

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Child development can be divided into different areas or domains including: cognitive, language, social, emotional physical, and moral. This development is shaped by many different influences. According to Urie Bronfenbrenner, the environment in which a child grows up will shape and affect his or her development. He calls this environment the **Ecological System**. The Ecological System includes the physical, social, cultural, financial, political, and religious environment in which the child matures and grows into an adult. Bronfenbrenner recommends investigating the Ecological System of the child, in order to understand and explain that child's development.

Bronfenbrenner developed this theory in the late 1960's. At this time, most psychology research took place in laboratories, and entailed **experimental studies**. Bronfenbrenner was very critical of this approach. He did not think that people could act and behave in a healthy and natural manner in a lab when they knew they were being watched and observed. Consequently, he believed that the findings from these experimental studies were not accurate or valid and did not give any valuable information.

When Bronfenbrenner began to build his Ecological Systems Theory, his approach reflected his outlook. His research did not involve any laboratory-based experiments. He took a different approach and based his theory on **observation**. Bronfenbrenner studied the behavior and actions of children as they went about their daily lives -- in school, at home, taking part in groups and clubs and playing together.

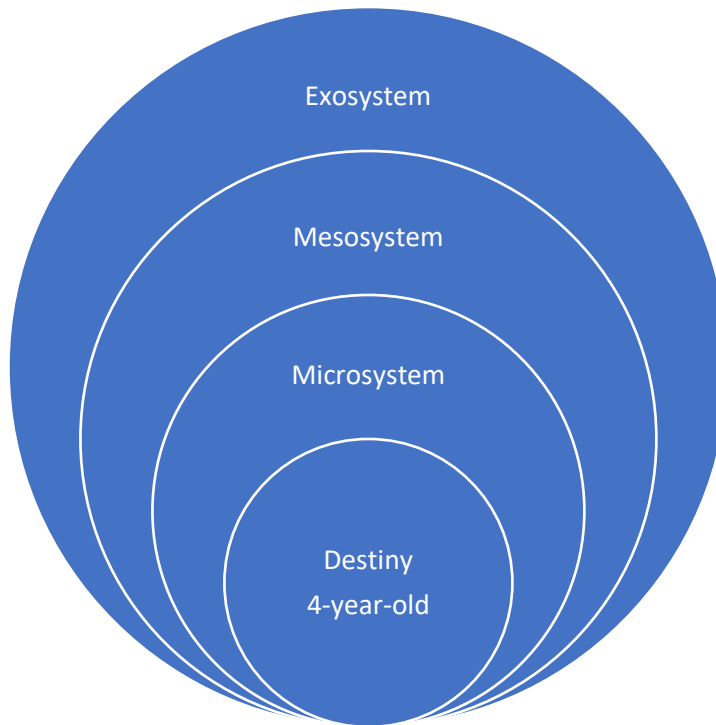
Environmental Effect on Development

Urie Bronfenbrenner explained the impact of **proximal processes**. Proximal processes are interactions between the child and his or her surroundings. Examples of proximal processes are activities and exchanges with parents, teachers, coaches and friends at school, during play, and at home. These interactions are the engine of development. Bronfenbrenner recognized that child development is bidirectional, meaning that the environment impacts the child but the child impacts the environment (people, interactions) s/he is in. Bronfenbrenner divides the environment into 4 different levels:

1. Microsystem
2. Mesosystem
3. Exosystem
4. Macrosystem

We will now more closely examine these levels, looking at how they impact on the development of 4-year-old Destiny. Have a look at the diagram below. See how the microsystem is nearest to Destiny, which demonstrates the microsystem as the closest system to Destiny and the one which she has the most direct connection.

Macrosystem



Microsystem

The microsystem is the system which the child has the most direct contact with. It describes how the child spends his or her life. In Destiny's case, it includes her family, kindergarten, and afterschool program. According to Bronfenbrenner, Destiny's development may be shaped by the activities and happenings at Kindergarten. For example, finger painting, threading beads, and practicing her pencil grip will help Destiny's physical development. If Destiny's mom reads to her every night, her language development and vocabulary growth will increase. On a more negative note, Destiny's social development and self-esteem may be affected if the afterschool program staff fails to realize that Destiny is the target of bullying behaviors from a group of other kids.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem outlines the exchanges between the various components of the microsystem e.g. the relationship between home and school and the relationship between home and friends. Destiny's parents may support her cognitive development by helping her with homework and speaking with her teacher regularly to quickly identify any problems she may be having. Arranging playdates will help Sophie's social development.

Exosystem

The exosystem is the connections between a child and a setting which affects them, but one of which they do not have any contact, such as a parent's workplace or school management. Think back to Destiny. If school management decides to spend their budget on a new mindfulness curriculum and training, Destiny's psychological development will benefit.

Conversely, if her dad loses his job, there will be other consequences. Her father may be stressed, which will impact his interactions with Destiny, there may be less money for food which could affect her physical development, and she may not have the money to go on the class field trip which could impact her socially and cognitively.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the background of all the other parts of the Ecological System, and it means the culture in which the child spends their life. Many cultural factors affect development. They include: poverty, cultural values, wealth of the country, role of women in society, role of religion in society, political views of the society. If Destiny lives in a country that does not value education for girls, or a society where women's roles are confined to the home, Destiny may not have the opportunity to attend school. She may not learn to read, to count, or to problem solve. Her cognitive development will be affected. She may not get the opportunity to play with children her own age and her social development may be negatively affected and delayed. If Destiny lives in a religious society, her development of a moral code may be strongly based on her religious beliefs.

Conclusion

This theory has strongly influenced the way educators work with children and families because it is now recognized that the environment impacts shapes development. Since Bronfenbrenner's work; educators now collaborate with children's families, caregivers, other professionals, and community groups. This acknowledges the affect other children and the environment has on a child's development.

Adapted from:

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