

CHILDREN, POVERTY and the BIBLE



Five-part Bible study for weekly meetings,
multi-day events or all-day retreats

BY CASSANDRA CARKUFF WILLIAMS

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Contents

General Introduction	1
Sessions	
1) Assumptions, Experiences and Expectations	3
2) Six Things the Bible Says about Poverty	7
3) Six Things the Bible Says about Children	9
4) One Child's Story	13
5) Creating a Vision	19
Leader's Guide	22
A Litany for Children	24
Appendix: Some Facts about Children in Poverty	28

General Introduction



Children, Poverty, and the Bible was developed in support of the Children in Poverty Initiative, which was adopted in 2005 as a denomination-wide issue of concern for American Baptist Churches USA. This initiative seeks to encourage and equip American Baptists to respond to the needs of children in poverty through ministries of caring and prophetic justice. The initiative identifies and highlights existing resources and opportunities for response, along with providing leadership for the development of new resources and opportunities for ministry to children. A first advisory session in fall of 2005 helped identify major impacts on children in poverty, including access to healthcare, living wage requirements and quality of public education. From that initial assessment, National Ministries narrowed in on public education — the primary route of social inclusion for children — as the first emphasis for the initiative.

The topic of children and poverty is large and complex. The Bible speaks of poverty and of children in a multitude of texts and from a variety of perspectives. Embracing the witness Scripture on this topic begins with the acknowledgement of the Christian Church's historic and contemporary failure to be obedient to God's mandates regarding children in need. This fundamental assumption of the Church's disobedience guided the process of appropriating the biblical message in what I refer to as a "hermeneutic of repentance." Approaching the Bible with a hermeneutic of repentance involves two main practices: 1) reading through the Bible to identify texts that speak to the topic,

in general, and focusing on those that challenge prevailing thought and practice; and 2) doing close readings of familiar texts to uncover teachings that may have been overlooked or even masked through misappropriation. The results of reviewing Scripture from this perspective on the topics of children and poverty form the basis of Sessions Two, Three and Four of this study, as follows:

- Session Two: Six Things the Bible Says about Poverty
- Session Three: Six Things the Bible Says about Children
- Session Four: A Close Reading of One Child’s Story

An additional assumption at work in this study is that Scripture is truly known only when it transforms us as individuals and as communities of faith and, in order for that to happen, we must allow the text to “read us” as we read it. In the initial session, therefore, you will be asked to participate in preliminary work designed to help you uncover your own assumptions and commitments related to children, poverty and the Bible. Throughout Sessions Two, Three and Four, you will be invited to wrestle with implications of Scripture’s mandates for your life and that of your church. And in the final session, you will be given the opportunity to create a vision of obedience and a plan for sharing and implementing that vision within your faith community.

The prevailing hope is not that we would *know* more or even *do* more as a result of this study, but that we would be *transformed* into people and communities who demonstrate the will of God in issues related to children and poverty. May God’s grace and Spirit empower us to become authentic followers of Jesus Christ,

who though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself
taking on the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
And became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11

NOTE TO LEADERS: Review Leader’s Guide (page 22) before beginning.

Session One

Assumptions, Experiences and Expectations

When we approach Scripture, we first must begin with honest reflection by asking, “What do I bring to this study?” The following exercises will help you explore your emotions, assumptions and expectations related to children, poverty and the Bible.

Exercise 1: Connect with the Child Within

Spend a few minutes doing something on this list, as a way to open up remembrance of your own childhood:

- Draw or color a picture using either markers or crayons, whichever you used as a child.
- Work with playdough, perhaps creating an image to represent your childhood.
- Close your eyes and let your mind wander back to childhood experiences. Then consider the following questions:
 - How did the important adults in your life view children? Were children, for example, a blessing, a nuisance, “little adults” or better seen than heard?
 - What childhood experiences have formed your understandings of and responses to poverty?
 - What is your understanding of the Bible and how was it formed? For example, did you memorize verses as a child, was Scripture quoted at you, or did the family Bible sit quietly on a shelf?

Exercise 2: Identify and Explore a Formative Experience



Personal experiences and family lore powerfully shape our perspectives. In this exercise, you will begin by opening yourself up to an event or family story that formed you. Then you will have a choice of discussing with a partner or engaging in personal reflection. Since you will be reflecting on details of a personal event or story, you need to select the safest mode for you. You may want to read the sample story on page 4 before you begin.

Step 1: Discover the story. Spend a few minutes in quiet thought and ask your memory to lead you to a single incident or family story that formed your perspective on children, poverty or both. Recall the story in detail, considering who was involved, your role in the event, and what feelings you had.

Step 2: Explore the story, using option A or B.

- *Option A:* Reflect alone and respond to your story in writing or by drawing. The questions listed below might be helpful as you proceed.
- *Option B:* Using the questions below as a guide, take turns reflecting on your story with someone else. You do not need to recount your stories to one another. Taking turns, simply listen and affirm the other's experience. Resist any temptation to ask questions, evaluate the other person's experience, "fix" the other person, or chime in with comparative stories. Each person takes one turn, speaking four minutes.

Questions for Step 2:

- What emotions did you feel during this experience or when you heard this story?
- What makes this experience or story so powerful?
- What beliefs did this story or experience form in your thinking about children, poverty or the Bible?
- Which aspects of those beliefs are accurate?
- What other truths might your story or experience overlook?
- How can you honor this experience or story while opening yourself up to other realities?

Step 3: Share insights. When everyone is done sharing or writing reflections, regroup and spend some time sharing any insights you gained during this exploration.

Sample Story

Frequently, when I bring up the issue of poverty, a dear friend who was raised during the depression shares this story. My friend remembers his parents as simple, sincere and hard working folks. This portrayal is very believable as my friend displays those same virtues along with a personal presence that emanates absolute gentleness. One particularly difficult summer, his father had planted three acres of potatoes in addition to their regular huge family garden. Throughout the summer, his dad spent the evenings out in a field where he planted and maintained potatoes with hands already blistered by long days of manual labor. When September came, his father harvested these three acres entirely by hand and exchanged its yield for wood that heated the family's home throughout the cold upstate winter.

