Bioecological model of economic disadvantage and children’s well-being
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Economic disadvantage and early experiences of adversity have long-term and wide spread impact on children’s developmental outcomes, leading to physical, cognitive, academic, social-emotional, mental health problems in early- and middle-childhood that snowball into significant health and social issues in adolescence and young adulthood, including higher rates of teen-parenthood, school drop-out, mental health and substance use problems, and higher rates of living in poverty as adults, perpetuating intergenerational poverty. These long-term, wide-spread and intergenerational effects of poverty can be understood from a bioecological perspective. In a bioecological model, children’s development occurs in nested contexts, with proximal contexts, such as parent, family and caregiver relationships, having the greatest impact on children’s development and being influenced by more distal contexts, such as community, workplace, extended family, and school contexts, which, in turn, are impacted by macro level contexts, such as socioeconomic, political and cultural factors. These nested influences result in a clustering of adversity or risk in low-income contexts. The clustering or accumulation of risk is called “cumulative risk,” and cumulative risk is a robust and consistent predictor of children’s developmental outcomes. In our research, we demonstrate the cascading effects of low income through cumulative risk, both of which are associated with disruptions to parenting. Disruptions to parenting nearly fully account for the effects of low income on young children’s developmental outcomes, impacting the neurobiological systems that underlie children’s self-regulation, and these, in turn, account for children’s academic readiness, social-emotional competence and behavior problems. Addressing the cascading effects of economic disadvantage requires a preventive approach, identifying as early as possible infants and children who are at risk of being exposed to cumulative risk, providing comprehensive, integrated, family centered support and resources that reduce a family’s cumulative risk context, and a two-generation approach to supporting self-regulation in parents who in turn are key in promoting self-regulation, academic readiness and social-emotional well-being in their children.