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## **American children – the challenges they are facing and helpful solutions**

### **Summary**

The goal of this paper is to analyze four major challenges that American children were facing well before COVID-19 and to discuss some initiatives and programs available to help children and families to overcome or lessen the disease effect. First, we will present information from a variety of research, webinars, and conferences addressing the challenges and programs aimed at alleviating the effects of adverse childhood experiences. Second, we will analyze data from surveys sent to Midwest American early childhood teachers about which programs are the most implemented, and/or helpful.

**Keywords:** American children, challenges, helpful solutions

**Słowa kluczowe:** amerykańskie dzieci, wyzwania, pomocne rozwiązania

### **Introduction**

There is a general opinion that America is the country of prosperity and wealth, but there are many issues that hinder the development of children that the world may not realize exists in the richest country in the world. According to child and family statistics, there are 73.9 million reported children in the USA (2019) including 23.1 million children ages 0–5 and 24.8 million from 6–11 (Forum of child and family statistics n.d.). Many of these children suffer poverty that causes malnutrition, lack of access to preschool, inappropriate testing, and assessment, bullying, and school violence. These problems exist in every state of America with varying prevalence, adversely affecting the development of children. It is therefore important to seek out and analyze the challenges that young children are facing and the ways of responding to them. Using literature-based discovery, information from webinars and conferences, and the data from surveys sent to Midwestern teachers, this article tries to shed light on adverse childhood experiences (ACE) of American children as well as the programs and initiatives aiming to erase the effects of ACE.

## Review of literature

Research on the brain and learning shows that the first years of life are the most important due to the rapid brain wiring. Babies are born with 100 billion nerves, but the neurons can be pruned due to the stress of poor stimulation and malnutrition. James Zull in the *Art of Changing the Brain* emphasizes that: “Experiments have repeatedly demonstrated an environment-dependent change in the brain, which happens as the connections between neurons become more extensive, become more or less active, or even extend into new parts of the brain” (Zull 2004: 69). Also, Bruce Perry underlined that: “When trauma or unpredictable stress brought on by poverty alters these systems, the neural networks involved in the stress response stop working properly, which can lead to emotional, behavioral, and learning problems” (Perry 2016: 28).

Karen Kalmakis and Genevieve Chandler, in their article *Adverse childhood experiences (ACE): towards a clear conceptual meaning*, sought to clarify and refine the definition of ACE. After analysis of 128 articles on this topic, they concluded that: “Adverse childhood experiences are childhood events that vary in severity and are often chronic and occur in a child’s family or social environment to cause harm or distress, thereby disrupting the child’s physical or psychological health and development” (Kalmakis, Chandler 2013: 1497). Data demonstrate that in 2018, 22% of children in the US had two or more adverse experiences that means that 1 in 5 children had multiple adverse experiences (Kids count 2018). Looking at the ethnicity, the most adverse experiences had American Indian children 37%, then African American 34%, Latino 19%, and 19% white. Also, children that live in the South and Southwest (Arizona 31%) had more adverse experiences in their childhood than children from New York or Maryland (15%) (National Survey of Children’s Health 2018).

Research connects the exposure of young children to toxic stress with the emergence of serious emotional and behavioral problems, and poor development of self-regulation, decision making, and sociomoral behavior in childhood (cf. Barrasso-Catanzaro, Eslinger 2016). The researchers also demonstrate the relationship between adverse childhood experiences, such as childhood abuse and neglect, household dysfunction, poverty, witnessing community violence, and many health risks in adolescence and adulthood (cf. Anda et al. 1999, 2002; Dube et al. 2003; Clark et al. 2008; Duncan et al. 2010).

Adverse childhood experiences must be therefore prevented, or we must correct the effect of them on the young child’s brain. A growing body of research proves that people can be extremely resilient in the face of adversity when provided with protective relationships, skills, and experiences, and that resilience can mitigate the impact of ACE (cf. Bethell et al. 2014, 2016). It can therefore be suggested that the crucial aspect of preventing the effects of adversity in childhood is to build family and community resilience (cf. Wolf 2012; Sparrow 2015; Ellis, Dietz 2017; Strengthening Families 2018).

