

CCCH / R.E. ROSS TRUST SEMINAR
HOW DO NEIGHBOURHOODS MATTER
FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH?
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**CHANGING DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES:
CONDITIONS AND RESOURCES FOR YOUNG
CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES**

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OUTLINE

- Developmental plasticity - the relative contribution of early and later experiences
- Changing children's developmental trajectories
- Conditions needed by children and families
- Contribution of neighbourhood and community factors
- CCCH Platforms service redevelopment framework and resources
- Conclusions

DEVELOPMENTAL PLASTICITY - THE RELATIVE CONTRIBUTION OF EARLY AND LATER EXPERIENCES



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WHAT ARE THE RELATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OF EARLY AND LATER EXPERIENCES?

There are two contrasting perspectives:

- The early years are critical for development and lay down patterns of behaviour and functioning that can have lifelong consequences
- Behaviour and functioning at any point in time are more strongly influenced by the immediate social and physical environment than by past experience

WHAT ARE THE RELATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OF EARLY AND LATER EXPERIENCES?

The early years are critical for development and lay down patterns of behaviour and functioning that can have lifelong consequences

This is the prevailing wisdom and is behind the push to invest and intervene during the early years

'The early years last a lifetime. Although this statement can be dismissed as a truism, it is profoundly significant. There is now an impressive body of evidence, from a wide range of sources, demonstrating that early child development affects health, well-being and competence across the balance of the life course. (Hertzman, 2004)

KEY FEATURES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

- **Young children develop through their relationships with others** – early relationships are formative and constitute a basic structure within which all meaningful development unfolds.
- **Brains are built over time.** Both brain architecture and developing abilities are built 'from the bottom up' Simple neurological circuits and skills providing the scaffolding for more advanced circuits and skills over time.

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KEY FEATURES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT (cont)

- **Early experiences can influence later health and developmental outcomes through a process of biological embedding.** This is a process whereby experiences are programmed into the structure and functioning of biological and behavioral systems, and set the child on a developmental trajectory that becomes increasingly difficult to modify.
- **Children's emotional development is built into the architecture of their brains.** Emotional development begins early in life, is a critical aspect of the development of overall brain architecture, and has enormous consequences over the course of a lifetime.

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KEY FEATURES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT (cont)

- **The growth of self-regulation is a cornerstone of early childhood development** that cuts across all domains of development. It underpins the subsequent development of emotional and social competences, as well as the mastery of academic tasks and general life skills.
- **Excessive stress disrupts the architecture of the developing brain.** Toxic stress in early childhood is associated with persistent effects on the nervous system and stress hormone systems that can damage developing brain architecture and lead to lifelong problems in learning, behaviour, and both physical and mental health.

WHAT ARE THE RELATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OF EARLY AND LATER EXPERIENCES?

Behaviour and functioning at any point in time are more strongly influenced by the immediate social and physical environment than by past experience

- Thus, developmental change is not gradual and continuous, earlier events are not precursors of later events, and the earliest events are not the most influential of all (Lewis, 1997).
- Instead, 'How people act is determined by their attempt to adapt to situations and problems as they find them'
- Since real life environments are rarely stable over time, our lives are 'more characterized by zigs and zags than by some predetermined, connected, and linear pattern'

WHAT ARE THE RELATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OF EARLY AND LATER EXPERIENCES?

Early behaviour and functioning are predictive of later behaviour and functioning to the extent that children's social and physical environments remain unchanged.

- The link between early experience and later behaviour occurs because children's environments tend not to change.
- We should be looking not only at the correlations between early and later behaviour / functioning, but also between early and later environments.

WHAT ARE THE RELATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS OF EARLY AND LATER EXPERIENCES?

Children's environments tend to remain unchanged because of feedback and feedforward loops that maintain established patterns of interactions between the child, family and community

- What this means is that it is difficult for children and families to extricate themselves from adverse circumstances – particularly when there are multiple risk or adverse factors in their lives.

Current behaviour and functioning are the result of an interaction between learnings and patterns of behaviour arising from earlier environments and experiences, and the child's adaptation to the current environment.

CHANGING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES?

Human development is shaped by the ongoing interplay among sources of vulnerability or risk and sources of resilience or protection.

- Exposure to adverse conditions does not inevitably lead to poor outcomes, but does significantly increase the risk.
- We need to distinguish between risk indicators and risk mechanisms: little is known about psychosocial risk processes, and even less is known about why and how effects persist when they do.

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WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES? (cont)

Development is 'weakly' determined – individual causal factors, whether genetic or environmental, rarely have a significant impact on development on their own.

