

# Helping At-Risk Youths: An Ecological Perspective

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## Ecological Levels

An exposition of the ecological systems<sup>1</sup> affecting youths is helpful if we want to understand how to help our at-risk youths.

The ecology of human development can be defined as the study of how a whole community functions to raise the children who will eventually take their place within that society.<sup>2</sup>

The developing individual typically faces four ecological levels that contain both socio-cultural risks and opportunities.

Garbarino describes **risk** as the **impoverishing of a child's world so that the child lacks the basic and psychological necessities of life.**

## Microsystems

The level most immediate to the developing individual is the "microsystem" which consists of the actual settings where the individual experiences or creates day-to-day reality.

This level will include situations where the child has face-to-face contact with influential others. Examples encompass the family, school, peer group, or religious faith group.

The key issue is the strength of reciprocal relationships the child appreciates.

- Is he or she regarded positively and generally accepted?
- Is he or she exposed to enough diversity in roles and relationships?

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<sup>1</sup>Much of the material in this essay is drawn from James Garbarino's work *Children and Families in the Social Environment (Second Edition)* where he expounded on Urie Bronfenbrenner's model of the human ecosystem.

<sup>2</sup>James Garbarino, *Children and Families in the Social Environment*, 2d ed. (New York, NY: Walter de Gruyter, Inc., 1992), 17.

The individual child constructs the microsystem as much as he or she is shaped by it.

**The microsystem becomes a source of developmental risk when it is socially impoverished.** This means the child suffers whenever the microsystem is stunted, be it through too few participants, too little reciprocal interaction, psychologically destructive interaction, or some combination of the three.

On the other hand, a healthy microsystem produces a child whose capacity for understanding and successfully dealing with ever wider spheres of reality increases. Such a child possesses and exercises self-respect, self-confidence, social and intellectual competence.

At the microsystem level, three important principles apply to the cultivation of a healthy individual.

- Firstly, the environment should furnish a full and rich range of roles, activities, and relationships for the child to use in his or her development.
- Secondly parents, or adults with parental authority over the child, should exert an authoritative style of parenting as opposed to either an authoritarian or permissive style.
- Finally, the developing child should be enveloped by a positive emotional climate that produces healthy self-esteem.

Children need to receive **nurturing feedback** from the significant adults in their lives. Children must be spared the danger of rejection which Garbarino, quoting a 1975 study by Ronald Rohner, terms as "a kind of emotional malignancy, a psychological cancer that eats away at the individual's capacity for self-esteem, social competence, and hope."

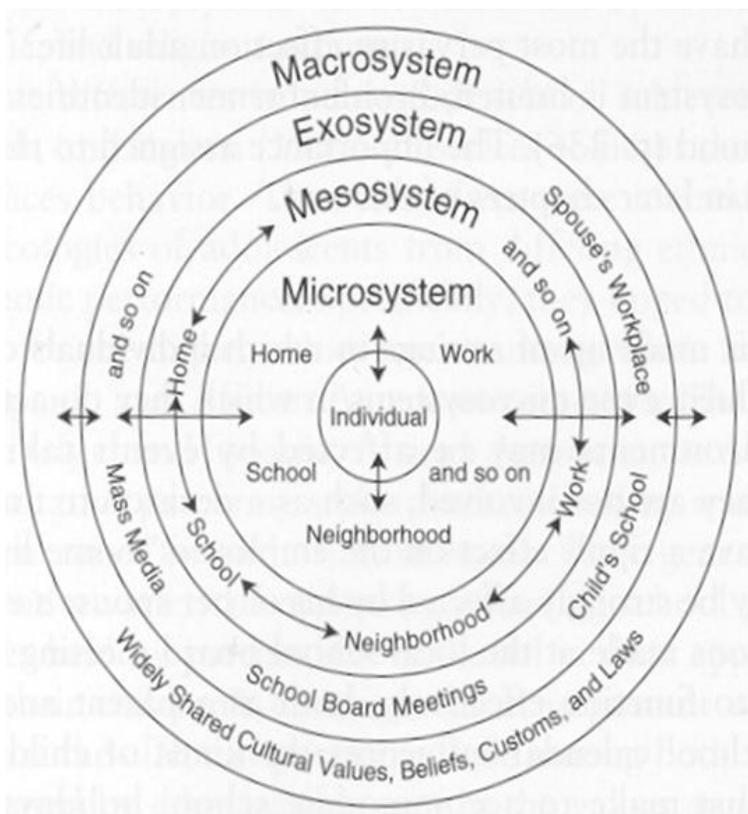
## Mesosystems

The next ecological level of the child's environment is referred to as mesosystems which are the relationships between two or more settings in which the child is an active participant.

