

Introduction

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There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.

Nelson Mandela, 1995.

The third edition of this book continues to focus on practice with families experiencing vulnerabilities in order to promote wellbeing and prevent violence, abuse and neglect.

Since the publication of the second edition of this book, global events have highlighted our collective vulnerabilities. Indeed, the word ‘unprecedented’ seems to be the word of our times – being used to describe the COVID-19 global pandemic, catastrophic bush-fires, floods and other disasters, mass migrations of people fleeing conflict zones and uninhabitable lands, and the global financial crisis. These events have not only increased our collective vulnerability, they have also shone a light on the disproportionate burden carried by some families and children, frequently due to structural and social inequality, and other vulnerabilities. Society’s soul and its commitment to creating a just and equitable society where children and their families can thrive has been laid bare. At the same time, global social justice movements have also gained momentum – exemplifying part of humanity’s eternal stance towards resisting oppression and inequality. Black Lives Matter, #metoo, and the global youth-inspired movement to address climate change are but a few examples.

Within this context, there has perhaps never been a more challenging, important, and rewarding time to be a human services professional. Irrespective of your field of practice, this book will provide you with relevant research and practice examples to inspire your work with families experiencing vulnerabilities. Contributing practitioners and researchers share evidence-based ideas about how to work with children, families and communities in a way that builds upon their strengths and capacities. Authors provide examples of how practitioners and policy-makers can address the environmental, social, political, and economic drivers of inequality, which disproportionately harm children and families experiencing disadvantage.

Commonly, families experiencing vulnerabilities often engage with government and/or non-government services. They often are experiencing a range of vulnerabilities that are interconnected, complex, and multiple. These often include domestic and family violence, problematic substance use, physical and/or mental health concerns, unresolved childhood abuse, poverty, and unstable or inappropriate housing. Family functioning and children’s development can also be challenged by living within oppressive social systems that do not recognise and celebrate diversity. Social and legal systems that promote patriarchal, white, colonial, ableist, heteronormative and classist norms, values, and practices can further compound family troubles and challenge parenting.

In this third edition, chapters that describe theories, frameworks, and policies that guide practice with families are presented first, followed by those that are more specialist in their perspective. In keeping with a public health model approach, chapters canvas

evidence-based or evidence-informed prevention approaches that cover the wide spectrum of intervention from universal to tertiary services. They also situate individual problems within a wider context – asking practitioners to not only focus on helping individuals and families to function more adaptively, but also to effect change on the fundamental drivers of oppression that make it hard for parents to care for children.

In Chapter 1, Menka Tsantefski and Susan Heward-Belle investigate the importance of considering children and their families within the broader environment in which they live. They identify the utility of the ecological model as a framework for understanding the myriad influences that produce vulnerabilities, strengths, and protective factors. They also discuss how the public health approach is applied to the prevention of child abuse and neglect and the promotion of wellbeing. Critical and trauma theories that underpin effective work with families experiencing vulnerabilities are presented.

In Chapter 2, Susan Heward-Belle, Brigid Lang-Norris, Pam O'Connor, Lauren Redmile, and Susan Brown privilege knowledge gained from the perspective of lived experience experts when describing the ingredients of helpful and responsive practice with individuals and families experiencing vulnerabilities. The authors argue that a person-centred, relationship-based approach to practice is critical as it can lead to a strengths-based approach to addressing vulnerabilities that adversely impact child and family wellbeing.

In Chapter 3, Dorothy Scott provides an updated chapter that describes the importance of a joined-up approach to working with families experiencing vulnerabilities. She describes the policy context that underpins approaches to working with families, as well as the factors that shape practitioners' roles. The potential for conflict that can occur from working within and across organisational boundaries is discussed and strategies to address conflict are described.

In Chapter 4, Peter Matthewson, Paul Harris, and Menka Tsantefski examine poverty as a significant, but frequently overlooked, factor experienced by many families that come into contact with services. They describe how poverty is a multidimensional issue that intersects with other factors to increase people's experiences of marginalisation and offer examples of place-based approaches that seek to address child and family disadvantage.

In Chapter 5, Amy Conley Wright and Peiling Kong describe attachment theory, with a particular emphasis on how it has been applied to work with children in out-of-home care. The background and basic tenets of attachment theory are discussed and the dangers of its non-critical application are considered.