Both the experience and the narrative of the experience are powerful for my friend. The memory brings out both pride and sadness for all his dad had to do to care for the family. His father's example helped to form my friend into a dedicated family man and hard worker, always joyfully busy with gardening, yard work, building or helping a neighbor. While my friend is exceedingly caring toward people in our community, the sacredness of his formative experiences sometimes limits his ability to express compassion for the poor, whom

he sometimes characterizes as “unwilling to work hard for their children.” The truth of his dad’s hours of backbreaking labor formed within my friend the belief that hard work can conquer poverty. This blinds my friend to other truths, for example, the reality that many people do not have a field to plant and, even if they did, it is simply not possible to grow enough potatoes today to heat a house. For my friend to grow in his ability to recognize that some people are indeed trapped in poverty and need help, he will have to find a way to honor his father’s memory while accepting experiences of other people.

Exercise 3: Unpack Aphorisms

When we discuss issues such as children and poverty, we often spout aphorisms, as if speaking an adage answers the matter. While aphorisms do frequently house truths, they do not reflect all truth on a given topic. On the one hand, pronouncing an aphorism in response to a situation can interfere with full understanding, if it is spoken with an “and that settles it” attitude. On the other hand, aphorisms are a pathway to uncovering faulty assumptions and exploring other truths, if we commit ourselves to examining them. Review the following examples:

■ ***Aphorism:*** *We worked for what we have!*

Truth: You did, in fact, work for what you have.

Faulty assumptions: Those who are poor are poor because they don’t work; the poor expect to be taken care of; and they aren’t willing to work for better lives.

Other truths: You were able to work (physically and intellectually able); you had opportunity (a job was available to you); and you did not start at zero (perhaps you were able to attend college or carpooled with a coworker until you could afford your own transportation, or, when you were starting out, minimum wage was enough to support a family).

■ ***Aphorism:*** *God helps those who help themselves.*

Truth: God cares for those in need.

Faulty assumptions: This is a biblical truth (it is not from the Bible); people are poor because they aren’t trying; and God helps by magical intervention.

Other truths: God helps the helpless (Isaiah 24:5); God calls people to help one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11); and it may be that the way God helps those in need is through the efforts of God’s people.

■ ***Aphorism 3:*** *Children are resilient.*

Truth: Children are able to come through very tough experiences.

Faulty assumptions: Coming through a difficult situation is the same as being unaffected by it.

Other truths: Children experience 90 percent of their brain development in the first few years; deprivation has an impact whether or not we can see it; and even a healed wound leaves a scar.

Spend some time identifying aphorisms about poverty and about children that are operative in your life. These can be common ones, as in the examples above, or personal ones. Try to identify adages that you have “inherited” from important people in your life, as these are the ones that are most often held without question. A good way to identify them is to think of times you have said “My mother always said...” or “I was always taught that...” Once you have identified several adages, spend time evaluating each one by considering questions such as: Where did it come from? What aspects of it are true? What assumptions does the adage betray? Are there other truths that need to be considered? What fears or concerns lurk beneath the adage?

Exercise 4: Explore the Situation

Read over “Some Facts about Children and Poverty in the U.S.A.” (Appendix, p. 28) in light of the following questions:

- Which statistics reinforce assumptions you have about children and poverty?
- Which, if any, statistics challenge your assumptions?
- Are there any facts that perplex you or that you reject? If so, consider researching the issue of children living in poverty in the United States.



Session Two

Six Things the Bible Says about Poverty

More than 300 Scripture verses directly address poverty and innumerable others indirectly address the matter. The Bible's message about poverty can be organized within the following themes and the listed texts are just a few of those that illustrate or otherwise evidence the theme.

- 1) God cares for “the poor” in a special way.
 - In Hannah's prayer, she names God as one who lifts “the poor from the dust and the needy from the ash heap” (1 Samuel 2:8). These sentiments are echoed by Mary when she celebrates her conception of Jesus (Luke 1:53).
 - Israel's identity was as a people who were once aliens and enslaved but were rescued by God (Deuteronomy 26:5-9).
 - God defends the rights of the poor and provides a safe place for them (Psalm 10:14 and 140:12; Isaiah 25:4 and 41:17).

- 2) While the experience of poverty affects people personally, making day-to-day life difficult and even painful, its causes are often social, as revealed in the legal material that defined Israel's social structure.
 - “The poor” are defined by naming classes of people who were at risk in society, including widows and orphans (even those who were among Israel's enemies), immigrants and Levites, who, because they were landless, were dependant on others for their survival (Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:28-29, 15:11).
 - God called Israel to institute societal practices, such as gleaning, redistribution of wealth, debt forgiveness, and equal treatment of immigrants, to protect those at risk (Deuteronomy 15:9 and 24:17; Leviticus 19:9-10, 33-36 and 25:25-39).
 - God charged those with institutional power to take up the cause of the poor (Proverbs 31:8).

- 3) God's people are called to care for “the poor” in all aspects of life: in personal giving, through religious rituals, and by creating just social structures.
 - God's people are called to sacrificial generosity (Deuteronomy 15:7; Luke 12:33; Galatians 2:10).
 - The prohibition against taking advantage of those on the margins includes paying laborers fair wages as soon as possible and not taking advantage of them, even if the letter of the law allows you to (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 24:14, 17).

- Some of what the Israelites grew with their own hands on their own land had to be left for those in need, for people and animals (Exodus 23:10; Leviticus 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21).
 - Every three years the tithe was given to the poor (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).
 - The religious ritual of fasting is redefined as loosing the chains of injustice and sharing with the hungry (Isaiah 58:6-7).
 - Israel suffers judgment for creating unfair laws (Isaiah 10:1-3).
- 4) The authenticity of our relationship with God is demonstrated in how we treat the poor and we experience consequences for our choices, so following God's directives for how we treat those on the margins is central to faithful living.
- God's people are admonished not to mistreat aliens, widows or orphans, lest they provoke God's anger (Exodus 22:21-22).
 - The sin of Sodom is specifically defined, in part, as their arrogant refusal to help the poor (Ezekiel 16:49).
 - Those who defend the poor are promised a blessing (Deuteronomy 15:10; Isaiah 58:10; Luke 14:12-14).
 - Knowing God is equated with pleading the cause of the needy (Jeremiah 22:16).
 - "Religion that pleases God" is identified with helping needy orphans and widows (James 1:27).
 - Any claim to love God is refuted by the failure to care for those in need (1 John 3:17-18).
- 5) God identifies with the poor.
- The Apostle Paul defines the incarnation as Jesus becoming poor (2 Corinthians 8:9).
 - When we care for the poor, we care for God; when we oppress the poor, we insult God (Proverbs 14:31 and 19:17).
 - Caring for the poor is one and the same as caring for Jesus; to neglect the poor is to neglect Jesus (Matthew 25:31-46).
- 6) The essential purpose of Jesus' ministry was to fulfill God's care for the people on the margins of society.
- Mary announced God's intention to reverse the fortunes of the rich and poor through the child she carried (Luke 1:52-53).
 - Jesus announced his mission as bringing good news to the poor (Luke 4:18-21, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2).
 - Jesus taught that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor (Luke 6:20-21).

