

Improving Children's Chances: Linking Developmental Theory and Practice

Children & Poverty Working Paper 2

*Andrew Dawes
David Donald*



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This working paper is the second in a series dealing with Children & Poverty.

Other working papers in this series include:

Working Paper 1:

Understanding Children's Experience of Poverty:
An Introduction to the DEV Framework

Working Paper 3:

Child-Context Relationships and Developmental
Outcomes: Some Perspectives on Poverty and Culture

Working Paper 4:

Promoting the Agency of Young People

Working Paper 5:

Children's Rights, Development and
Rights-Based Approaches: The Way Forward

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Christian Children's Fund

2821 Emerywood Parkway
Richmond, Virginia 23294

1-800-776-6767

www.ChristianChildrensFund.org

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Glossary of Terms

ASB	Antisocial Behavior
CCF	Christian Children's Fund
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DDR	Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration
DEV	Deprivation, exclusion, and vulnerability
IGS	Income Generating Scheme
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RBA	Rights-based Approach
SAP	Structural Adjustment Program
SES	Sex and Socioeconomic Status
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNHCR	U. N. High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRISD	U. N. Research Institute for Social Development

Foreword

In 2002, Christian Children's Fund (CCF) commissioned a comprehensive study on the experience and the impact of poverty on children. The resulting three-part series, *Children and Poverty*, provides a fascinating and thought-provoking summary of major issues from the perspective of children, youth and parents. CCF offered this study to community and colleagues as a contribution to our common field of endeavors – breaking the cycle of multigenerational poverty.

The findings of the Poverty Study provided CCF with the opportunity to reflect on and debate the implications for our programs – how we develop them, work with communities, and evaluate our effectiveness. Key issues emerged from the Study that have been discussed in a set of Working Papers, which are now circulated for your review, consideration and discussion. The first of the working papers defines and discusses the proposed Poverty Framework for our work with children and is of critical importance to our future programming efforts. This Paper and the other four are summarized below:

Working Paper 1

Understanding Children's Experience of Poverty: An Introduction to the DEV Framework

In light of the findings from CCF's poverty research, this paper argues that children experience poverty in three domains: Deprivation, Exclusion and Vulnerability. Each of these domains is examined individually, although it is shown that the complexity of poverty for children emerges from the interplay of all three, rather than from any one alone. In this way, it is hoped that the DEV Framework will assist staff in deepening their understanding of child poverty and consequently designing and supporting more relevant and effective programs.

Working Paper 2

Improving Children's Chances: Linking Developmental Theory and Practice

The paper explores the importance of linking research to practice in designing effective and appropriate interventions that aim to improve the developmental chances of children living in difficult circumstances. Interventions should be informed by a knowledge of developmental epochs and pathways, as well as sources of influence at different points in development. Further, it is noted in the paper that the developmental level of the target children, the risks they face and local child rearing practices must be understood before an intervention is planned.

Working Paper 3

Child-Context Relationships and Developmental Outcomes: Some Perspectives on Poverty and Culture

The paper points out that programs must be sensitive to the several contexts that simultaneously influence the child's development – the ecology that surrounds the child, the developmental period he or she is in, and the developmental domain (social, emotional, cognitive, physical). It also seeks to provide a more thorough discussion of some of the complexities of child-context interactions in poverty contexts. Cultural practices form a central component of the child's context. The second half of the paper explores the ways in which cultures structure the experience of childhood.

Working Paper 4**Promoting the Agency of Young People**

As a child-focused organization, CCF places the well-being of children and youth at the heart of its work, and the measure of success has always been the benefits accrued and the results achieved. In the past, however, this has not necessarily meant that programs directly engage and work with young people, or expect them to take a leading role in program development and implementation. In this paper, we describe how CCF has come to place children and youth at the center of its attention, how the concept of agency is changing our program practices, and why this evolution advances our goal of broadening and deepening CCF's impact on children's well-being.

