

## THE DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATION OF MEANING

Drawing from extensive developmental research, this book highlights the significance of meaning in shaping individual worldviews within relationships, from infancy onwards. By focusing on behavior and experience, it reshapes our understanding of pertinent psychological phenomena, tracing the emergence of self, self-regulation, causality comprehension, peer relationships, adolescent experiences, and life-long adaptation. Using developmental psychology and compelling clinical cases, the authors emphasize the central role of “meaning” as a unifying theme, addressing diverse topics such as resilience, intergenerational behavior patterns, trauma impacts, and existential meaning. Ideal for students and professionals in psychology, counseling, and social work, as well as researchers and clinicians in related fields, this book integrates existing theories and empirical evidence to illuminate various aspects of human development and adaptation.

L. ALAN SROUFE, PhD, Professor Emeritus at the University of Minnesota, is a renowned expert in emotional development and developmental psychopathology. With 8 books and 160 articles on these subjects, he has received numerous awards, including the Distinguished Scientist Award from the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) and the Mentor Award from the Developmental Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association.

JUNE SROUFE, PhD, is a family and child therapist who specializes in relationship theory and clinical uses of the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI). With eight published articles, she is recognized for her expertise in family functioning and AAI applications.

# THE DEVELOPMENT AND ORGANIZATION OF MEANING

*How Individual Worldviews Develop in Relationships*

L. ALAN SROUFE AND JUNE SROUFE



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-009-38547-3 — The Development and Organization of Meaning  
L. Alan Sroufe, June Sroufe  
Frontmatter  
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India  
103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,  
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of  
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781009385473](http://www.cambridge.org/9781009385473)

DOI: 10.1017/9781009385480

© L. Alan Sroufe and June Sroufe 2025

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions  
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take  
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009385480

First published 2025

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library of Congress*

ISBN 978-1-009-38547-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-009-38544-2 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence  
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this  
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will  
remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
PART I THE BEGINNINGS OF MEANING	
1 The Place of Meaning	3
The Power of Meaning	5
Meaning, Synthesis, and Integration	6
Meaning and Behavior	8
Conclusion	9
2 Four Features of Meaning and Its Development	12
Meaning as an Inherent Human Motive	
and Active Process	13
The Dynamic Interplay of Meaning and Experience	15
The Social Embeddedness of Meaning	18
Acknowledging Culture	21
The Place of Meaning	23
3 The Cradle of Meaning	25
How Meaning Is Created	27
Prototypes for Meaning	33
4 Attachment Theory: The Rise of Meaning in Psychology	35
Attachment as a Relationship Concept	37
The Reality and Power of Relationships	46
5 Toddlerhood: The Meaning of Me	50
Guided Self-regulation	52
Variations in Toddler Experience	55
From Past Meaning to New Meaning	57
Taking Meaning Forward	61
The Way Development Works	62

## PART II THE GROWTH OF MEANING

6	The Preschooler: The Emergence of the Person	67
	Questions of Meaning	68
	The World of the Preschooler	69
	Deepening Meanings as the Person Emerges	77
	The Way Development Works	83
7	Middle Childhood: Me and My Friends	85
	Major Developments in Middle Childhood	87
	The Inner World: Representations of Self, Family, and Peers	94
	The Consolidation of World Views	99
	Change and Continuity in the Search for Meaning	101
8	Adolescence: Finding Personal Meaning	103
	The Expanding Mind of the Adolescent	105
	Implications for Self and Relationships	107
	Finding Meaning in “Autonomy with Connection”	111
	Opportunities and Vulnerabilities	114

## PART III THE ORGANIZED AND ORGANIZING NATURE OF MEANING

9	Meaning as the Currency of Development	119
	What Is Taken Forward	122
	The Way Adaptation Works	125
10	The Role of Meaning in Intergenerational Transmission Effects	128
	Continuity of Parenting across Generations	128
	Continuity of Attachment Relationships across Generations	132
	Processes in Carrying Forward Meaning	139
	The Way Development Works	141
11	Competence, Resilience, and the Fate of Early Experience	143
	Resilience	146
	The Fate of Early Experience following Developmental Change	149
	Continuity, Change, and the Nature of Maladaptation	151

## PART IV MEANING AND DISTURBANCE

12	On the Meaningfulness of Disturbance	157
	A Note regarding Blaming Parents	159
	Explaining Common Problems	160

	<i>Contents</i>	vii
	Viewing Childhood Disorders through the Lens of Meaning	167
	The Meaningfulness of Even Extreme Disturbance	169
	Conclusion	172
13	Trauma and Meaning	175
	Trauma and Brain Development	175
	Trauma and Psychological Development	178
	Trauma and Meaning	180
	Attachment, Coherence, and Trauma	182
PART V INTEGRATION AND CONCLUSION		
14	Integration	187
	Meaning through the Lifespan	190
	Individual Variations in Meaning across Development	193
	Mature Meaning Systems	200
15	Conclusion	201
	Personal Meaning	204
	In the End	205
	<i>Bibliography</i>	208
	<i>Index</i>	219

## *Preface*

We are a researcher and a clinician. When we have looked from these different perspectives at the panoply of research in developmental psychology, the literature on psychopathology, and a range of clinical case material, we have been impressed by a unifying theme that underlays all of this work. This is the thread of meaning. Whether trying to explain when infants begin to laugh or what things frighten them, or why toddlers jabber in their cribs, why some preschoolers hover by teachers while others do not, why children with classic autism engage in stereotyped behavior, why some children see relationships with others as unavailable to them or fraught with difficulty, or how all of us see the world in the particular ways we do, the answer always came back to meaning. And, while each clinical case seen over the years was completely unique and presented unique issues, always at the core was the meaning the individuals were making of their experience.

In this book we will explore two central ideas: first, that the organized network of meanings that each of us has is a developmental construction and, second, that understandable principles underlie these constructions. The development of anything – from embryos to brains to the universe – has the same nature. As does everything else, our individual meaning systems evolve, step-by-step, building upon foundations that began to be established in the earliest years of life. This developmental process is complex but understandable.

A great deal is now known about the development of meaning, but it is spread through a diverse and unorganized literature. Our purpose is to summarize much of this knowledge, emphasizing what we have learned first-hand through our clinical work and through the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation. The information will be presented both as general conclusions from research findings and as anecdotes based on the lives of actual children and adults, with names and details altered.

The research findings will refer to group data. This means that, of course, there are individual exceptions to the general statements made. Not every 8-year-old child with a history of extreme rejection draws family figures with their arms pinned at their sides. Not every child with a history of secure attachment becomes a peer leader. Moreover, we have made the choice to present findings without details concerning statistical controls of other factors that were necessarily made. There are no graphs or tables with complex statistical analyses. All of this has been presented previously in numerous books and articles. For interested readers, there is an extensive bibliography at the end of the book that will guide you to the details of the ideas and findings discussed. The evidence for each of the claims made in the book is documented in one or more of the books or papers listed, much of it in three of our previous books: *Emotional Development*, *The Development of the Person*, and *A Compelling Idea*.

Our goal is to present a readable and compelling account of how individual world views develop, in the hope that researchers will feel inspired to continue the study of deeply psychological topics and clinicians will feel newly supported as they continue to explore meaning systems with their clients.