What are initiatives in the US aimed to help children and their families affected by ACE? One of the initiatives created at Harvard University in 1990 was the **Brazelton**

**Touchpoint Center** to organize family support programs, professional development, and helping to align the system of care with community strength and priorities. The Touchpoint, a term invented by Dr. Thomas Brazelton, had the mission of looking at stressors that families have and how to cope with adversity. The collaboration included working with Harlem Children’s Zone and the American Indian Early Childhood Head Start programs. Dr. Joshua Sparrow, the director of the Brazelton Touchpoints Center at Harvard Medical School in the 1990s, cared for children hospitalized for severe psychiatric disturbances often associated with physical and sexual abuse, and the developmental delays aggravated by social and economic deprivation and health promotion (Sparrow 2015). In Michigan there exist different programs that could be used in a similar manner such as the **University of Michigan women and Infant Mental Health Clinic** which works with mothers and infants by providing psychiatric and psychotherapeutic services to high-risk mentally ill pregnant and postpartum mothers with young children (Muzik, Rosenblum 2015); the **Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health** which promotes standards for workforce development in the infant-family field in 21 states (Paradis 2015), and the **Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute** for Child & Family Development which provides clinical interventions to the families of infants and young children (Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute n.d.).

There are many sources of childhood trauma and chronic or persistent stress, many of which are not included in the original ACE Study scoring tools (Anda n.d.). Among the measures missing from the ACE Study model are “peer rejections, exposure to violence outside the family, low socioeconomic status, and poor academic performance” (Finkelhor et al. 2013: 70). Four major sources of adverse childhood experiences of American children, namely: poverty, maltreatment, extensive assessments at a young age, and bullying and violence in school, will be described in the following part of this literature review. Examples of the initiatives that can effectively respond to children’s difficult situations will also be presented.

### ***Poverty***

According to Kids Count (2018), the nation’s child poverty rate has fallen to 18% – which means that 3 million kids in the US are living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau’s – American Community Survey 2017). Across the country, 15 states reported 2017 child poverty rates below prerecession levels. The five states that saw the greatest drop from 2007 to 2017 were Colorado, Montana, Arkansas, North Dakota, and Iowa ([www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)). The percentage of young children living in homes where no parent is employed – is just 8% nationally. This rate has remained relatively static since 2008 (Kids Count 2018).

Between 2005 and 2017, 46 out of 50 states had seen an uptick in the percentage of children who are living in families that receive public assistance. In 2005, nearly one in five children across the country – more than 13.8 million children total – lived in a family

that received public assistance. Today, one in four children in America – nearly 18.6 million children – lives in such a family (Kids Count 2018).

There is solid evidence that high-quality daycare improves the cognitive and academic performance of disadvantaged children (Elliot 1999: 458). One of the early preschool programs intentionally designed to increase the success of children from families with very low income was, developed in 1954, **High Scope-Perry Preschool** in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The children attended a morning session five days per week, and teachers visited their homes in the afternoon every week for 2 years. All 123 children were from an African American background and their lives were followed for 30 years after leaving Perry preschool. The statistically significant positive outcomes provided an argument for preschool programs (Derman-Sparks, Moore 2016).

In Michigan with a population of almost 10 million (9.962 million in 2016–2017), there were 38,371 children enrolled in preschool – a decrease of 400 from 2015–2016. In 2015–2016, Michigan was ranked #16 in access for 4-year-olds to public preschool and #12 in state spending per child (www.nieer.org). The total state funding was \$243.9 million, which is a decrease of 2.4 million from 2015–2016 (adjusted for inflation). State spending-per-child is currently \$6,356, compared to \$6,353 in 2015–2016.

Amidst the growing 325.7 million (2017) population of the US, nationwide state-funded program enrollment exceeded 1.5 million children, which breaks down to 33% of 4-year-old and 5% of 3-year-olds. State funding for preschools rose only 2% to 7.6 billion, a \$155 million increase since 2015–2016. State funding per child was \$ 5,008, a slight decline from 2015–2016.