Working Paper 5**Children's Rights, Development and Rights-Based Approaches: The Way Forward**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze whether CCF should adopt a rights-based approach to programming. After providing a brief overview of the international human rights movement, the paper examines the strengths and limits of rights-based approaches. It concludes that although a strict rights-based approach is too narrow operationally for CCF, children's rights should be integrated more fully into all aspects of CCF's work. CCF can make its most significant contributions through a distinctive combination of child-focused, strategic programming that addresses urgent needs, integrates child protection into all programs, and reduces the underlying sources of poverty, particularly deprivation, exclusion and vulnerability.

We look forward to continued debate and reflection through dialogue with CCF staff and partners, children, youth, parents, partnering organizations, and colleague agencies in our collective efforts to decrease children's vulnerability, strengthen their resilience, and reduce poverty.



Michelle Poulton, Ph.D.

Vice President, International Program Group

Introduction

In this paper we argue that psychosocial interventions with children¹ can be made more effective if they are informed by theory and research. This may seem an obvious point. However practitioners and researchers often work in different worlds. Practitioners face enormous demands on their time. And the pressing needs of those they serve call for quick responses, leaving little space for theoretical reflection. On the other hand, researchers seldom go out of their way to make their findings accessible or even understandable to practitioners.

Unfortunately, a lack of dialogue between practitioners and researchers often leads to expensive and inappropriate investment in programs that are just not effective: programs that could have been improved if they had a more adequate research base (Louw, 2000). Child development is a complex process. Therefore, an understanding of the various influences on child development and how they interact is crucial to the design of successful interventions.

For our purposes, we adopt a definition of child development given by Aber, et al., (1997, p. 47). They see it as: *“the acquisition and growth of the physical, cognitive, social and emotional competencies required to engage fully in family and society.”*

Although researchers in the United States have formulated this definition, it is applicable to children worldwide. Its value lies in its neutrality. The type of society and family is left open, and development is seen as the acquisition of competencies that are appropriate for the society in which the child lives.

A definition like this is especially important for developing countries where views about the importance of particular competencies may differ considerably from those put forward in textbooks on child development (Nsamenang & Dawes, 1998). For example, views of what constitutes intelligence can vary considerably across societies (Cole, 1998). Professional psychological knowledge about children, ideas concerning their rights and their welfare, and provisions for advancing their development, have largely been developed in Europe and North America (Kessen, 1979). This modern view of child development is being increasingly exported to developing regions that have rather different understandings of childhood and child rights from those of the West (Boyden, 1990; Stephens, 1995).

A particular force in this pattern of globalization has been the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) by the United Nations in 1989. Its aim is to improve the situation of the children of the world through enhancing their chances of survival and development, increasing their protection, and ensuring their rights to participation. These are very important aims.

The CRC also informs the practices of many aid programs to families and children in developing regions. It seeks to ensure that all such programs contain practices that are designed to enhance and protect children's rights.

The CRC is a very positive international instrument, and has helped to improve the situation of children in many parts of the world. Nonetheless it is based on a range of Western assumptions about child development (Boyden, 1990). When applied in non-Western developing societies, it can be problematic when the local culture has different ideas as to what is best for children.

¹ Throughout the paper we will use the terms “child” or “children” to refer to both adolescents and younger children, unless more specific terms are required.

However, in spite of cultural variation, there is much that is universal about children's development. It would therefore be foolish to ignore everything that has been learned in contexts other than one's own. An understanding of children's lived contexts is central to the design of effective interventions because it can take into account both the universal aspects of development and local cultural practices.

What can developmental theory and research tell us about this?

Understanding children's psychosocial development in context

Huston (1994) points out that most research in developmental psychology does not consider the role of the larger social context in shaping developmental processes. She suggests, "If child development research is to have an impact on public policy for children, it needs to be conceptualized and framed in terms that can be communicated to policy makers and translated into policies and programs" (p. 5). In short, programs designed to improve children's developmental outcomes need an understanding of how the total child-context relationship functions. Recently, many intervention programs have benefited from the study of child-context relationships (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan & Aber, 1997a & b; McLoyd, 1998; Richter, 1994).

In the next section, therefore, we have chosen to highlight contributions that have proved particularly useful in understanding how children's development is shaped by their material, social and cultural contexts. Probably the most influential has been the *ecological framework* formulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1986). A closely related and complementary perspective is *transactional developmental theory* (Sameroff, 1975; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). Finally, the notion of socially-related *developmental epochs* (or developmental phases) has useful practical applications for programming (Aber, et al., 1997).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework

Bronfenbrenner sees a developmental context as a: “*socially constructed system of external influences that is mediated by individuals' minds ... whatever influences local environments have on children must be seen as a product of how these environments are perceived and interpreted by parents and children*” (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1997, p. 27).

