

Solution Statement

Addressing the impacts of poverty-related trauma on children requires a coordinated, multi-dimensional approach that aligns neuroscience, youth development, and family support systems. Research demonstrates that trauma is not only experienced cognitively, but is stored in the body and expressed through dysregulated nervous system responses, impaired sensory processing, and disrupted motor development (Matson et al., 2023; Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2018). As a result, effective interventions must move beyond traditional academic or behavioral models to incorporate movement, skill-building, and relational support as core strategies for healing and resilience.

This proposal advances a comprehensive model centered on four integrated pillars: exposure, skill-building, movement, and family engagement.

1. Expanding Exposure to Possibility and Opportunity

For youth impacted by adversity, limited exposure to enriching environments and career pathways constrains not only opportunity, but also future orientation—the ability to imagine and plan for a better future. Research shows that ACEs can diminish hope, goal-setting, and long-term planning capacity (Nayar, 2022; Mueller et al., 2023). Intentional exposure to new environments, career pathways, and creative experiences is critical for expanding what young people believe is possible.

However, exposure alone is insufficient. Without the internal capacity to regulate stress and engage fully, many youth are unable to translate new experiences into sustained motivation or achievement. This underscores the need for exposure to be paired with both movement-based regulation and structured skill-building.

2. Bridging Exposure and Outcomes Through Skill-Building

Skill-building serves as the bridge between exposure and long-term outcomes such as educational attainment, employment, and economic mobility. Programs that intentionally develop communication, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and planning skills equip youth with the tools necessary to act on their aspirations.

Importantly, research indicates that children impacted by trauma often prioritize survival-based skills over developmental ones, resulting in gaps in executive functioning and social-emotional capacity (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2018). Through intentional, repetitive practice, these skills can be strengthened due to the brain's capacity for neuroplasticity—the ability to rewire and form new, healthier patterns of thinking and behavior.

3. Movement as a Mechanism for Healing and Self-Regulation

At the core of this model is movement as a primary tool for healing trauma and restoring neurological balance. Studies show that chronic childhood stress disrupts the central and autonomic nervous systems, impairing self-regulation, sensory integration, and motor coordination (Erb & Weber, 2018; Matson et al., 2023). Movement-based interventions directly target these disruptions.

Rhythmic, play-based, and physically engaging activities—including dance, sports, yoga, and structured play—support the integration of sensory systems (vestibular, proprioceptive, tactile) that are often dysregulated in children who have experienced trauma. These activities help children develop body awareness, coordination, and emotional regulation while organizing the nervous system in safe and predictable ways.

Research demonstrates that:

1. Physical activity is positively correlated with resilience and well-being, and negatively associated with anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Wang et al., 2023).
2. Group-based physical play improves motor skills, executive functioning, and social interaction, particularly when activities combine cognitive and physical challenges (Bai et al., 2022).
3. Movement and play serve as natural therapeutic agents, helping children process trauma, build resilience, and re-engage in developmental growth (Chen, 2025).

Equally important, movement in group settings fosters co-regulation—the ability to achieve emotional stability through safe, synchronized interactions with others. These shared rhythmic experiences promote social bonding, increase engagement, and create conditions for healing that are both culturally responsive and developmentally appropriate.

4. Reducing Barriers Through Coordinated Access

While the benefits of movement and enrichment activities are well-documented, access remains a significant barrier—particularly for youth from low-income families. Research on youth sports participation highlights structural challenges including cost, transportation, and an overemphasis on specialization, all of which limit participation for low-income youth (Hernandez et al., 2023).

A coordinated approach is therefore essential to ensure that young people not only have access to programming, but can consistently participate in safe, developmentally appropriate, and non-exclusionary activities. This includes prioritizing inclusive, low-barrier movement opportunities and avoiding environments that may introduce additional harm, such as high-contact or overly aggressive sports contexts.

5. Advancing a Two-Generation (2-Gen) Approach

Sustainable impact requires engaging not only youth, but also their families. A two-generation approach recognizes that children's outcomes are deeply interconnected with caregiver well-being, stability, and capacity (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014).

Parent and caregiver engagement—including coaching, workshops, and skill-building in areas such as communication, conflict resolution, and health—strengthens the home environment and reinforces gains made through youth programming. Research also highlights the importance of parental modeling in shaping children's physical activity and behavioral patterns (Crumbley et al., 2020).

By integrating services such as parent coaching, resource navigation, and “dream weaving” (aligning family aspirations with concrete supports), programs can address the broader ecosystem influencing a child's development.

Conclusion

Together, these components form a holistic, neuroscience-informed strategy that addresses trauma at its root—within the body, the brain, and the broader family system. By coordinating exposure, skill-building, movement, and family engagement, this approach not only mitigates the effects of adversity, but actively builds resilience, agency, and long-term opportunity.

For youth in communities such as College Park, East Point, and South Fulton, this model offers more than enrichment—it provides a pathway to healing, development, and sustained upward mobility, ensuring that all children have the capacity not only to imagine a different future, but to realize it.