

# "Unpacking" the Effects of Childhood Poverty: A Psychosocial Approach to

## Intergenerational Risk

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Invited address: CIQSS/QICSS

Social Statistics, Poverty, and Social Exclusion:  
Perspectives from Quebec, Canada, and Abroad

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# Concordia Inter-generational Risk Project

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**Centre for Research in Human Development (CRDH)**

**Concordia University**

# Concordia Inter-generational Risk Project

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# Concordia Inter-generational Risk Project

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# Situation in Canada

- In Canada, approximately 1 in every 6 children lives in poverty: basically unchanged from '70' s.
- Child poverty has been a target of every federal government since the mid-1980s
- Quebec govt. actively targets family poverty: today's meeting.....

# Poverty is bad for Children

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- SES “health gradient” persists in Canada despite universal health care.
- Poverty is associated with problems in virtually all areas of development and health across the life course.

# Poverty may operate on health and development via many processes

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- Stressful environment (neighborhood and family); impacts physiology and behavioral coping for both parents and children
- Limited resources for poor families
  - Low income
  - Low parental education and high school dropout
  - Early/off time parenthood
  - Single parenthood and parental absence
  - Lack of social support and community resources

Add to stress load, and make coping more difficult

# Intergenerational transfer of risk via parenting

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- Impaired parental mental and physical health
- Reduced physical and emotional availability of parents
- Physical and emotional neglect and abuse
- Learning: Modeling of problematic behavior and coping styles
- Reduced cognitive stimulation

# Role of behavior in continuity and outcomes of poverty????

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- Direct links between poverty and problematic behavior.
- Behavioral problems may mediate effects of poverty on development
- Reciprocal relation between poverty and behavioral problems over time (Caspi, Bem, & Elder, 1989).

# The Concordia Longitudinal Risk Project

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- Today I will discuss some of the pathways from family poverty to later development, using examples from an ongoing 30-year inter-generational longitudinal sample of disadvantaged Montreal families.

# Concordia Longitudinal Risk Project

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- A prospective, longitudinal study of over 4000 inner-city Montreal elementary school children, begun in 1976.
- Participants were screened on measures of aggression and social withdrawal.
- **Within gender** nominations by peers were used to assign scores on the Aggression and Withdrawal dimensions.

# Concordia Longitudinal Risk Project

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- These children and their families have been followed over time, from 1976 to the present, including representative sub-samples for a wide variety of questionnaires, archival and interview-based measures of health, social and occupational functioning, and criminality.

# Concordia Longitudinal Risk Project

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- Many participants have since had children, providing the opportunity to examine the intergenerational transfer of risk, via parenting and environmental stress.