Exercise 1: Discussion

- “The poor” are identified as those who are at risk because they are marginalized in society. In what ways are people marginalized in our society? Who are the poor in your community?
- What have you “grown” with your own hands? How could gleaning be translated into contemporary society?
- How do you feel about the notion that the central purpose of Jesus’ ministry was to bring good news to those on the margins of society? How does that correspond to other ways in which the essence of Jesus’ ministry is described?

Exercise 2: Explore Implications

In small groups, review the theme or themes that you are assigned, then, consider the implications of that teaching for your personal life and the life of your church, ecumenical community, region and/or denomination. Be sure to identify some specific actions that your faith community can take and record these for use in Session Five.

Session Three

Six Things the Bible Says about Children



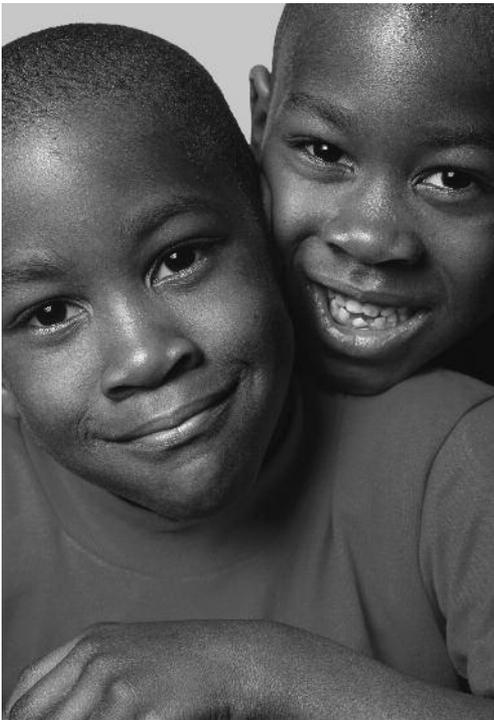
The Bible bears a complex witness to children, most of which has been neglected and some of which has been distorted and misused against children. The witness of Scripture regarding children can be organized into the following themes, with the listed texts representing a few Scriptures that illustrate or otherwise give evidence of that theme.

1) Children have relationships with God independent of adult mediation. *Adults often function as though the relationship between God and a child is necessarily mediated by adults or that children do not rise to full relationship with God until they enter into adulthood. The witness of Scripture is that children have natural spirituality and stand in relationship with God as evidenced by:*

- participation in the covenant with God (Ezra 10);
- a presumption that they will ask questions and engage in discussion about God, rather than simply absorb what adults tell them (Exodus 12-13; Joshua 4:5-7);
- their designation as those who are ordained to praise God (Psalm 8:2, which Jesus quotes in Matthew 21:16); and
- a child identified as the fulfillment of Israel's hope (Isaiah 11 and 65).

2) Children have personal agency, are God's instruments, and serve as models for adults.

We often treat children as objects rather than as personal agents. Scripture witnesses to God's employment of children as agents of divine will. We also often approach the adult-child relationship as though it is a one-way street — adults teach children. According to Scripture, children are also teachers of adults by divine decree. For example:



- The child Samuel was called to be a religious and political leader when adults failed to faithfully serve God (1 Samuel 3).
- A young slave girl is the instrument of healing for a military commander (2 Kings 5).
- Jesus presents children as models for entering the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; and Luke 18:15-17).
- Jesus calls children models of greatness (Matthew 18: 1-5; Mark 9:33-37; and Luke 9:46-48).
- A child listened to Jesus, trusted Jesus, and provided the means for Jesus to reveal his divinity through the miracle of feeding the multitude when adults, including the disciples, failed to do so (John 6:1-15).

- 3) Children are different from adults and have special status.
While we often treat children as “lesser beings” in faith, ironically, we also often hold them to accountability equal to — or even greater than — we hold ourselves. The Bible affirms the goodness of childhood and suggests that the developmental process that children go through is part of God’s very design. In early stages of human development, people are granted a special state of grace in relationship to God. These assertions are supported by:
- the fact that as human beings, children are created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27);
 - the recognition that children belong first to God (Genesis 30:20 and Psalm 127:3);
 - the call to teach children beginning with stories of God’s love and grace, rather than with “expectations,” suggesting that they have a different level of accountability (Deuteronomy 1:39; Isaiah 7:15-16 and 8:4; 1 Corinthians 13:9-11; and John 9:20-21); and
 - the fact that Jesus went through this developmental process himself (Luke 2:40, 52).
- 4) Children are innocent victims of the choices adults make so God has special concern for them.
As we saw in the discussion of the Bible and poverty, God’s concern for poor children is explicitly mentioned in the call to care for widows and orphans, but there’s more. God’s concern for children is mentioned in response to other ways in which children suffer as a result of adult actions. Examples include:
- being victims of adult idolatry that practices child sacrifice (Jeremiah 19:4-5)
 - being victims of famine and war, which is the primary cause of children’s suffering in Scripture (Lamentations 2:11-12)
 - being victims of adult ambitions (Matthew 2:6-18)
- 5) God identifies with children and children both reveal and receive God’s kingdom.
The incarnation (Luke 1:16-56 and 2:1-12; Matthew 1:18-25), one of the most basic tenets of Christian faith, demonstrates the universality of being a child. Not only do humans and all living creatures experience childhood, God in Christ experienced childhood also. Jesus revealed that children are central to the kingdom of God when:
- he said the kingdom belongs to children (Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; and Luke 18:15-17)
 - his first act after the transfiguration to show his glory was to heal a child (Matthew 17:14-18; Mark 9:15-29; and Luke 9:37-43a)
 - he was recognized and proclaimed by children as the Son of David (Matthew 21:15-17)

6) How we treat children has serious consequences.

