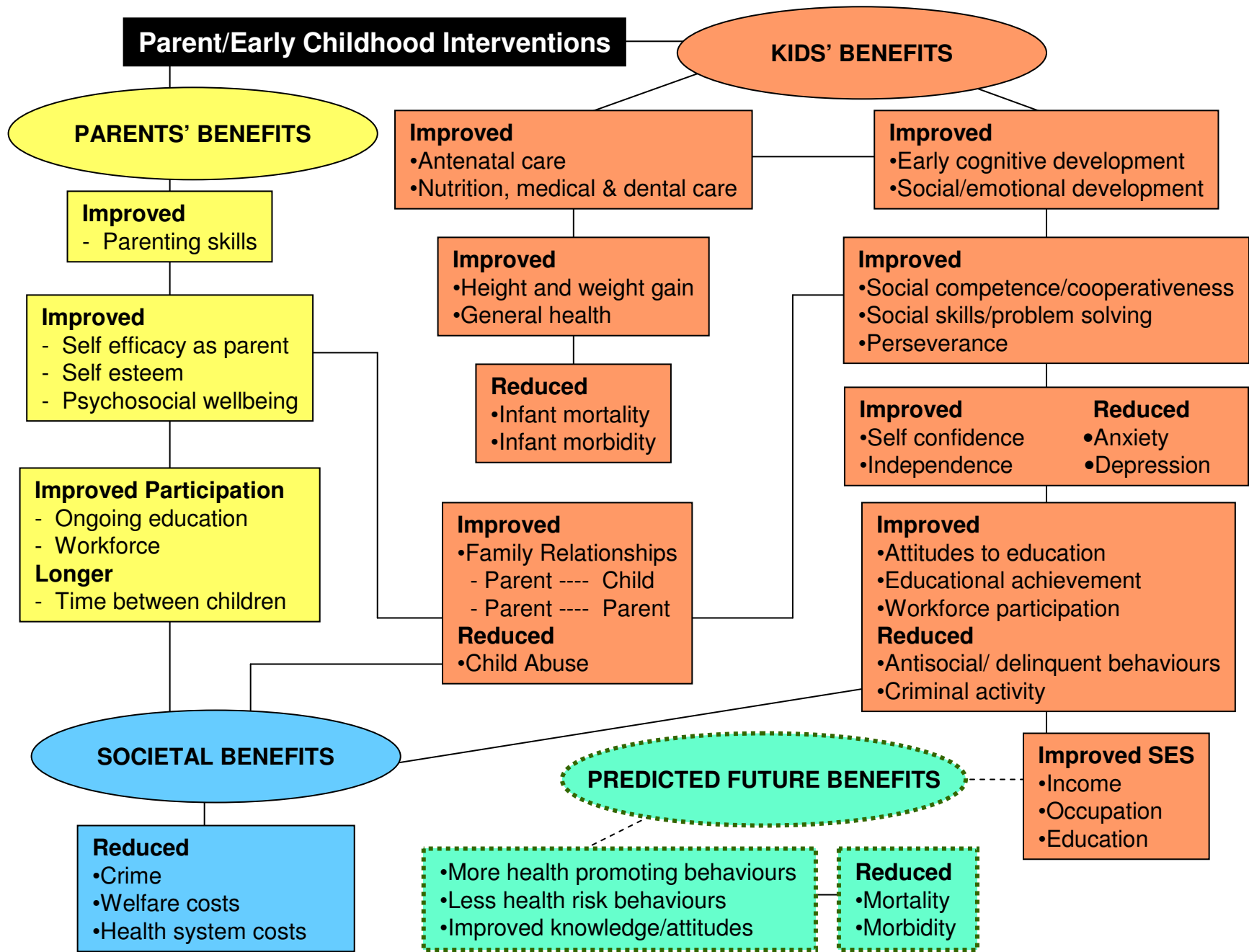
- **Examples of more direct health benefits from psychosocial interventions:**
 - **↑** treatment compliance in chronic disease
 - **↓** adolescents' uptake of smoking, alcohol & other drugs
 - **↓** irrational beliefs and **↑** coping, QoL, mental & physical wellbeing among elderly
 - **↑** longevity among nursing home patients given choices
- **Most impressive = parenting / early childhood interventions**

When to Intervene?

- **Prevention better than cure**
 - **Empowerment affected by very early experiences**
 - physical factors
 - social factors
 - environmental factors
 - economic situation
- ➡ Need to intervene early
- ➡ Need to intervene with parents and children

Any Evidence of Effective Programs?

- **Many studies:**
 - parenting interventions
 - early childhood interventions
- **Mainly from educational / social welfare perspective**
- **Consistently positive results:**
 - across many studies
 - from many countries
 - including long term follow-ups



Benefits of Early Psychosocial Interventions

- **Assists other mechanisms:**
 - biological
 - environmental
 - health behaviours / risk factors
- **Suggests multiple actions towards reducing health inequalities**
 - ➡ great opportunity for diverse health promotion outcomes

What Makes an Effective Program?

- **Various styles of intervention are effective but important themes are:**
 - being supportive & encouraging (vs blaming & punishing)
 - being preventive
 - having a positive message, not necessarily health-related
 - developing general life skills
 - targeting families together
 - addressing psychosocial wellbeing (eg: CBT, RET)

What Makes an Effective Program?

All programs

- supportive & encouraging (vs blaming & punishing)
- preventive / early intervention focus
- positive message, not necessarily health-related
- develop general life skills
- high quality
- structured
- well-trained staff
- involve parents & children
- assist transitions
- target psychosocial wellbeing (eg: CBT, RET)

Parent programs

- start prenatally
- educational & service provision
- long term programs
- continuity of care-provider

Child programs

- start young
- low child to staff ratio
- minimum of 1 year's duration
- multiple components
- child-directed activities
- provide food

Implications for HP - Implementation

- **Rethinking nature of HP interventions:**
 - need to be empowering
 - can be structural
 - need to consider long-term sustainability
 - consider impact on health inequalities
 - need community involvement
- **Advocating for empowering interventions**
 - seeking funding, assisting evaluation / monitoring
 - engaging partners - communities, councils, health services, schools, preschools

Implications for HP - Research

- **Explore gaps in the literature:**
 - gather evidence re: direct link between early psychosocial interventions and later health outcomes
 - explore effectiveness of different types of psychosocial interventions for different groups
 - conduct regular monitoring surveys:
 - psychosocial & physical wellbeing
 - health promoting behaviours / attitudes / risk factors
 - exposure to NRAHS HP interventions