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1

Middle Childhood

Contexts of Development

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In 1981, the National Research Council organized the expert Panel to Review the Status of Basic Research on School-Age Children, which produced a seminal volume, *Development During Middle Childhood: The Years From Six to Twelve* (Collins, 1984). The panel concluded that middle childhood is a time of marked change in capacities and typical behaviors that have long-term implications for adolescent and adult patterns. Although several chapters dealt with family, school, peer, and cultural influences on development, most of the research reviewed was designed to understand normative developmental patterns rather than individual differences. The panel noted gaps in available knowledge about what characteristics of middle childhood environments influence developmental change and about the range of environments experienced by children in the different "ecocultural niches" that are defined by such characteristics as ethnic group, socioeconomic characteristics, family structure, and geographic location (Weisner, 1984). Because "Middle childhood behavior and performance have repeatedly been found to predict adolescent and adult status . . . more reliably than do early childhood indicators," the panel recommended additional research on the processes by which middle childhood contributes to later development (Collins, 1984, p. 409).

WHAT DOES MIDDLE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE CONTRIBUTE?

In 1994, the MacArthur Foundation formed a Research Network on Successful Pathways Through Middle Childhood, comprising an interdisciplinary group of scholars, with the goal of advancing knowledge about this age group. One of the network's activities involved gathering a group of investigators to analyze longitudinal studies around a common set of questions about middle childhood. The purpose of this book is to assemble what we have learned since 1981 about how children's environments in middle childhood influence development, using contributions from these

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15 different longitudinal studies. We hope to advance theory and basic knowledge by presenting cutting-edge research using a range of strong methodological approaches and to inform policy and practice by providing information about how contexts can be used to promote successful development.

Although the preschool years establish the base for future development, experiences in middle childhood can sustain, magnify, or reverse the advantages or disadvantages that children acquire in the preschool years. At the same time, middle childhood is a pathway to adolescence, setting trajectories that are not easily changed later. Therefore, two overriding questions in these chapters are *How do developmental patterns, both stability and change, in middle childhood relate to developments in adolescence and adulthood? What do environmental contexts in middle childhood contribute to long-term developmental patterns?* Several themes guide the analyses and discussion.

Developmental Importance of Middle Childhood

To the extent possible, we attempt to identify the "unique" contribution of middle childhood – that is, what middle childhood adds to the skills and characteristics formed in early childhood, and what effects endure when children reach adolescence and adulthood. Throughout the volume we ask: What are the important contributions of middle childhood development and experiences, above and beyond those in the preschool years, to educational attainment, emotional adjustment, and social functioning in adolescence and adulthood? What aspects of middle childhood development and experience have long-term consequences for adolescent and adult patterns?

Contexts

We emphasize developmental contexts. Earlier longitudinal studies of child development provided detailed evidence about the stability of individual differences, but relatively little information about children's environments, particularly those outside the family. We attempt to determine what characteristics of contexts promote positive or negative developmental trajectories. What environments increase or decrease developmental continuity? We are interested in naturally occurring environments as well as interventions in middle childhood. Because children select and affect their families, schools, peers, and other contexts as well as being affected by them, some of the work explicitly tests reciprocal models of causal relations.

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Continuity and Discontinuity

Continuity and stability are the "norm" in child development. Children who are intelligent or aggressive early tend to be intelligent or aggressive later. But we can learn a great deal from *dis*continuities in developmental patterns. What conditions are associated with discontinuous development (e.g., changes in trajectories of achievement or aggression)? What leads to these changes in direction? Do these discontinuities predict later development, or do individuals ultimately return to an earlier trajectory? We are less interested in the stability or instability of a particular trait than in knowing the conditions under which it is changeable or continuous and the long-term implications of continuity and discontinuity.

Successful Development

"Success" is positive behavior, not merely the absence of such problems as delinquency, early pregnancy, and mental illness. Not surprisingly, many of the investigators define successful development as academic performance, motivation and engagement in school, educational and occupational attainment, and adult labor force participation and earnings, but some studies also include a wider range of skills in such areas as athletics, leadership and the arts, and positive self-concepts about one's abilities. Adult success is marked by strong, positive, and nonaggressive *social* relationships with coworkers, friends, partners, and one's own children and by psychological well-being. Although different domains of development (e.g., cognition, emotion, and social relationships) are often investigated separately, we assume that they are interdependent.

Individual and Group Differences

The ecocultural niches resulting from culture, race, and economic advantage or disadvantage not only generate different experiences for children, but also may lead to different impacts of family conditions, schools, and neighborhoods. Some authors in this book ask whether generalization from group to group is appropriate and identify group differences in the relations of contexts to behavior. The samples in these chapters represent Canada, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand as well as the United States, so there are some opportunities to compare across English-speaking countries. We also address whether boys and girls or children with different temperamental predispositions have different opportunities and supports or respond to developmental contexts differently.