The needs of children and how we respond to them are not secondary issues for Christians. They are central to our faithfulness, as Jesus revealed when he:

- proclaimed that to welcome (the word here means to treat as a special guest) a child is to welcome Jesus and God, who sent Jesus (Matthew 18:2-5; Mark 9:33-37; and Luke 9:46-48)
- warned his followers, “If you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” (Matthew 18:6; Mark 9:42; and Luke 17:1-3)

Exercise 1: Discussion

- We often modify Bible texts to make them moralistic tales for children. A common example is using the story of feeding the multitude (John 6:1-15) to teach children to share. What does our willingness to present inaccurate Bible stories to children stories say about our understanding of them? Is it ethical to modify God’s Word in order to make children act a certain way? How powerful might this story be for children if we emphasized the child’s role as one who believed when the adults didn’t, and thus became Jesus’ partner in the miracle?
- A common adage today is “Children are our future.” What assumptions lie beneath this adage? In what ways does it violate, however unintentionally, children’s standing as described in the Bible?
- God overturned cultural patterns and broke religious rules by appointing Samuel to lead ancient Israel (1 Samuel 2:18, 30-50). Are there ways in which people in your church hold cultural patterns or religious rules in higher esteem than they do children?

Exercise 2: Explore Implications

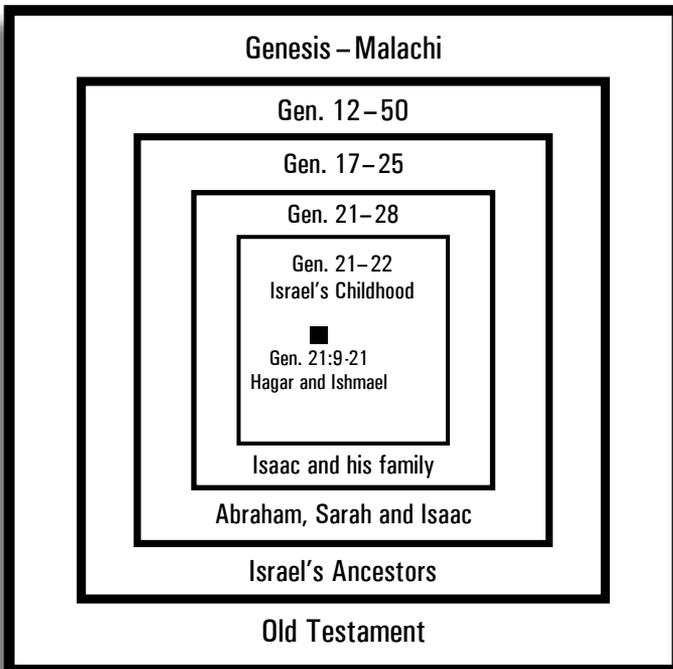
In small groups, review the theme or themes that you are assigned, then consider the implications of that teaching for your personal life and the life of your church, ecumenical community, region and/or denomination. Be sure to identify some specific actions that your faith community can take and record these for use in Session Five.

Session Four

One Child's Story

Introduction to the Story

The story of Ishmael as found in Genesis 21:9-21 provides an excellent opportunity for exploring the topic of children in poverty. Perhaps the most fascinating fact about the story of Ishmael is that it appears at all. As biblical scholar Walter Brueggeman put it in his commentary on Genesis: “The story knows what it wants to tell. Isaac is the child of the future. But the story has no easy time imposing its will on the characters. Ishmael will not be so easily reduced. He has some claims too.”¹ The graphic below illustrates the place of the Ishmael story within the Old Testament, which houses the story of the people of Israel. Genesis 12-50 presents the stories of Israel’s roots, with chapters 12-25 focusing on Israel’s ancestors, Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. Isaac is the child who fulfilled God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah and from him descended the people who were to become Israel. Genesis 21-28 tells Isaac’s story, and 21-22 focus on his childhood. In the midst of this purposeful narrative come thirteen verses that tell of the “other child.” The agenda to tell the story of the chosen one cannot silence the story of the marginalized one, Ishmael, a descendant of and ancestor to a people historically (and currently) considered to be Israel’s enemy. The story of the lesser child interposes itself in the sacred text.



Read Genesis 21:9-21 with commentary.

The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. [The introduction to this vignette makes it clear that this is a story about Isaac (not Ishmael). Surviving until the age of weaning was significant, as childhood mortality rates were very high. Additionally, being weaned meant that the child was no longer “attached” to his mother and could move into his father’s circle.]

One day, Sarah noticed Hagar’s son Ishmael playing and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that Egyptian slave woman and her son! I don’t want him to inherit anything. It should all go to my son.” [Commentators have gone in a variety of directions in dealing with the word translated as “playing.” The word can mean playing, mocking or simply laughing. We risk missing a key point if we don’t note that the Hebrew root for what Ishmael is doing is the same word for what Abraham (Genesis 17:17) and Sarah (Genesis 18:12) did when they heard God’s promise of a son — they laughed. Additionally, the word for “laugh” in Hebrew sounds like Isaac’s name (Genesis 21:6). These connections emphasize Sarah’s concern that Ishmael not be a pretender to the rightful place of her son, the child of promise. When Abraham accepted Ishmael as his son, Ishmael became entitled to an inheritance. If his mother were to be freed, however, Ishmael would lose his standing. While we cannot claim to know all of what motivated Sarah (fear, jealousy, self-preservation), we do know that she used what limited power she had as the wife of Abraham to shut out the other child. This is an interesting turn of events, considering the fact that it was her idea for Abraham to have a child by Hagar, who had no choice in the matter.] Abraham was worried about Ishmael. [The word for “worry” here indicates thinking something is evil because it will bring personal pain. Abraham’s response is passive and emotional.]

But God said, “Abraham, don’t worry about your slave woman and the boy. Do what Sarah tells you. [Literally, “Listen to Sarah’s voice.”] Isaac will inherit your family name, but the son of the slave woman is also your son and I will make his descendants into a great nation.” [God reaffirms his promise to Abraham, Sarah and Isaac; however, Ishmael also has a promised destiny, which is worded remarkably like the promise to Abraham (Genesis 17:4).]

