



# 1

## Introduction

Susan H. Landry

University of Texas Health Science Center, U.S.A.

The wellbeing of children and families is of utmost importance to our communities, cities, and nations. This volume is a collection of chapters that address many of the issues related to understanding the wellbeing of young children and, in turn, the wellbeing of their families. The first part of this volume includes four chapters that describe different, but related, areas of children's early development that together provide an important foundation for later competence. The changes in children's self-regulation and executive control over the first years of life, described in Chapter 2, are dramatic. This is important to appreciate as these skills are critical to children's ability, at entry into school, to function somewhat independently in a classroom with all of the numerous social and cognitive demands they face in this complex setting. The inclusion of these discussions in this book is important, given how self-regulation and executive control together with emotion regulation are integral to later academic and social competence.

Chapter 3 provides a sound rationale for considering the importance of early emotional regulatory skills for understanding that early cognitive learning can be best supported if there is careful attention to these skills and the emotional climates of children's learning environment (e.g., classrooms, schools, and home). We also understand, from information provided in Chapter 4, how early math and literacy skills that develop across the first 5 years are key to understanding later academic achievement. The rigorous research described in this chapter demonstrates longitudinal support for these skills as early predictors that can guide educational policy to make informed decisions.

---

*Wellbeing in Children and Families: Wellbeing: A Complete Reference Guide*, Volume I.  
Edited by Susan H. Landry and Cary L. Cooper.  
© 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2014 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.  
DOI: 10.1002/9781118539415.wbwell01







---

---

## *Introduction*

When Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are considered together, the complex nature of children's early development, in terms of the need to consider the interrelatedness of skills across different developmental domains in order to account for later life competence, is truly highlighted. However, in light of the dynamic nature of the early development of the many skills necessary to put children on a trajectory that will better assure life success, the evidence provided in Chapter 5 is concerning. This chapter considers the importance of intrinsic motivation for understanding a sustained high level of learning in light of the decline in this key predictor across the elementary-school years. Discussion of the factors that may buffer this decline provides hope for ways to intervene effectively.



Parts 2 to 4 of this collection of chapters explore the many factors that are documented to influence the quality and rate of development of children's abilities, such as those described in Part 1. The caregiving environment and parents' interactions with their young children are consistently documented as two of the most important environmental influences on children's outcomes. The selection of chapters in Part 2 considers the mechanisms that explain this influence, as well as some of the developmental areas that are impacted by parenting. The critical nature of parents' behaviors with their children, beginning at birth, is striking—as described in Chapter 6 in relation to early language development and emergent literacy, and in Chapter 8 in relation to executive functions. In addition to delineating the mechanisms that help explain the parent–child associations, Chapter 6 provides empirical evidence for four specific features of parents' language with their young children that could have strong implications for future interventions to facilitate parents' use of effective language support strategies. The role of parenting in understanding change in development, in contrast to the role of genetic factors in explaining stable individual differences, highlights the specific aspects of parent interactional behavior that predict variability in change or rates of growth in executive function skills. The theme of specificity is expanded on in Chapter 9, where the reader is provided with insight into the complexity of parenting in terms of its multifaceted nature. A variety of factors such as the goals of parenting (e.g., teaching values or customs, obtaining cooperation, positive engagement) and how different forms of parenting predict different outcomes are highlighted as well as the importance of considering the bidirectional nature (parent–child, child–parent) of the influence of this process. As much of what is known about the importance of early parenting is based on correlational data, Chapter 7 provides experimental research



## *Introduction*

that supports a causal influence of this environmental factor on children's development.

In Part 3, chapters explore the interplay of contextual influences on the child. This is illustrated in one chapter using a bioecological system approach that reveals how high-risk home and child-care environments are more likely to be present for children from poverty and describes the interconnectedness and joint negative influences of two low-quality caregiving environments on children's outcomes. In light of the destructive effect on children's development of low-quality early caregiving settings and growing documentation of the economic benefits of investing in high-quality early childhood programs, Chapter 13 describes the research that has informed this educational movement.

In a comprehensive discussion of the contribution of quality environmental stimulation across the period from birth to elementary school in Chapter 14, the importance of the relationship between children and adults (e.g., parents, teachers, and child-care staff) is demonstrated in terms of its potential influence on aspects of social and cognitive development including emergent literacy skills. Finally in Part 3, the influence of relationships with same-aged peers gets attention. Although much has been written about the adult-child relationship, elementary-school peers can influence children's openness to school participation and learning. Chapter 12 considers distinct types of peer relationships, how they develop, and the process by which they affect the child.

We understand, in the first chapter of the final part of this volume, that poverty in early childhood has a more lasting negative impact than poverty in later childhood. These effects are far-reaching and the things they impact include adult health status and earnings. When one considers how poverty affects multiple aspects of the young child's environment (e.g., the nurturance, physical, and nutritional), the explanation in this chapter regarding the extent to which safety nets are in place to protect young children from the devastating effect of poverty is revealing. Another chapter reveals the importance of considering characteristics of a child's neighborhood for understanding variability in child outcomes. A comprehensive discussion of the direct and indirect influences of neighborhood effects on child outcomes provides insight into the mechanisms by which neighborhoods manifest effects on children and their families. The theme of the importance of the early caregiving environment for understanding child wellbeing is reiterated in Chapter 16, although with a thoughtful discussion of the effect of negative early experiences impacting neurobehavioral development.





---

---

## *Introduction*

When children are exposed chronically to negative experiences, biological systems are activated in response to these environmental stressors that affect brain and body. Information on this process and its environmental triggers can ultimately inform preventative approaches. The final chapter in Part 4 describes such a program. Although the effects of the Family Check-Up Program have not been investigated in relation to children's physiological responses, it targets prevention of many of the negative environmental factors that are known to be triggers for elevations in cortisol levels showing higher reactivity to stress. Programs such as the Family Check-Up, which fit within the service-delivering milieu and are effective in early identification of caregiving problems with effective solutions, may advance our public health initiatives that target the wellbeing of families and their children.