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TABLE 1.1. *Percentage of U.S. Children in Different Ethnic and Racial Groups, 1980–2020*

Ethnic Group	1980	2000	2020 (projected)
White non-Hispanic	74	64	55
Black non-Hispanic	15	15	14
Hispanic	9	16	23
Asian	2	4	6
American Indian/Pacific Islander	1	1	1

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2004). *Trends in the well-being of America's children and youth*. Table PF1.3, p. 22.

MIDDLE CHILDHOODS ARE PLURAL AND DIVERSE

Demographic Trends

Childhoods in the United States and in many other developed countries are increasingly diverse as immigrants, people of color, and ethnic minorities become a larger proportion of the population and as economic and structural features of families change. The Collins (1984) volume provides a detailed demographic analysis of children in 1980. In this section, we examine changes from 1980 to the early twenty-first century in the contexts surrounding children in the United States, using data compiled by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USHHS) (2004).

Although the number of children in the United States continues to increase, it is becoming a smaller percentage of the total population. The number of 6- to 11-years olds was 20.8 million (9.1% of total population) in 1980 and 24.8 million (8.5% of total population) in 2001; by 2020, a total of 26.9 million (8.0% of total population) is projected.[1]

Ethnic Diversity. Ethnic diversity increased dramatically during the last part of the twentieth century, largely because of increases in immigration from Latin America and Asia. Although the percentage of Black non-Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native children remained steady, the proportion of children identified as Hispanic or Asian/Pacific Islander nearly doubled between 1980 and 2001, with proportional declines in the percent of White non-Hispanic children. By 2020, one-third of the population is expected to be Hispanic or Asian (see Table 1.1).

Family Composition. The proportion of children living with only one parent has increased since 1980. From 1970 to 1995, the percentage of children

[1] Calculations from figure in table PF1.1, p. 37 (HHS, 2004).

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TABLE 1.2. *Percentage of U.S. Children in Different Family Structures, 1980–2002*

	Number of Parents in Child's Household	1980	1995	2002
All ethnic groups	Two	77	69	69
	One	12	27	28
	None	3	4	4
White non-Hispanic	Two	NA	78	77
	One	NA	19	20
	None	NA	3	3
Black non-Hispanic	Two	42	33	38
	One	46	56	53
	None	12	11	8
Hispanic	Two	75	63	65
	One	22	32	30
	None	3	4	5

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2004). *Trends in the well-being of America's children and youth*. Table PF2.2A, p. 51.

living with two married parents declined and then leveled off. Among Black families, there was even a slight increase in the percentage of children living in two-parent married families (Table 1.2). Although the percentage of children living with neither parent remained stable at 4%, the rate of foster care almost doubled from 4.2 per 1,000 children in 1982 to 7.3 in 2002. Black children constituted 37% of the children in foster care in 2002 – a rate much higher than their proportion in the population (USHHS, 2004).

Poverty. During the late twentieth century, the United States continued to have relatively large numbers of children living in poverty, even though more parents, particularly mothers, were employed. From 1980 to 2002, the poverty rate for families of children ages 6–17 declined from 17% to 15.4%, after reaching a high of 19% in 1985 (USHHS, 2004).[2] Black or Hispanic children and those living with one parent were *much* more likely to suffer economic disadvantage than their counterparts in other ethnic groups or two-parent families. Median incomes of Black and Hispanic families were about half those of White families (USHHS, 2004).

After relatively stable rates of poverty and employment for single mothers between 1980 and 1995, dramatic changes occurred between 1995 and 2002. Single mothers entered the labor force, and, even though public

[2] Calculations from figure in table PF1.2, p. 39 (HHS, 2004).

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TABLE 1.3. *Poverty, Income, and Employment in Families of Children With Single Mothers*

	1980	1995	2002
Income below poverty (%)[a]	45.5	44.6	36.5
Average annual income ($)	17,502	19,032	22,637
Receiving AFDC (%)	11.3	13.2	5.7
Mother employed (%)[a]	67	69	81
No employed adult in household (%)[a]	33	31	19

[a] Data are for children ages 6–17.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2004). *Trends in the well-being of America's children and youth*. Tables ES1.2A, p. 81; ES 1.1, p. 77; ES 2.2, p. 89; ES 3.1A, p. 98; ES 3.1B, p. 99.

cash assistance declined, their families were less likely to live in poverty. Nonetheless, their incomes remained low. In both 1980 and 2002, the median income of single-mother families was 35% of that for two-parent married families (see Table 1.3).