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. [Hagar has been sent out with no particular destination in mind. While Abraham has the confidence of the promise God gave him on behalf of Ishmael, there is no indication — and it is very unlikely — that Hagar knows of this promise.]

When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the

distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. [Here, the voice of the one who had neither voice nor choice is raised up in desperation.]

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. [Whose voice did God hear? God heard the voice of the child exactly where he was.] Come, lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. [We can tend to read Scripture with magical eyes and might presume that God made the well appear. But the text indicates instead that God opened Hagar’s eyes to see the means to care for the child. In her despair, Hagar was unable to see the solution until God broke through that despair. Then God used her to meet the needs of the child.]



God was with the boy, [We may often think in terms of taking God to children. However, Old Testament professor Terry Freitheim suggests that when we go to where hurting children are, we don’t bring God to them, we find God there.²

We refer to encounters with God as mountaintop experiences, yet, interaction with the divine is just as likely to take place when encountering parched throats, empty bellies and runny noses.] and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. [Here the story echoes Isaac’s experience that introduced the narrative. The word for “grow” suggests both physical growth and thriving. The child grew and excelled at what he was destined to be.]

He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt. [It would appear that Hagar thrived, too. No longer a slave, she now had a choice and was able to select a woman of her own nationality to marry her son.]

Endnotes for introduction to and reading the story

¹ *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 183.

² “God and Children in the Old Testament through the Lens of Genesis,” presented at the Children’s Spirituality Conference, Concordia University, River Forest, Ill., June 4, 2006. Several insights for this study are drawn from this presentation, expected to appear in *Biblical Perspectives on the Child* (working title), Marcia J. Bunge, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, due out in spring 2007).

Let the Story Read Us

In small groups or pairs, discuss the section(s) assigned to you. Keep a record of key answers. Once you reconvene and share your answers, you will work with the entire group to identify key understandings that might inform a vision of obedience around the issue of children in poverty.

1) Choices

Hagar is without choice. In his ambiguity, Abraham chooses by default, and Sarah seems to believe it is necessary to choose between the two children. The story does not make its readers choose between the two children and makes it clear that God values both the “chosen child” and the “other child.”

- In what ways do we choose among children?
- On what basis do we make those choices?
- How are we, like Abraham, ambiguous in our concern for children and unable to act on our feelings?
- How might we, like Sarah, make unnecessary choices based on inaccurate assumptions?
- What other choices that we make (personally and in our churches) set us up to choose against children in need?
- How might you and your faith community think through your choices in light of God’s commitment to children in poverty?

2) Voices

Abraham, whose voice is most powerful in the culture of his day, remains virtually silent. Sarah’s voice, which may be a voice of fear, sets the initial tone of the story. Hagar raises her voice in despair until she hears the voice of God’s messenger, and Ishmael appears voiceless until we realize that God hears the voice of the child. God’s voice empowers Hagar to save the child.

- What voices are we hearing in our churches, our denomination and in the wider Christian community?
- How are those voices in conflict with one another?
- Do those in conflict share any common perspectives or concerns?
- What are the voices of fear saying?
- What are the voices of despair saying?
- What are voices of privilege saying?
- Whose voice(s) do we hearken to most often?
- Whose voices are missing? What voices are being silenced?
- Where is the voice of the child? and How can we better listen to that voice?
- How can we better listen to — and trust — the voice of God?

3) Power

The people in the story have different degrees of (human) power. As the patriarch, Abraham has the most power, yet he responds with emotion and without

action. Sarah's power, which is limited and granted by another (Abraham), is exercised in a self-protective response. Hagar, although she hasn't any social power, is an adult with more physical strength and mental capacity than Ishmael, who is essentially powerless. In terms of power, in what ways are you and your faith community like:

- like Abraham
 - What resources do you have and what influence do you hold within your culture?
 - How are you avoiding using that power?
 - How can you move beyond “feeling bad” toward effective action (and help others to do so)?
- like Sarah
 - Who or what grants or limits your power?
 - What other agendas, fears or misunderstandings might keep you from using your power on behalf of children?
- like Hagar
 - In what ways is your power restricted by socio-political and economic realities?
 - How can you open yourselves up to God's empowerment?
 - Could some solutions be obscured by your despair or discouragement?
- like Ishmael
 - What situations are you truly powerless to affect?
 - What realities demand that you cry out in utter dependence upon God?

4) *Marginalization*

Ishmael is at least thrice marginalized: by age, social status as the son of a slave, and ethnicity as the son of an *Egyptian* slave in a context where distinctions were made among slaves according to country of origin.

- Make an honest assessment of your church. Who would not feel welcome? Who among your members and regular attendees is not fully included in the life of the church? What factors (e.g., education, socio-economics, physical ability, length of association, age) play a role in determining status in your church?
- How do you marginalize children in your family and church simply because they are children?
- How can you avoid marginalizing children in general?
- In what ways are poor people marginalized in your nearby community? How does (or could) your church challenge your community in that regard?
- How might you guard against marginalizing children and poor people as you develop a vision of faithfulness to God on behalf of children in poverty?

- What levels of marginalization (e.g., race, geographic location, citizenship of parents) exist among poor children in the United States? (See Appendix, p. 28).
- On what fronts can you address these levels of marginalization?

5) *Wandering*

There is no plan or destination for Hagar as she and her child leave to “wander about in the wilderness.” Hagar is an Egyptian slave woman in a foreign land. Alone with a child, her only resources are a little bread and water.

- What plans could she make?
- Do you ever judge poor people for not planning ahead?
- Have you ever experienced a personal crisis or one in your church that supersedes the need to plan ahead?
- Is it possible that some who are marginalized in society and live in the crisis of poverty don’t have the power to choose their destinations and therefore can’t make plans?
- What can you do to empower those who are disenfranchised, so they can have hope and a future for which to plan, for themselves and their children?
- What wildernesses do our children wander in?
- Can those wildernesses be transformed into places where children can thrive as Ishmael did? If so, how? If not, are there other options?
- What would it mean for poor children to thrive?
- What changes in our society would give all children *real* possibilities in life?