In Chapter 6, Susan Heward-Belle and Patrick O'Leary describe how policies and practices have historically rendered fathers, in general, invisible in the provision of services, and domestically violent fathers more so. They present recent research that

offers innovative ideas for policy-makers and practitioners to redress this absence and build the workforce capacity to engage men to be safe and nurturing fathers.

In Chapter 7, Asukulu Bulingwengu and Pooja Sawrikar draw on recent research to consider the lived experiences of individuals and families parenting in a new land. They draw upon notions of collectivism, intensified patriarchy, intersectionality, white privilege, and neoliberalism as lenses to use when trying to understand some of the complexities experienced by families in a new land.

In Chapter 8, Sharon Dawe, Paul Harnett, and Elizabeth Eggins provide an updated chapter which describes an integrated program that supports families where children are at risk due to parental substance misuse and mental health problems. Practice examples from the Parents under Pressure (PuP) program are provided to stress the importance of comprehensive assessment and intervention with families.

In Chapter 9, Larissa Fogden, Cathy Humphreys, and Menka Tsantefski explore the evidence in relation to the prevalence of domestic and family violence and its impact on family functioning, women's and children's health and wellbeing, and practice approaches to prevention and intervention. They emphasise recent Australian research that is building the evidence base to improve whole-of-family based approaches.

In Chapter 10, Elizabeth Newnham, Enrique Mergelsberg, Lauren Kosta, Katitza Marinkovic Chavez, Jonathan Bullen, Jane Nursey, and Lisa Gibbs focus on how anthropogenic climate change, coupled with insufficient political and corporate action, has resulted in more severe and frequent disasters. They highlight that although everyone is vulnerable to the impact of disasters, social inequality and disadvantage mean that not everyone is equally impacted. The authors describe how practitioners can engage effectively with children, families, and communities impacted by disasters.

In Chapter 11, Jo Spangaro describes how pregnancy and/or childbirth are critical transitions for women and their families that raise a range of complex emotional and practical considerations. She outlines how pregnancy and/or childbirth can be opportunities for women to engage with healthcare and other human service professionals to address vulnerabilities including domestic and family violence, unresolved childhood trauma, substance misuse, and mental health issues. She also considers how fathers may be engaged at this time.

In Chapter 12, Menka Tsantefski and Mary Jo McVeigh outline how policy-makers and practitioners can work with children through a human rights and relational approach. Drawing upon the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,

they describe practices that promote the Articles of the Convention that stress the agency and dignity of children, and the importance of their social context.

In Chapter 13, Jioji Ravulo concentrates on the diverse and multiple journeys that young people take as they navigate adolescence – a critical transition period that can bring particular joys and challenges to individuals and families. He considers aspects of identity that influence adolescent development and family functioning during this period, identifying opportunities for practitioners to engage responsively.

In Chapter 14, Susan Collings and Margaret Spencer consider how structural disadvantage and ableist attitudes limit opportunities for people with intellectual disability to become and be parents. They describe contemporary research exploring the knowledge base about parents with intellectual disability, and their children, and outline collaborative practices that can support families.

In Chapter 15, Lynette Riley, Sarah Ciftci, and Irene Wardle describe how colonial policies and practices have fractured Aboriginal cultures and kinship systems, and discuss the continuing impact this has on individuals, families, communities, and culture. They describe how Indigenous peoples have resisted the impact of colonial policies and practices and outline principles, frameworks, and practices, including family decision-making models, that aim to promote the participation of Aboriginal people in child protection decision-making.

In Chapter 16, Sharyn Roberts describes the Māori worldview including the way that knowledge and cultural practices informed traditional Māori society. She identifies key concepts, principles, and policies that practitioners must understand in order to be helpful and responsive to Māori families experiencing vulnerabilities that stem from colonisation.

In Chapter 17, Peter Matthewson and Ives Rose discuss issues facing rainbow people and their families. They identify the ongoing vulnerabilities that people from LGBTQIA+ communities face when confronted with heteronormative attitudes, systems, and social structures. They identify the values, skills, and knowledge for responsive practice with rainbow young people and their families that promote non-discriminatory, anti-oppressive practice.