### ***Maltreatment***

The typical maltreatment victim in the USA is very young. Child protective services confirmed that nearly 668,000 children – or 9 in every 1,000 kids – were victims of maltreatment in 2016. Just over 40% of these children were between birth and age 4 and 74% were younger than age 11. Maltreatment is a term that encompasses various offenses, the most common being neglect, which can stifle healthy development and result in long-term consequences for children. Physical abuse, emotional abuse, medical neglect, and sexual abuse are also different types of maltreatment. According to statistics, 1 in 10 children in the US will be sexually abused before they turn 18. Most of these abuses happen when children are below 17 years old, they know their abuser because 60% of them are their parents or people in their inner circle (Darkness to Light 2017; Bolde 2018). Sue Bolde raises the question of how we can eradicate sexual abuse and suggests that children must break the silence, we must teach children the language to talk about it and we need a movement towards a “0” tolerance policy, we must train people to save children (Bolde 2018).

In the US, 19 states still allow corporal punishment in schools. In 1994, 25 stated that they would ban the practice recognizing that it is an ineffective and inappropriate measure of school discipline (Gershoff, Font 2016). At the state level, rates of confirmed child

maltreatment vary widely. Children in Massachusetts (23 in every 1,000 kids) and Kentucky (20 in every 1,000 kids) are most likely to experience maltreatment. At the other end of the spectrum sits Pennsylvania, where 2 in every 1,000 kids are confirmed as victims of maltreatment (Kids Count 2018).

One initiative aimed at improving the situation of children is **Resourceful Fathering** – Resource-Centered approach for fathers, to educate, support, engage and empower diverse dads to effectively father for life, even those fathers returning from incarceration (Palkovitz 2015). Another idea is **foster care** placement for children when they are not able to live with their parents. In 2016, 250,200 kids exited the U.S. foster care system. Most of these children (66%) were reunited with a family member: parents and primary caregivers (50%), guardians (9%), and relatives (7%) (Kids Count 2018). In Michigan, there are 13,500 children in foster care and more foster parents are needed. The research of Kristin Turney and Christopher Wildeman, based on data collected from 2011–2012 by the National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH), on children ages 0–17 in the United States, proved the correlation between poor foster care placement and exposure to an array of ACEs. “Children placed in foster care or adopted from foster care, compared to their counterparts, were more likely to experience parental divorce or separation, parental incarceration, parental abuse, violence exposure, household member mental illness, and household substance abuse” (Turney, Wildeman 2017: 117). There are also programs like **Parents’ Café** with resources for both parents and foster parents. In almost all states there are programs like **Fostering Success Michigan** that help children graduating from foster care to become successful students and graduate from higher education. In South Carolina, the program **Darkness to Light** helps to prevent child abuse. They organize the Stewards of Children® in prevention **training**, in which people meet survivors who lived through child sexual abuse, experienced its immediate and long-term effects, and ultimately were able to find healing (Darkness to Light n.d.).

### *Assessment*

As researchers emphasize that preschool is not the time for heavy academic instruction, children from more academic preschools tend to have greater anxiety about testing (Elliot 1999). Too many early assessments of very young children cause problems like early entrance to the school. Children become very anxious because of the pressure that they experience in school. In the words of Marty Davis, a kindergarten teacher from Utah, “Even the 4- and 5-year-olds are getting anxious because we expect so much from them and they feel pressure” (cf. Flannery 2018). Preschool teachers must administer only 2 tests: Ages and Stages as a baseline screening tool for children entering preschool and TS Gold 3 times per year as an ongoing assessment.