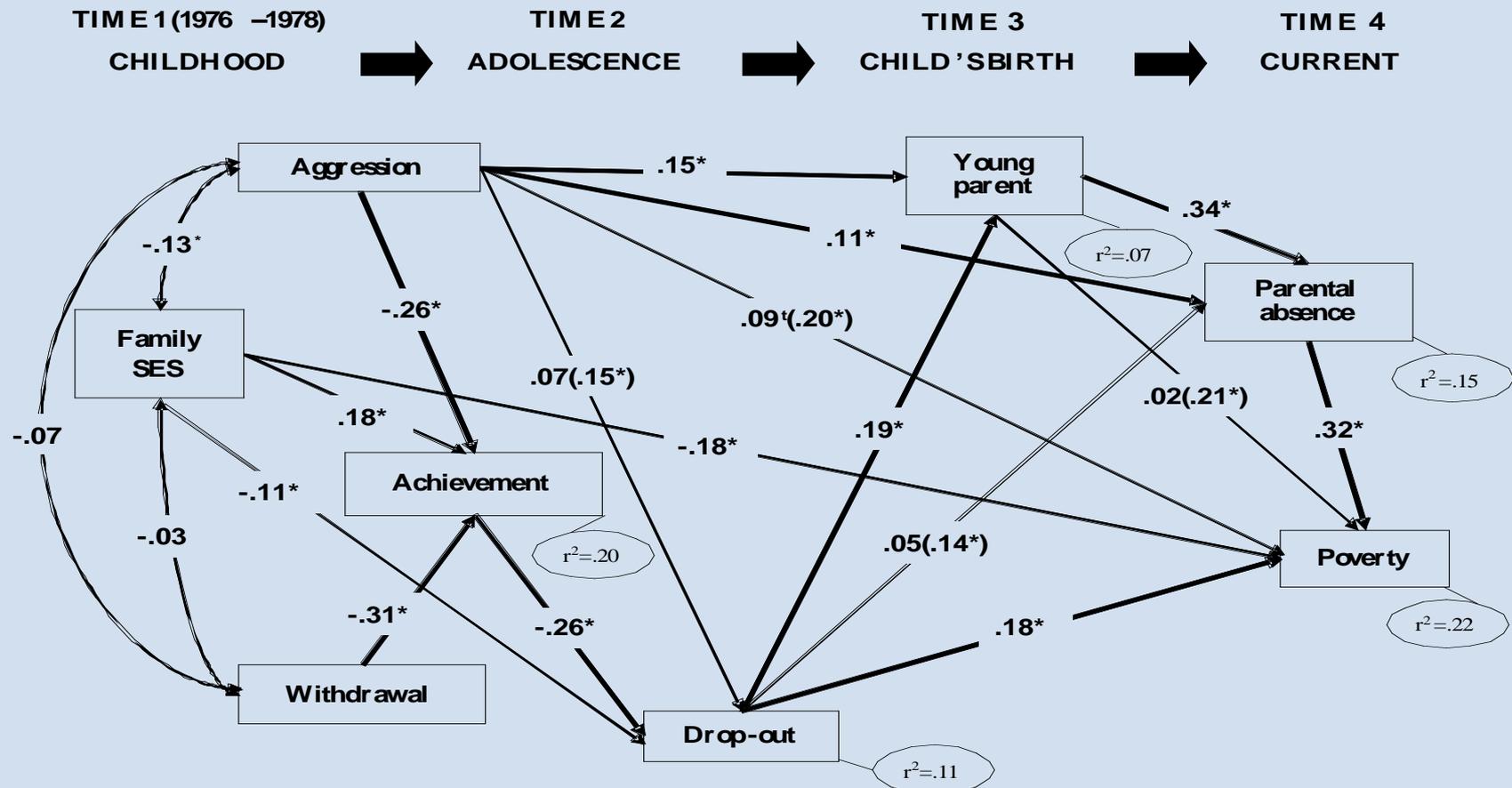
# A model of intergenerational transfer

## Part 1: Predicting parenting in poverty

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- Study involves 548 participants in the Concordia Project, now mothers (n=328) or fathers (n=220).
- Examined the “cumulative continuity” of disadvantage from childhood to parenthood, including behavioral characteristics in childhood. How problem kids become disadvantaged parents.

# Predicting poverty and other threats to parenting among mothers



(N = 328)

Chi Square = 12.36,  $p = 0.42$ , CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.01  
 \*:  $p < 0.05$ , †:  $.05 < p < 0.1$ , and r: correlation coefficient  
 Bold line: significant direct or indirect path from childhood aggression or withdrawal