He has demonstrated that *proximal interactions* are the most important in shaping lasting aspects of development. These forms of interaction occur in long-term face-to-face relationships. An example is the interaction between a mother and child, or a child and a close friend.

Basic to the model are four interacting dimensions that have to be considered in understanding child development:

- Person factors (e.g., the temperament of the child or parent);
- Process factors (e.g., the forms of interaction process that occur in a family);
- Context factors (e.g., families, neighborhoods or the wider society); and
- Time factors (e.g., developmental changes over time in the child or in the environment).

Each of the four dimensions above influences proximal interactions.

For example, a child's temperament will influence the way she interacts with her mother (person factors); whether it is playful or task-related (process factors); whether it is at school or at home (context factors); and finally, whether the child is younger or older (time factors).

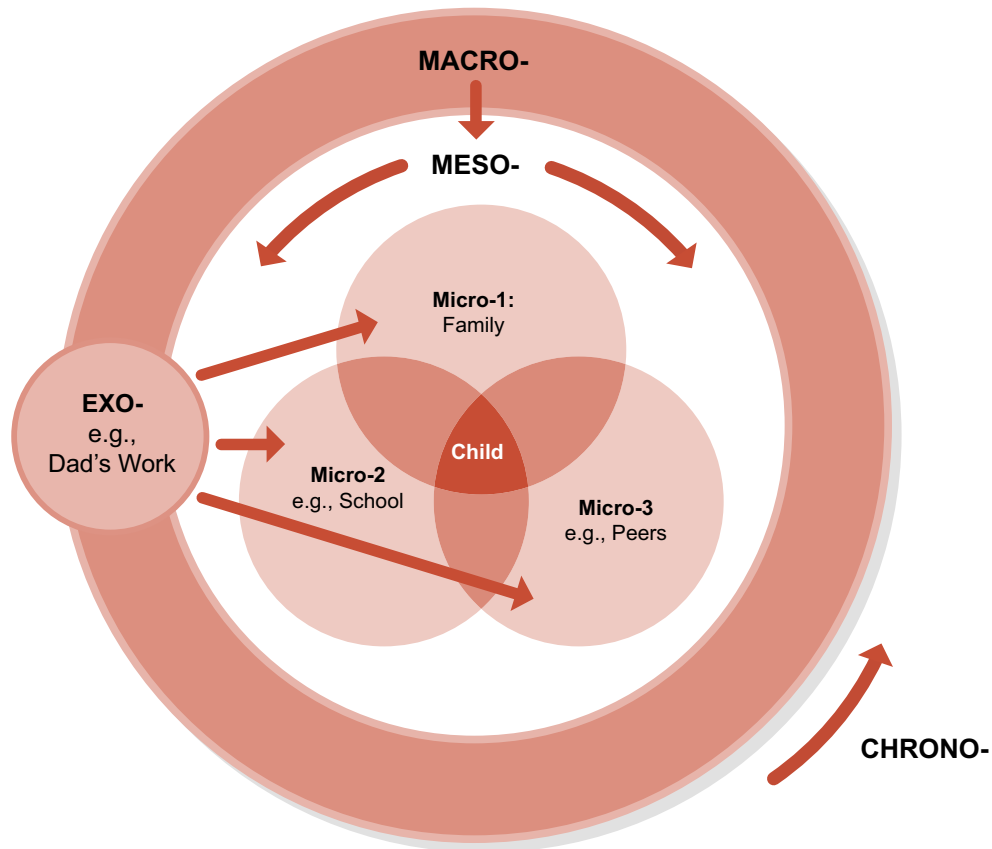
Children bring their own understandings to any proximal interaction. Thus, how children understand the rules of social interaction between children and adults will influence how they interact with adults. For example, in some cultural contexts, children will know that it is not socially acceptable to contradict teachers.

In addition to the environmental influences, children themselves are active participants in their own development. For example, they make choices about friendships that can have a profound influence on their development.

