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## Family and Systemic Influences

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Ecological theories of child development outline how numerous contexts interweave to support both normative and less adaptive socio-emotional development (for a review, see Dunn *et al.* [1]). Family networks are central to early child development. As their social worlds widen, children encounter childcare and school settings, and their expanding social systems encompass relationships with friends and peers. Children's growing competencies are influenced by each of these systems and by interactions among them. These systems, in turn, are influenced by broader social and cultural influences, and by variations in access to social and material resources (see Figure 1.1 for an illustrative model).

## Family Relationships and Parenting

Family relationships are complex: each dyadic relationship is affected by other relationships in the family system, and children influence, as well as being influenced by, those around them [2]. Even very young infants affect interactions with their caregivers, and variations in children's temperamental styles continue to evoke differing responses from carers at older ages. In part, variations of this kind reflect children's inherited characteristics; indeed, many aspects of family relationships and functioning once thought to be purely 'environmental' in origin are now known to reflect elements of 'nature' as well as 'nurture'. Children play an active part in shaping the environments they experience; their genetic make-up also affects individual differences in sensitivity to environmental influences, contributing to both resilience and vulnerability to stress [3].

Families are biologically and culturally evolved to promote children's development [4]. Some of the earliest steps in those processes – pre- and postnatal influences on neurobiological regulation, and early attachment relationships – are discussed in other chapters. But family relationships and parenting show ongoing links with the development of children's behavioural control and with the regulation of their attentional, arousal and emotional systems throughout childhood. In addition, parents contribute to children's cognitive development, socialize them into culturally appropriate patterns of behaviour and promote their understanding of moral values and the development of their talents. Parents also select and secure children's access to key resources beyond the family system.

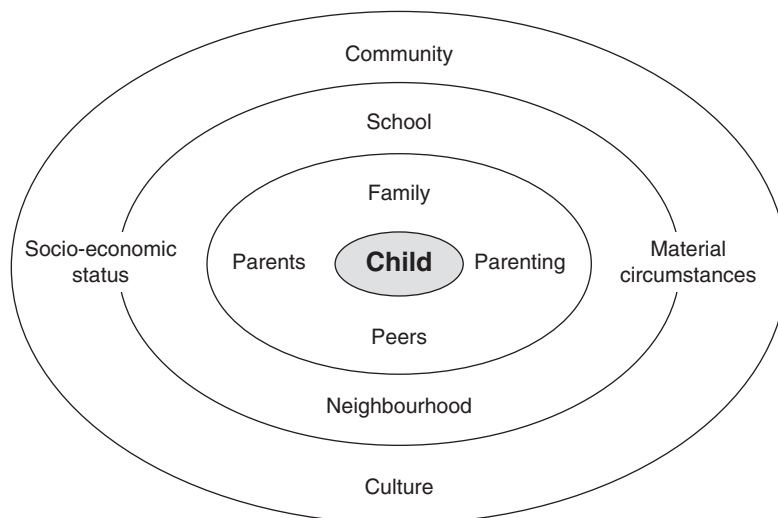


Figure 1.1 Ecological model of influences on development.

Successful parenting involves numerous skills and capacities, varying with the age of the child, with culture and with social context. Underlying this diversity, most models of parenting highlight two central dimensions, one related to parental involvement and responsiveness (encompassing warmth, availability, positive engagement and support), the second centring on ‘demandingness’ or behavioural control, and incorporating monitoring, expectations and behaviour management. Combinations of these dimensions have been used to characterize four general styles of parenting [5].

- **Indulgent** (responsive but not demanding) – parents are non-traditional and lenient, allow considerable self-regulation, and avoid confrontation.
- **Authoritarian** (demanding but not responsive) – parents are obedience- and status-oriented, and expect orders to be obeyed without explanation.
- **Authoritative** (both demanding and responsive) – parents are assertive, but not intrusive or restrictive. Disciplinary methods are supportive rather than punitive. Children are expected to be assertive as well as socially responsible, self-regulated as well as cooperative.
- **Uninvolved** (both unresponsive and undemanding) – most parenting of this type falls within the normal range, but in extreme cases it might encompass both rejecting–neglecting and neglectful parenting.

