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IMPROVING CHILDREN'S CHANCES (PAPER 1):<sup>1</sup>  
LINKING DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY AND PRACTICE

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In this paper we argue that psychosocial interventions with children<sup>2</sup> 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 programmes that are just not effective: programmes 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”.

While this definition has been formulated by researchers in the United States, 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, M. (1998).

Professional psychological knowledge about children - ideas concerning their rights and their welfare, and provisions for advancing their development - have largely been developed in

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been adapted from Dawes & Donald (2000)

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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 to those of the West (Boyden, 1990; Stephens, 1995).

A particular force in this pattern of globalisation 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 programmes to families and children in developing regions. It seeks to ensure that all such programmes contain practices which 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.

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 as well as 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 that "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" (Huston, 1994, p. 5). In short, programmes designed to improve children's developmental outcomes need an understanding of how the total child-context relationship functions. Recently, many intervention programmes 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);
- contexts (e.g. families, neighbourhoods or the wider society); and
- time (e.g. developmental changes over time in the child or in the environment).

Each of the four dimensions above influence proximal interactions.

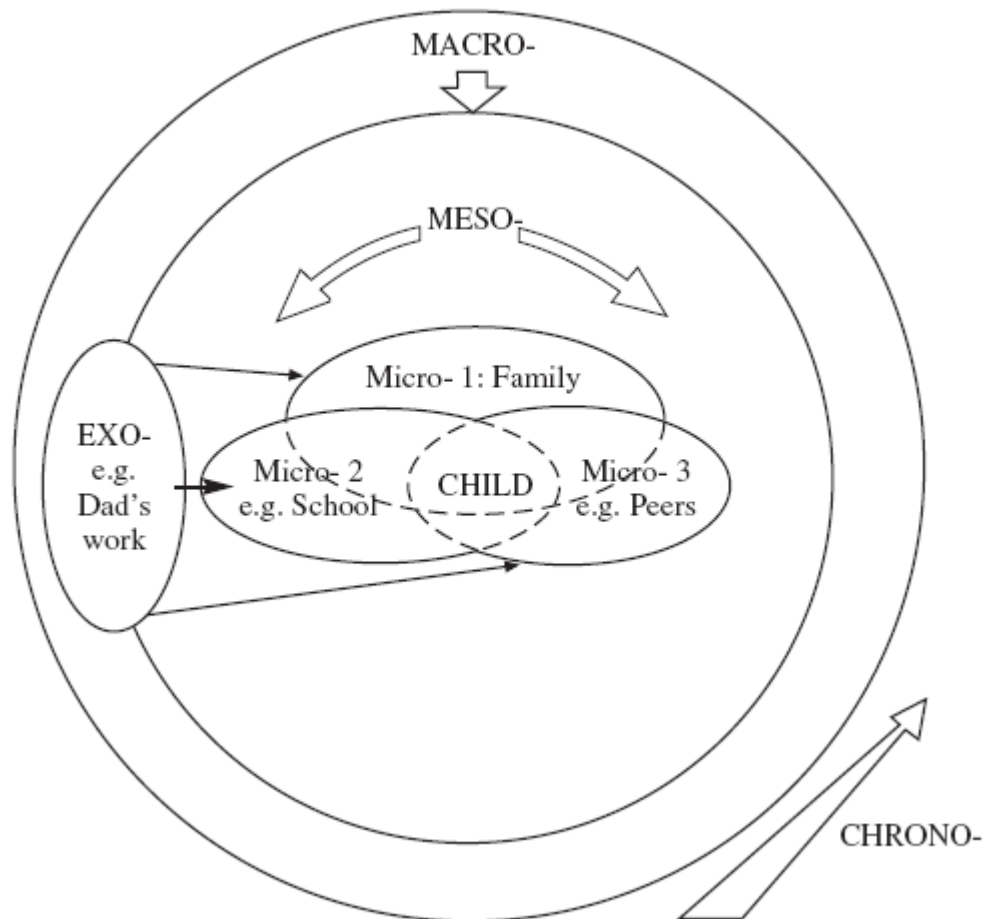
For example a child's temperament will influence the way she interacts with her mother (person factor); whether it is playful or task-related (process factors); whether it is at school or at home (context factors); and finally, whether the child is younger or older (time factor).

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 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*<sup>3</sup>. 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.

FIGURE 1: BRONFENBRENNER'S NESTED SYSTEMS



(From: Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002: p52).

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 bi-directional nature. All parties to the interaction, including the child, influence its outcome.

<sup>3</sup> In simple terms, 'micro' means small, 'meso' means in the middle, 'exo' means outside, and 'macro'

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 which 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 which 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 neighbour 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).

