CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN COMMUNITIES

Theory, Research, Policy and Practice

Jacqueline Barnes, Ilan Katz, Jill E. Korbin and Margaret O'Brien

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CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN COMMUNITIES

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Dedicated to Professor Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917 to 2005) whose writings have been so influential in bringing the topic of the community to the forefront for all those concerned with the well-being of children and their families. And to our children: Wesley and Max; Daniel, Gideon and Talia; Michael; Patrick and Rosie.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jacqueline Barnes is Professor of Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London, based at the Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues. After undergraduate study at University College London and qualifying at the University of Wisconsin to be an educational psychologist she returned to the UK and was awarded her PhD in Psychology from London University in 1983. A member of the newly-formed Fatherhood research group she co-edited a book about the emerging interest in fathers in the UK, *Fathers: Psychological Perspectives*, with Nigel Beail. In the 1980s she also developed the *Early Years Behaviour Checklist* with Naomi Richman, a widely used measure of the behavioural problems of young children in group settings published by the UK's leading test distributor, NFER. Since then she has worked at Harvard in the USA, returning then to London University. Her current research interests are: evaluation of early intervention programmes related to children's health and development and parenting; community characteristics and the environment as they relate to family functioning and children; the impact of parental illness and the use of assisted reproduction on parenting and child behaviour; and the use of child care in the early years, particularly factors associated with mothers returning to work after having a new baby. Professor Barnes is one of the directors of the national evaluation of the UK government's Sure Start local programmes initiative.

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Margaret O'Brien is Professor of Child and Family Studies and Co-Director of the Centre for Research on the Child and Family at the University of East Anglia. She was awarded her Ph.D. in 1984 from the London School of Economics and qualified as a Clinical Psychologist (British Psychological Society) in 1987. She was one of the early figures in fatherhood research in the UK, founding the Fatherhood Research group and co-editing two influential books *The Father Figure* (1982) with Lorna McKee and *Reassessing Fatherhood* (1987) with Charlie Lewis. O'Brien's current research interests are on fathers and family life, children's neighbourhoods and children's services. Recent publications include: *Children in the City: Home, Neighbourhood and City* (with Pia Christensen) (2003, London: Falmer Press) reporting on findings from the *Childhood, Urban Space and Citizenship: Child Sensitive Urban Regeneration, ESRC* funded Child 5–15 Research Programme; *Children's Trusts: Developing Integrated Services for Children in England (*2004 London: DFES*); Working Fathers: Earning and Caring* (2003, London: Equal Opportunities Commission). Professor O'Brien is one of the directors of the national evaluation of the UK Government's Children's Trust intervention to develop integrated children's services.

FOREWORD

COMMUNITY-BUILDING – SO WHAT?

[By natural law,] we are bound together in what the Bible calls 'the bundle of life.' Our humanity is caught up in that of all others . . . . We are made for community, for togetherness, for family, to exist in a delicate network of interdependence. Truly, 'it is not good for man to be alone,' for no one can be human alone. We are sisters and brothers of one another whether we like it or not and each one of us is a precious individual. (Tutu, 1999, pp. 196–197)

All of us, at some time or other, need help. Whether we're giving or receiving help, each one of us has something valuable to bring to this world. That's one of the things that connects us as neighbors – in our own way, each one of us is a giver and a receiver . . . . (Rogers, 2003, p. 135)

In the giving of help, a parent experiences one of the best feelings that any of us can have: that life has meaning because we are needed by someone else. Watching a baby grow with our help tells us other things we like to feel about ourselves: that we are competent and loving. (Rogers, 2003, p. 82)

Ubuntu does not say, 'I think, therefore I am.' It says rather: 'I am human because I belong. I participate. I share.' (Tutu, 2004, p. 27)

In *Children, Families, and Communities*, authors Jacqueline Barnes, Ilan Katz, Jill Korbin and Margaret O'Brien have undertaken the ambitious task of description of the relationship between community life and the well-being of children and families. The resulting volume is without peer in its breadth. *Children, Families, and Communities* is remarkable in at least two ways.