6) *Human Agency*

Hagar was Egyptian, a woman, outside the covenant and a slave, yet God used her to save the child. God turns to *available* human agents to help children in need.

- In what ways are you and your church family available to God? What hinders that?
- How do you see people making themselves available to work on behalf of children?
- Are there any implications for how you relate with those who work on behalf of children but do not share your theological commitments?



As is often the case, the needs of the children appear to be secondary to adult agendas in the story.

- Do you see any ways that your church uses children to serve its own agenda, rather than really caring about the needs of children?
- Are there those in your church who will reject efforts on behalf of children in poverty, because they cannot see how those efforts will benefit the church? How might you respond to such concerns?

Hagar was blinded by despair and unable to see the well until God opened her eyes.

- Are there any crises or perspectives in your church that could hinder your members from seeing ways to help children in poverty?
- What, if any, resistance might you or your church have to seeing solutions; that is, could *not* seeing serve you in any way (e.g., seeing might cost something, entail changing priorities or challenge long-held political loyalties)?
- What steps can you as a faith community take to allow your eyes to be opened by God?

Session Five

Creating a Vision

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

PROVERBS 29:18a

In this final session, you will draw on insights and implications from previous sessions to create a guiding vision and a plan for implementing that vision within your faith community. Before moving into that exercise, however, it will be helpful to revisit the work done in Session One.

Exercise 1: Review Preconceptions

With a partner or in a small group, spend some time recalling the assumptions and emotional commitments you brought to this study. Then, with each person taking two to three minutes, share with one another your responses to the following questions:

- Which one of your assumptions surfaced most often during the course of this study?
- What aspects of that assumption do you still hold to be true?
- What challenges to that assumption did you encounter?
- What feelings do you have related to those challenges?
- Did your thinking change related to that assumption?

Exercise 2: Create a Vision

The oft-quoted Proverbs 29:18 issues a powerful reminder of the necessity of defining our vision according to God’s guidance. While the King James translation of that verse, with which many of us are most familiar, suggests that the consequences of not having a vision is that we will no longer exist (“perish”), a more accurate translation suggests that without a divinely guided vision, our efforts will be ineffective.

The Hebrew root for the word translated as “perish” speaks of untethered hair flying wildly in the wind. So one good translation is: “Without God’s vision, the people run wild.” We can be very busy in our efforts, but ineffective, unless we are guided by God’s design. Another use of the Hebrew word is “slip through the cracks.” So “Without God’s vision, people will slip through the cracks,” is also an acceptable translation. Both of the images — of people running around in ineffective efforts and people slipping through the cracks — speak to the necessity of developing a guiding vision for your efforts to address children in poverty.

Step 1: Condense your insights.

Spend some time reviewing key insights and implications that your group identified during Sessions Two, Three and Four, then work together to distill these into five or six foundational principles. Print these principles on newsprint and post them on the wall.

Step 2: Dream big.

Using the materials provided by the study leader, create a mural of what it would look like if you and your faith community were successful in fulfilling God’s mandates related to children and poverty. You may use words, drawings or pictures cut from magazines.

Step 3: Get specific.

Print out on index cards results and actions that reflect both the principles you identified in Step 2 and the dream you defined in Step 3. Be as specific as possible and make sure that these results and actions reflect your situation. For example, you might put “lobby for a higher minimum wage” or “form a partnership between the school board and our church to make the start of the school year a good experience for all children.” Be sure that each result or action reflects both foundational principles and the dream. Post these index cards on the wall to create a walkway between the principles poster and the dream mural.

Step 4: Pray.

After completing this step, dedicate a period of time to silent prayer. You may wish to close your eyes, go for a walk or sit as you pray, and meditate on the vision you have just been creating. While it is often difficult to embrace

silence, stillness reminds us that it is God's vision we are seeking to fulfill and even the best plans cannot proceed without God's power. Take care to suspend planning for these moments and allow yourself to open up to God's voice.

Step 5: Evaluate the Vision.

Reconvene and spend a few moments sharing thoughts about the vision. As you discuss the questions below, keep in mind that the best visions are "alive" — they provide a solid place to start and are open to modification as you proceed.

- Does your vision reflect God's will as you understand it from Scripture?
- Does it reflect your actual circumstances?
- Is it specific enough to be more than just a good idea?
- Do you feel a sense of commitment to this vision? If not, what would help you to do so?

Once everyone in your group can agree that the vision provides a good place to start, move on to Exercise 3.

Exercise 3: Plan Next Steps

This exercise is designed to help you take those important first steps in fulfilling your vision by answering the following key questions.

1) Who will undertake this endeavor? Do you hope to have your vision carried out by your local congregation or region, an ecumenical group or a subgroup within your church?

2) How will you bring others on board with this vision?

- Will presenting the vision be enough to gain support and participation?
If so, make a plan for presenting the vision to your church or ecumenical group or within your region. Be sure your plan includes identifying specific action steps.
- Will members of your church, ecumenical group or region be resistant?
If so, plan steps for addressing resistance. An alternative is to consider a subgroup that can begin to carry out the vision. Your congregation, ecumenical group or region may be better served by the faithfulness of a dedicated few than by ongoing debate about the value of the endeavor.

Closure Exercise: Create a Litany

Work together to write a litany for children that reflects your situation and your vision. Pray this litany together as your closing and keep it to use as a rallying prayer for your work on behalf of children in poverty.

As you proceed in your efforts, we want to be able to share your story. Please consider forwarding stories about your ministry with children in poverty or the litany you created to Curtis Ramsey Lucas (Curtis.Ramsey-Lucas@abc-usa.org) or Carol Sutton (Carol.Sutton@abc-usa.org).

Leader's Guide

Thank you for your decision to lead this Bible study on children in poverty. May God bless your endeavor and may there be more laughter and fewer tears in little lives because of your efforts.

This study was developed in a transformational education model, which assumes the following:

- 1) Learning has taken place when there is change in how people think, feel and act.
- 2) Transformation requires identifying key “meaning perspectives” or operative beliefs, which are formed early on and are often emotionally charged.
- 3) Transformation requires critical reflection on beliefs and practices.
- 4) Transformation can only take place in a safe context in which people are invited (not coerced, shamed or manipulated) to participate.
- 5) The Word of God needs to be closely read with an awareness of pre-conceptions that might hinder reception of its message.
- 6) The Word of God must be allowed to honestly read us and our situations.
- 7) Leaders must trust that the Spirit of God is at work in each learner and within the learning group, and thereby be freed to teach without maneuvering the group toward a preconceived outcome.