Comparisons across these styles consistently highlight *authoritative* parenting as associated with more positive child outcomes in a range of domains: self-discipline, emotional self-control, positive peer relationships and school performance.

When children are under stress, family life can provide compensatory experiences. Cohesion and warmth within the family, the presence of a good relationship with one

parent, close sibling relationships and effective parental monitoring are all known to represent protective influences of this kind. Finally, when parenting is compromised, risks of emotional and behavioural difficulties increase. Problems in four broad aspects of family relationships and parenting seem most important here:

- Discordant/dysfunctional relationships between parents, or in the family system as a whole
- Hostile or rejecting parent-child relationships, or those markedly lacking in warmth
- Harsh or inconsistent discipline
- Ineffective monitoring and supervision

Many family-based interventions and parenting programmes are designed to target difficulties of these kinds.

### **Parent and Family Characteristics**

Some parent and family characteristics show systematic links with children's risk of emotional and behavioural problems. Parents' own mental health is among the most important of these. In part, such associations reflect heritable influences; in part, they are also likely to index the effects of parents' mental health on family relationships and parenting. Mothers who are depressed, for example, are known to be less sensitive and responsive to their infants, and attend less, and respond more negatively, to older children [6]. Alcohol and drug abuse and major mental disorders in parents may impair parenting in more wide-ranging ways. When parents are antisocial, effects may also be mediated through the endorsement of antisocial attitudes and social learning.

### **Sibling Relationships**

Sibling relationships form a further key part of the family system for many children. The dynamics of sibling relationships show transactional links with relationships in other family subsystems and with aspects of parenting. Harsh and authoritarian parenting, for example, is associated with more conflictual relationships among siblings, while sibling conflict can constitute a major stressor for parents [7].

Bonds between siblings are intimate and often emotionally intense. Consequently, their potential for influencing children's trajectories is strong. Warm sibling relationships facilitate the development of social understanding [8] and are protective when families are under stress. Sibling conflict, by contrast, can compromise both emotional and behavioural development [9]. Evidence now suggests that up to 40% of children are bullied by their siblings, and that this intra-familial aggression can increase risks of being bullied outside the family [10]. In adolescence, siblings often show similar levels of problem behaviours such as delinquency and substance use. In part, these similarities are likely to reflect broader family-based processes; in part, they appear to reflect direct facilitation and 'deviancy training' by siblings. For all of these reasons, a focus on siblings is increasingly recommended as one element in therapeutic work with children and families.

## Changing Family Patterns

Recent decades have seen major changes in patterns of family formation, stability and complexity in many western societies [11,12]. Families are formed later, and are smaller, than in the past. Fewer parents now marry and there is more divorce, meaning that many children face transitions in their family lives. Parental separation can be followed by periods in single-parent households, and later by the establishment of new step-families. In addition, increasing numbers of children are now conceived following the use of new reproductive technologies, and more are growing up with same-sex parents – factors that have been examined for their potential to influence children's development. On average, children in single-parent and step-families show somewhat higher levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties than those in stable two-parent homes. [13,14]. Typically, however, these differences are modest and there is much variation within as well as between family types. Importantly, associations between the quality of mother–child relationships and children's adjustment are similar across family settings. Additionally, single-parent and reconstituted families often face economic and other stresses and may lack social and family supports. Taking these variations into account, research indicates that family type *per se* shows few consistent links with children's adjustment. Similar conclusions emerge from studies of 'non-traditional' family forms: children's adjustment typically reflects the quality of family relationships and the well-being of family members to a much greater degree than variations in family structure [15,16].

### Parental Separation and Divorce

When parents separate, most children show some short-term behavioural or emotional difficulties. In general, these are not severe [17]. School progress and motivation can be affected, and longer-term influences on young people's own patterns of relationship formation and stability later in life are found. Research suggests that these responses are not simply 'one-off' effects of parental separation: many children experience parental discord before their parents separate, and divorce itself is often followed by a cascade of other changes. Parents themselves are likely to be distressed, and many families face marked declines in economic circumstances. Some children can subsequently encounter house moves, school changes and disruptions to their social networks. Children's outcomes may be impacted by any element of this complex network of change.