To improve, teachers hope that the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) will make a difference in the classroom, replacing the No Child Left Behind Act from 2016. The new policy is based on six ideas:

- No More High Stakes Test that results in determination which schools must be closed;
- **More State and District Control.** ESSA dramatically reduces the power of the U.S. Department of Education and gives states the authority to design and implement the most appropriate assessments. It also gives states the ability to set targets on the amount of time spent on testing;
- Multiple Measure. ESSA also opens the door for other forms of assessment, instead of a snapshot test score;
- **Measuring Growth Rather than Proficiency.** In ESSA there is a new focus on demonstrating student growth;
- Highlighting Achievement Gaps Without Punishing Underserved Students. ESSA holds schools accountable and requires that they provide interventions;
- **Opting-Out and 95 Percent Participation Rate.** While ESSA recognizes that families can refuse testing if a state has an opt-out law, like Oregon, it still mandates a 95% participation rate. It is up to the states to decide what to do if that rate isn't met, but the law is unclear as to what, if any, those consequences may be (Long 2016).

### ***Bullying and school violence and exposure of violence in media***

Research on children's violent behavior in the USA is growing, especially after the shootings in Sandy Hook Elementary School where 20 children and 6 educators died. In 2018, 17 shootings were reported in schools and there were 290 since 2013 (Wilson 2018). Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman (2001) stress the correlation between exposure to violent video games and aggression. The reasoning is that this type of modeling increases psychological arousal, increasing aggressive thoughts and feelings. This hypothesis was confirmed in 2013 by Youssef Hasan, Laurent Bègue, Michael Scharkow, and Brad Bushman. The authors proved that: "aggressive behavior and hostile expectations increased over days for violent game players, but not for nonviolent video game players, and the increase in aggressive behavior was partially due to hostile expectations" (Hasan et al. 2013: 224).

One way of improving the situation of children is to implement character education in educational practice. There are many character education programs like **Project Wisdom** (1992), and researchers stress the relationship between character education and academic achievement (Benninga et al. 2006). Frances Carlson and Bryant Nelson stress the role of responsive touch and secure attachment in reducing aggression in children. They emphasize that children in the US are, for the most part, touched less than their counterparts in the world (Carlson, Nelson 2006: 11). Academics from the College of New Jersey underline the role of books in creating a caring environment in which children can learn empathy, treat others fairly and kindly, and defend themselves and their friends safely and appropriately. They recommend the books such as "Quit-it", "The Anti-Bullying and Teasing Book", "Flop-Ear", "Chrysanthemum" and "Yesterday I had a blues". Blythe Hinitz recommends using feeling faces posters at the beginning of the day (children draw their

faces with an expression), or making paper plate faces with expressions every day, and implementing a “Work-it out” program. She also suggested asking students to draw what bullying means to them, using talking puppets, creating a booklet stressing unity, and emphasizing that parents must be on board with preventing bullying (Hintz 2012, (ed.) 2019).

Professor Rachel Wagner from the State University of New York presented the case study of Hayley (Webinar, August 13, 2015) in which she described a program at the Therapeutic Center for Young Children that exists in New York in which children were expelled from preschool 3 times. She elaborated on the case of a 4-year-old named Hayley who was expelled 4 times from preschools. Her foster parents were older and preschool teachers were afraid of her behavior. The girl kicked, swore, and when she met the therapist, she constantly called her “Fat, Feeble, Female.” The therapists used the **FLIP** – 4-step program on her:

- F – Feelings (Talk about feelings: Oh, you are so mad);
- L – Limits (Put limit on them: We agreed to keep us safe);
- I – Inquiries (Ask them to think by themselves: What can we do with your anger?);
- P – Prompts (Offer some prompts: Can we blow bubbles? Can I put lotion on your hands? What about going for a walk? Can I rub your back? Can I scratch your feet?).

Each time Hayley worked with the therapist they used the same ritual of feet scratching. Hayley needed touch. She took with her a back scratcher to kindergarten and on to the next few grades. The older couple subsequently adopted her, and her behavior improved so much that she could function both in school and at home (Webinar August 13, New York, The case of Hayley).