In the final chapter of this book, Ann MacRae and Dave Vicary describe the challenges, needs, and resources for kinship carers and the children in their care. They highlight that kinship care is the fastest growing type of out-of-home care in Australia and argue that kinship carers and children have specific needs that are frequently overlooked in the service system. Violence-informed and trauma-informed approaches to practice that attend to the specific needs of kinship carers and children are presented.

The information in this book is relevant for students, practitioners, and policy-makers interested in working respectfully with families experiencing vulnerabilities in order to promote safety and wellbeing. This book is also concerned with advancing social justice aims that address structural issues that embed inequality and social disadvantage, and that serve as a fertile breeding ground for child maltreatment and a wide range of individual and family troubles.

Reference

Mandela, N. (1995). *Speech by President Nelson Mandela at the launch of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund*, 8 May. Mahlamba Ndlopfu, Pretoria, South Africa.

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The context for practice with children, young people, and their families

Menka Tsantefski and Susan Heward-Belle

Learning goals

This chapter will enable you to:

- Become familiar with the ecological model as a unifying framework for identifying risk and protective factors in child development and wellbeing
- Reflect on the role of critical theories in informing practice with children and families experiencing vulnerabilities
- Be aware of how the public health approach shapes policy and practice in child and family welfare
- Understand the context for child and family interventions in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand
- Appreciate the importance of informal networks in supporting children and families
- Describe relationship-based, trauma-informed approaches to practice with children and families

Introduction

To work effectively with children, young people, and families experiencing vulnerabilities, practitioners need to understand risk and protective factors that influence children's safety and development. They also require familiarity with policy and practice frameworks that underpin responsive and critically reflective practice. Increasingly, workers are required to engage in trauma-informed, ethical practice, as discussed in this chapter.

Child maltreatment: a definition

Risk and protective factors that contribute to, or shield children from, child abuse and/or neglect are present in all families, to a greater or lesser extent, at different points in the family life cycle. Fortunately, most children thrive within their families and communities. An understanding of risk factors in child maltreatment, and the factors that protect children from maltreatment, helps us to identify children and young people likely to experience poorer outcomes and to provide them with support. According to the World Health Organization (2020):

Child maltreatment is the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under 18 years of age. It includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.

Child maltreatment can result from acts of omission, commission, or both. In acts of omission, the parent or caregiver fails to take actions necessary for the care of the child – neglect is an example of omission, and can be detrimental to the child's safety and development, especially among infants and younger children. In acts of commission, the parental or caregiver actively abuses the child, for example, through emotional abuse, physical or sexual assault. In effect, all abuse is emotionally abusive. Child abuse and neglect can profoundly affect children's developmental trajectories from prebirth through to adulthood, and affect their physical and mental health into old age. While there can be lifelong consequences resulting from maltreatment, some children display resilience. Resilience can vary across the lifespan depending largely on the presence of protective factors in a supportive environment, or the continuation of risk factors in a stressful, unsupportive context. For some children, risk will continue and harm will be cumulative (CFCA, 2017). Children are considered resilient when they are able to function well across life domains; for example, a child might meet developmental milestones, display emotional and social competence, and achieve academically (Afifi & MacMillan, 2011). It

is important to note that risk factors increase the likelihood of child maltreatment, but they do not necessarily lead to abuse and neglect; as such, they are not causal.

The ecological systems model of development: a framework for practice

As the above discussion indicates, the social environment, or the context, in which children are raised has implications for their development. The most widely accepted account of the relationship between the social environment and human development is the ecological systems model of child development proposed by US psychologist Uri Bronfenbrenner in 1979. His work is highly influential in social work, psychology, and human services research, policy, and practice. Bronfenbrenner was critical of how child development was studied and responded to without due consideration of the interaction between the child and factors within the child's environment. He proposed that human development is a process of mutual influence between the developing child, the child's living environment, and the wider social context. As such, the process is dynamic and bidirectional; the child shapes and is, in turn, shaped by the immediate and the broader social setting. Bronfenbrenner conceived the ecological environment as a series of concentric structures or circles, each contained within the next. While he used the metaphor of Russian dolls to describe the model, with each structure nested within the next, unlike Russian dolls, the boundary between each structure in the ecological model is permeable to allow each to influence the other. This developmental context thereby involves connections and interactions between the various settings, which are as follows:

- The microsystem is the environment in which the developing child directly experiences activities, roles, and relationships with others, such as in the home, the day care centre, the school, and the playground. The microsystem is characterised by specific physical and material qualities. Within it, the interactions between the child and others in the microsystem are reciprocal in nature – the child influences, and is influenced by, the behaviours of others.
- The mesosystem is the interrelations between two or more of the settings in which the child actively participates. For a child, this could be the home, the school, and the neighbourhood. The mesosystem is concerned with relations and communications between the various microsystems in which the child participates, along with the knowledge and attitudes each microsystem has in relation to the others.
- The exosystem is the settings in which the child does not directly participate, but that exert an influence over the developing child. Examples include the parents' place of employment, social services, legal systems, school boards, or local councils.

- The macrosystem is the overall culture or a subculture, and the beliefs and ideologies contained within including political ideology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems model of child development is depicted in Figure 1.1.

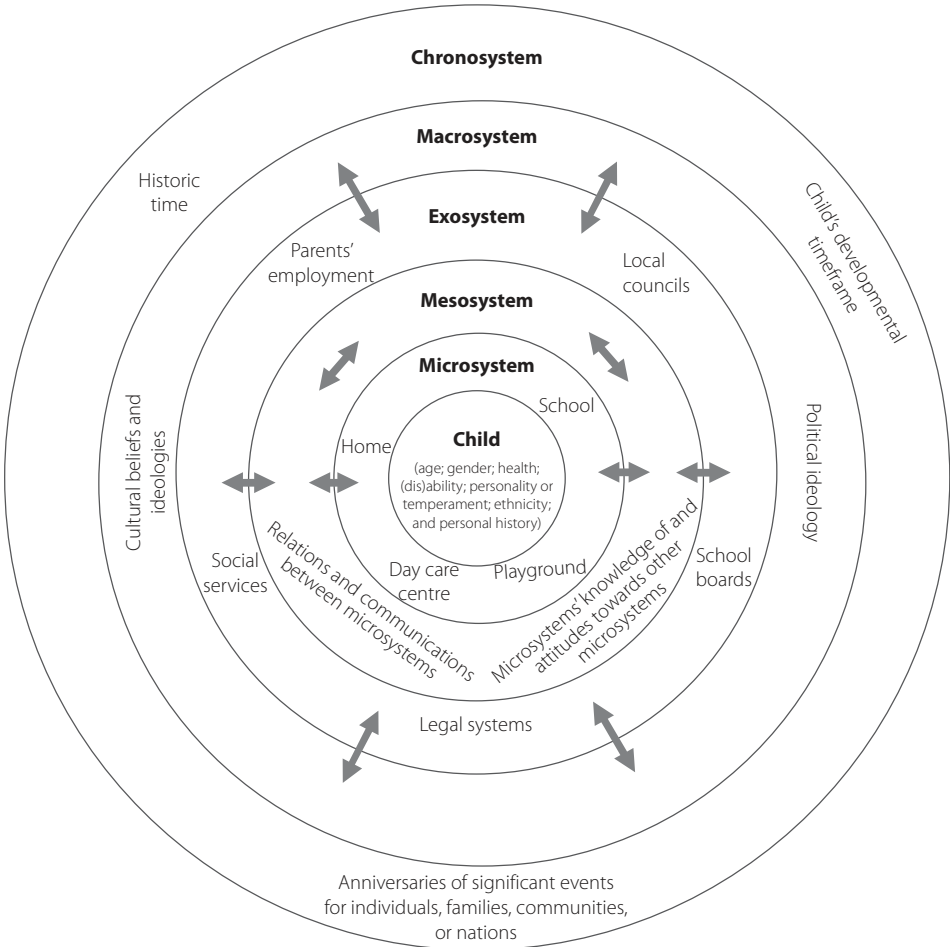


Figure 1.1 Ecological systems model
 Source: Adapted from Bronfenbrenner, 1979.

Children’s interactions within these various systems shape the development of each child through a combination of biological and environmental changes, and the child’s perceptions and actions. Bronfenbrenner wanted to make it clear that ‘development never takes place in a vacuum; it is always embedded and expressed through behaviour in a particular environmental context’ (1979, p. 27). His theory puts an end to the argument about nature versus nurture – human development involves an interaction between the two. The multidimensional model adds the chronosystem (the timeframe), in which the