# Conclusions from “Threats to successful parenthood” study

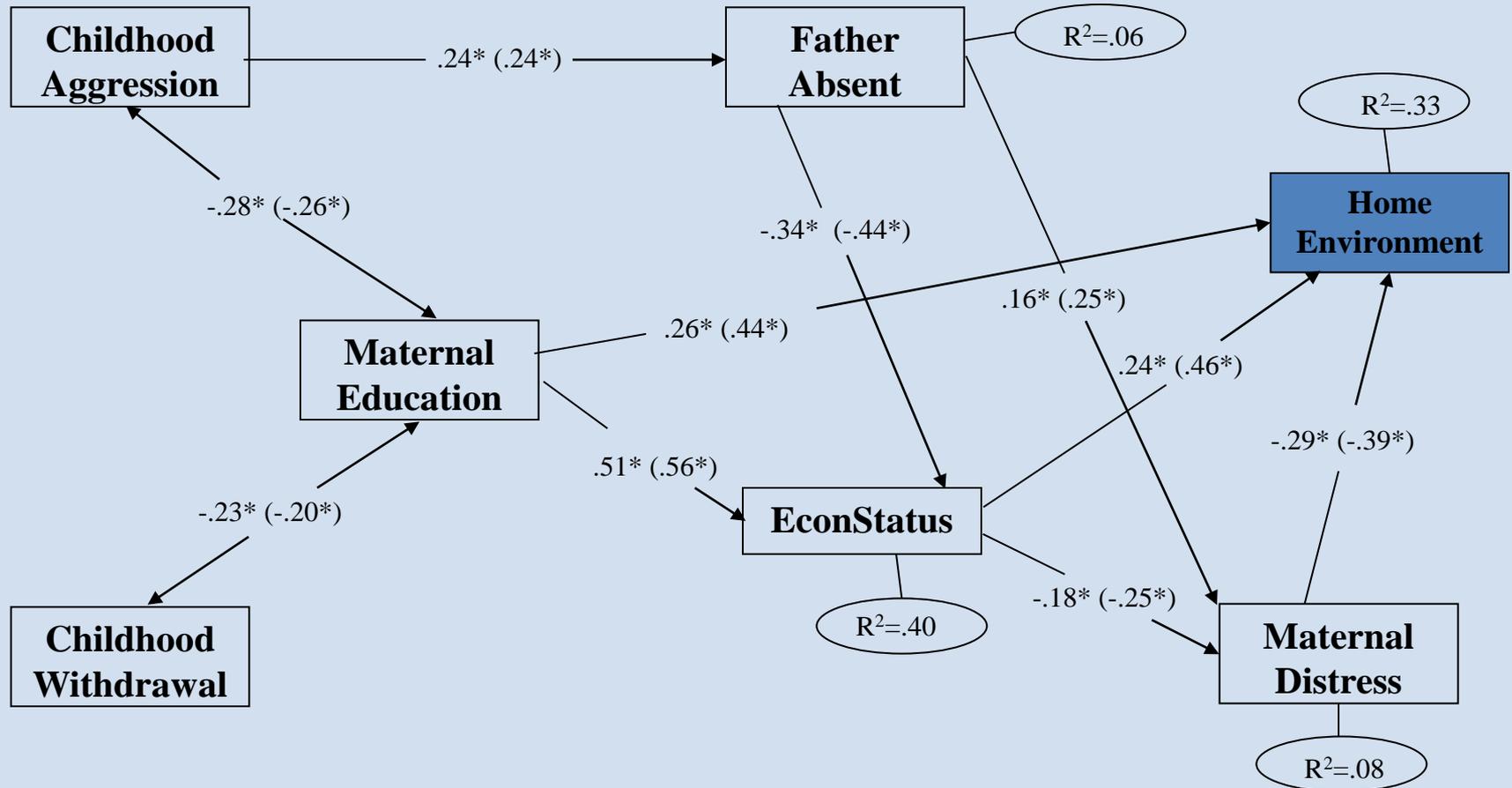
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- Intergenerational: Poverty operates partially through intervening developmental events/conditions to create new family poverty, across multiple generations (three generations in Concordia Study)
- Mediating role of education in the model
- Within a low income sample, behavior, e.g. childhood aggression, plays both direct and indirect roles in predicting “threats” to child rearing many years later, in adulthood.

