

Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis is a 2016 memoir by J. D. Vance about the Appalachian values of his Kentucky family and their relation to the social problems of his hometown of Middletown, Ohio, where his mother's parents moved when they were young.

Vance describes his upbringing and family background while growing up in the city of Middletown, Ohio, the third largest city in the Cincinnati metropolitan area. He writes about a family history of poverty and low-paying, physical jobs that have since disappeared or worsened in their guarantees, and compares this life with his perspective after leaving that area and life.

Though Vance was raised in Middletown, his mother and her family were from Breathitt County, Kentucky. Their Appalachian values include traits like loyalty and love of country, despite social issues including violence and verbal abuse. He recounts his grandparents' alcoholism and abuse, and his unstable mother's history of drug addictions and failed relationships. Ironically, Vance's mother was Valedictorian of her graduating class. Vance's grandparents eventually reconciled and became his de facto guardians. He was pushed by his tough but loving grandmother, and eventually Vance was able to leave Middletown to attend Ohio State University and Yale Law School.

Alongside his personal history, Vance raises questions such as the responsibility of his family and people for their own misfortune. Vance blames hillbilly culture and its supposed encouragement of social rot. Comparatively, he feels that economic insecurity plays a much lesser role. To lend credence to his argument, Vance regularly relies on personal experience. As a grocery store checkout cashier, he watched welfare recipients talk on cell phones although the working Vance could not afford one. His resentment of those who seemed to profit from poor behavior while he struggled, especially combined with his values of personal responsibility and tough love, is presented as a microcosm of the reason for Appalachia's overall political swing from strong Democratic Party to strong Republican affiliations. Likewise, he recounts stories intended to showcase a lack of work ethic including the story of a man who quit after expressing dislike over his job's hours and posted to social media about the "Obama economy", as well as a co-worker, with a pregnant girlfriend, who would skip work.

A film adaptation was released in November 2020. Directed by Ron Howard and starring Glenn Close as Vance's beloved Mamaw the movie was an instant hit. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillbilly_Elegy

Although we are not physically located in the Rustbelt, we do have underrepresented low socio-economic students who may be gifted. Are we missing them because they do not fit the typical mold of how a "gifted student" may look?

Author and researcher Eric Jensen shares his research in the publication: [Teaching With Poverty In Mind](#)
[What Being Poor Does to Kids' Brains and What Schools Can Do About It, 2009](#)

In the first two chapters, Jensen shares how poverty physically alters the brain and shares suggestions for educators to assist these students. This is a list of my personal notes from those first two chapters:

Reflect on students who are bright but have poor attendance or lack respect. Remember to relate this research with the ACES research. What does poverty do to the brain? Remember, we can stop saying, "WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?" to "WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?" when we are working to pinpoint and correct behaviors that are socially unacceptable. How can we grow together to appreciate poverty through a different lens when working with all of our students?

Chapter One

Understanding the Nature of Poverty

- If life experiences can change poor kids for the worse, can't life experiences also change them for the better?
- Three claims in the book:
 - Chronic exposure to poverty causes the brain to physically change in a detrimental manner
 - Because the brain is designed to adapt from experience, it can also change for the better. In other words, poor children can experience emotional, social, and academic success.
 - Although many factors affect academic success, certain key ones are especially effective in turning around students raised in poverty.
- Six types of poverty:
 - Situational - Sudden crisis or loss & may be temporary
 - Generational - at least two generations have been born into poverty - lack tools to move out of situation
 - Absolute - Scarcity of food, water, shelter - live day-to-day
 - Relative - economic income status does not meet avg standard of living
 - Urban - in population >50,000 chronic and acute stressors (noise, overcrowding, violence)
 - Rural - in population <50,000 more single parent families, lack access to services, increasing each year - has surpassed urban poverty rates. **reference statistics in Ohio's Plan to Raise Literacy Achievement
- Four primary risk factors
 - Emotional and social challenges
 - Acute and chronic stressors
 - Cognitive lags
 - Health & Safety issues
- 40% of children living in chronic poverty had deficiencies in at least two areas of functioning at age three.
- Children in poverty tend to spend less time finding out about the world around them and more time struggling to survive within it.
- More likely to rely on peers for soc/em support
- Chaotic, unstable households, single parents, less structure - poor school attendance, less books, more tv,
- May move a lot and in young children developing brains need predictability
- Hectic work schedules may lead to chemical dependency, depression
- Perpetuate poor choices which in turn may make college an untouchable for them
- Refer to the ACEs
- Students who ACT OUT is often a symptom of the effects of poverty and indicates conditions such as a chronic stress disorder. Such disorders alter students' brains and often lead to greater impulsivity and poor short term memory. This may look like blurting out, acting out or forgetting what to do next.
- DO NOT LET PITY LOWER EXPECTATION - feel empathy rather than pity - create a culture of caring not of giving up. In this case less is NOT more.