In summary, some but not all of the trends noted in 1980 have continued into the early twenty-first century in the United States. Perhaps the greatest change is the large increase in Hispanic and Asian ethnic groups, with a corresponding decline in the proportion of White Non-Hispanic children. Although more children live in single-parent families now than in 1980, that trend leveled off in the late 1990s. After a rise in the early 1990s, poverty among school-age children has declined slightly, but children in Black, Hispanic, and single-parent families are still much more likely to live in poverty than are children in other ethnic groups or those in married-couple families. Children at all income levels are more likely to have employed parents today than in 1980, and that is especially true for children in single-mother families.

How Children Spend Their Time

Popular literature is filled with concerns about how modern children spend their time. On the one hand, images of couch potatoes in front of a television set abound as the rate of child obesity rises, and visions of "latchkey" children suffering neglect as their parents pursue careers are rampant. On the other hand, critics worry about overly structured, programmed children who are driven endlessly from soccer to band to French lessons, with little time just to play. The evidence from systematic studies of children's time use in nationally representative samples does not support either of these extremes. In a comparison of time-use diaries for children ages 3–12 in 1981

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and 1997 (Hofferth & Sandberg, 1998), there was very little change in the time devoted to television (about 13 to 14 hours per week). Children spent, on average, a little over an hour per week on computers and video games in 1997 (Wright et al., 2001). Participation in sports increased, with 76% of children engaging in some sports activity in 1997, but other extracurricular activities were not reported separately. Older children spent less time with parents than younger children did at both times of measurement (Hofferth & Sandberg, 1998, 2001).

WHY MIDDLE CHILDHOOD?

Although there are no points of sudden demarcation in children's development, periods of transition form important developmental markers. Between the ages of about 5 and 7, children in most societies enter formal education, learn to read, and gain new cognitive abilities that permit them to reflect on and regulate their own behavior. Around ages 10 to 12, biological, intellectual, and social changes occur as children approach or reach puberty, develop new cognitive capabilities, and, in the United States, enter middle or junior high school.

Middle Childhood Is Often Neglected

Middle childhood has been neglected at least since Freud relegated these years to the status of an uninteresting "latency" period. We hear a great deal about early childhood, with some people even arguing that development is fixed in the first three years; and adolescents attract a lot of attention because adults worry about sex, drugs, crime, and "rock-n-roll." Research specializations in infancy and adolescence have burgeoned into separate journals and professional organizations, but no comparable trend has occurred for middle childhood. In fact, the term is often confused with middle school.

Maybe we tend to neglect middle childhood because people think it is freer of major hazards than are very early childhood or adolescence. To the extent that this view is accurate, middle childhood should be valued as a window of opportunity, as a period to "grow by." Because children in this age period have increased cognitive capabilities and self-awareness without the strong pressures of adolescence, it may be a good time to maximize the potential for positive growth and to introduce supports and opportunities that help children along successful pathways to adulthood.

Normative Development in Middle Childhood

Although this book is about contexts, their effects on individual differences can be understood only within the framework of normative development

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and change. Middle childhood is the period when children gain the fundamental skills needed for adult life, undergo the early stages of puberty, develop self-awareness and self-regulation, and form the foundations for social relationships with age-mates.

Skills for Adult Life

In Erikson's (1950, 1963/2005) theory, the crucial task in middle childhood is developing a sense of industry – mastering the basic tools and skills needed for adult life in one's culture. The corresponding hazard is a sense of inferiority if one's abilities and tools are inadequate or if one despairs of becoming productive in ways that are valued in society. Erikson's theory is explicitly cross-cultural – different societies require different tools and skills.

In developed and developing countries, academic skills are central to economic and occupational attainment in adulthood. In almost every society that provides formal education, children begin school between ages 5 and 7, suggesting some universal recognition that capabilities needed for such schooling emerge during this age period. These capabilities are cognitive, social, and behavioral (e.g., the ability to sit still, follow directions, or perform autonomously). The early school years are critical for children's educational futures. Although first grade achievement does not forecast well, by third grade, a child's level of achievement is a strong predictor of high school and later performance (Collins, 1984).

Social advantage also arises from proficiency in sports, music, drama, visual arts, computers, languages, leadership, and many forms of social exchange. By the end of middle childhood, most American children know how to ride a bicycle and how to swim, and many have played softball and basketball, played a musical instrument, sung in a choir, gone to camp, learned drawing and crafts, created science projects, and spent many hours on a personal computer. A child who reaches adolescence without the rudiments in these skills may face a handicap, not only for acquiring competence in the specific skills, but for being able to participate fully in social activities that include them.

