

ChildFund Australia Fact Sheet 6 - Child Context Relationships

What is meant by child context relationships?

Throughout the world, millions of children live in impoverished environments that are powerful predictors of negative outcomes. The web of relationships within these adverse environments provides a context that profoundly influences the child's development. These contexts must be considered as development inputs and incorporated when planning any intervention. Three primary areas that make up the child's environment are:

Human characteristics of a community such as the:

- Ethnic composition
- Proportion of community members living below employment and poverty levels
- Nature of adult and child social networks
- Number of female-headed households
- Age and gender distribution

Personal aspects include:

- The personal characteristics of parents, caregivers, peers, teachers, and other significant people who influence children's development in proximal settings (e.g. the quality of care provided by the child's caregiver)

Structural features of the community can include:

- The physical and human structure of communities (i.e. demography) and the household.
- The physical characteristics of the child's context (e.g. type of housing, access to water, quality of the recreation facilities, and the number and quality of the schools)

These three areas influence a child's development in a multitude of ways. The impacts can be identified at the micro, meso and macro levels. The starting point is the recognition that 'proximal' or close interactions are the most important in shaping lasting aspects of a child's development. Often referred to as a child's 'micro system', this is where continuous, face-to-face interactions with familiar people such as family, school, or peer group relationships have a profound effect on a child's development. The child's 'meso system', encompasses the immediate community environment (that may in turn influence the people who have close relationships with a child) while the 'macro system' refers to the wider cultural, political, and material influences which may impact the child.

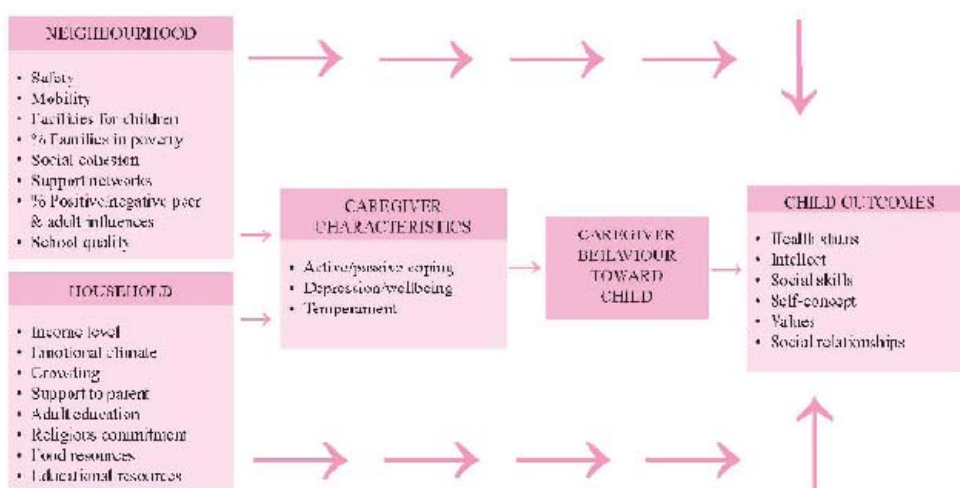
In what ways do these relationships influence the child?

The interaction of the areas and levels listed above can variously create negative or positive emotional and developmental outcomes.

Within the family, children who have the support of a positive relationship are better protected against the damaging affects of poverty than children lacking this relationship. Externally, the impact of neighborhood characteristics can be mediated by family members.

Positive role models are particularly important for children. Should an environment or persons be negatively perceived by a child (particularly a child without the support or mediation of a caregiver or family) the child can develop antisocial and negative behaviors which can take hold more firmly and permanently in adolescence.

Figure 1: Influences of poverty on child outcomes



Many of the variables that determine risks to child well-being are stable, resist change, and are expensive to change. Culturally appropriate interventions in caregiver interactions, family processes, peer contexts, and schools are most likely to succeed, particularly during early and middle childhood.

Why is the culture within a community so important?

Community culture is a major factor in determining how children are raised and in providing a set of commonly understood norms, behaviours and expectations for children. Community culture can be a major protective factor for children that contributes to a sense of belonging, identity and provides opportunities to participate in community life (e.g., participation in community events, rituals and ceremonies.)

Cultures structure the settings where the child's activities take place; they determine how children's needs are seen, suggest acceptable behavior at different ages and for different genders, and indicate the signs of children's wellbeing and distress. Misunderstanding community culture can prevent organisations from working effectively with these communities. It is essential that respect and understanding of community culture be achieved, particularly if development interventions are aimed at influencing attitudes or practices within a community. Changing adult perceptions in relation to children will be more effective if interventions recognise (not necessarily accept) local knowledge, values, and practice and attempt to develop cooperative interventions with those they intend to help.

How does ChildFund use an understanding of child context relationships in its development work?

Achieving an understanding of the web of relationships in beneficiary communities is integrated into ChildFund's program management cycle. Ongoing relationship and partnership with the communities help enrich ChildFund's knowledge of culture which is taken into account in defining sustainable programs and culturally appropriate strategies for child-centred interventions. Some approaches and techniques that are used to gain a better understanding of the community are Participatory Rapid Appraisal, situational analysis, gender analysis and child participation.

All of these have a high degree of participation from the community (adults and children) and other relevant stakeholders. The rich expertise of ChildFund's local staff on culture and language are also utilised to better understand communities and other stakeholders in order to maintain an unbiased and non-judgmental perspective towards practices and local dynamics that affect children.

DEV, child development and child context relationships – putting the pieces together

Implementing successful programs requires that ChildFund apply several core areas of knowledge in working with children and communities. These core areas of knowledge are set out in other fact sheets. When planning and implementing programs, technical application of the DEV framework, understanding of child development and child context relationships are brought together as indicated in the diagram. The DEV framework identifies the

deprivation, exclusion and vulnerability experienced by children as they progress through different developmental stages within a complex web of relationships. The experience of children, and our understanding of their experience, is dynamic and is constantly evolving due to the unique circumstances in which a child exists at any given time.

