Preparing Educators to Engage Families
Case Studies Using an Ecological Systems Framework

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A DEVELOPMENTAL-CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVE

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Contemporary psychological research on children with developmental disabilities is beginning to focus on the factors that support development rather than solely describing the ways in which these disabilities may impede development. Our work has focused on skills and
characteristics within the child and within the family that are associated with positive development. These relationships are multidirectional: Family members influence children's development, and children, in turn, affect the well-being of other family members (Minuchin, 1988; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). These relationships are also dynamic because changing needs and influences shape the child and family over time (Guralnick, 2005; Lerner, 1991).

From a developmental-contextual perspective, family processes and children's development are mutually interrelated. This theoretical lens considers the bidirectional influences of parents and children upon each other. Research on these relationships provides four important insights for working with children and their families: (a) children promote their own development through processes of self-regulation; (b) family relationships shape child development; (c) children affect parents' well-being and capacity to engage in children's schooling; and (d) despite challenges such as low income, single parenthood, and disability, many families are resilient.

Although this area of research focuses on the relation between the development of children with disabilities and their families, this work identifies processes that appear to be central to the development of all children.

The Research

One of the most fruitful ways to examine children's development is through empirical studies that gather information over time. Such longitudinal studies can help researchers better understand the pathways of child development, examine the degree to which development can be influenced by interventions, and understand how changes in the child and family affect each other. In this chapter, we present findings from the Early Intervention Collaborative Study, a longitudinal study of children with biologically based disabilities and their families (Hauser-Cram et al., 2001). This research, which followed children from infancy until age 10, has revealed important information about the reciprocal influences of child development and parent well-being over time (Hauser-Cram et al., 2001; Shonkoff, Hauser-Cram, Krauss, & Upshur, 1992).

Children act as agents of their own development. One of the most important ways children advance or impede their own development is through self-regulation, which is the capacity to modulate one's behavior in accordance with environmental demands. Children who can control their emotions and actions well during intellectual challenges or frustrating situations show developmental advantages over those with poorer self-regulation skills (Bronson, 2000; Eisenberg, Smith, Sadowky, & Spinard, 2004). We found two areas of self-regulation to predict positive developmental change in children with disabilities. One manifestation of self-regulation is mastery motivation, which is present when a child persists at a problem-posing task even when the task is quite challenging (e.g., matching unusual shapes, completing a complex puzzle, working a multistep musical device). Our research found that preschool children with high mastery motivation made greater gains throughout the middle childhood years, especially in cognitive growth. Cognitive growth, in turn, led to positive changes in other areas of development such as social, communication, and daily living skills.
The second aspect of self-regulation is **social-emotional regulation**, which is the ability to manage socially appropriate behavior during frustrating or demanding situations. When children have difficulty regulating their emotions, they exhibit behavior problems such as tantrums, defiance, and withdrawal. We found that children who exhibited these behaviors in their early childhood classrooms displayed less positive change in cognitive performance through the middle childhood period. Thus, both types of self-regulation (i.e., mastery motivation and social-emotional regulation) contribute to children’s cognitive growth.

How does self-regulation relate to children’s development at different ages? Preschool-aged children gradually become more goal-oriented and monitor their actions more effectively (Bullock & Lutkenhaus, 1988). They also begin to evaluate the success or failure of their actions more accurately (Stipek, Recchia, & McClintic, 1992). As they persist in their goals, young children learn to correct their actions and, as a consequence, experience the rewards of successful performance. As children persist, self-correct, and evaluate the results of their efforts, they benefit emotionally from developing mastery and cognitively from understanding their errors. In this way, children promote their own developmental progress (Bandura, 1977).

Children with better social-emotional self-regulation also are more engaged in growth-promoting activities with their peers, less involved in disputes with others, and able to take advantage of the classroom experience in a way that helps them advance cognitively (Hauser-Cram et al., 2001).