First, reflecting the authors' own cosmopolitan backgrounds, the reference points for the volume nearly span the globe. Although Barnes et al. acknowledge that a disproportionate number of relevant studies and programmatic innovations have occurred in the United States, the examples are drawn from the various countries in Europe, North America and Oceania in which the majority of people speak English as their first – and often only – language. Second, *Children and Families in Communities* integrates research findings with lessons from experience in family services. Going beyond relevant evaluation research, the authors also review practice- and policy-relevant basic research about topics in community sociology and environmental psychology. Thus, *Children and Families in Communities* is distinctive in the scope of the cultures studied, the sources of knowledge drawn upon and the settings to which the conclusions are applied.

COMMUNITIES AS VENUES FOR SERVICES

Building on the conceptual underpinnings of the family support movement (see, e.g., http://www.familysupportamerica.org), Barnes et al. endeavour to make their multi-cultural integration relevant in an era in which 'community-based programmes' and, subsequently, 'community initiatives' have dominated efforts to improve the well-being of children and families. Of course, what such projects *do* varies enormously, even if there is some commonality in *where* they work. Further, that these projects reflect the conventional wisdom about 'best practice' – in effect, much of the focus of *Children and Families in Communities* – does not necessarily mean that modal practice is even a close facsimile.

In several respects, the programmatic efforts chronicled in *Children and Families in Communities* have often been largely reactive. First, community-based programmes have often been defined in terms of what they are not. They ordinarily do not require people to leave their homes or relinquish the simple liberties of everyday life. Often, as in school-based services, community-based programmes are located within neighbourhood settings or primary community institutions. Such settings are likely to be 'friendlier' than hospitals (even the outpatient clinics) or correctional facilities – an important but modest accomplishment in the quest to protect the dignity of children and their families.

Second, community-based services often have been developed in response to particular local service gaps. The proliferation of community-based services is apt, almost by definition, to increase the accessibility of professional help. As a practical matter, especially in communities that are remote or that lack public transportation, this increased proximity to clients often results in greater availability of services, not just greater convenience in using them. Such a translation of nearby location into increased availability of services may be especially significant for individuals (indeed, most children) who are usually dependent on caregivers to transport them to service providers.

Although such increases in the help available to families in the most underserved communities are by no means trivial, their significance is often overstated. Rarely do they *transform* the services to make them more respectful and humane, better adapted to the setting, more family- and community-oriented, or better grounded in research. Creation of a school-based human services programme, for example, does not necessarily result in a qualitative change in the services delivered (see Melton, Limber & Teague, 1999; Melton & Lyons, in press; Motes, Melton, Pumariega & Simmons, 1999). *School-based* rarely means *school-oriented*. Instead, school-based mental health services, for example, often are organised in traditional 30- or 50-minute blocks for individual therapy, as if they were delivered at an ordinary community mental health centre. Often such school-based services are even less family- and community-oriented than are clinic-based services, because the hours of operation are limited to the school day, and only the children themselves are 'captive' during that time.

Third, community initiatives have emerged as a reaction to problems of operation of the service system itself. As the example of school-based mental health services illustrates, co-location by itself does little to eliminate the generations-old artificial division of the lives of children and families into

overlapping domains (e.g., education; health; justice; welfare) or, worse, into
co-extensive problems (e.g., conduct disorder; juvenile delinquency; poverty;
special educational needs; school misbehaviour). Common sense leads to the
conclusion that the current child and family service system is hopelessly
inefficient. Worse, the panoply of agencies that serve (or control) more or less
the same populations with more or less the same repertoire of interventions means
that reform in one without concomitant change in all of the others typically
accomplishes little more than to shift children and families to other service tracks
that are the new paths of least resistance (Melton, Spaulding & Lyons, 1998).

Such effects are surely unintended, and almost everyone would agree that they are
undesirable. De jure policy goals are frustrated, the lives of children and families are
purposelessly invaded, and money is wasted. Nonetheless, elimination of the
redundancies in the service system has proven to be a formidable challenge – maybe
even an intractable problem. Not only is the need for coincident change in many laws
and practices virtually impossible to engineer, but the historic categorisation of serv-
ices is sustained by large and well-entrenched bureaucracies and professional guilds.