- No single risk factor makes a significant difference to children's development – it is the cumulative impact of multiple risk factors that does the damage

Development is multiply determined, with both direct and indirect factors within and outside the child contributing to particular outcomes.

- Thus, many different risk or protective factors can lead to any particular developmental outcome, and particular risk or protective factors can lead to many different developmental outcomes.

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WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES? (cont)

No single form of intervention makes a significant difference to child development or family functioning – it is the cumulative impact of a comprehensive range of interventions that leads to positive change.

- The earlier these are provided the better – the younger the child, the easier it is to make a difference, and the more cost effective the intervention.

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WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES? (cont)

The importance of relationships

- **Relationships matter** - there is strong evidence that the relationships of all types have a significant impact on the development and well-being of those involved.
- **Relationships affect other relationships** - parallel processes operate at all levels of the chain of relationships and services, so that our capacity to relate to others is supported or undermined by the quality of our own support relationships.
- **Relationships change brains** - we are changed neurologically and neurochemically by relationships, and these changes may be for the better or for the worse

EFFECTS OF COMMUNITY AND NEIGHBOURHOOD ENVIRONMENTS ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL TRAJECTORIES AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING

- Environmental influences may be divided into proximal and distal contexts – the proximal influences are embedded in the distal influences
- The **proximal factors** affecting child development and functioning are family environments and relationships, while the **distal factors** include most community and neighbourhood effects.
- As a result, neighborhood influences generally account for much less variance than family influences - family characteristics account for about three to four times as much variance as do neighborhood characteristics.

CONDITIONS NEEDED BY CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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- What are the 'good enough' conditions and experiences needed by infants and young children to develop well?
- What are the conditions and supports needed by families to enable them to rear young children as they (and we) would wish?
- What are the features and qualities of communities that enable families of young children to rear their children as they (and we) would wish?
- What contribution can government make to supporting communities and families in rearing young children as they (and we) would wish?

CONTRIBUTION OF NEIGHBOURHOOD AND COMMUNITY FACTORS



THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

- At the proximal level, social environments take the form of **social support** or **personal support networks** - these refer to the people in our lives, usually our family and friends, who are the most immediate sources of emotional and practical support.
- At the distal level, social environments take the form of **social connectedness** or **social capital** - these refer to the nature of the linkages within communities, which can vary according to the general level of trust and reciprocity in the relationships between members of the community.

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THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT (cont)

- Both social support and social capital affect the functioning of individuals and families, but the proximal factors (ie. social support and social networks) have a greater effect than the distal factors (social capital)
- On the other hand, social capital and social connectedness have a greater effect on the overall well-being of the community, and a relatively modest impact on the functioning of individuals.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Aspects of the built environment that have implications for young children and their families include

- **Safety** – this includes physical safety (of roads, public spaces and facilities) and social safety (protection from violence or predation)
- **Health** – this includes environmental health (exposure to environmental toxins) and physical health (opportunities for physical exercise and play)
- **Social** – this includes opportunities for contact with a wide range of other children and families
- **Services and facilities** – this includes ease of access to services and facilities, and availability of transport

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT (cont)

What contribution does the built environment make to creating conditions that families with young children need to raise their children as they (and we) would wish?

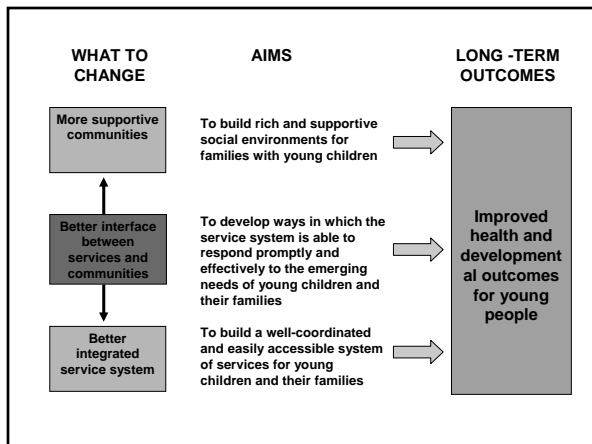
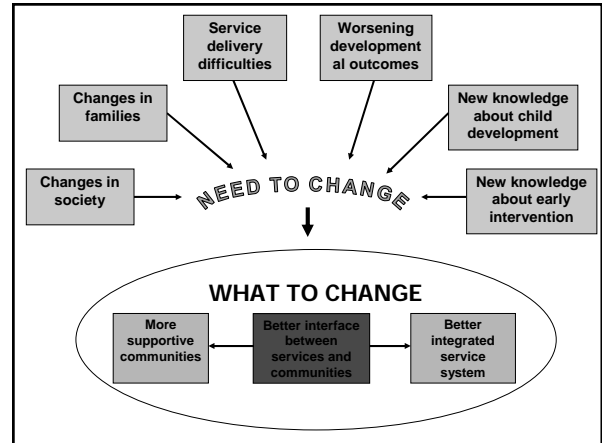
- Easily navigable urban environments.
- Public places that encourage social contact
- Services and facilities whose location, form and function are shaped by what families prefer and where families go

Built environments with these qualities have an impact on the conditions under which families are raising young children.

