

Published August 13 2010

## Speaker: Poverty impacts brain development

An early childhood educator kicked off the Communities Collaborative Brain Development Conference here Wednesday, focusing on some of the latest research done on the topic.

By: **Riham Feshir**, DL-Online

---

MAHNOMEN — An early childhood educator kicked off the Communities Collaborative Brain Development Conference here Wednesday, focusing on some of the latest research done on the topic.

Dr. Cathy Grace, who holds a doctorate in curriculum and instruction early childhood and special education, spoke to a room of about 500 parents, teachers and child care providers.

"Ten years ago, we were sort of new at this," Grace said of the research. "...if you're using stuff you were using 10 years ago, it needs to be thrown away."

Grace, the director of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), provided some key statistics that either showed improvements or downfalls in the last decade.

Poverty and children's brain development are heavily correlated, according to the CDF. In 2008, 14.1 million children were poor — an increase of 2.5 million since 2000.

Poverty may be more damaging during the early childhood years than later, Grace said.

She explained that those who experience poverty under the age of 10 may grow up with emotional and social problems. On the other hand, children who grow up in economically stable homes, but face poverty later as adults, aren't necessarily affected as much.

Studies in 2010 show that approximately 30 percent of children living in poverty in the United States are American Indian or Alaska Native.

To avoid long-term mental, social and emotional problems, teachers and parents must be equally involved in their children's lives early on.

New techniques have been developed to make sure the statistics of poverty, teen pregnancy and drug and alcohol use are not affecting brain development.

"Societies are changing and children are being left behind," Grace said.

Family dynamics are as much a factor as poverty levels and in many ways, they're like cognitive learning.

A lot of folks think that babies don't understand the tone of voice, facial expressions or physical contact, Grace said.

"Children are born wired for feelings and ready to learn," she added. "A child's brain is not a smaller version of an adult brain."

She encouraged parents and classroom teachers to be mindful of the children's environments, as well as what they say, how they say it and how they act around them, even as young as 9 months old.

"Often times, children are programmed very early," Grace said.

Ten years ago, there was not much emphasis on the emotional and brain development as much as there was on cognitive research.

But the same way child care providers use the practice makes the perfect approach when it comes to learning the alphabets and numbers, if they can implement it when it comes to behavioral problems.

Instead of focusing on what not to do when children act up, tell them what they should do and teach them self-regulation.

"Instead of saying 'don't run' say 'walk.' Instead of saying 'don't holler' say 'use your inside voice,'" she said.

Try to avoid telling a child that he or she is bad, useless or unworthy, or comparing them to a relative who didn't turn out too well, Grace said.

"That's just gonna indicate to the child, 'well that's my identity I guess,'" she added.

Furthermore, children who grow up with a depressed parent will have a hard time adapting to a normal environment.

Grace said many of the women she has worked with over the years are truly "deeply depressed" but don't try to seek help because they consider it a "cultural no-no."

"So they're suffering in silence and their children are suffering," she said.

According to CDF, a child is abused or neglected every 41 seconds, 71 percent of them are victims of neglect and Infants are most likely to suffer from maltreatment.

Results of toxic stress can disrupt brain development causing depression, problems handling transitions and different types of anti-social behavior.

"It's much easier and less expensive to raise a healthy child than to try to fix a broken person," Grace said.