For example, some political jurisdictions have attempted to eliminate the
redundancies by merging the traditional panoply of youth service agencies into
an omnibus department or ministry of child, youth and family services or even
simply 'human' services. As a practical matter, however, the result of the 'radical'
reorganisation typically has been the creation of one more layer of bureaucracy
laid atop new 'divisions' (not 'departments') of child welfare, juvenile justice, child
mental health, etc. Indeed, agreement on an organisational chart that comports
with common sense is itself such a difficult task that the creation of services that are
closely tailored to families' and communities' needs and resources often seems to
be a mere pipedream.

As the colloquial guidance goes, the response typically has been, 'If you can't
beat 'em, join 'em'. All US states and, I suspect, most or all of the other jurisdictions
discussed in this volume have undertaken major initiatives in the past two
decades – typically multiple times – to increase *coordination* and *collaboration*
among agencies providing services to children and families.

At root, such projects have had three assumptions. First, re-stating the thesis
about the malfunctioning of the service system, virtually all observers both inside
and outside agency leadership concede that the rampant fractionation of child
and family services impairs their efficiency and effectiveness. Second, noting the
unimpressive history of service system restructuring, most would contend that
fundamental reform – in effect, starting over – is impractical and, many would
argue, undesirable. (In this instance, *undesirability* refers to the widespread belief
that the present ineffectiveness of child and family services is the product of
inefficient administration, not inherent problems in the service array itself.)

Third, most directly driving the emphasis on service coordination, many
contend (naïvely, in my view) that, if only agency administrators were enabled –
or forced – to talk more often with each other, the efficiency and effectiveness of
services would increase substantially. Reflecting the strength of this belief, such
inter-agency initiatives have often begun with great hoopla, they sometimes have
included substantial financial incentives from federal or state governments and
large private foundations, and the resulting councils, teams and other structures

and processes to facilitate coordination of services have typically consumed much time and effort of key staff.

THE NEED FOR A BROADER APPROACH

As Barnes et al. discuss, however, these projects have typically had disappointing, even if unsurprising results. Inter-agency communication – even when inter-agency decision making and case management are added – generally fails to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of services. These results should be unsurprising. Well coordinated and even well financed ill-conceived services are still ill-conceived!

There are two related problems that underlie these conceptual failures. First, traditional services, even if administered in community settings, typically are logically linked neither to clients' needs nor to families' and communities' resources. When a family lacks sufficient income to enable parents to meet their child's basic needs, when the child (actually, usually adolescents) lag several grade-levels in educational achievement behind the mean for their age, when they have well-entrenched patterns of misbehaviour, and when their family has a multitude of other social problems (also often of long standing), then why should one expect a chat with a psychotherapist for 30 or 50 minutes every week or two to make a difference in the well-being of the child or the family? Despite the obvious lapse in common sense, this was the usual prescription when mental health professionals were given a blank cheque in the largest and best evaluated initiative ever undertaken to build a coordinated system of child mental health services (Bickman, 1996, 2000).

Second, the 'players' in the model coordinated services generally have been primarily – or only – the formal service providers. The 'community' involved in many purportedly comprehensive community initiatives has been narrow indeed!

This narrow construction is unfortunate at one level because the 'clinical' approach that relies only on professionals and bureaucrats has long been known not to be cost-effective, at least in the aggregate. Volunteers and paraprofessionals have long been known to be at least as effective as professionals in eliciting change on mental health variables among children (Berman, 1985; Weisz & Berman, 1987).

More generally, the nearly exclusive attention to formal programmes (especially those that are problem-focused rather than developmental; cf. Commission on Positive Youth Development, 2005) inherently diminishes both the reach and the effectiveness of help for children and their families. The incorporation of informal networks and natural helpers into service plans, whether at the family or the community level, enables immediacy and ubiquity of assistance. Such attributes are valuable in themselves. Help that comes sooner rather than later when one is hurting is nearly universally regarded as better. So is help that is available when one needs it most. Help that *prevents* pain altogether is still better, and help that does not simply prevent distress but that actually promotes a better quality of life is surely best of all.

