

How Poverty and Trauma Can Affect Healthy Brain Development

Proskauer For Good Blog on **January 17, 2019**

Proskauer is proud to lead conversations that foster insight into the pressing issues facing our communities. Together with [Partnership with Children](#) (PwC), we hosted experts in various fields on January 15 to discuss How Poverty and Trauma Affect Healthy Brain Development. Our panelists included Margaret Crotty, Executive Director of PwC, Dennis M. Walcott, President and CEO of [Queens Library](#), and Dr. Olajide Williams, Chief of Staff of Neurology, Director of Acute Stroke Services, and Associate Professor of Neurology at [Columbia University](#). The panel was moderated by Dr. Max Gomez, Senior Medical Correspondent, CBS News.

The conversation centered on the association of child poverty and early trauma, brain development and academic achievement.

Dr. Olajide Williams discussed how a healthy brain develops and the disadvantages that confront children who grow up in poverty. While everyone is born with the same number of brain cells, the construction of those cells change in response to our environments. Growing up in poverty with high levels of stress is linked to slower rates of growth in the brain that are critical to cognitive development. These environmental deficiencies have helped explain why learning, problem-solving, memory and behavioral problems are more common among the disadvantaged. Factors that can greatly influence a child's development include (but are not limited to) nutrition, violence, cognitive stimulation and parental involvement.

Each panelist shared their unique perspective of how stress in small doses can be useful for brain development, while large amounts of stress prove toxic:

- The more [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#) in a child's life, the greater likelihood of developmental delays and health issues.
- Those experiences can cause lifelong medical, mental and social problems.
- Children need to be provided with safe, stable, loving, stimulating environments to grow and thrive into healthy, productive adults.

Dennis Walcott shared the inclusive approach of Queens Library. The Library has over 60 branches who serve approximately 2.3 million people in the New York City area ranging from toddlers to seniors. Everyone is welcome and their programs are as diverse as the population of Queens.

Reducing and reversing the damaging effects of chronic stress may be achieved through education, mentorship and opportunity. Founded in 1908, Partnership with Children has been working in public schools in New York City's low-income communities for more than 100 years, providing counseling for many of the most vulnerable students. The organization helps children overcome the chronic stress of growing up in poverty and achieve success in school and beyond.

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