CONCLUSIONS RE NEIGHBOURHOOD / COMMUNITY EFFECTS

- Changes to neighbourhoods and communities can be expected to have diffuse effects across the whole of the local population, making a small contribution to average well-being.
- There are some aspects of the physical and built environment that can have a direct effect on children's health and development – eg. air quality, parks etc.
- However, many of the key aspects of development are more directly affected by proximal factors, especially their relationships with family, caregivers etc.
- Whether or not changing neighbourhoods or strengthening communities produces significant change in individual children depends upon the extent to which those changes alter the quality and range of their relationships

CCCH PLATFORMS SERVICE REDEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK AND RESOURCES



CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY CHILD HEALTH PLATFORMS SERVICE REDEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

PHASE 1	Raising awareness
PHASE 2	Engaging the community
PHASE 3	Planning
PHASE 4	Implementing
PHASE 5	Monitoring and evaluation

PHASE 1: <i>RAISING AWARENESS</i>	
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Disseminating research related to early childhood development ▪ Analysing implications for policy, service delivery and professional practice
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CCCH Policy Briefs. These summarize current research that is related to early childhood development and makes recommendations on how improvements in policy can impact ECD. • Seminars, workshops and media. Various seminars and workshops are held in the community promoting the importance of ECD and appropriate media coverage of ECD is supported.

PHASE 2: <i>ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY</i>	
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identifying key government and non-government stakeholders ▪ Identifying key policies, programs and initiatives ▪ Profiling community demographics and major community issues
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CCCH Community Audit Tool. A set of guidelines for conducting a systemic audit of policies, initiatives, funding and key community issues in a particular locality.

PHASE 3: <i>PLANNING</i>	
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identifying and building local resources and leadership ▪ Mapping community resources and needs ▪ Setting priorities and developing a detailed action plan
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CCCH Community Planning Toolkit. Guidelines and resources designed to assist communities in planning and refocusing services to emphasize prevention and early intervention to improve ECD outcomes. This involves linkages and improved coordination between different service types (e.g. child health and child care services). • CCCH Outcomes Framework. A guide to planning community-based services and service systems to optimize outcomes for ECD.

PHASE 4: <i>IMPLEMENTING</i>	
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Training providers and managers in key concepts related to ECD ▪ Early identification of child health and developmental issues ▪ Early identification of parenting and family issues
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CCCH Training Modules. A set of training modules on core knowledge and skills needed by professionals working with young children and their families. • Parent Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS) – Australian version. A brief questionnaire to assist those working with young children to elicit parent concerns about their child's development or behaviour. • CCCH Parent Engagement Resource. A resource to assist those working with families of young children to identify and address psychosocial issues that may adversely affect child and family functioning.

PHASE 4: <i>IMPLEMENTING (cont)</i>	
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provision of evidence-based interventions
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CCCH Practice Resources. A set of web-based resources detailing evidence-based practices in selected clinical areas such as language, behaviour, breastfeeding, literacy, and so on. • Let's Read. A comprehensive universal program that aims to promote literacy in young children aged 4 months to 5 years, especially those living in disadvantaged communities. • Universal Language Promotion Resources. A universal language promotion strategy delivered to parents by Maternal and Child Health (MCH) nurses. It aims to assist parents to improve the language and communication skills of their young children. • Toddlers Without Tears. This parenting program aims to prevent mental health problems developing during early childhood.

PHASE 5: <i>MONITORING AND EVALUATING</i>	
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Measuring progress
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CCCH Monitoring and Evaluation Toolkit. A set of resources to enable community-based services and service systems to monitor and evaluate the delivery and impact of their programs. • Australian Early Developmental Index (AEDI). An instrument used to assess key domains of a child's functioning that are considered important for 'school readiness.' The AEDI is completed by teachers in the first year of a child's formal schooling and is used to help communities in planning ECD services so as to improve school readiness in children.

CONCLUSIONS



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CONCLUSIONS

- Let's not claim too much for early experience – support for children from disadvantaged backgrounds needs to be maintained throughout childhood
- Let's not claim too much for what can be done through community strengthening – it is no substitute for strategies that address the basic needs of families for security of income, housing etc.
- There is a great deal that can be done at the community level to improve the conditions under which families are raising young children

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