

Unit One

The Definition of Child, Family, Community and Its Interaction

Introduction

This chapter defined the meaning of children, family, and community. It also included the inter-relationships of these three concepts and the influence of the last two points on child development. The assumptions of Bioecological theory has been used for the explanation. Thus, at the end of the unit you will be able to:

- Define child, family, and community adequately.
- Explain fully the interaction among children, family, and community.

1.1. What is a child?

There is no universal definition of who is a child, adolescent, or youth. Chronological age is not a sufficient criterion to define a child operationally. A child is a person with distinctive physical, psychological, and social characteristics found in the age ranges of the childhood period. The childhood period is understood in very different ways in different contexts. It is a social and cultural construction, not merely a stage in physical and psychological development. Although it is common to define children by reference to age and the level of children's biological and psychological development, definitions of children and childhood are much more complex than this.

➤ **Defining children by age:**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 1) states that “a child means every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, the majority is attained earlier”. The definition provides a point of common reference for international organizations, NGOs, and governments, operational definitions in the field may differ. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross defines an unaccompanied minor as “below 15 years of age and not being accompanied by an adult”. In contrast, the UNHCR

definition is consistent with the CRC and sets “under 18” as the age for inclusion in family tracing services.

In many cultures, there is a distinction between different stages of childhood especially between stages of the “innocence” or “ignorance” of childhood and a later stage of “reason” and “responsibility”. Many legal codes define the age at which children are legally deemed to be responsible for their actions.

Cultural factors:

In different cultural contexts, factors other than age may be important in determining who is a child or an adolescent: factors such as social roles, gender, marital status, and the capacity to contribute economically may be more important than chronological age in shaping expectations of children. Rituals of religion or custom may also confer social status, clearly marking points of transition in rights and obligations in the eyes of the wider community. These may be indirectly linked to age, notably the onset of puberty.

Childhood as a social and cultural concept: It is neither timeless nor universal. It is not determined only by age, or by biological and psychological factors. Rather childhood is understood by reference to particular cultural and social contexts and particular periods in history. It is now seen as an extended period of economic dependency and protected innocence during which play and schooling are seen as central components: but this is far removed from childhood in many other cultures, where work (whether paid or work within the household) must take precedence over both schooling and play.

1.2. What is family:

It is two or more people who have chosen to live together and share their interests, roles, and resources. It is bounded together by attachment and commitment.

- It is unique, but all families share the goals of survival and personal fulfillment of family members.
- It is a group of persons who are united by marriage, by filiation or even, but

exceptionally, by adoption.

- It is a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one and more children own or adopted sexually cohabiting adults.

1.3. What is a community?

It is a group of individuals residing in a specific geographical location. Or it can be defined as a small or large social unit that has something in common, such as norms, values, religion, and identities. This social unit can be characterized by religion, geographic location, occupation, and level of income.

1.4. The interaction among child, family, and community

The development or socialization of a child is predicted by the interaction of the child himself, the family, and the community dynamism. i.e., the context of the wider community, the family, and the child himself interacts with each other. The Bronfenbrenner, 1989 Bioecological model shows these interacting relationships among these the aforementioned entities and the wider societies where the child lives in as shown below.

Bioecological Theory of human development and other socialization:

This theory is developed by Bronfenrebenner, he was a professor of psychology, human development, and social work. It assumes that the social context of individual interactions and experiences determines the degree to which individuals can develop their abilities and realize their potentials.

According to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory, there are five basic structures:

- Microsystem,
- Mesosystem,
- Exosystem,
- Macrosystem,
- Chronosystem

Relationships and interactions take place among these structures to form patterns that affect human development. Such a conceptual framework enables us to study the child and his or her family, school, and community as dynamic, evolving systems that are influenced by broader social change (the chronosystem), as in economics, politics, and technology.

This theory operationalizes “Ecology” as it is the science of interrelationships between organisms and their environments. The term "bioecological" refers to the role organisms play in shaping their environments over time. Human beings create environments that shape the course of human development in aspects of biological, social, and psychological characteristics. Its actions influence the multiple physical and cultural tiers of the ecology that shapes them, and this agency makes humans, for better or worse, active producers of their development.

Hence, the interaction of child, family, and community are examined in figure 1 based on the general concept of this theory. For better clarification, each subsystem is explained as follows in detail.

A. Microsystems

The first basic structure, the microsystem (micro meaning small) refers to the activities and relationships with significant others experienced by a developing person in a particular small setting such as family, school, peer group, or community (see Figure 1.2).

i. Family

The family is the setting that provides nurturance, affection, and a variety of opportunities. It is the primary socializer of the child in that it has the most significant impact on the child's development. Thus, the child who is not adequately nurtured or loved, such as one who grows up in an abrasive or dysfunctional family may have developmental problems.