Both common sense and principles of behaviour change also suggest that intervention is apt to be most effective when rehearsal is in vivo and the contingencies used to maintain the change can be made 'natural' in the settings of everyday life. When these conditions can occur without payment of professional fees and the

stigma of identification as a patient or a client, such help is both more feasible and more likely to be accepted.

The epidemiology of child and family problems also suggests the need for an approach that gives due weight to the potential contributions of relatives, friends, neighbours and primary care professionals (e.g., family physicians; clergy; schoolteachers; recreation leaders). A panoply of factors push toward enlistment of the community as a whole as helpers and 'friendly' agents of control: the high proportion of children and families with serious problems in meeting the demands of everyday life, the multiplicity of problems that they typically have, and the ubiquity of the settings in which such problems are manifest. To use a US sports metaphor, a 'full-court press' in which *all* of the local players (not just the coach [the agency administrator or consultant] or the team captains [the credentialed professionals]) are engaged in coordinated action to address an issue of common concern sometimes is the only sensible course of action. It also may be the only approach that has a chance to be effective in combatting multifaceted problems of formidable strength. (New Zealand's family group conferences – and, even more so, the community-driven steps to implement the resulting plans – are illustrative.)

Apart from the immediate effectiveness of a system of care that relies in substantial part on the good will of concerned community residents, such a system is likely to have important positive side effects. For example, Reissman and Carroll (1995) brought social scientists' attention to the *helping paradox*, the familiar phenomenon in which helpers receive more benefit than those whom they assist. It is indeed more blessed to give than to receive.

Further, if a community-wide safety net is to be woven for children and families, it must be used often enough and visibly enough that all of those who are needed as weavers perceive the importance and efficacy of their contributions, it must be big enough to blanket the community, and all must perceive the responsibility to lift the net into place where it is needed. As the metaphor suggests, we need a universal norm of mutual assistance. This norm must extend from 'haves' to 'have nots', and it must encompass young people as well as adults.

In that regard, observation of neighbourhood residents having a positive effect on the community may be important for both parents and children in building a sense of collective efficacy and, for parents, of parental efficacy – dimensions that are important elements in improving both objective and subjective quality of life for families. As Barnes et al. discuss, participatory planning may be one mechanism for such action. Regardless of the particular strategy, however, the effects of one's own participation are likely to be multiplied by the effects of observation of neighbours' involvement. Such collective experiences are first steps toward construction of new norms of mutual assistance.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY BUILDING

The Questions of Concern

Barnes et al. conclude this volume with an expression of 'considered optimism'. Their lukewarm enthusiasm for the approaches that they review appears to be

based on a lack of definitive evaluation studies using conventional indicators of child outcomes and a suspicion that community change may be too distal from individual well-being to be an effective strategy.

There is a more fundamental problem, however, than the instrumental query of whether a given approach 'works' in affecting individual behaviour. As a matter of social policy and public morality, the experience of *belonging* – of being sheltered by a community, of being treated with respect as a *person* in that community and ultimately of contributing to the well-being of other people in the community, individually and collectively – ought to be a part of every child's life. This is a *bonum in se* (a good in itself) – perhaps even the *summum bonum*. As implicit in the Golden Rule, everyone should expect to be treated as a person of worth who will be noticed and cared for, and, by their own behaviour, all should contribute to such expectations in the community at large.

There is good reason to believe that the experience of belonging and the corollary immersion in a sea of relationships within and across the generations are indeed critical elements of effective strategies for reduction of problems of childhood and family life. These experiences are too important in themselves, however, to relegate them in public discussions to consideration merely as intermediate outcomes.