In Bronfenbrenner's model, children's development is influenced by four nested systems: the *micro-system*, the *meso-system*, the *exo-system* and the *macro-system*². The systems may be seen as surrounding one another, and shaping each other in various ways (see figure 1). The *chrono-system* refers to changes over time.

² In simple terms, “micro” means small, “meso” means in the middle, “exo” means outside, and “macro” means large.

FIGURE 1: Bronfenbrenner's Nested Systems



(From: Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002: p. 52.)

Micro-systems. These are systems, such as the family, the school, and the peer group, in which children are closely involved in continuous, face-to-face interactions with other familiar people. Such systems involve patterns of daily activities, roles, and relationships. It is at this level that the key proximal interactions, referred to above, occur. Examples would be a parent's relationship with her child (Richter, 1994), the teacher-child learning relationship at school (Liddell, Lycett & Rae, 1997), and the child's relationships with close friends in the neighborhood (Berndt & Ladd, 1989). A key feature of the micro-system is its bidirectional nature. All parties to the interaction, including the child, influence its outcome.

Meso-systems. At this level, peer-group, school, and family systems interact with one another. The meso-system is in fact a set of micro-systems that are associated with one another: it links the different micro-systems in which an individual is involved. For example the economic strain on a single female parent may reduce her ability to respond to her young child's emotional needs (McLoyd & Wilson, 1990; Richter, 1994). However, the child may also have an attentive and caring teacher who is able to provide a positive environment that boosts the child's self-esteem. Thus, the experience in the micro-system of the school provides a protective influence (Rutter, 1985) which reduces the impact of the stress within the micro-system of the family. In another situation, a distressed family may have a supportive neighbor who has a warm relationship with a vulnerable child, protecting him to an extent from the psychological effects of emotional neglect in his own home (McLoyd & Wilson, 1990).

Exo-systems. This level refers to contexts in which a child is not directly involved, but which may influence the people who have proximal relationships with the child. Thus, the parent's employment situation may not involve the child, but its stresses or benefits will influence the quality of the child's relationship with that parent. Equally, parental social isolation is known to increase the risk of child neglect (Garbarino, 1995). However, a single parent who lives in a neighborhood where there is high social cohesion and mutual support is less likely to be isolated, and this may have a positive influence on her child care capacities. Another common example would be the supports or constraints placed on a school by the body or department which controls it. These supports or constraints would influence the proximal interactions of teachers with their students.

Macro-systems. This level includes the wider political, cultural and material influences on all other levels that impact the child. At the highest level are international conventions such as the CRC. That instrument requires signatory countries to implement laws that ensure the well-being of children. At a lower level are the prevailing values and norms of a particular society regarding how children should be treated and raised.

For example, cultural values and ideas about childhood give rise to scripts for child care. Thus, a culturally determined script may include developing obedience to authority and respect for senior members of the community as goals of child care. In many African communities, the means to the attainment of this goal is strict discipline (LeVine, et al., 1994). This macro-system value filters through the relevant meso- and exo-systems, down to the proximal interactions occurring in the child's micro-systems.

It is important to note that, although obedience to authority may reflect long established cultural values, it may also arise in contexts that are perceived as dangerous for children. In such contexts, strict discipline which promotes obedience is a source of protection to children. Compliant children, who listen to their caregivers, will be safer than those who are freer to exercise their will. Though obedience scripts are often negatively associated with authoritarian and punitive approaches to childcare (Dodge, Pettit & Bates, 1994), they clearly have survival value in dangerous contexts. However, these practices can often outlive their functional value. When social conditions have changed, punitive practices may still live on – simply justified as the “right way” to bring up children.

Chrono-system. This system reflects changes in the developing child, as well as simultaneous changes in his/her developmental context. For example, a family, or any of the systems in which a developing child is involved, may be seen in a process of development itself (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989). These developments, in turn, interact with a child's progressive stages of development.

An important aspect of the chrono-system is the envelope of historical time that surrounds all other systems. The idea here is that development is influenced by the historical features of the period during which it is occurring. These may contain stable elements as well as disruptions such as periods of economic depression, political violence, and war. These events shape the children who are growing up at that time in a way that is different from other generations. However, the particular impact of the events will always depend on the developmental level of the child, how the child perceives the events, and how they are mediated through proximal interactions.