The social richness of a child's mesosystem derives from the number and quality of these connections. The stronger, more positive and more diverse the links between settings, the more powerful and beneficial the resulting mesosystem will be for the child's development.

Conversely, mesosystem risk is defined firstly by the absence of connections and secondly by conflicts of values between one microsystem and another. **When the child's microsystems work in isolation or in opposition, the child becomes at risk.**

Perhaps one of the most important mesosystems for the child is the school-home relationship. When this connection is strong and positive, it promotes the child's intellectual and social development. When it is weak and negative, it burdens the child with conflicts of values, style and interest.



Garbarino refers to a strong home-school mesosystem as a set of multiple and mutually respectful relationships between families and school officials.

For instance, the child's home background prepares and trains the child to be comfortable and competent with the school's basic activities. Such a child will most likely work to the fullest of his or her potential at school.

While some students are well-equipped to be students, others find going to school an alien experience. Such children become set up for a whole series of socially and personally "risky" experiences, e.g., conflicts over rules, economic penalties, threats to self-esteem, and further alienation from society.

## Exosystems

The next ecological level, the exosystem, is the setting in which the child does not participate directly but which has an effect on the child through the mesosystems or microsystems.

**The risks operating in a child's exosystem act out in two broad categories. Firstly, where the parent's ability to participate productively in the child's microsystem is diminished and secondly, where individuals in institutional roles make decisions that adversely affects the child.**

An example in the first category may include parents being so stressed out or discouraged at work that they do not have the energy or spirit to play the role of nurturing or responsive parents.

Another example could stem from a local corporation's decision to relocate operations. Families where parents are employees of the corporation may be disadvantaged by having to relocate geographically or facing imminent financial hardship if the parents are retrenched.

Exosystems enhance development when they make life easier for parents. Exosystem opportunities thus exist where there are forces outside of the family that work on behalf of children and their parents.

On the other hand, **exosystem risk occurs when the child lacks effective advocates in decision-making bodies.**

Hence, Garbarino argues that risk at this level is primarily a political matter because “who gets what” is the basic political issue. This brings us to the broadest level of the child’s ecological system - the macrosystem.

## Macrosystems

Macrosystems are the blueprints for the ecology of human development. They arise out of the interplay of many factors like technological developments, economic climate and prosperity, corporate initiatives, government stability and policies, ideologies and even cultural norms.

In other words, the child’s development is inevitably influenced by macro forces far beyond the control of one individual.

To take this implication a step further, it is imperative that if we want **to reduce the risks** attached to the child’s most immediate level of the microsystem, we must **effect changes in the big picture in a concerted manner.**

## Chronosystems

This element was added to explain the impact of elements that affect the child’s development over time, for instance, the different tasks and challenges that face the child at his or her different stages of development. It could also relate to the impact of certain life-changing circumstances, like parents’ divorce or death of a loved one.

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## Application

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1. An understanding of the various ecological levels influencing the development of children or youths is useful if it leads us to a determination to help reduce the risks posed to them. There is a measure of optimism attached to any such endeavour because we are helped by the inherent adaptability and resilience of the human being.
2. Garbarino concludes that there are certain traits critical to the child’s success:
  - a. **a will to cope** (rather than a defensive reaction) combined with a willingness to seek out positive relationships with peers and adults;
  - b. **cognitive competence;**
  - c. **experiences of self-efficacy** (defined as being good at something which in turns build a useful and sustainable reservoir of confidence and self-esteem);
  - d. **a stable emotional relationship** with at least one person who may not be a parent but who is committed to the care of the child;
  - e. **an open supportive** educational climate; and
  - f. **social support** from persons outside of the family to connect the child positively to the community and resources.
3. The human child can and will become a competent person **if given the chance.**
4. The child’s innate desire to succeed amidst the host of antagonistic sociocultural risks must be bolstered by the parent’s committed love together with the community’s motivated care for all its children.