**Family relationships shape child development.** Family relationships, however, also contribute to child outcomes. We found that preschool children whose mothers interacted more positively with them during a teaching task displayed greater growth in cognitive performance, communication, and social skills in later childhood. Likewise, children whose families had more positive relationships with each other experienced more growth in their social skills. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that both children’s self-regulation and positive family relationships are important to children’s development.

**Children affect parent well-being.** Having a child with a disability presents parents with new and unexpected challenges. A number of factors affect how parents adapt to their child with a disability, including their coping skills and sources of social support. Parent well-being includes parents’ satisfaction with and adaptation to the child’s temperament and behaviors as well as their emotional resources and adjustment to the parenting role.

We found that as children developed from infancy to age 10, fathers’ and mothers’ stress levels increased considerably. Fathers displayed higher levels of stress than mothers when the child was in the infant and toddler years and had more moderate increases thereafter. Mothers, on the other hand, showed a continuous increase in stress levels over time. Both mothers and fathers experienced higher levels of stress when their children exhibited poor social-emotional self-regulation. However, certain factors reduced parental stress. Specifically, mothers’ stress levels were lower when they had strong social support networks, whereas fathers’ stress levels were lower when they had greater problem-focused coping skills.

**Many families are resilient.** Despite the multiple challenges faced by family members when a child has a disability as well as when a family encounters economic and other critical
stressors, many families emerge as quite resourceful (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The concept of resilience—the ability to rebound from crises and challenges—is important to recognize when working with families (Walsh, 2003). Although in the past a child’s disability was often considered a “risk” factor leading to poor family functioning, our research shows that most families function well in supporting their child with a disability. While not ignoring those who are less resilient, a strengths-based understanding of families and their challenges, including single parenthood (Murry, Bynum, Brody, Willert, & Stephens, 2001), provides a greater understanding of the potential for positive and adaptive functioning when parenting a child with a disability.

Conclusion

Our research examined the bidirectional relations between child and parent characteristics and the influences of child and family processes. Children, to some extent, advance their own development through self-regulatory processes. Family processes—high-quality mother-child interactions and parent assets (e.g., problem-focused coping skills and social supports)—are also critical components of improved development in children with disabilities and parent well-being. Finally, regardless of family structure, many families are quite resilient and resourceful in their support of a child who exhibits developmental challenges. These processes govern the development of children with and without developmental disabilities.

Implications for Educators

Develop family-focused services. When families move from early intervention programs to school-based services, they experience a shift from a family-focused to a child-focused system. In view of the higher levels of stress that parents experience as their children grow into and through middle childhood, schools should pay greater attention to the mental health of children and their parents, especially during early and middle childhood (Knitzer, 2000). Neglecting the behavioral needs of children and the mental health needs of parents may have long-term negative consequences for families, especially as children enter the adolescent period.

Tailor different types of supports for fathers and mothers. Different types of parent assets (e.g., social support for mothers and problem-focused coping skills for fathers) predict changes in parents’ well-being over time. School services can help connect mothers with opportunities for social support. For mothers who can easily access their child’s school, activities such as “make and take” workshops and discussions held by parent advisory boards about special education and other services may prove meaningful. Similarly, services that support the problem-focused styles of fathers may serve to improve their well-being over time. For example, fathers’ clubs that advance father involvement in schools may provide an important avenue for fathers to understand the needs of the school and problem-solve with others about those needs. For all families, school personnel could provide information about community organizations and services—such as the Family Voices Family-to-Family Information...
Initiate teacher professional development that focuses on the family system in child development. All those who work with children (with and without disabilities) need to acquire knowledge about the contexts of child development, and especially the role of families, so that they can promote children's self-regulatory processes and positive parent-child interactions. Knowledge of the multiple and changing facets of the family system is vital to teacher collaboration with families. Teachers and service providers might benefit from a collection of case examples in which potential collisions between families and practitioners were averted. In addition, it would be beneficial to provide examples in which teachers and other service providers have revised standard practices in ways that support families and benefit children (Hauser-Cram & Howell, 2003). Finally, while acknowledging the challenges faced by a family, teachers can also acknowledge and build on the strengths that a family brings to those challenges.