Thus, Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework helps to foreground children's developmental contexts as central influences in the formation of their psychological capacities. It has also encouraged the emergence of a more culturally sensitive approach to developmental psychology, and to interventions in this field.

Sameroff's Transactional Approach to Development

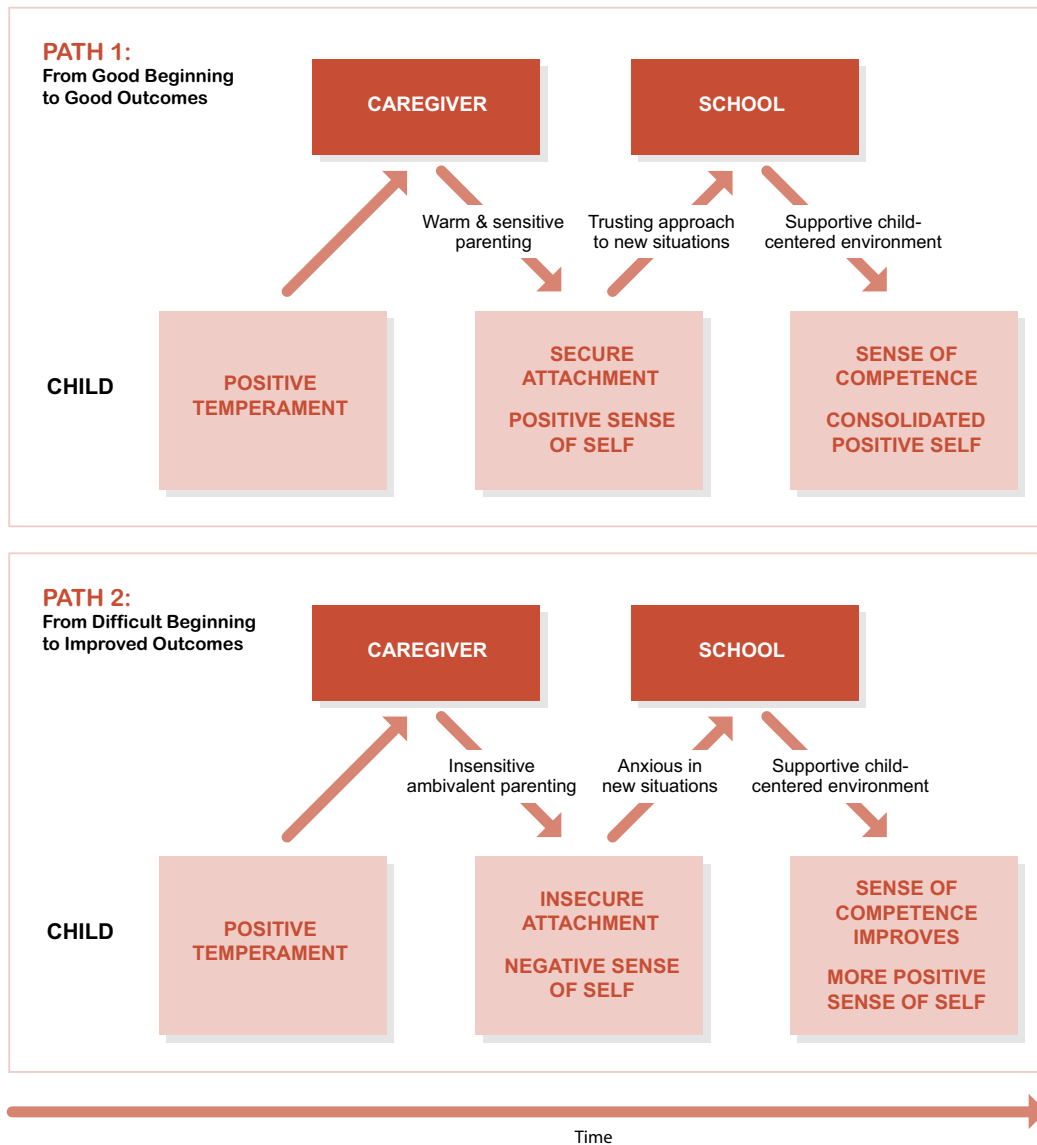
A transactional approach foregrounds how child-context interactions contribute *differently* to development at different points in the life cycle (Sameroff, 1975; 2000). A key feature of Sameroff's model is his analysis of how the changing developmental status of the child contributes to these processes. Thus, at any one point in time, the child brings existing psychological capacities, which are themselves a product of earlier interactions, to new micro-system interactions. The form of these capacities is also related to the child's particular stage of development.