The Ideas of Mr Rogers and Archbishop Tutu

The significance of this idea is suggested in the quotes of Fred Rogers and Desmond Tutu that opened this foreword. The humanitarian instincts of these two men were, in my judgment, among the most heroic in the 20th century. At first glance, they had little in common. Fred Rogers, known to a generation of American children as 'Mr Rogers', starred in a US public television show for preschoolers, and Archbishop Tutu provided much of the moral and intellectual leadership for the transformation that occurred in South Africa late in the century. One was White, and the other is Black. One was American, and the other is South African. One was a media celebrity, and the other is a spiritual and political leader. Mr Rogers was so legendary for his 'niceness' that he was often the subject of satire, but, as indicated by his Nobel Prize, Archbishop Tutu is a larger-than-life figure who now is virtually beyond criticism and who, even during the apartheid years, was largely invulnerable to the government's disdain. (This observation is not meant to denigrate the courage that undoubtedly was required for a Black man to be a vocal critic of the then-prevailing social and political order.)

In my own mind, however, Mr Rogers and Archbishop Tutu had much in common. Although Mr Rogers' viewers and most of their parents knew little about his background, he was also a Protestant clergyperson (specifically, a Presbyterian minister). The major point of commonality that struck me, however, was not their similar educational and professional background or even their common religious faith. Although these experiences probably contributed to the similarities in their public personas, the feature that united Mr Rogers and Archbishop Tutu in my mind was their gentleness. Whether in the company of young children or heads of state, each compellingly communicated respect for others through a demeanor of

grace and humility. Although their words were memorable (whether in Mr Rogers' simple songs about 'the people in your neighbourhood' or Archbishop Tutu's thoughtful homilies integrating Anglican theology and African experience), these two kind men's soft demeanor was the foundation for their power.

The blend of medium and message is overt in Archbishop Tutu's ubuntu theology, which blends East and West (perhaps more precisely, South and North) to show the compatibility of a strong sense of community and respect for human rights (see Battle, 1997, for a detailed exposition of the integration of these ideas with Judeo-Christian theology, specifically the belief that human beings are created in the image of God). *Ubuntu* is a Xhosa word, which apparently does not have a direct English equivalent but which is translated roughly as *humanity*. It subsumes a statement of worldview, a code of ethics, a mode of social relations and a characteristic of personality.

In 1993, Tutu gave an address to an African American audience in 1993, in which he described ubuntu as the embodiment of welcoming, giving, and sharing, just as a neighbourly person acts as a friend to a stranger. As he commonly does, Tutu described the human condition as a 'delicate network of interdependence', so much so that self-discovery arises only within the context of community:

> We say a person is a person through other persons. We don't come fully formed into the world. We learn how to think, how to walk, how to speak, how to behave, indeed how to be human from other human beings . . . We are made for togetherness . . . This is how you have ubuntu [in effect, how you discover your personality] – you care, you are hospitable, you're gentle, you're compassionate and concerned. (Battle, 1997, p. 65, quoting Tutu's 1993 speech at Morehouse Medical School)

To return to the quotes of Mr Rogers, the value that one adds to the world (stated in psychological and philosophical terms, the *meaning* that one's life has) is discovered most directly in acts of generosity. Further, when families and communities are functioning well, this interdependence as giver and receiver is the framework for everyday experience.

It is this experience that is most fundamental to community life and, in particular, to the growth of children as uniquely important persons. As succinctly stated in the seminal global expression of human rights, '[e]veryone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of personality is possible' (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, art. 29, § 1). In recent years, the international community has joined in a pledge to support 'the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential' (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, art. 29, § 1(a)) and in 'the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society' (art. 29, § 1(d)) – a society grounded in 'the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity' (preamble).

A Personal Anecdote

To concretise these grand pronouncements, I hope that readers will permit me to indulge in the presentation of a personal story. Several years ago, my older

daughter Jennifer and her then-fiancé Tom chose to hold their wedding in the small-town Methodist church in North Carolina where my great-grandfather had been minister and in which his heirs had been active. Although Jennifer had spent little time in that community in which I grew up, she felt connected by the family ties across five generations. These connections were made even more obvious because, by happenstance, the wedding was held on the day of the town's centennial anniversary. Several of the guests noted an exhibit in the festival displays that chronicled my late grandfather's service as mayor.