There have been several initiatives created recently to ameliorate the existing situation in both Michigan, the US, and around the world. For example, in 2015 Central Michigan University hosted a symposium called Shifting Mindsets: Early Childhood Summit to help leaders, experts, and advocates discuss early childhood education and the care of children. The objective was to exchange and shape ideas to transform early childhood education in Michigan and beyond. Many co-founders of the programs and organization, with the mission of improving the situation of children, shared their work platforms and initiatives. Some of them are mentioned below:

- **Utopia Foundation, Children of the World Foundation** with the mission of improving the lives of children around the world (Sutherland, Kaguir 2015);
- In 2001 Jackson Kaguir founded **Nyaka AIDS Orphan Project** with the mission of helping via free education, children who have lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS. He operates 2 schools, a library, a dairy farm, a nutrition program, a medical clinic, a clean water system, and a support program for the grandmothers who care for up to 14 children at the time (cf. eTown achievement Award 2018);
- **SmartWired** provides interactive materials, websites, and programs around the world in different languages to help bring out the best in children and adults (Markowa, McArthur 2015);

- **The Kellogg Foundation** (W.K.K.F.) founded in 1930 and located in Battle Creek (Michigan) is an independent foundation created by Will Keith Kellogg with the belief that all children have an equal opportunity to thrive. WKKF creates conditions for vulnerable children to realize their full potential. WKKF also works in the high poverty places in the US, in Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, and New Orleans, Mexico, and Haiti;
- **Michigan Children’s Foundation** monitors federal and state policies affecting children, analyzes helping the communities, preparing policies for local use, and provides training in advocacy opportunities;
- **Be Strong Families** is a global resource organization for strengthening families from the inside out, building parent/provider partnership, and embedding a strength-based family supportive approach in services for children and families;
- **Thirty Million Words** tests different parent-directed interventions and investigates the effect of these interventions on parent behavior and long-term child language and cognitive development.

### Analysis of survey data

According to the review of the literature, there were four major challenges that young children in America were facing until 2020 and may face even more intensely during and after COVID-19. Using mixed methods based on web surveys sent through Qualtrics to teachers in the Midwest of the US, researchers sought to verify information previously gathered through literature review. The purpose of this part of the research was to investigate the view of Midwest American teachers about the challenges children face and programs that will lessen, eliminate the problems, or correct their consequences.

Out of 74 early childhood teachers who were sent the survey, 29 responded. All respondents were women except one. The following graph demonstrates the age distribution of the respondents (Figure 1).

Most respondents were young teachers between 26 and 33 years old followed by 34 to 41 years old. It was just one very young teacher age 18 to 25 years who responded to the questionnaire. There was also a few represented the group of teachers between the ages of 50–57. The next graph demonstrates the educational background of the respondents (Figure 2).

The graph shows that most of the respondents had postgraduate or university degrees.

The examined teachers were asked to express their opinions on challenges faced by young children in the US: “According to your experience, what are the challenges you feel young children are currently facing? (Please select all that apply)”. Teachers’ opinions are presented in Table 1.



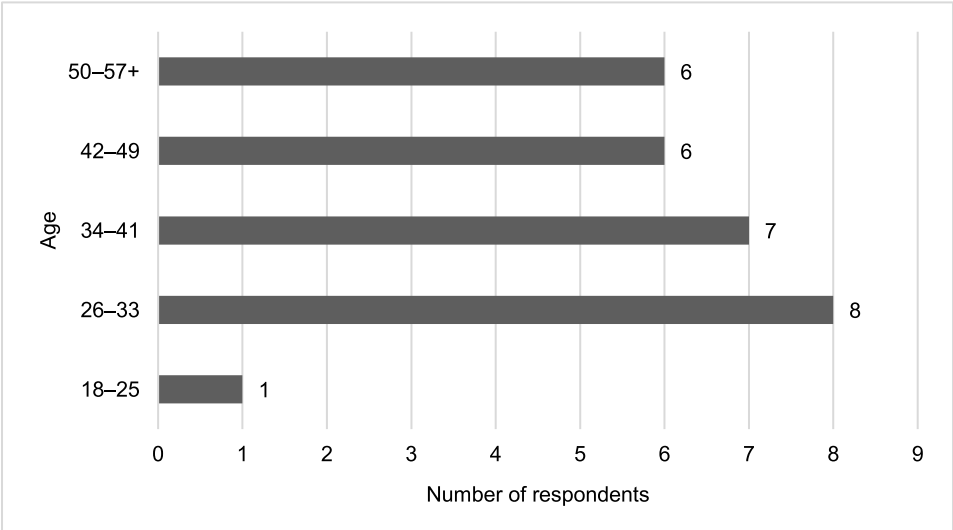


Figure 1. Age distribution of the respondents

Source: Nowak-Fabrykowski.