Take the example of two boys entering school for the first time at age six (Figure 2). The first boy (Path 1) begins life with a positive temperament and warm and sensitive parenting. He has developed a secure sense of trust in his early interactions with his caregiver and other people so that he approaches the move from home to school in a positive way. The supportive, child-centered environment at the school then results in transactions that consolidate a sense of competence and self-worth in this child.

The second boy (Path 2) has had insensitive and inconsistent parenting, setting him on a path of insecurity and mistrust in his interactions with people. His move to school is initially anxious and fearful. However, he is lucky to have a supportive teacher and school environment where positive interactions modify his insecurity. This allows his sense of competence and self-worth at least to improve. In this boy's case, his early negative developmental trajectory (pathway) is shifted to a more positive one through the interactions he experiences at school.

Conversely, if the school interactions experienced by these two boys had proved to be grossly unsupportive, the first child might have had his sense of trust in people negatively modified, and the second boy would have had his sense of mistrust and insecurity further consolidated.

FIGURE 2: A Transactional Model of Development



This example shows how the socio-emotional capacities that children bring to the first day of school (or any other key developmental event) transact with the situation. Depending on how these transactions turn out, they may consolidate or modify the developmental trajectory that has formed to that point in a child's life.

This view challenges the idea that what is established early in development always has lasting or permanent effects. This should not be taken as saying that there is no lasting substance to psychological characteristics or no developmental periods when children are particularly sensitive to certain forms of stimulation. Clearly there are (Clarke & Clarke, 1986). There is evidence for several sensitive periods during which the stimulation that the child receives has a lasting influence on specific areas of development. Language acquisition is one example, and orientation to relationship formation in early childhood is another.

However, stability and change in personality, and other psychological characteristics, are also a function of children's activities in shaping their development, as well as the complex interactions between their genetic endowment and contextual influences across the life cycle. Current research is attempting to tease out the relative influence of different contexts such as the family, the neighborhood, the school, and the peer group on children's psychological development (e.g., Brooks-Gunn, et al., 1997a & b). The importance of a transactional approach is that it suggests that these sources exert their influence in different ways during different developmental periods. The next section extends this idea in more concrete terms.

The role of developmental epochs

Aber, et al., (1997) have defined a set of developmental periods termed epochs, which take account of the transitions that occur at significant points where new demands are placed on the young by their society. Although particularly applicable to North America, they are also applicable to most established urban communities in developing societies. However, adjustments would have to be made in interpreting the sorts of demands faced by children in some communities – for example, traditional rural settings and newly urbanized informal settlements. In such contexts, local traditional practices may create demands on children at particular points in their development that are different from those that are characteristic of highly developed societies.

A specific example would be children's early involvement in forms of work that may replace, or be in parallel to, schooling. Also, girls in such contexts may be forced to leave school to undertake domestic work, child care and marriage in their early teen or even preteen years (Bray, 2003; LeVine, et al., 1994). The AIDS pandemic is also causing significant shifts in the worlds of affected children who may have to care for sick and dying parents, and even run their own child-headed households (UNICEF, 2004; Mann, 2003).

Developmental epochs are marked as much by the child's physical and psychological maturation, as they are by the new tasks set by societies. Thus, the physical changes of puberty may be linked with increased social responsibilities, or with attending the next stage of schooling. The epochs are therefore also associated with shifts in the power of different environmental sources to influence development. In the move to school, for instance, the sources of influence on the child now shift to include not only the home but also the school and the peer group.

Aber and his colleagues (1997) consider four broad epochs:

1. the period from conception to the beginning of formal schooling
2. the primary school period up until about the age of 10 years
3. early adolescence (11-16 years)
4. and the later teens (17-20 years).

