Developmental Contexts in Middle Childhood

During middle childhood, the period between ages 5 and 12, children gain the basic tools, skills, and motivations to become productive members of their society. Failure to acquire these basic tools can lead to long-term consequences for children’s future education, work, and family life. In this book the editors assemble contributions from fifteen longitudinal studies representing diverse groups in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom to learn what developmental patterns and experiences in middle childhood contexts forecast the directions children take when they reach adolescence and adulthood. The editors conclude that, although lasting individual differences are evident by the end of the preschool years, a child’s developmental path in middle childhood contributes significantly to the adolescent and adult that he or she becomes. Families, peers, and the broader social and economic environment all make a difference for young people’s future education, work, and relationships with others.

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Foreword

Robert C. Granger

In 1994, the MacArthur Foundation invited fourteen scholars to form an interdisciplinary research network. The network's goal was to advance knowledge about middle childhood, the period from roughly age five to twelve. I think it is a fair characterization that, at the outset, none of us in the network saw ourselves as “middle childhood” scholars. Like many researchers interested in child development, we came to the task with backgrounds in early childhood or adolescence. In principle, we all thought middle childhood mattered, but the belief was buttressed more by theory and personal experience (many of us had children in or just leaving the age range) than it was by empirical research.

The MacArthur Network on Successful Pathways Through Middle Childhood functioned for seven years and generated a lot of good work. But it was not until I read the draft chapters for this volume, three years after the Network ended, that I was sure there were definitive data on the question “does middle childhood matter?” Thank goodness, as richly shown in this volume, it does.

Aletha Huston and her former student and current colleague Marika Ripke have done a great service to developmental science by executing the project that became this book. Having been there at the project’s outset, but unconflicted by any substantial involvement, I can certify that the effort took clear thinking, countless hours, and all the intellectual and social skills that the chapter authors ascribe to healthy adults.

As with many important efforts, the book is grounded on a few elegant and important questions: Does middle childhood matter over and above the early childhood years and, if so, why and how?

To address these issues, Huston and Ripke identified research teams with data sets that met certain criteria. The teams had to possess longitudinal data covering middle childhood and the period before and/or after (often both); good measures of the contexts that shape development, such as family, school, and peers; strong measures of both good and bad
developmental outcomes; and diverse samples of adequate size. This compilation of criteria represents a difficult standard, and I was therefore impressed that Huston and Ripke found fifteen such teams. As readers will understand, this aggregation represents millions of dollars of effort, from far-flung teams, working in some cases for more than forty years. It is extraordinary.

Beyond the power of the underlying data, the strength of the volume is its discipline and its freshness. This book is the antithesis of an edited volume where disparate chapters are loosely tied together. Rather, almost all of these chapters are driven by new analyses and a strong editorial hand that helps the reader. Chapters begin with a few clear questions and some theory, followed by the analysis strategy, the findings, and a discussion of the implications. As with any edited volume, there will be a tendency to read the editors’ introduction and their closing synthesis. Readers who use that approach will get a clear exposition of the volume’s storyline, but they will miss chapters that deserve individual attention and citation.

Although written for other developmental scientists, the volume’s subtext is an issue that is important to policymakers and practitioners. That is, in a world of limited financial resources, how important is the middle childhood period? Should policies steer resources toward that age range? This work will not settle those questions, but the analyses surely leave them on the table. For example, in this volume we learn that families, schools, and peers all influence children in middle childhood in ways that go beyond their influences during early childhood. We also learn that the unique influence of middle childhood is most obvious when, across time, there is change in the environment; when a child’s family becomes stronger or weaker; when schools get better or worse; or when peers are more or less competent. This is important. In the lives of most children, stability is the norm, and this can lead to the erroneous conclusion that genetics plus early influences inevitably determine later life. But this is only because the contextual influences tend to remain relatively stable. By capitalizing on the modest natural variation that does exist, coupled with an occasional data set from an intervention trial, the chapters in this volume repeatedly show the potential of the middle childhood years. This is instructive to all who are interested in improving the lives of young people. It suggests the following strategy: maintain the strengths of positive settings while adjusting incentives and resources to improve the contexts when children are doing less well.

Having assured us that middle childhood is uniquely important, the authors do not claim to understand how the developmental contexts influence development or exactly what to do when development goes awry. Time and again chapter authors note that the agenda can now turn from “does middle childhood matter” to “because middle childhood matters, how can we improve it for many children?” That is a worthy shift, made
viable by this excellent work. In the language we use at the William T. Grant Foundation, this will require a combination of descriptive and intervention studies that are simultaneously grounded in theory and the daily lives of children. When doing such work, we argue for a shift from the study of the normative development of children to an understanding of how contexts evolve and how they can be improved. In effect, we suggest shifting the unit of analysis from the child to the child and setting in dynamic transaction over time. Understanding development in this framework will help us all do a better job of creating successful pathways into, through, and beyond middle childhood.
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