## Childcare and Schooling

In most western societies at least half of mothers now return to work before their youngest child reaches the age of 3 years [18], resulting in a major interest in the impact of non-maternal care on children's development. Research suggests that multiple features of early childcare should be considered when assessing its effects. Higher-*quality* childcare (including, for example, variations in sensitive and responsive caregiving, and cognitive and language stimulation) has developmental benefits. For example, it is associated with gains in cognitive and language domains, academic skills [19] and

prosocial behaviours, and fewer adjustment difficulties. Especially in the first year of life, a higher *quantity* of childcare (i.e. hours/week in any kind of non-maternal care) is associated with an increased risk of behaviour problems and disobedience [20]. As in family settings, however, individual children's sensitivity to non-maternal care will vary. For example, out-of-home care has been shown to have positive effects on the development of at-risk young children.

School life provides further opportunities, demands and challenges. Starting and changing schools are significant events in children's lives. Most adapt well, but a significant minority show some difficulties when starting school, and many young adolescents show short-term declines in academic performance and self-esteem on transfer from primary to secondary school. Tests are high up on children's lists of fears, and major examinations are often associated with increased psychological distress. Bullying can be frequent and is a key risk factor for children's mental health. Surveys suggest that many children experience occasional bullying at school, and smaller groups are persistently victimized. Although some may have been anxious and insecure prior to starting school, recent evidence demonstrates that bullying has independent effects on risks of later adjustment problems [21].

Variations in the social and organizational 'climates' of schools have modest independent effects on children's academic progress and behaviour [22]. In part, such variations reflect differences in the background characteristics of pupils, although differences in organizational characteristics and the tenor of day-to-day school life are important. Schools with more positive child outcomes have purposeful leadership, an appropriate academic emphasis, constructive classroom management and consistent, though not over-severe, discipline. The composition of pupil groupings also appears important – for instance, young children are more likely to become aggressive in classes with other very aggressive children. Both school- and classroom-based interventions can provide highly effective in behaviour management. For some severely disadvantaged children, schooling can provide significant positive experiences and support. Importantly, experimental studies of preschool programmes show long-term reduced risks of participant delinquency and unemployment many years after school leaving.

## Wider Social and Environmental Influences

### Poverty and Social Disadvantage

Poverty and social disadvantage are consistently associated with variations in children's health, cognitive skills and academic achievements, and – somewhat more modestly – with their social and emotional development [23]. Disruptive behaviours, in particular, show links with persistent family poverty, although effects are more marked for boys than for girls and are stronger in childhood than in adolescence. Research suggests that these associations reflect elements of both social selection and causal influences. Especially in families of young children, effects are likely to be indirect, operating through processes whereby poverty imposes stresses on parents that, in turn, have an impact on family relationships and parenting. In more affluent societies, relative deprivation – the perception of disadvantage by comparison with others – may also contribute to parental stress.

### Neighbourhood and Community Contexts

Rates of behavioural difficulties (and other markers of child health status) also vary with neighbourhood context [24]. Problem levels may be especially high in chronically disadvantaged inner-city areas, and the task of parenting may be more challenging when neighbourhood supports are poor. Again, many of these effects seem likely to be indirect in early childhood, operating via increased stress on families. But in severely disadvantaged settings, even quite young children may be directly exposed to community violence and, later in development, neighbourhood influences may be mediated through associations with delinquent peers.

### Multiple Stressors

For many children, exposure to these and other adversities will covary: children in stressed families often live in poor neighbourhoods, attend poorly resourced schools, and are exposed to deviant peers. Research suggests that risks at the child, parenting, sibling, peer and sociocultural levels each add uniquely to the prediction of emotional and behavioural problems. The total number of risks explains further variance in outcomes, and evidence is beginning to accumulate that differing *configurations* of risk are associated with specific emotional and behavioural difficulties [25]. Exposure to poverty, for example, may differ in its impact depending on parental characteristics and the quality of family relationships. Comprehensive assessments of family and systemic influences require that each of these levels of influence, and the interplay between them, be taken into account.

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