Exosystem. This system 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 neighbourhood 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-system. This level includes the wider political, cultural and material influences on all other levels of system 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 care-givers, will be safer than those who are freer to exercise their will. While obedience scripts are often negatively associated with authoritarian and punitive approaches to child-care (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 to 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**

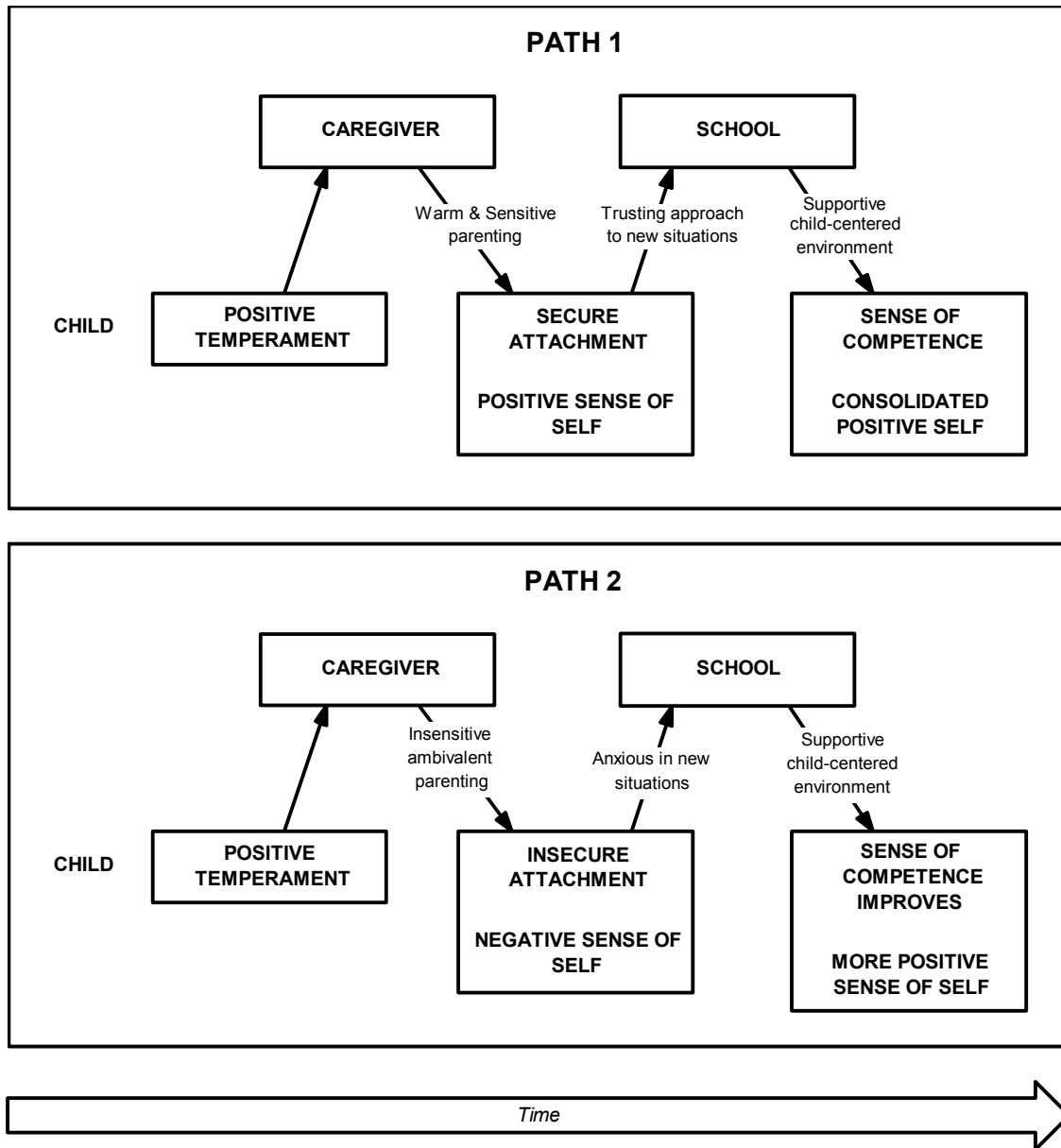
A transactional approach foregrounds how child-context interactions contribute *differently* to development at different points in the life cycle (Sameroff, 1975; 2000). A key feature of Sameroff’s model is his analysis of how the changing developmental status of the child contributes to these processes. Thus, at any one point in time, the child brings existing psychological capacities, that 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.

Let us take as an 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-centred 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 may have had his sense of trust in people negatively modified, while the second boy would have had his sense of mistrust and insecurity further consolidated.

FIGURE 2: A TRANSACTIONAL MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT



PATH 1: FROM GOOD BEGINNING TO GOOD OUTCOMES

PATH 2: FROM DIFFICULT BEGINNINGS TO IMPROVED OUTCOMES

This example shows how the socio-emotional capacities that children bring to the first day of school (or any other key developmental context) 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 neighbourhood community, 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, that take account of the transitions that occur at significant points where new demands are placed on the young by their society. While they are 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 urbanised informal settlements. In such contexts, local traditional practices may create demands on children at particular points in their development that are different to 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 pre-teen 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 care-givers, 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 care-givers are disrupted by factors associated with migration from rural areas to cities. For example, Jones (1993)<sup>4</sup> 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.

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

2. The second epoch from 7-11 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, poor self concept, and also may lead the child to be attracted 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 age period 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 where 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 socialisation established in the home are likely to be disrupted as these children are inducted into violent life-styles.

4. During the final epoch (late adolescence), there is increasing preparation for adulthood and work. However, in many parts of the world, millions of children have left school for one or

other 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 neighbourhood 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 neighbourhood influences, increases significantly during this period. Peer influences on adolescents have marked effects on their behaviour. Adolescence is a period during which the majority of young people are likely to challenge social conventions to some extent. For most youth, antisocial behaviour is limited to adolescence (Moffitt, 1993). However, in communities with few opportunities for positive social engagement and high levels of anti-social 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's 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 provide 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 programme 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 are central to understand *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 programmes to prevent child abuse and

neglect. In this regard, and stressing the importance of an ecological approach, Duggan et al. (2004, pp. 616-617) 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 programme 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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