Chapter Two

How Poverty Affects Behavior and Academic Performance

- The brains of infants are hardwired for only six emotions: joy, anger, surprise, disgust, sadness, and fear – to grow up emotionally healthy children under the age of three need:
 - Strong, reliable primary caregiver who provides consistent and unconditional love, guidance & support
 - Safe, predictable, stable environments
 - 10–20 hours/wk of harmonious, reciprocal interactions
- This is ATTUNEMENT for the first 6–24 months to develop healthy emotions like gratitude, forgiveness, and empathy
- Warm emotions are at a premium – families are overworked, overstressed
- Failure to form positive relationships with peers inflicts long-term socio-emotional consequences
- Give up easily and difficult to work in cooperative groups
- Remember, every emotional response other than the SIX (sadness, joy, disgust, anger, surprise, fear) must be TAUGHT – take the time to work with students to learn humility, forgiveness, empathy, optimism, compassion, sympathy, patience, shame, cooperation, gratitude
- Three things students come to school in search of:
 - Drive for reliable relationships – if no reliable partner or mentor is available they will find someone
 - Strengthening of peer socialization – everyone wants to belong somewhere – peers (not parents) have the greatest influence on student academic success
 - Quest for importance & social status – status hunt

ACTION STEPS:

You cannot change a student's bank account but you can change their emotional account

EMBODY RESPECT

- Give students respect even when they seem least to deserve it
- Share decision making in class
- Avoid directives – give choices that lead to the same end – would you like to first do the rough draft or gather ideas right now?
- Calm voice and avoid labeling – we have time today for these three things – let's do this first
- Discipline through positive relationships – avoid – don't be a wise guy – sit down – rather try calm – let's all take our seats we have a lot to learn today.

EMBED SOCIAL SKILLS

- Teach essential meet and greet skills – eye to eye contact, shake hands, smile
- Embed taking turns
- Remind please and thank you

BE INCLUSIVE

- OUR school OUR class
- Thank for small things
- Pack acknowledgements, celebration and praise into every class

BRAIN RESEARCH

- Compared with a healthy neuron, a stressed neuron generates a weaker signal, handles less blood flow, processes less oxygen, and extends fewer connective branches to nearby cells. Exposure to chronic or acute stress actually shrinks neurons in the brain's frontal lobes.

SIGNS OF CHRONIC STRESS

- Linked to 50% of chronic absences
- Impairs attention and concentration
- Reduces cognition, creativity and memory
- Diminishes social skills and social judgement
- Increases the likelihood of depression
- Reduces neurogenesis (growth of new brain cells)

ACTION STEPS:

Behavior that comes off as rude may actually indicate feelings of hopelessness and despair. Students who are at risk for a stress-related disorder tend to:

- Believe that they have minimal control over stressors
- Have no idea how long the stressor may last or how intense it will be.
- Have fewer outlets to release frustrations
- Lack social support

What we can do in the classroom:

- Reduce homework
- Use cooperative structures rather than authoritarian
- Incorporate kinesthetic activities to blow off steam
- Empower students by introducing conflict management skills
- DeStress - count to 10, deep breathing
- Teach goal setting
- Role-model how to solve real-world problems

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