The wedding was clearly a family affair, but there was a touch of globalisation even in Granite Quarry. One of my brothers (a United Methodist minister) officiated, and the other (an accountant by day but a semi-professional classical singer by night) sang love songs by Grieg. The international flavour came not only from Jennifer's selection of music by Grieg but also her choice of her best friend from the folk school that she attended in Norway as her matron of honour and as the folk-music soloist at the reception.

Although these personal touches in themselves made for a memorable wedding, the most striking aspect for me was the relationships in which Jennifer now joined, perhaps unintentionally. The setting vividly suggested the strength of the community connections that sustained several generations before her when, as the vows go, our family had been richer or poorer, in sickness or in health. Those relationships could be found not just in the church but also in and among the bridge group, the Civitan civic club, the women's club, the Little League baseball team, the Scout troop, the street dance, the town council meeting and the school classroom.

When my siblings and I attended church the next day, we were struck not only by the number of childhood mentors whom we saw but also by the number and specificity of their memories of my family's involvement in the everyday life of the community about 40 years earlier. For example, the minister told the congregation a story that had not entered my own memory in years about one of my brothers' quiet attentiveness to a Little League teammate who lost first a leg and then his life to bone cancer.

I have since visited the church several times and each time become re-acquainted with more now-elderly adults who were important to my parents, one of my siblings, or me. Each time I am reminded about new stories of shared celebration or mourning. The stories are not always ones of pride; most notably, racial segregation was a fact of life throughout my childhood. However, the stories are uniformly grounded in a strong web of *relationships* that gave shape to me as a person. From an early age, I had no reason to doubt that my friends, my relatives, my teachers and youth group leaders, these adults' own friends and relatives and I myself all were important members of the community – Tutu's delicate network of interdependence.

Re-experiencing these connections is always a bittersweet experience, however. My ambivalence comes from the fact that my own daughters and most of their peers have not experienced the same depth and breadth of connections. They are less likely than the generations that came before to have friends who share their burdens of disability and loss and their joys of creation and union. They are less likely to notice and be noticed when there is cause for celebration and sorrow. If

current long-standing trends continue, the next generation will be even less likely to experience the personal meaning that comes with community.

CONCLUSION

I am not telling the story of Jennifer's wedding because of a sense of nostalgia or an idyllic view of life in the small-town US South. Rather, I combine it with the observations of Fred Rogers and Desmond Tutu because that weekend and the connections that it re-awakened demonstrate what community means. Such experiences are at the centre of our humanity, and they have particular significance for the personal development of children.

There is no question that the decline in social capital has been adverse for our children (see, e.g., Seligman, 1995, on the trend toward greater depression among young people, and Twenge, 2000, on the analogous trend toward greater anxiety). Nonetheless, my point is that the primary reference point for understanding community initiatives ought not to be in a traditional evaluation of their efficacy as a strategy to replace older means of human service delivery in responding to particular problems of individual children. Although that is a legitimate question, the more important concern rests in their effectiveness in fostering community itself.

In that regard, I suspect that the ultimate contribution that Barnes et al. will have made in this volume lies in their beginning to address the basic question of the nature of children's involvement in communities and of the significance of that involvement for their development. We need a better understanding of the 'glue' that binds communities together – especially communities fully inclusive of children. (I was struck recently by the evidence that the most attractive and 'renewed' cities in the United States – e.g., San Francisco; Seattle; Minneapolis; Boston; Austin – are also the cities with the lowest proportion of children in their population.) The acquisition of personal meaning in a time of community fragility is a profound question indeed and one that will be important for generations to come.

Professor Gary B. Melton
August 2005

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PREFACE

> Sustainable communities meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, their children and other users, contribute to a high quality of life and provide opportunity and choice. They achieve this in ways that make effective use of natural resources, enhance the environment, promote social cohesion and inclusion and strengthen economic prosperity (*Egan Review. Skills for Sustainable Communities*, ODPM, 2004, p. 7).

