



# Effect of Social Environment on Child's Development

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## 1. Introduction

An individual's social environment, including the social relationships an individual makes within it, can also have a profound impact on the quality of parenting, which in turn affects a child's health development and future achievements. Inclusive social environments which provide support to parents have been shown to enhance parents' capacity to care for their children and in doing so promote better child health and development. They have also been shown to have a positive effect on the family system, and families who are well connected to networks of supportive individuals are better able to cope with factors which may negatively influence their health.

## 2. What are social environments?

The social environment refers to an individual's physical surroundings, community resources and social relationships. The physical surrounding of a social environment include housing, facilities for education, healthcare, employment and open space for recreation. The nature of physical surroundings (including their quality, e.g. the extent to which open spaces are clean and buildings maintained) can influence the quality of parenting and in turn affect the health and wellbeing of children within that environment.

## 3. Social relationships

The social environment also influences the nature and quality of the social relationships in which parents and children engage, as the social environment largely determines who, how often and on what terms parents and children will interact socially. Developing and maintaining positive social relationships is fundamental to a good quality of life and psychological health. Individuals who have good relationships develop a sense of belonging and receive support from other members of their social network which helps them to function normally from day to day and also to cope with stress and difficult times. Social relationships also provide opportunities for generating new ideas, discussing issues and concerns, sharing good news and obtaining social, economic and emotional support. However, some social relationships involve negative emotions and behaviours (e.g. lack of trust, envy, jealousy, breaking promises and violence) which may undermine an individual's wellbeing and life quality.

Living in a good social environment increases the likelihood that a child will develop positive social relationships. Social behaviour and the ability to develop positive relationships with others were traditionally conceived as skills which would develop naturally. However, there is an increasing recognition that social behaviours are learned and that children must be taught pro-social behaviour. Children learn from their social environment, for example by challenging the social behaviour of their peers, and thus what they see in their day to day environment is likely to influence their social behaviour. Social skills can also be actively taught, for example when a parent or teacher reinforces and encourages good behaviours, the probability of these behaviours occurring is enhanced. Teachers and parents may also actively encourage children to apply social skills learnt in one social setting (e.g. the classroom) to other settings (e.g. home or the playground).

Both the parent's and children social relationships are increasingly recognised as a important factors influencing the quality of parenting, which in turn is an important contributor to the child's overall

development. The children of parents who have strong and supportive social relationships are more likely to develop positive social relationships themselves and having positive and supportive social relationships and networks improves a child's development. In terms of parenting, social relationships of key importance include those between a child and their parents, but also a child and other adults (e.g. teachers, other children's parents) and other children (including their siblings). Parental involvement with the parents of other children creates trust and obligations, as well as community norms, which the parents set collectively for their children. This means that parents can collectively take responsibility for children's behaviour, for example by providing discipline if a child misbehaves.

#### **4. Cognitive development and educational attainment**

A child's social environment influences their cognitive development and educational attainment. Children who engage in good social relationships perform better academically than those who do not. Children living in social environments characterised by residential stability are less likely to be absent from school and perform better academically than those who do not. Those who live in poor quality neighbourhoods (e.g. low socio-economic status) are more likely to drop out of school before completion than those who do not.

Attending early childhood education, at which a child can develop social relationships with other children and teachers and in doing so, develop pro-social behaviour, has a particularly profound effect on future academic achievement. Children who attend preschool perform better academically and are less likely to repeat a grade. There is evidence that cognitive development is influenced by the social environment during early childhood even if a child subsequently moves to a different neighbourhood. For example, a child who lives in a disadvantaged neighbourhood during early childhood will experience reduced cognitive development and academic performance even if they move to a more affluent neighbourhood later in life. An intergenerational effect is also present, and children whose parents grew up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods also experience impaired cognitive development and educational attainment compared to those who did not, even if they grow up in a more affluent neighbourhood.

#### **5. Risk-taking behaviour**

Growing up in a positive social environment is associated with less risk taking behaviour. Children who grow up in positive environments are less likely to have accidents requiring treatment than those who do not. There is also a reduced risk of developing a substance use disorder amongst children who have positive social relationships compared to those who do not.

#### **6. Emotional and psychological wellbeing**

The sense of belonging which individual's experiences when they have good social relationships has a positive influence on their mental health. Children who have good social relationships have greater self esteem than those who do not and are less likely to experience mental health problems including depression and anxiety. There is also evidence that pro-social behaviour during childhood leads to better psychological health in adulthood. The social environment may also influence a child's health by influencing the behaviour of their parents. For example, an Australian study reported that parents living in communities where services were more accessible, were less likely to use hostile parenting techniques (which are expected to have negative psychological effects on their children) than those living in communities where resources were not available.

#### **7. Motivation**

Individuals living in social environments characterised by positive social relationships are more motivated than those who do not. For example, peer support has been found to be an important predictor of a child's motivation to pursue social goals, while teacher support increases a child's

motivation for both social and academic goal pursuits. Parent support also influences children in terms of their level of interest in school and their pursuit of goals.

### **8. Consciously encourage family rituals and routines**

Routines such as eating meals together as a family or going to the park on Sundays provide opportunities for family members to develop social relationships amongst themselves. Family rituals also promote a sense of belonging. Bedtime routines are associated with better sleep patterns amongst children. Family routines may also make it easier for children to cope with stress such as parental separation or divorce.

### **9. Balance work and family life**

Parents may experience improvements in their social environment by adjusting their work schedules, for example by freeing up time to participate in community activities or organisations.

### **10. Develop parenting skill**

Parents may also contribute to their children's health and development by improving their parenting skills. Parenting programs which teach parents to develop their children's emotional competence have reported positive results, and that the development of emotional competence in children improves their social behaviour. Children who are emotionally confident are more likely to interact with other children and displayed fewer negative emotions which might interrupt their social relationships.

### **References**

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