To conduct this study, each participant will need a booklet. A litany has been provided for optional use (page 24). Consider using the litany to begin and end each session. You may also want to choose a theme hymn, such as “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” or “Children of the Heavenly King” that can be sung at the beginning or end of each session. Follow whatever procedure your group is most comfortable with, since much of what participants will be asked to do during the sessions will be challenging and it will



be reassuring if you approach the opening and closing in a familiar way.

It is important that you read through each session's material in preparation for leading this study. Consider completing some of the exercises in advance or opt to do them along with your group. Since this study focuses attention on children, find some way to keep children “present” during the study. For instance,

post images of children around the room or record a child reading Genesis 21:9-21 to play for Session Four. The following outlines are provided to help you prepare for and lead each session.

Session One: Assumptions, Experiences and Expectations

- *Preparation:* Review the general introduction and session material. Familiarize yourself with the statistics in “Some Facts about Children and Poverty in the U.S.A.” (Appendix, p. 28).
- *Materials needed:* crayons, playdough, paper, pens, colored pencils, tape, markers
- *Opening:* If people don’t know each other, ask participants to introduce themselves and say a brief word about why they have chosen to participate in this study. Use the litany (page 24) or offer an opening prayer in a way that suits your group. Distribute booklets and summarize or read the “General Introduction” (page 1) to give participants a sense of where the study will take them.
- *Exercise 1 (Connect with the Child Within):* Review the instructions and make available paper, colored pencils or markers, and playdough. Emphasize that this exercise is an individual one and they will not be sharing with one another. After a few minutes, move directly on to Exercise 2.
- *Exercise 2 (Identify and Explore Formative Experiences):* Review the instructions and give people about five minutes to get in touch with their personal experiences. Provide paper and writing materials for those who want to work by themselves and invite them to move to a quiet area. Invite participants to pair up. Step in as a participant if the number is uneven, however, you will need to serve as or assign a time keeper to call “time to switch” after four minutes. Reconvene the group after the allotted time and invite sharing of any insights gained during the exercise.
- *Exercise 3 (Unpack Aphorisms):* Read the introduction and invite the group to review the sample aphorisms. Review the instructions that follow the samples, make paper and pens available, and give participants about 10 minutes to identify and unpack one or two of their aphorisms. Move directly to Exercise 4.
- *Exercise 4 (Explore the Situation):* Review the bulleted questions with the group and ask participants to read through “Some Facts about Children in Poverty in the U.S.A. (Appendix, p. 28), marking those that reinforce or challenge their assumptions, or that they want to research. Invite sharing, allowing for a few minutes to close the session.
- *Closing:* Join together in the litany for children on page 24, a hymn or time of spontaneous prayer.



A Litany for Children

Leader: Rescuer of the weak, father of the fatherless, voice in the wilderness,

Group: We lift our voices to you on behalf of children. We pray:

Leader: For those whose laughter tickles our ears

Group: And for those whose sobs go unheard

Leader: For those who count the days 'til Santa rewards the "nice"

Group: And for those who dread Christmas morning's empty chill

Leader: For fussy eaters who hide their peas

Group: And for bellies full of hunger

Leader: For scary trips to the dentist

Group: And for unrelenting toothaches

Leader: For backpacks filled with markers and mid-day snacks

Group: And for outgrown sneakers filled with holes and hurting feet

Leader: For those who dream big dreams

Group: And for those whose hopes go unfulfilled

Leader: For grins of joy

Group: And stares of shame

Leader: Open our ears to the voices of children

Group: And our eyes to your solutions.

All: We pray. Amen.

Session Two: Six Things the Bible Says about Poverty

- *Preparation*: Familiarize yourself with the session material. Decide how you will divide your group to discuss the six themes. Depending on the number of participants, it may not be feasible to work with six groups. You may need to have three groups and assign each two themes, or you may need to have more than six groups and give the same theme to more than one group.
- *Materials needed*: newsprint or poster board, tape, markers
- *Opening*: Use the litany for children on page 24 or offer an opening prayer in a way that suits your group.
- *Review “Six Things”*: Read together the numbered entries in “Six Things the Bible Says about Poverty,” asking participants to hold off on discussion until later. Do not go over the bulleted items as that will be handled in small groups.
- *Exercise 1 (Discussion)*: Spend about 15 minutes on the discussion questions as a whole group or, if your group is quite large, divide into three smaller groups, assigning each group one question to discuss and report on to the entire group. Ask a volunteer to label a sheet of newsprint “Session Two, Exercise 1” and record key answers to the questions. Keep the newsprint on hand for use in Session Five.
- *Exercise 2 (Explore Implications)*: Divide participants into groups and assign each group one or more of the numbered themes to discuss. Give each group a sheet of newsprint and a marker and ask them to label the newsprint “Poverty: Implications.” Review the instructions and allow 20 minutes for identifying and recording implications. Reconvene and ask each group to share two key implications, allowing for a few minutes to close the session. Save the sheets of newsprint for use in Session Five.
- *Closing*: Join together in the litany for children on page 24, a hymn, or a time of spontaneous prayer.

Session Three: Six Things the Bible Says about Children

- *Preparation*: Familiarize yourself with the session material. Decide how you will divide your group to discuss the six themes. Depending on the number of participants, it may not be feasible to work with six groups. You may need to have three groups and assign each two themes or you may need to have more than six groups and give the same theme to more than one group.
- *Materials needed*: Bibles, newsprint or poster board, tape, markers
- *Opening*: Use the litany for children on page 24 or offer an opening prayer in a way that suits your group.
- *Review “Six Things”*: Read together the numbered entries under “Six Things the Bible Says about Children,” asking participants to hold off on discussion until later. Do not go over the brief commentary or bulleted items as that will be handled in small groups.

- *Exercise 1 (Discussion)*: Spend about 15 minutes on the discussion questions as a whole group or, if your group is quite large, divide into three smaller groups, assigning each group one question to discuss and report on to the entire group. Ask a volunteer to label a sheet of newsprint “Session Three, Exercise 1” and record key answers to the questions. Keep the newsprint on hand for use in Session Five.

