

PREFACE

Sustainable communities meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, their children and other users, contribute to a high quality of life and provide opportunity and choice. They achieve this in ways that make effective use of natural resources, enhance the environment, promote social cohesion and inclusion and strengthen economic prosperity (*Egan Review. Skills for Sustainable Communities*, ODPM, 2004, p. 7).

In the 1990s there was a resurgence of interest in policy, practice and research relating to communities and their significance for children and families, which has continued into the current century. This has been accompanied by increasing concern about the breakdown of families and communities in post-modern society, and a belief that this breakdown is a contributory cause (and an effect) of social problems. Improvements in data collection and analysis have shown that problems such as child abuse, juvenile crime, substance abuse, school expulsion, mental health problems of children and parents and marital discord are not only concentrated in certain types of families, but also in particular geographic locations. This realisation has resulted in a growing recognition (accompanied at times by almost religious fervour) that the community or neighbourhood environment may be a significant factor in enhancing children's well-being. Community development and regeneration, once relatively neglected disciplines, have recently received a great deal of attention in a number of countries in the Western world. This in turn has led to the recognition that effective programmes to prevent and treat these social problems need to be targeted not only at high-risk individuals or families, but also at neighbourhoods and communities themselves.

In the USA evidence of increasing interest in communities can be seen in the formation of the Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families (Connell et al., 1995). This has led to a range of catchy book titles – '*From Neurons to Neighbourhoods*', '*It takes a village*', '*Does it take a village?*' – and many other less catchy but equally important volumes. Following the election in the UK of the Labour Government in 1997, a range of initiatives such as Sure Start, New Deal for Communities, On Track and the Children's Fund have been developed and rolled out to target high-risk communities or neighbourhoods. Indeed, there are now over 20 'Area-based initiatives' either wholly or partly focused on children in the UK. In other countries community initiatives are burgeoning – Better Beginnings Better Futures in Canada, Stronger Families and Communities in Australia, CoZi schools in the USA – to name but a few.

The theoretical underpinning for many of these interventions is the 'Ecological Model' originally proposed by Bronfenbrenner in 1979, which provides a framework

for understanding how different levels of the ecology interact to affect the lives of children. There is a growing body of empirical and theoretical literature emerging about the effects of the environment on children and families, and this literature is pointing towards a rather complex relationship between communities, families and children. In particular, the relationship between community-level interventions and child outcomes is not at all straightforward.

Another area which has been growing has been the participation of children in communities, prompted in some ways by the greater attention being paid to children's rights following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified currently by 192 nations. Only recently has it been acknowledged in both policy and research that children and young people themselves may have a distinctive view of communities and a specific role to play in improving and developing communities (or indeed in degrading and undermining them). Whilst participation by children and young people has now become an important focus of policy and practice, there is a relatively small theoretical and evidence base for this work, and much of the discussion ignores or downplays the role of parents and families. This book considers the research, theorising and some of the policy implications of involving young people in communities. In so doing it draws on the emerging disciplines of childhood sociology, childhood geography and anthropology.

This book brings together some of the latest current thinking on the relationship between children, families and communities, exploring the theoretical, policy, research and practice implications for the emerging knowledge in this area. It adds to a growing literature which is aimed at building up the theoretical and evidence base for intervening in family life to reduce poverty and social exclusion.

The book addresses the theoretical bases of community and childhood, the extent to which it is known (rather than assumed) that communities influence children and parents, what has been done to involve young parents and young people in community strengthening, and the knowledge-base regarding community interventions for infants and preschoolers and their families, for school-age children and for adolescents.

The first three chapters deal with theory and methodology, examining the many and varied definitions of community, the theoretical approaches to understanding the influence of communities on children and parents and the developments in the measurement of communities. The next two chapters summarise research, first examining ways that community features may (or may not) influence child development and parenting behaviour, and second the role of children in communities is examined in detail by looking at how children use communities and move about in them.

The remainder of the book focusses on policy and practice. The concept of a community intervention is clarified in the context of current policy agendas. There follow reviews of a range of interventions grouped according to whether they primarily focus on young children and their parents, older children, schools as communities, or on preventing adolescent problems and in particular juvenile crime.

Finally, we provide some conclusions and thoughts about future directions, particularly on the future of community interventions for children and families.