The Academic Pediatric Association (APA) has formed an APA Task Force on Childhood Poverty and issued a Strategic Road-Map for addressing childhood poverty. The Road-Map describes childhood poverty as the “most important problem facing children in the United States today.” The task force is co-chaired by Dr. Bernard Dreyer, APA’s immediate past president. Dr. Dreyer’s APA presidential address, To Create a Better World for Children and Families: The Case for Ending Childhood Poverty, recommended formation of the task force.

The Road-Map summarizes the consequence of childhood poverty as follows:

“The effects of poverty on children’s health and well-being are well documented. Poor children have increased infant mortality, higher rates of low birth weight and subsequent health and developmental problems, increased frequency and severity of chronic diseases such as asthma, greater food insecurity with poorer nutrition and growth, poorer access to quality health care, increased unintentional injury and mortality, poorer oral health, lower immunization rates, and increased rates of obesity and its complications. There is also increasing evidence that poverty in childhood creates a significant health burden in adulthood that is independent of adult-level risk factors and is associated with low birth weight and increased exposure to toxic stress (causing structural alterations in the brain, long-term epigenetic changes, and increased inflammatory markers).

The consequences of poverty for child and adolescent well-being are perhaps even more critical than those for health. These are the consequences that may change their life trajectories, lead to unproductive adult lives, and trap them in intergenerational poverty. Children growing up in poverty have poorer educational outcomes with poor academic achievement and lower rates of high school graduation; they have less positive social and emotional development which, in turn, often leads to life ‘trajectory altering events’ such as early unprotected sex with increased teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, and increased criminal behavior as adolescents and adults; and they are more likely to be poor adults with low productivity and low earnings.”

The APA Road-Map calls for a “war on childhood poverty” and recommends policy initiatives to reduce child poverty including raising the minimum wage, making the Child Tax Credit fully refundable, strengthening the Earned Income Tax Credit, and strengthening and improving access to TANF. The Road-Map also calls for free early education for all low-income 3- and 4-year olds, and for expanding high quality, affordable child care.

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