- *Exercise 2 (Explore Implications)*: Divide participants into groups and assign each group one or more of the numbered themes to discuss. Give each group a sheet of newsprint and a marker and ask them to label the newsprint “Children: Implications.” Review the instructions and allow 20 minutes for identifying and recording implications. Reconvene and ask each group to share two key implications, allowing for a few minutes to close the session. Save the sheets of newsprint for use in Session Five.

- *Closing*: Join together in the litany for children on page 24, a hymn, or a time of spontaneous prayer.

Session Four: One Child’s Story

- *Preparation*: Familiarize yourself with the session material, paying particular attention to the commentary on the Ishmael story. Decide how you will assign the sections for the exercise “Letting the Story Read Us.” Since these sections will require quite a bit of time, you will need to divide into at least six groups, so no group is assigned more than one section.

- *Materials needed*: Bibles, newsprint or poster board, tape, markers

- *Opening*: Use the litany for children on page 24 or offer an opening prayer in a way that suits your group.

- *Introduce the Story*: Read the introduction to the story and spend some time looking at the graphic, making note of how this story fits into the overall emphasis of the Old Testament.

- *Read the Story*: Ask a volunteer to read aloud (or play a recording of a child reading) Genesis 21:9-21. Then review the story verse by verse with the commentary given in the session material. If your group is large and you prefer less of a lecture format, you may want to divide the participants as you would for the exercise, and let them review the verses and commentary in small groups.

- *Let the Story Read Us*: Divide participants into groups and assign each group one of the sections to review and discuss. Give each group a sheet of newsprint and a marker and ask them to label the newsprint “The Story Reads Us.” Review the instructions and allow 20 minutes for discussion of the questions.

Reconvene and ask each group to report from their newsprint. Encourage listeners to make note of themes that surface. Post the newsprint sheets and invite participants to review and distill the responses into several key learnings. Record the learnings on a sheet of newsprint labeled “Key Learnings” and save it for use in Session Five.

• *Closing:* Join together in the litany for children on page 24, a hymn, or a time of spontaneous prayer.

Session Five: Creating a Vision

- *Preparation:* Familiarize yourself with the session material and be sure to revisit your own preconceptions.
- *Materials needed:* Bibles, blank newsprint or poster board, newsprint from previous sessions, tape, markers, mural paper, glue sticks, magazine, scissors
- *Opening:* Use the litany for children on page 24 or offer an opening prayer in a way that suits your group.

• *Exercise 1 (Review Preconceptions):* Review the instructions. Divide participants into pairs or small groups and invite them to revisit the preconceptions they identified in Session One. Remind participants that when the other person is speaking, their only job is to listen. After a couple of minutes, ask them to switch speakers and listeners. Check in to make sure each person has a chance to speak. After all have had a chance to review their preconceptions, invite comments to the whole group.

• *Exercise 2 (Create a Vision):* Present the introductory discussion of Proverbs 29:18 and review the steps the participants will be following to create a vision. If your group is large, you may want to divide into two subgroups and assign one group Step 1 and the other Step 2. Allow participants to choose which step they prefer to work on as these are very different activities. If you choose to handle Steps 1 and 2 in subgroups, be sure each group has time to present the end result of its work. Steps 3, 4 and 5 require everyone’s participation.

• *Exercise 3 (Plan Next Steps):* If a consensus cannot be reached in Step 5 of this session, move on to Exercise 3. Those who are onboard can invite the others to develop a dissenting opinion that they can share at the end of the session. Invite the consensus group to respond to the questions and come up with a plan for presenting the vision to your church or ecumenical group, or within your region. Encourage the group to be specific, identifying who, what, when, where and expected outcome.

• *Closure Exercise:* Review the instructions in Session Five. You may want to use the litany for children on page 24 as a model. Once the group’s litany is completed, use it to close the session.

A Final Note: Consider inviting feedback from your group on the study's content and presentation. A simple way to do this is simply to place a comments box where participants can insert anonymous notes for you to review later. It would be greatly appreciated if you would forward any pertinent feedback to me at cassandra.williams@abc-usa.org or at (610)768-2459.

Appendix

Some Facts about Children and Poverty in the U.S.A.*

- One in every five children will experience poverty for at least one year before reaching age 15.
 - 81% of the 29 million children who are growing up in low-income families have at least one working parent.
 - The Federal Poverty level in 2006 was \$20,000 yearly income for a family of four.
 - While cost of living varies greatly by locality, research indicates that a family of four requires \$40,000 a year to meet basic needs.
 - 20% of children in low-income families moved in 2005 (vs. 10% of above low-income families)
 - Young children are disproportionately low income, with 43% of all children under age 6 (more than 10 million) living in low-income families, broken down as follows:
 - 44% of children (5.3 million) under age 3
 - 42% of children (3.4 million) ages 3 to 4
 - 42% of children (1.6 million) age 5
 - 40% of children (11.3 million) ages 6 to 12
 - 35% of children (7.5 million) 13 to 17 years old
 - With 90% of brain development taking place in the first three years of a child's life, the impact of poverty on children is literally wired into their brains, as well as potentially damaging to psycho-social, emotional, cognitive and physical development.
 - Brain development continues through approximately age 20, with the areas of judgment and inhibition developing last.
- Low-income rates for children according to:
 - Region
 - South: 43% (11.5 million children)
 - West: 42% (7.5 million children)
 - Northeast: 33% (4.2 million children)
 - Midwest: 37% (6.0 million children)
 - Parental level of education
 - Did not complete high school: 26%
 - High school completed: 35%
 - Some college or more: 38%
 - Family structure
 - Single parent: 51%
 - Married parents: 49%
 - Race and ethnicity
 - Latino: 63%
 - Black: 61%
 - Native American and Alaskan native: 43%
 - Asian: 30%
 - White: 27%
 - Immigrant parents: 59%
 - U.S.-born parents: 36%
-
- * Sources: "Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Birth to Aged 18" from the National Center for Children in Poverty, New York, N.Y., Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, January 2006 (Published by The Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary, New York) and "The First Years Last Forever," a video by the Washington, D.C.-based Parents' Action for Children (formerly the I Am Your Child Foundation)



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