1. During the first epoch, the primary influences are home-based.

Community influences are principally mediated through family members in proximal relationships with these young children. This is a sensitive time for critical elements of emotional as well as cognitive growth. The young child needs a reasonably consistent, predictable environment, together with a responsiveness on the part of caregivers, to foster such growth.

Disturbed or chronically impoverished environments often do not meet these requirements (McLoyd, 1998). The family lives of many millions of children in all parts of the world have been disrupted by war and political violence (e.g., Wessells & Monteiro, 2000). For many children in Africa, relationships with caregivers are disrupted by factors associated

with migration from rural areas to cities. For example, Jones (1993)³ has reported that it is not uncommon for the South African children of migrant workers living in informal settlements to shuttle between grandparents in rural areas and mothers or fathers in town. This is also common in communities affected by AIDS, as children are taken into care by kin (Mellins, et al., 1996). Most of the children in any of the circumstances referred to above are unlikely to have consistent family relationships either nuclear or extended.

Self-regulation is a key attribute that begins to develop during this early period of life (Masten, 2004). It enables the child to delay gratification and to improve impulse control – characteristics that are critical on entry to school. As Liddell, et al., (1997) have found in their study of children in rural schools, attentive quiet children, who were able to control their impulses, were highly rated by their teachers. Thus, during this epoch, children growing up in relatively chaotic situations – such as many of those mentioned above – are less likely than those brought up in stable environments to develop the qualities of self-regulation that predispose the child to successful schooling and peer relationships.

2. The second epoch (6-10 years) is associated with a wider set of influences as the child increasingly encounters other adults and widens contact with peers (Berndt & Ladd, 1989).

The social challenge of this time is to begin to learn skills that will be useful in the adult world – frequently, although not always, through schooling. How children think about themselves as learners and as social beings becomes important. Schools are primary sites for the development of the self-concept. Peers have a significant impact on this aspect of development. Children who have not developed adequate self-regulation, are aggressive, have poor attention and concentration, and are likely to draw negative feedback from peers (Loeber, et al., 1993). This lack of social competence is likely to lead to social isolation, to poor self-concept, and perhaps to attraction to deviant peers. In contrast, pro-social children tend to choose pro-social peers (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

In some developing countries, children begin by attending school, but many of their schools are not well designed to retain them, to deal with their learning or other difficulties, or to prepare them adequately for life ahead (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002). In many impoverished contexts, in both urban and rural areas, many children during this epoch leave school after a brief period of attendance in order to earn money for their families. Others have left schools and homes that have failed to meet their needs, to make a living on the streets (Baker & Panter-Brick, 1997; Swart-Kruger & Donald, 1994).

3. During the third epoch, early adolescence (11-16 years), changes in biology are usually linked to many changes in the child's social contexts and relationships.

Influences outside the family become much more significant. In the urban context in particular, there is normally a move to high school, and a reduction in parental supervision. Increased risk-taking is common, and in poor communities there is high exposure to negative social influences such as gangs and other risks such as drug taking (Moffitt, 1993).

Once more, there are a number of differences in life circumstances and therefore developmental outcomes during this period for such children. As in the previous epoch, the continued influence of schooling cannot be taken for granted. Also, many thousands of children in this age group have been shifted prematurely into adult roles through being forced to take up arms in civil wars (Boyden & de Berry, 2004; Barenbaum, et al., 2004). For many boys in urban slums, gangs begin to assume a similar role (Pinnock, 1984). In both cases, earlier patterns of socialization established in the home are likely to be disrupted as these children are inducted into violent lifestyles.

³ A number of research studies referred to in this section are South African in origin, reflecting the regional focus of the original chapter (Dawes & Donald, 2000). However, in the majority of cases, the issues to which they refer may be seen as common to other developing or impoverished regions in the world.

4. During the final epoch, late adolescence (17-20 years), there is increasing preparation for adulthood and work. However, in many parts of the world, millions of children have left school for one or another reason by this time. Some have already taken on adult roles, including work and parenthood. Many are unemployed.