Also, children who do not have sufficient opportunities to manipulate objects, to model desirable behaviors, to initiate activity, or to be exposed to a language-rich environment will be at a disadvantage when they reach school. This early disadvantage will persist and even worsen as the child progresses through school unless intervention, such as that provided by some quality

child-care programs, can modify the opportunities at home and in school.

ii. School and child care

The school is the setting in which children formally learn about their society. The school teaches reading, writing, arithmetic, history, science, and so on. Teachers encourage the development of various skills and behaviors by being role models and by motivating children to succeed in learning.

iii. Peer Group

The peer group is the setting in which children are generally unsupervised by adults, thereby gaining experience in independence. In the peer group, children get a sense of:

- Who they are and what they can do by comparison with others.
- Peers provide companionship and support as well as learning experiences in cooperation and role-taking.

iv. Community

The community, or neighborhood on a smaller scale, is the main setting in which children learn by doing. The facilities available to children determine what real experiences they will have as:

- Is there a library?
- Are stores and workplaces nearby where children can observe people at work?
- Are the people with whom children interact in the community similar or diverse?
- Are the people in the community advocates for children? These questions relate to the significance of the community as a socializer.

v. Media

The media, television, movies, videos, DVDs, books, magazines, music, computers, consoles, and cellular phones—are not regarded as a microsystem by Bronfenbrenner because they are not a small, interactive setting for reciprocal interaction. However, it considers the media as significant a socializer as those just described because of the media present a setting in which a child can view the whole world—past, present, future, as well as places, things, roles,

relationships, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Much of today's media technology is interactive, providing opportunities to relate socially in that they are multifaceted, such as cell phones, social networking sites, and computerized games.

The child's development is affected in each of the aforementioned settings not only by the child's relationships with others in the family, school, peer group, or community but also by interactions among members of the particular microsystem. For example, the father's relationship with the mother can affect her treatment of the child. If the father is emotionally supportive of the mother, she is likely to be more involved and to have more positive interactions with the child. For another example, a child's classroom performance varies as a function of whether or not the teacher has taught the child's older sibling and how well that sibling performed. A teacher who has taught a high-achieving older sibling tends to have high expectations for the younger sibling. The younger sibling, in turn, is more likely to perform as expected.

B. Mesosystem

The second basic structure, the mesosystem (meso meaning intermediate), consists of linkages and interrelationships between two or more of a developing person's microsystems, such as the family and the school, or the family and the peer group (see Figure 1.3).

The impact of mesosystems on the child depends on the number and quality of interrelationships. Bronfenbrenner (1979) uses the example of a child who goes to school alone on the first day. This means that there is only a single link between home and school for the child. Where there is little linkage between home and school "in terms of values, experiences, objects, and behavioral style," there also tends to be a little academic achievement for the child.

In contrast, where all these links are strong, there is likely to be academic competence. To illustrate, many studies have found a consistent relationship between the joint effects of family and school over time and academic performance. When the style of family interaction was similar to the schools, in that both settings encouraged child participation, academic performance was enhanced. Thus, the more numerous the qualitative links or interrelationships between the

child's microsystems, the more impact they have on socialization. Mesosystems, then, provide support for activities going on in microsystems. For example, when parents invite a child's friends to their home, or when parents encourage their child to join a certain club, team, or youth group, the socialization impact of the peers is enhanced through parental approval.

C. Exosystems

The third basic structure, the exosystem (exo meaning outside), refers to settings in which children are not active participants, but that affect them in one of their microsystems, for example, parents' jobs, the city council, or parental social support networks (see Figure 1.4).

The effects of exosystems on the child are indirect via the microsystems. When parents working in settings that demand conformity rather than self-direction, they reflect this orientation in their parenting styles, tending to be more controlling than democratic. This orientation, in turn, does affect the child's socialization. When the city planning commission approves a freeway through a neighborhood or an air traffic pattern over a school, children's socialization is affected because the noise interferes with learning. Studies show that parental employment, income, and setting affect child development outcomes. For example, low-income parents involved in work-based antipoverty programs (ones that provide sufficient family income, child care, health insurance, and support services) have been shown to enhance the school performance and social behavior of their children.

On the other hand, high-income parents living in upwardly mobile suburban communities have been shown to have children who exhibit a relatively high rate of lower-than-expected school performance and negative social behavior (anxiety, depression, and substance abuse) as a reaction to achievement pressure.

