

Why Early Years Matters

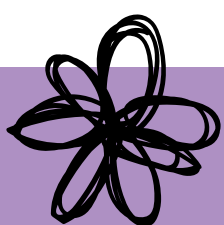
Circumstances and Experiences in the Early Years Affect a Child's Development and Future Outcomes

The environments and experiences that young children and their families are exposed to affect [more than the developing brain](#) - other physiological systems including cardiovascular function, immune responsiveness, and metabolic regulation are impacted. These systems are responsible for lifelong health and wellbeing and are essential for survival – they are designed to protect us by anticipating threats to our emotional and physical safety. When stress responses are activated frequently, intensively, and persistently during early childhood, children may develop physiological responses and coping behaviours that are attuned to the harsh conditions they are experiencing at the time. This can have long-term consequences to their physical and mental wellbeing, self-regulation, and effective learning. Excessive and persistent adversity early in life can overload biological systems and lead to greater risk for stress-associated health conditions into the adult years, such as heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes, respiratory conditions and a range of mental health problems, including anxiety and depression.



Such experiences or events in childhood associated with an increased risk of poor health and other problems in later life, can include growing up in households where there is abuse, neglect, substance misuse, poor mental health, and poverty – however, these cannot only be considered in terms of the impact that they are likely to have on the future outcomes of children. It is important to acknowledge from a child rights perspective, that adverse experiences in the early years are likely to have a negative impact on a child's immediate wellbeing.

When we give children the best start in life, we give them what they need today and set them up with every chance of success tomorrow. Children inhabit an ecology made up of a series of interacting systems – for instance, of family, home, health, childcare and school, the community, and the wider social and cultural contexts that these are in. It is these systems and the interactions between them that shape children's wellbeing and developmental outcomes, for example, poor housing especially cold and damp conditions affect respiratory health, which in turn affects the child's ability to fully engage in learning opportunities. Similarly, being unable to provide appropriate/seasonal clothing or resources due to lack of money at home, means that these children will find it more difficult to learn at home or at school.

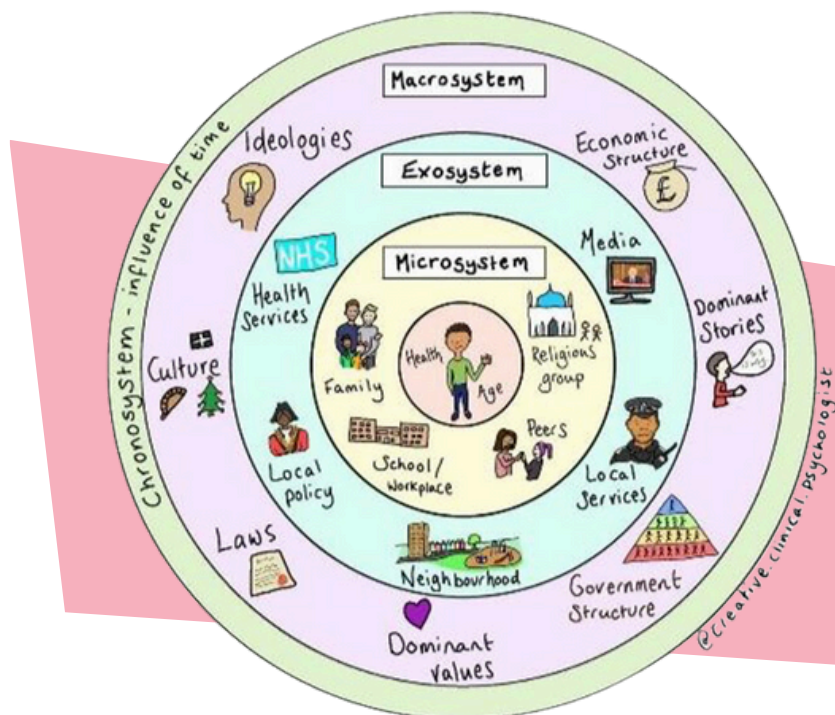


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Social and emotional development begins during infancy, when babies form attachments to those providing consistent sensitive and responsive social interactions. When these interactions are positively reinforced by an adult who is attuned to their physical, social and emotional needs, young children can build secure attachments and start to participate in communicative dialogue. A young child's communication and language development typically occurs simultaneously, such as, a young infant will smile and babble, initial indicators of secure attachment and early communication skills.

Ecological Systems Theory

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979)



It's important to note the significance of early language skills on later outcomes for children. [Best Start in Speech, Language and Communication](#) (2020) sets out how important these responsive and attuned experiences are for young children, where conversational turn-taking is particularly predictive of later language and cognitive skills, even more than the number of words children hear in the home. With early communication and language, as well as social and emotional development, being the strongest predictor of future outcomes for children, it's crucial to focus on how we can best enable families and their children to thrive.



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Being exposed to high levels of long-term stress, e.g. living in poverty, means that parents and carers' physical and mental health are affected too, making it more challenging to create the conditions needed to enable their children to thrive – materialistically as well as developmentally. The link between family income and language development is persistent, with early learning gaps in England already present at 18 months of age. These gaps so early on in life are unfair and perpetuate ongoing inequalities throughout childhood and into adulthood, shown in data collected across the UK during the last decade. A report on [closing the attainment gap](#) (2014) in Scotland found that by the time children start school, those living in families with the lowest income start school on average 10-13 months developmentally behind their better off peers. This gap continues to grow as children go through school - in the UK, 16-year-olds who are eligible for free school meals are still around 27% less likely to achieve good GCSEs than their less disadvantaged peers.

The combined strength of children's early environments with the quality of engagement, interactions and experiences with others, means that children benefit most when adults play an active and meaningful role in their learning and development through everyday playful experiences, opportunities, and activities, alongside providing emotional support, encouragement, and praise. However, the material and psychological impact that living in poverty has on families, makes it much more difficult for parents and carers to provide a rich home learning environment.