# Study 2: The intergenerational transfer of Risk

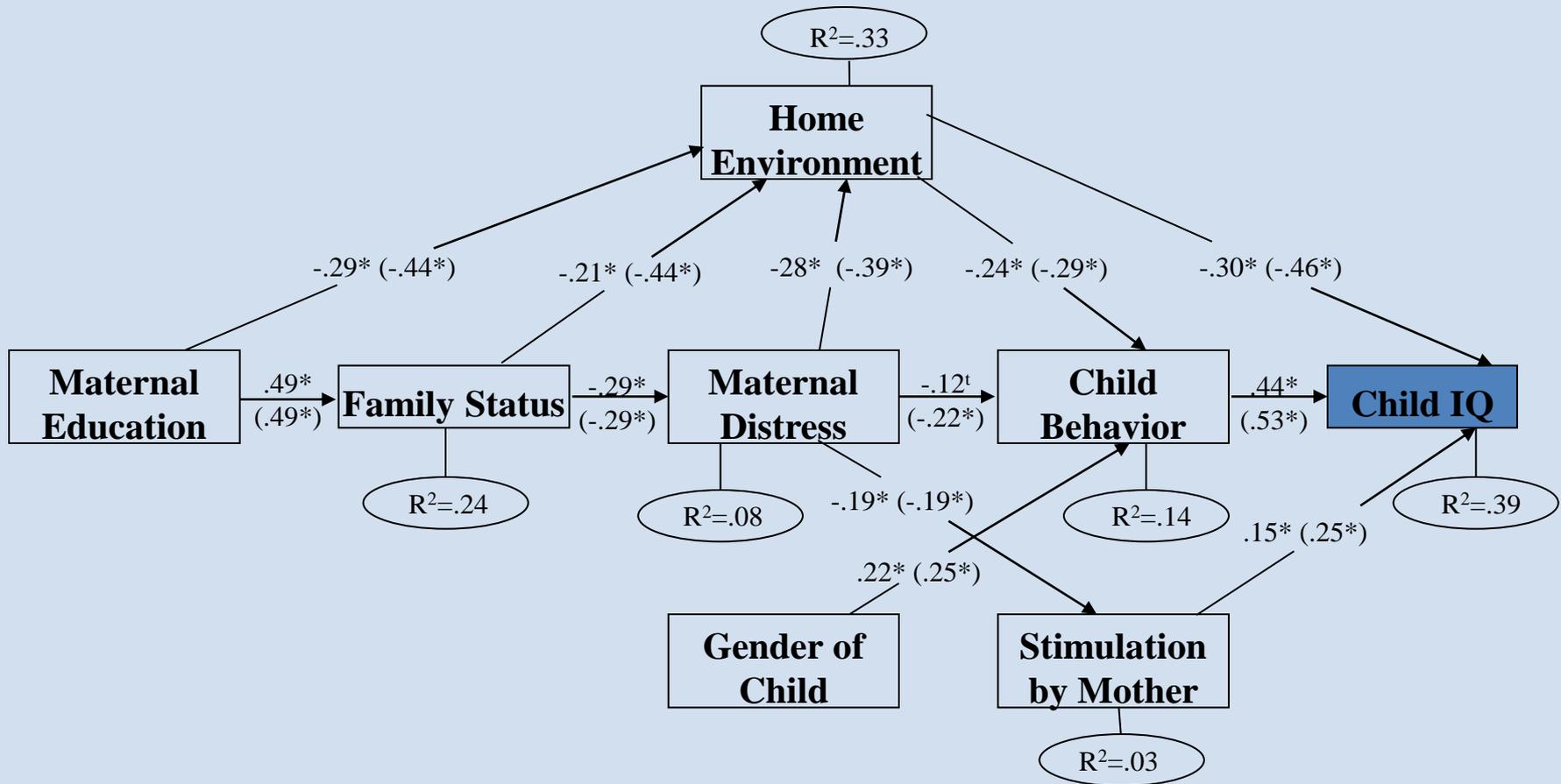
- Intensive study of 175 families from among the parents in the previous study.
- All had children aged 2 to 5 at the time the study began
- Have now followed the offspring into early adolescence: 4 time points, 3 yrs. apart.
- Today focus on the early (age 2-5) and middle childhood outcomes.

# Prediction of Home Environment



N = 175,  $\chi^2 = 10.43$ , P=0.49, CFI=1.0, RMSEA=0.00; Path coefficient and (Correlation coefficient);  
All coefficients are significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ .

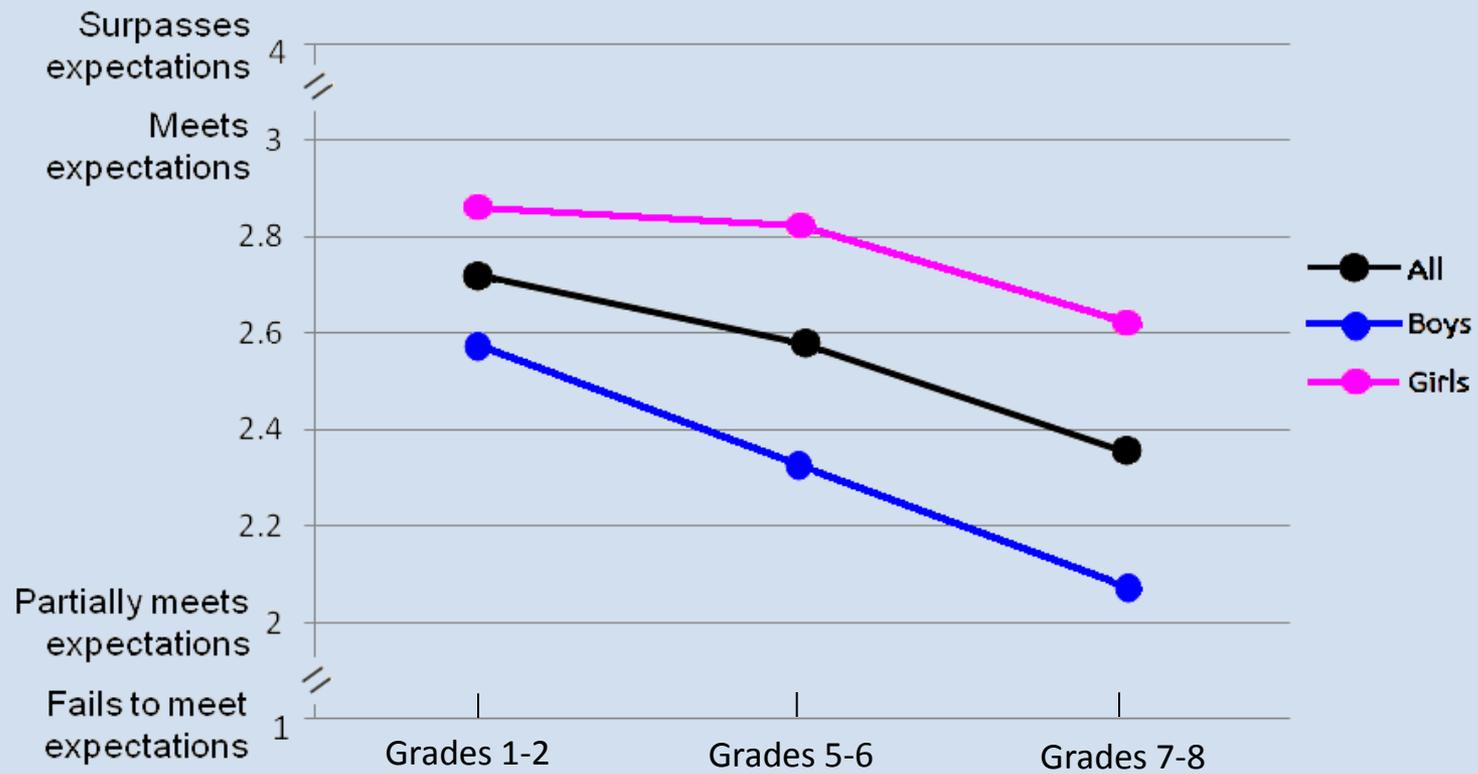
# Prediction of Child Intellectual Functioning



N = 175,  $\chi^2 = 13.33$ ,  $p = 0.65$ , CFI = 1.00, RMSEA = 0.00; Path coefficient and (Correlation coefficient);  
 \*: Coefficients are significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ ; t: at  $0.05 < p \leq 0.1$ .

# School marks over time

End of year Average :



# Predicting Performance after School entry (grades 1-2)

- Protective factors:
  - Mother's years of education ( $\beta = .23^*$ )
  - Home environment (cognitive stimulation) ( $\beta = .29^{**}$ )
  - I.Q. ( $\beta = .27^{**}$ )
  - Mother's involvement in schooling (early grades) ( $\beta = .39^{***}$ )
- Risk factors:
  - Mother's distress (early childhood) ( $\beta = -.28^{**}$ )
  - Behavior problems (externalizing) ( $\beta = -.29^{***}$ )

# Predicting maternal involvement in child's schooling

- Mother's years of education ( $\beta = .42^{***}$ )
- Mother's Sensitivity ( $\beta = .18^*$ )
- Mother's Distress ( $\beta = -.19^*$ )
- Family poverty ( $\beta = -.21^*$ )

# Summary of effects

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- Education is a primary mediator between family poverty and developmental outcomes:
  - This applies both within and between generations.

# Additional Pathways include:

- Parental behavior (i.e. problem patterns over time)
  - Environmental and economic stress
  - “Distress” of parents during childrearing
  - Stimulation to children in environment
  - Parenting behavior (e.g. sensitivity, cognitive stimulation, harsh punishment....etc.)
  - Low involvement in schooling
- Offset by available buffers (e.g. social and economic support, education, coping ability, involvement).

# So what do we know now?

- Poverty is bad for children, inter-generational

**BUT**

- There are pathways from one generation to the next via behavioral problems and lowered education.
- Parenting and home environment are part of the ongoing process.
- Perhaps we can focus public policy on these issues to reduce both the impact and prevalence of child poverty.

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Thank you....  
questions and comments?

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