D. Macrosystems

The fourth basic structure, the macrosystem (macro meaning large), consists of the society and subculture to which the developing person belongs, with particular reference to the belief systems, lifestyles, patterns of social interaction, and life changes (see Figure 1.5).

Examples of macrosystems include the United States, the middle or lower class, Latino or Asian ancestry, Catholicism or Judaism, and urban or rural areas. Macrosystems are viewed as patterns, or sets of instructions, for exosystems, mesosystems, and microsystems. Democracy is the basic belief system of the United States and so is considered a macrosystem. Democratic ideology affects the world of work, and exosystem—for example, employers cannot discriminate in hiring. Democratic ideology also affects school–family interaction, a mesosystem—for example, schools must inform parents of policies, and parents have the right to question those policies. Finally, democratic ideology affects what is taught in schools, a microsystem—for example, children must learn the principles upon which the United States was founded.

A person who lives in the United States and subscribes to its basic belief system of democracy, and consequently is influenced by that microsystem, may also be part of other microsystems, such as his or her ethnic group and culture. Ethnicity refers to an ascribed attribute of membership in a group in which members identify themselves by national origin, culture, race, or religion. Members of an ethnic group share biologically and/or socially inherited characteristics. Culture refers to the acquired or learned behavior, including knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, and traditions, that is characteristic of the social environment in which an individual grows up. While “ethnicity” and “culture” often overlap because an ethnic group usually has a common culture.

“Ethnicity” refers to ascribed attributes passed on by one’s family (for example, biology and/or social status), and “culture” refers to acquired attributes cultivated through learning (for example, language and/or celebrations). Examples of how children, families, schools, and communities adapt to cultural contrasts discussed as follows.

Diverse Macrosystems: Low- and High-Context

According to cultural anthropologist people from different macrosystems, or cultures, view the world differently, unaware that there are alternative ways of perceiving, believing, behaving, and judging. Particularly, significant is the unconscious assumptions people make about personal space, time, interpersonal relations, and ways of knowing.

Table 1.1. World View

	Low Context Macrosystem	High Context Macrosystem
General Characteristics	Rationality	Intuitiveness
	Practicality	Emotionality
	Competition	Cooperation
	Individuality	Group identity
	Progress	Tradition
Significant Value	Emphasis on concrete evidence and facts	Emphasis on feelings
	Efficient use of time	Build solid relationships through human interaction
	Achievement	Character
	Personal freedom	Group welfare
	Humans can control nature and influence the future	Nature and the future are governed by a power higher than human
	Change is good	Stability is good
➤ What if these views represented two individuals wanting to marry? ➤ What if one view represented a teacher's and the other a student's? ➤ What if one view represented an employer's and the other an employee's?		

As Table 1.1. Indicated this classification of macrosystems as being (individualistic-oriented) or high (collectively-oriented context are characterized by:

- Low context macrosystem: in rationality, practicality, competition, individuality, and progress.
- High context Macrosystem: intuitiveness, emotionality, cooperation, group identity, and tradition.

These diverse characteristics translate into differences in communication, relationships to the natural and social environment, and adaptive behavior to survive.

Diverse Patterns of Behavior

The following low- and high-context behavioral patterns, presented here as extremes (either-or),

occur more often in reality by degrees. Examples of low- and high-context cultures are represented as a continuum in Figure 1.6.

- **Communication:** In a low-context macrosystem, meaning from communication is gleaned from the verbal message a spoken explanation, a written letter, or a computer printout. What is said is generally more important than who said it. Many employees in government, business, or education routinely communicate by phone or memorandum without ever meeting the other individuals involved.
- On the other hand, in a high-context macrosystem, meaning from communication is gleaned from the setting in which the communication takes place. In some languages, one can communicate familiarity by whether one uses the formal or informal word for "you." Body language, such as eye lowering or bowing, can be used to communicate a degree of respect.
- **Relationship to Natural and Social Environment:** In a low-context macrosystem, people tend to try to control nature (such as irrigating desert areas) and to have more fragmented social relations that are, they may behave one way toward friends, another way toward business colleagues, and yet another way toward neighbors. In a high-context macrosystem, people tend to live in harmony with nature and with other humans who are part of their social network.

Whereas individuals in low-context macrosystems usually develop an identity based on their efforts and achievements, people in high-context macrosystems tend to gain their identity through group associations (lineage, place of work, organizations). Members of low-context cultures expect personal freedom, openness, and individual choice. Members of high context cultures are less open to strangers, make distinctions between insiders and outsiders, and are more likely to follow traditional role expectations.