During this epoch, further exposure to risks in the community occurs. As adolescents move into their late teens, they spend an increasing amount of independent time in neighborhood and other community settings with peers. As Brooks-Gunn, et al., (1997a & b) report, the direct effects on development of the child's exposure to neighborhood influences increase significantly during this period. Peer influences on adolescents have marked effects on their behavior. Adolescence is a period during which the majority of young people are likely to challenge social conventions to some extent. For most youth, antisocial behavior is limited to adolescence (Moffitt, 1993). However, in communities with few opportunities for positive social engagement and high levels of antisocial conduct, adolescents may be drawn into activities that place them at risk for drug use, criminal conduct and interpersonal violence (Garbarino, 1995) that may have more severe developmental consequences.

Conclusion

The particular theoretical perspectives and supporting research we have chosen to foreground in this paper are important to consider in the design of psychosocial interventions that aim to improve the developmental chances of children in difficult circumstances. Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework points to the many sources and levels of influence on children's well-being and development at different points in time. Sameroff's transactional approach provides a more detailed, interactive view of proximal relationships within the developmental time frame. Aber et al.'s notion of developmental epochs provides a concrete way of dividing the time frame into periods where significant new demands are placed on the young by their society.

We conclude with two key principles for psychosocial interventions based on the foregoing discussion.

1. Where possible, psychosocial interventions should be participatory, and undertaken at multiple levels.

Emerging best practice suggests that psychosocial interventions use an ecological perspective to establish the range of possible influences on the situation of the children for whom the intervention is intended.

In the case of children affected by war, Duncan & Arnston (2004) have produced a most useful guide to psychosocial programming and evaluation that draws strongly on eco-systemic principles. Another is the work of Armstrong, et al., (2004) who used an ethnographic child participatory approach to programming with Sri Lankan children.

Whatever the context, multiple-level interventions and changes to the structural features of the context will be very difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, two key sites for intervention that have frequently been cited as providing good opportunities for intervention with children in difficult circumstances are the family and the school (McLoyd, 1998). In these settings, adults are close to children for extended periods and, particularly with younger children, can have a relatively enduring influence on their development.

An example of an intervention – which drew on Bronfenbrenner's systemic approach – involved children, their parents, as well as their teachers in an interactive program that aimed to improve the mediation of reading skills for children from poor communities (Overett & Donald, 1998). Because the local children's librarian also became involved in supporting this process, a positive meso-systemic interaction between school, home, and the local library resulted.

Clearly, in many emergency situations families are disrupted and schools may not be functioning. Where this is the case, interventions should as a first principle seek to strengthen primary supportive bonds between the child and potential caregivers (Barenbaum, et al., 2004).

2. Interventions should be informed by a knowledge of developmental epochs and pathways, as well as sources of influence at different points in development.

With interventions for children in difficult circumstances, it is useful to consider:

- who the child population is (their developmental level and cultural community)
- who is available to them (functioning micro-systems)
- what the main threats to their well-being are (negative sources of influence)
- what opportunities for risk reduction or protection are evident (potential positive sources of influence).

For example, Wessells and Monteiro (2000) describe a community-based, culturally grounded, psychosocial intervention for war-affected Angolan children. The project sought to address the traumatic affect of the war on children through improving age-appropriate support and protection provided by their caregivers and other community members.

Further, as we have noted in this paper, the developmental level of the target children, the risks they face, and local child rearing practices must be understood before planning an intervention.

A fundamental point is that weak or inadequately planned interventions will not produce powerful outcomes – particularly in the case of complex problems. This point has been stressed by those who have designed home visiting programs to prevent child abuse and neglect. In this regard, and stressing the importance of an ecological approach, Duggan, et al., (2004, pp. 623-643) remark: “The normative nature of several acts of psychological aggression and minor physical assault makes them difficult to modify...Multilevel frameworks...suggest that such behaviors need to be addressed not only in terms of parent experiences and attitudes, but with intervention in family relationships and environment, community environment, and cultural or societal norms.”

The impact of interventions for children at risk therefore depends crucially on a thorough assessment of the situation (including the context of the intervention), the integrity of program delivery (whether it is delivered according to its design), and whether the design is informed by the appropriate theory and evidence.

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2821 Emerywood Parkway, Richmond, Virginia 23294

1-800-776-6767

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