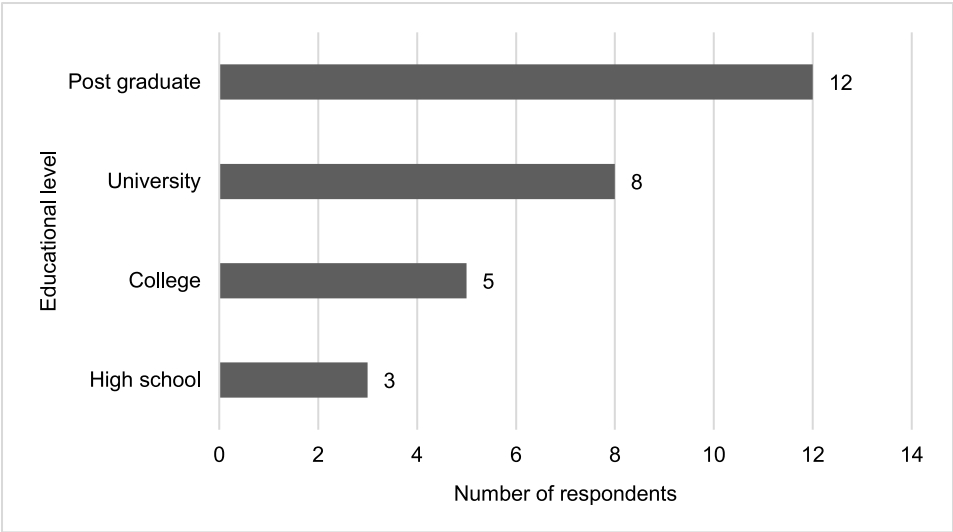


Figure 2. Educational background of the respondents

Source: Nowak-Fabrykowski.

Table 1. Challenges those young children are facing in the opinion of the teachers

#	Answer	(%)	Count
1	Poverty	16.81	20
2	Unemployment of parents	15.97	19
3	Heavy academic instructions imposed by demanding requirements from the state	15.13	18
4	Too many assessments	13.45	16
5	Inadequate housing	10.92	13
6	Maltreatment at home	10.08	12
7	Bullying in school	7.56	9
8	Inadequate school building	4.20	5
9	Pollution of water, food, and the environment	5.04	6
10	Violence on the street	0.84	1

Source: Nowak-Fabrykowski.

According to the respondents, the greatest challenge that young children are facing related to poverty and parents' unemployment followed by the heavy academic standards and assessment. There was not much concern about the pollution in water and environment.

The teachers were also asked to give their opinions on challenges imposed by media: "Which areas of media are you most concerned about negative influences on children's development?" Respondents' opinions are shown in the following graph (Figure 3).

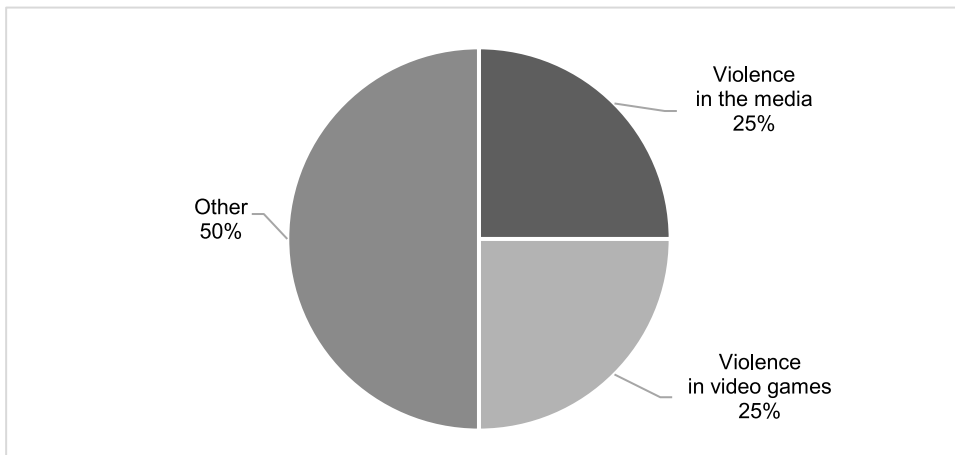


Figure 3. Challenges imposed by media

Source: Nowak-Fabrykowski.

