

The Research in Early Child Development Framework

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The Research in Early Child Development (RECD) Initiative commenced in the spring of 2008 as a partnership between the [Prince Edward Island Children’s Secretariat \(PEI CS\)](#) and researchers at the [University of Prince Edward Island \(UPEI\) Centre for Education Research \(CER\)](#). The initial focus of the work was to develop a framework for thinking about and assessing progress in early child development on Prince Edward Island (PEI), to present that framework to the member networks of the PEI CS, and to jointly develop an understanding of the state of the field of early child development in PEI. The project commenced with first refining a review of the literature, and then developing a conceptual framework which would provide a set of guiding principles for the work. The literature review is presented as a separate section of this monograph; the framework and guiding principles are presented here.

There are a number of ways we can approach the question of how best to describe children’s growth and development in the early years. Those adhering to a medical model might describe physical milestones of growth, while educators might list a series of domains and the tasks associated with each. Urie Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist, proposed and explored a theory to describe human growth and development over the entire lifespan (1979). In this model, Bronfenbrenner proposed that there are numerous influences that have an impact on individuals, as well as influences that individuals exert on the environments surrounding them.

Bronfenbrenner’s model of human development proposes that human beings develop in relation to the family and home, school, community, and society—these environments are conceptualized as nested systems (2005). These interconnecting and multi-level environments are critical for human development. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) suggest that, “child development takes place through processes of progressively more complex interaction between an active child and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment” (p.996). Bronfenbrenner suggests that each environment influences the others, and that these bi-directional influences occur among all levels of environment (Berk, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner placed the child at the centre of his theory of early human development. However, he proposed the presence and impact of ever-widening circles of influence surrounding the child as well as the child’s influence on each of the environments. Influences within these environments include:

- **Individuals** including parents, grandparents, educators, doctors, nurses, peers, legislators, policy makers, and researchers;

- **Institutions** such as early childhood centers, schools, libraries, government offices, family centers, community centers, municipalities, universities, and hospitals;
- **Services** such as health agencies, legal agencies, social services, transportation, and social marketing;
- **Physical settings** such as the presence of parks, green spaces, and homes; and
- **Values and beliefs** such as parenting style, safety, education, spirituality and parental beliefs about childhood.

In our adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's theory, we place *The Child* at the center. Other influences which we describe include the *Child and the Family*, the *Child and the Community*, the *Child and Society*, and *The Global Child*. The graphic below provides a visual representation of our adaptation.



The following brief description of each system demonstrates the connections between Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory and the RECD's current work in the field of early child development.

The Child: The child and the people and structures that have an impact on the child are located within this environment. This system includes the relationships and interactions a child has with his or her immediate surroundings. Also included here are aspects of a child's biology, genetics, and brain development including well-being, weight, and height. The events that affect a young child's development the most are those in which the child is involved face-to-face, such as bonding and play. According to Bronfenbrenner (2005), these proximal processes of interaction are "the primary engines of development" (p.6).

Child and Family: This environment integrates the child's home environment and extended family. The family/home environment is most influential for children age 0-8 years. The family environment includes such qualities as family values, history, culture, beliefs, parenting styles, socio-economic status, and parental education level. The child lives in the environment of home and family, but also exerts an influence on it, such as when an infant cries to be fed, or an older child begs for "just one more story, please?"

Child and Community: The environment describes the child's life beyond the home. The child might not function directly in this ecological environment, but this environment does affect his or her development (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). The community includes parental job experience, the presence of parks in the community, accessible libraries, and other structures such as early learning centres and/or elementary schools. The accessibility and quality of these services are key determinants of healthy child development. For instance, the existence of a public library and a children's story hour may have an impact on a child's love of literature and story, while the child's attendance at such events helps librarians demonstrate a need for these services.

Child and Society: This environment incorporates the attitudes and ideologies of a child's culture. For instance, cultural mores, social customs, and laws are included in this layer (Berk, 2000). This environment integrates aspects of spirituality, ethnicity, and nationality. It also involves overarching institutions such as federal and provincial governments, as well as public policy. In the first eight months of life, a child has the facility and potential to speak any language. As a child grows, the customs and language of the geographical place where the child is raised influence and shape that child to hold certain understandings and to behave in particular ways in accordance with the customs of the larger society.

The Global Child: This environment incorporates the child as a citizen of the global world. A child's global society includes cultural conditions, patterning of environmental events, and transitions over the lifespan. Influences may include the changes which flow from technological progress, global economics, and political strife. As an example, 7-year-old Charlie Simpson decided to raise money for young hurricane victims in Haiti by riding his bicycle around the park at his home in the United Kingdom, and asking his friends for donations for UNICEF. The event went viral, and donations flowed from all over the world to this young humanitarian (who has thus far raised almost \$322,000 for the children of Haiti). Events like this demonstrate the impact an individual may have on the global environment.

A number of guiding principles (derived from Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) have formed a mainstay for our work in early child development. These principles have been shared with the member networks of the PEI CS, and include the following:

- The child is the focus of the framework;
- A child both affects, and is affected by, the settings in which he or she spends time;
- The critical setting for a young child is the family;
- Child development is determined by what he or she experiences in the settings in which he or she spends time; and
- Connections among various settings in which a child spends time has an impact on a child's development.

The RECD ecological framework and the guiding principles have become an important means of describing the work conducted during the project. For instance, when the RECD team collected data about services and programs from the PEI CS networks, they used the framework to facilitate the data analysis and display. The five environments: The Child, Child and Family, Child and Community, Child and Society, and The Global Child formed one axis, while the domains described in *A Framework for Monitoring Child Well-Being*—physical development, emotional development, social knowledge, language, and cognitive development—formed the second axis. The team therefore hoped to root the data received from the networks of the PEI CS in a familiar context. The integration of the *Framework for Monitoring Child Well-Being* domains with the ecological framework allowed partners to consider the information from a different perspective.

The networks of the PEI CS have requested copies of the data poster to help them think about the programs and services currently available, to consider how these are meeting the needs of children and parents, and to determine whether changes need to be made to

more effectively address more of the identified needs of families in the community. Further information about this data display is shared later in the monograph. Suffice it to say here that the ecological framework that the RECD team adopted and adapted to the PEI context has proven to be both useful and well-accepted.

References

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