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Mentoring with Purpose

By Jamie Sokolik  |  Photo: Tom Vangel

The Cities Project mentoring program helps children living in poverty cope with the stress of their everyday lives so they can stay in school and graduate from college.
Kathryn Grant, director of The Cities Project at DePaul, is on a mission to help impoverished children cope with the extreme stress that negatively affects their mental, and sometimes physical, well-being, as well as their ability to learn. As a result of this stress, children living in Chicago’s poorest neighborhoods rarely graduate from a four-year college.

“Poverty is the mother of all stressors, especially for kids,” Grant says. “It makes it more likely that their parents will break up or that they’ll experience abuse and neglect. That’s in addition to the daily stressors, such as inadequate education, generally poorer schools and teachers who have too much to deal with. It also erodes their ability to cope with everything. These kids are just getting it from all angles.”

In her research, Grant found that the typical coping strategies professionals teach children often aren’t effective for those living in poverty. Instead, The Cities Project teaches methods, such as distraction, self-soothing and problem-solving, that Grant hopes will help them escape the cycle of poverty.

“Different types of coping are needed for different types of stressors,” she explains. “When you’re experiencing things like gang violence, actively engaging with the problem can sometimes backfire. We discovered it was better to connect these kids to a trusted adult or that they’ll experience abuse and neglect. That’s in addition to the daily stressors, such as inadequate education, generally poorer schools and teachers who have too much to deal with. It also erodes their ability to cope with everything. These kids are just getting it from all angles.”

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