Cognitive Changes. The grand theories of cognitive development have been replaced in recent years by theories that emphasize gradual and nonlinear changes in memory, reasoning, and conceptual structures (e.g., DeLoache, Miller, & Pierroutsakos, 1998; Kuhn, 1998; Schneider & Bjorkland, 1998). Nonetheless, all agree that, between ages 5 and 12, children develop new cognitive skills that allow them to think more flexibly and intentionally than preschoolers usually do. Examples include grasping logical concepts, the ability to use multiple categories simultaneously, metacognition (e.g., being able to analyze thought and memory processes

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and to plan ahead), explicit rather than implicit understanding, and self-reflection. Cognitive developmentalists no longer talk of isolated maturational processes within the child. Virtually all recent research emphasizes processes of change involving constant interactions of the child with the physical and social environment. For example, Rogoff (1998) describes learning as a collaborative process involving the child's interactions with adults and peers embedded in a system of sociocultural activities.

Physical and Biological Changes. Middle childhood was once considered a period of sexual latency because it was assumed that hormones influencing sexual motivation and behavior are at very low levels. We now know that the hormonal changes associated with puberty begin between ages 7 and 9 (Buchanan, Eccles, & Becker, 1992) and that growth spurts and other body changes associated with the first stages of puberty begin toward the end of this period (e.g., widening of hips, development of testes and breasts), although there are large individual differences in timing. Menarche occurs for the average White girl in the United States at about age 12.6 to 12.8, and there has been little change since 1946 (Demerath et al., 2004). There is some evidence of earlier menarche for Black girls (Herman-Giddens & Slora, 1997).

Self-Direction, Self-Concept, and Identity. Although families and parents continue to play a crucial role, children's increasing independence from parents is associated with an increasing ability to regulate themselves, to take responsibility, and to exercise self-control – abilities that are essential as they enter adolescence (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998). Children in middle childhood form identities – a sense of who they are and where they fit in the larger scheme of things. They acquire complex understandings of gender, race, ethnic and cultural heritage, and religious affiliation that depend not only on developing cognitive capacities, but also on the social context in which they live (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Ruble & Martin, 1998; Harter, 1998). During middle childhood, children also form concepts of what they do well and what they do not – whether they are smart, good at sports, and popular, to name a few examples (Eccles et al., 1998).

Social Relationships. Success in adult life is marked not only by getting a college education and a good job but also by establishing healthy and harmonious relationships with one's romantic partners, friends, family, and coworkers. Relationships with parents in the early years form one basis for social competencies. In middle childhood, learning to interact with peers and with adults outside the family and making friends are critical developmental tasks. Social skills and friendships during this period are important foundations for later social adjustment (Hartup, 1984; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). The social skills children acquire during this

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period are based in part on cognitive changes that allow more sophisticated moral reasoning, the ability to reflect on oneself, and the ability to perceive others' thoughts and feelings (Shantz, 1983). Good relationships with peers and adults are also important for acquiring competencies in and out of school during this period (e.g., Eccles et al., 1998; Entwisle & Alexander, 1999; Ladd & Burgess, 1999).

CONTEXTS OF DEVELOPMENT: SUPPORTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

During middle childhood, children's worlds expand beyond family to schools, peers, activities outside school hours, and adults outside the family. The larger social environment, including public policies affecting parents' employment, income, and resources available to children, in turn, influences these experiences (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

Family

Family Environment. At the center of children's expanding worlds, the family remains the core, although there is considerable dispute about the importance of parenting practices *per se* (e.g., Harris, 1998; Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000; Vandell, 2000). Family influences are partly genetic, and the environmental effects of families begin in early childhood. Because most families do not change dramatically over time, separate contributions of middle childhood family experiences may be difficult to detect. Nevertheless, our analyses demonstrate that both the cognitive and emotional supports in the family matter for development in middle childhood. Family problems, including conflict and parental depression, affect children's well-being during middle childhood in ways that carry over into adolescence. Children learn about relationships first through their interactions with parents, carrying what they learn in the crucible of the family into their relationships with other children and with adults (Rubin et al., 1998).

Family Management. Children spend less time with their parents as they get older, regardless of whether parents are employed (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). As children and parents have less direct interaction, parents' roles as "managers" of their children's environments and activities become more salient (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). Parents often take considerable pains to arrange and monitor their children's lives by selecting schools, neighborhoods, peer groups, out-of-school activities, and media (e.g., Scott-Jones & Cho, 2003). Their choices are constrained by the family's resources and by the opportunities provided by public and private entities, so some parents probably settle for less-than-optimal settings, but this very important family management

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