In the 1990s there was a resurgence of interest in policy, practice and research relating to communities and their significance for children and families, which has continued into the current century. This has been accompanied by increasing concern about the breakdown of families and communities in post-modern society, and a belief that this breakdown is a contributory cause (and an effect) of social problems. Improvements in data collection and analysis have shown that problems such as child abuse, juvenile crime, substance abuse, school expulsion, mental health problems of children and parents and marital discord are not only concentrated in certain types of families, but also in particular geographic locations. This realisation has resulted in a growing recognition (accompanied at times by almost religious fervour) that the community or neighbourhood environment may be a significant factor in enhancing children's well-being. Community development and regeneration, once relatively neglected disciplines, have recently received a great deal of attention in a number of countries in the Western world. This in turn has led to the recognition that effective programmes to prevent and treat these social problems need to be targeted not only at high-risk individuals or families, but also at neighbourhoods and communities themselves.

In the USA evidence of increasing interest in communities can be seen in the formation of the Roundtable on Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families (Connell et al., 1995). This has led to a range of catchy book titles – '*From Neurons to Neighbourhoods*', '*It takes a village*', '*Does it take a village*?' – and many other less catchy but equally important volumes. Following the election in the UK of the Labour Government in 1997, a range of initiatives such as Sure Start, New Deal for Communities, On Track and the Children's Fund have been developed and rolled out to target high-risk communities or neighbourhoods. Indeed, there are now over 20 'Area-based initiatives' either wholly or partly focused on children in the UK. In other countries community initiatives are burgeoning – Better Beginnings Better Futures in Canada, Stronger Families and Communities in Australia, CoZi schools in the USA – to name but a few.

The theoretical underpinning for many of these interventions is the 'Ecological Model' originally proposed by Bronfenbrenner in 1979, which provides a framework

for understanding how different levels of the ecology interact to affect the lives of children. There is a growing body of empirical and theoretical literature emerging about the effects of the environment on children and families, and this literature is pointing towards a rather complex relationship between communities, families and children. In particular, the relationship between community-level interventions and child outcomes is not at all straightforward.

Another area which has been growing has been the participation of children in communities, prompted in some ways by the greater attention being paid to children's rights following the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified currently by 192 nations. Only recently has it been acknowledged in both policy and research that children and young people themselves may have a distinctive view of communities and a specific role to play in improving and developing communities (or indeed in degrading and undermining them). Whilst participation by children and young people has now become an important focus of policy and practice, there is a relatively small theoretical and evidence base for this work, and much of the discussion ignores or downplays the role of parents and families. This book considers the research, theorising and some of the policy implications of involving young people in communities. In so doing it draws on the emerging disciplines of childhood sociology, childhood geography and anthropology.

This book brings together some of the latest current thinking on the relationship between children, families and communities, exploring the theoretical, policy, research and practice implications for the emerging knowledge in this area. It adds to a growing literature which is aimed at building up the theoretical and evidence base for intervening in family life to reduce poverty and social exclusion.

The book addresses the theoretical bases of community and childhood, the extent to which it is known (rather than assumed) that communities influence children and parents, what has been done to involve young parents and young people in community strengthening, and the knowledge-base regarding community interventions for infants and preschoolers and their families, for school-age children and for adolescents.

The first three chapters deal with theory and methodology, examining the many and varied definitions of community, the theoretical approaches to understanding the influence of communities on children and parents and the developments in the measurement of communities. The next two chapters summarise research, first examining ways that community features may (or may not) influence child development and parenting behaviour, and second the role of children in communities is examined in detail by looking at how children use communities and move about in them.

The remainder of the book focusses on policy and practice. The concept of a community intervention is clarified in the context of current policy agendas. There follow reviews of a range of interventions grouped according to whether they primarily focus on young children and their parents, older children, schools as communities, or on preventing adolescent problems and in particular juvenile crime.

Finally, we provide some conclusions and thoughts about future directions, particularly on the future of community interventions for children and families.

