



## Understanding the Culture of Poverty

Current political and socioeconomic events are contributing to an entrenched class system within America. Poverty is playing an increasingly large role in the lives of many children—approximately one in four live at the poverty level. Poor children of any race or ethnicity are more likely to suffer developmental delays and damage, drop out of school and give birth during

multiple relationships.

- Time occurs in the present moment and future implications are seldom considered; being proactive, setting goals and planning ahead are not a part of generational poverty's culture.
- Extra money is shared among an individual's support system rather than using the extra money to "get ahead". From a poverty perspective, a person

possible to follow given available resources). I have learned the value of helping kids and adults understand how two sets of behaviors (one for the street and one for middle class-oriented school and work settings) helps a person cope in our complicated and class-conscious society.

Families experiencing poverty often work hard if they respect you. Adults and kids from poverty do not take kindly to the "parent" voice; full cooperation is much more likely with the "adult" voice when accompanied with genuine emotional warmth and respect for personal space. I have thrown away my attitude of trying to "save" people entrenched in poverty. Instead I find success when I respect individual choices and offer to teach coping strategies, provide a support system, and be a good role model.

Poverty is rarely about a lack of intelligence or ability. But many individuals stay in generational poverty because they are not aware of behavioral strategies that would open the door to other options and/or they don't have anyone to help teach them the rules of the middle class so they can access resources. The number of people (particularly children) below the poverty line is growing. We have an important role to help those in poverty achieve the highest level of wellness. ☺

### REFERENCE

Payne, RK: A framework for understanding poverty. RFT Publishing Company, . Highlands, TX, 1998, 1-205.

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their teen years. Understanding some of the class characteristics of poverty is important. A school principal at my current clinical work site works with many economically poor families and has taught me some important lessons.

### ■ Hidden Rules

Poverty is primarily a result of interrelated factors, including parental employment status and earnings, family structure and parent education. People raised in a specific class learn certain thought patterns, social interactions and cognitive strategies that often remain with the individual through adulthood. Schools and businesses operate from middle class norms and use (but don't teach) the hidden rules of the middle class.

The following are some of the cultural rules unique to poverty:<sup>1</sup>

- While criteria for middle class decisions often relate to work and achievement, generational poverty class decisions are often based on the importance of one's personality to sustain

will never "get ahead" so it is important to share fortune with others to ensure one will be assisted in a time of need.

- A male's identity is often tied to being a lover and fighter while a "good" woman is expected to take care of and rescue her man and children.
- For many in generational poverty, jail is a part of life; unlike the middle class, a lack of resources means a lack of resources to avoid jail.
- Scolding and corporal punishment from the matriarch (typical head of household) is about penance followed by forgiveness and feeding; correction or change is often not an expectation because of a strong belief in fate and destiny.

### ■ Rule Recognition

Recognizing these rules has helped lessen my frustration when I work with people who are experiencing generational poverty. I have learned how essential it is to analyze a family's resources before dispensing middle class suggestions (which are often im-