Most of the teachers were concerned about violence that children were exposed to by playing video games. The violence in media and other sources had the same weight. Some of early childhood teachers' comments are presented below:

All the above. The videos and video games my current preschool students talk about are not appropriate and include a lot of violence and vulgar material.

Excessive use of electronic devices by the adults in their lives (parents/guardians) limits personal interactions in many areas of their lives.

The impact of adults consuming highly biased media that only comports with their world-view and then using view in their parenting

Being exposed to entertainment that is rated for adults at a young age when they can't determine what is fact or fiction.

Home environment.

The respondents were asked to answer to the following question: "What are the helpful programs and initiatives? Please check a program or initiative you are familiar with or list any not currently listed?" The answers given by the respondents are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Helpful programs and initiatives

#	Answer	(%)	Count
1	Free breakfast	16.78	25
2	Head Start	14.77	22
3	High Scope	12.70	19
4	Foster care	9.40	14
5	Darkness to Light that helps to prevent child abuse	7.38	11
6	Parents' Café	6.71	10
8	Central Michigan University Therapy and Counseling Clinic for Children	5.37	8
9	University of Michigan Women and Infant Mental Health Clinic	4.70	7
11	Please add the name of other programs that you know	3.36	5
12	The Kellogg Foundation	2.68	4
13	Character education programs, please give names of the programs that you know	2.68	4
14	Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health	2.68	4
15	Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)	2.68	4
16	FLIP – 4 steps program	2.68	4
17	Thirty Million Words	2.68	4
18	Be Strong Families	1.34	2
19	Resourceful Fathering	0.67	1

Table 2. cont.

#	Answer	(%)	Count
20	Fostering Success Michigan	0.67	1
21	Utopia Foundation, Children of the World Foundation	0.00	0
22	Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute	0.00	0
23	Smart Wired	0.00	0

Source: Nowak-Fabrykowski.

Teachers emphasized that the most important initiatives were free breakfasts, Head Start, High Scope, and Foster Care programs. Almost as meaningful were the programs Darkness to Light program and the Parents' Café.

## Conclusions

Of the four major challenges identified in the literature and addressed by the teachers, poverty was pointed to as the primary concern. Therefore, free breakfasts in preschool/school were the most important initiatives. This is congruent with Abraham Maslow's theory that food and shelter must be provided first so the children develop their full potential (Maslow 1943). Teachers also expressed more concerns about high academic standards and heavy assessments as big challenges. The violence in video games was their next highest concern.

Looking at the situation that is occurring in 2020 with COVID-19 concerning parental unemployment, poverty is on the rise. Children are often using digital media many hours and during the COVID-19 often the whole day, since they could not attend school, some did not have access to the computer, they could not go out and play with their friends during social isolation. Many single children were only playing with their parents, who were often busy working at home. We can expect this difficult time to negatively influence children's development and, in many cases, traumatize them.

We could see on American television advertisements for food banks, programs such as Feeding America and we watched teachers bringing food to children and leaving it on their doorsteps. We also see comments from psychologists worrying about children's high-stress levels and depression as effects of the interruption of the school year, and social distancing.

Many researchers and policymakers in the US stress the focus on more prevention of problems. Adverse Childhood Experiences like poverty, maltreatment, violence are documented by researchers to hinder learning and development since they affect executive functions processes located in the brain. The effects of these experiences should be taken more seriously and more programs like **Utopia Foundation, Children of the World Foundation, Kellogg Foundation, Nyaka AIDS Orphans Project** for improving the life of children around the world should be created.

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