1

INTRODUCTION

ECOLOGICAL THEORY AND ITS APPLICATION TO CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND PARENTING

It has always been recognised that a child's circumstances are likely to have an influence on their developmental progress. In the past psychologists in particular have focused predominantly on the behaviour and skills of parents, looking at the extent to which they have gained educational qualifications, attained employment at different levels of the occupational 'ladder', or provided opportunities for their child – to play, to meet other children, to attend schools of good quality and so on. Personal characteristics of the parents such as their personality, attitudes or mental health were also considered to be of importance in understanding both their child's development and their parenting behaviour. In contrast, sociologists paid more attention to community influences.

What has changed in the past few decades is the acknowledgement by a number of disciplines concerned with child and family development, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, psychiatry and social policy, that parents and children occupy systems beyond the family system, that they need to be understood in context, and that their environment makes a difference to their health, well-being and progress. Now it is recognised that individual, family and wider community factors need to be addressed together rather than being considered separately. For instance, 'broken windows' in a neighbourhood have long been associated with levels of criminal and delinquent behaviour (Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Wilson and Kelling hold that if someone breaks a window in a building and it is not quickly repaired, others will be emboldened to break more windows. Eventually the broken windows create a sense of disorder that attracts criminals, who thrive in conditions of public apathy and neglect. Their argument in relation to interventions to reduce crime and delinquency was that, if you send the message that people care about this neighbourhood (by fixing windows), this also sends the message that if something happens someone may catch you or at the very least notice. The theory would predict that this attention to the structural 'well-being' of the neighbourhood will change people's behaviour, not just about whether they break windows but whether they mug old ladies and whether or not they burgle houses and so forth. More recently structural aspects of a geographical community such as the broken windows indicator, or general community neglect, have been linked with a range of other issues including health

problems (Cohen et al., 2000), parenting problems (Garbarino & Eckenrode, 1997), children's educational achievement (Gibbons, 2002) and child behaviour (Boyle & Lipman, 1998).

The environment of a child or a family, including their immediate dwelling and conditions in the home, has been intensively studied by researchers around the world using instruments such as the HOME inventory (Bradley & Caldwell, 1976; Caldwell & Bradley, 1984). However, as much if not more attention is now also being directed towards understanding the importance of neighbourhoods or communities, and towards the relationships that children and parents have within their neighbourhoods with non-family groups or communities of interest. Thus there is both a physical community in which they are placed, and a community of relationships that may influence them.

Although talk about 'ecological influences' and 'community intervention' is becoming commonplace[1] it is important to understand the theoretical underpinnings of this trend as well as the limitations of current knowledge. Much of the literature pertaining to the possible relevance of the community to children and parents has been inspired by, and gives credit to, the theoretical work of Bronfenbrenner (1979). His ideas provided the mainspring for a wealth of research and writing over the following decades. Very simply put, he proposed that a child's development should be examined as an evolving interaction between the person and the environment; that development is defined as the way in which the environment is dealt with. It was his concept of the environment that was original, described as a 'set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls' (p. 3). Some of these 'dolls' would be actual settings in which the child moved (microsystems; e.g. the home, the classroom), others would be 'virtual dolls', the interaction between settings that the child occupied (mesosystems; e.g. between home and school), and yet other layers would be settings in which the child did not move, but which were occupied by key figures in their world (exosystems; e.g. their parents' workplaces). Finally the complex inter-relationship between nested levels will be influenced by the prevailing culture or subculture (macrosystems). He stressed that 'what matters for behaviour and development is the environment as it is *perceived* [his italics] rather than as it may exist in "objective" reality' (p. 4). He further suggested that, rather than basing social policy on research evidence 'Basic science needs public policy even more than public policy needs basic science', going on to conclude:

> Knowledge and analysis of social policy are essential for progress in developmental research because they alert the investigator to those aspects of the environment, both immediate and remote, that are most critical for cognitive, emotional, and social development of the person (1979, p. 8).

[1] For instance, a Google search using the terms 'ecological, influence, child, development' produced 905,000 hits; 'ecological theory' produced more than three million (3,370,000); using the terms 'community, intervention, child, development' produced 11,100,000 results; and entering the terms 'community, intervention, child abuse) led to 4,560,000. A Psychlit search entering 'ecological' produced 32,407 hits, and the term 'Bronfenbrenner' produced 14,000 results.