- **Adaptive Behavior to Survive:** Both low- and high-context macrosystems illustrate adaptive behavior to survive, which includes parenting styles. Low-context cultures, valuing progress, provide ways of changing and using new knowledge that can benefit society. Parenting style influences a child's independence and creativity.

- On the other hand, high-context cultures, valuing tradition, provide a strong human support network that helps guard against the alienation of a technological society. Parenting style influences a child's interdependence and conformity.

E. Interaction of Ecological Systems over Time: The Chronosystem

The chronosystem involves temporal changes in ecological systems, or within individuals, producing new conditions that affect development. For example, significant societal events can produce a variety of effects on children. Accessibility to knives and guns has affected many on-campus security procedures; schools installed metal detectors, hired guards, and initiated “zero-tolerance” policies whereby aggressive students are expelled for one offense. For another example, the physical changes a child experiences during puberty can affect his or her self-esteem, depending on how the child’s developing body compares to his or her friends' as well as to the culturally ideal body type.

These are figures that show the five types of Bioecological model:

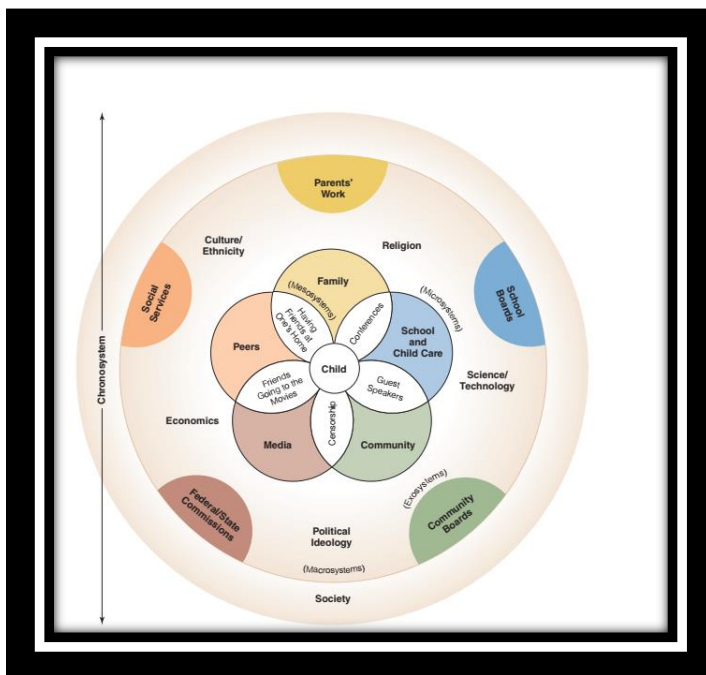


Figure 1.1. A Bioecological Model of human development

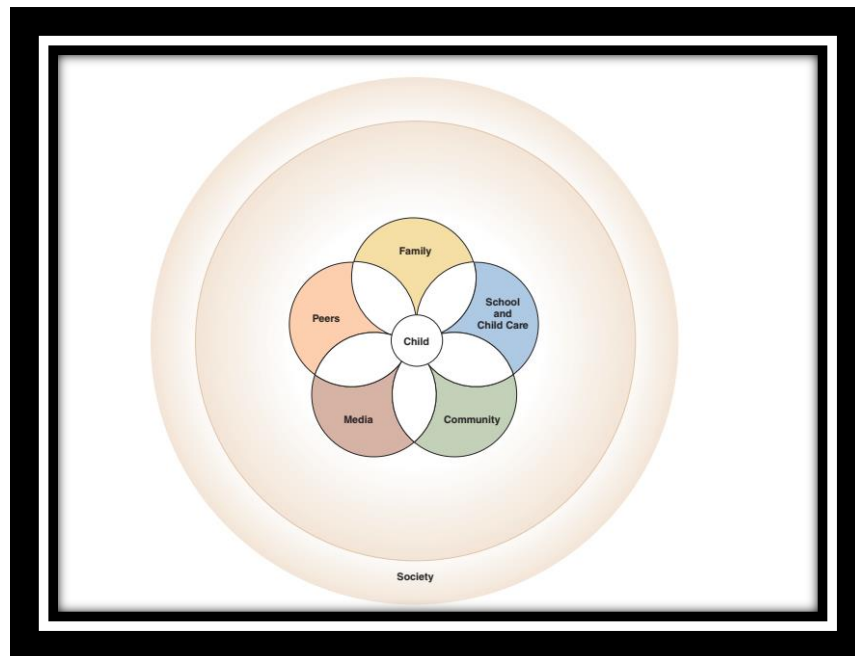


Figure 1.2. Microsystem

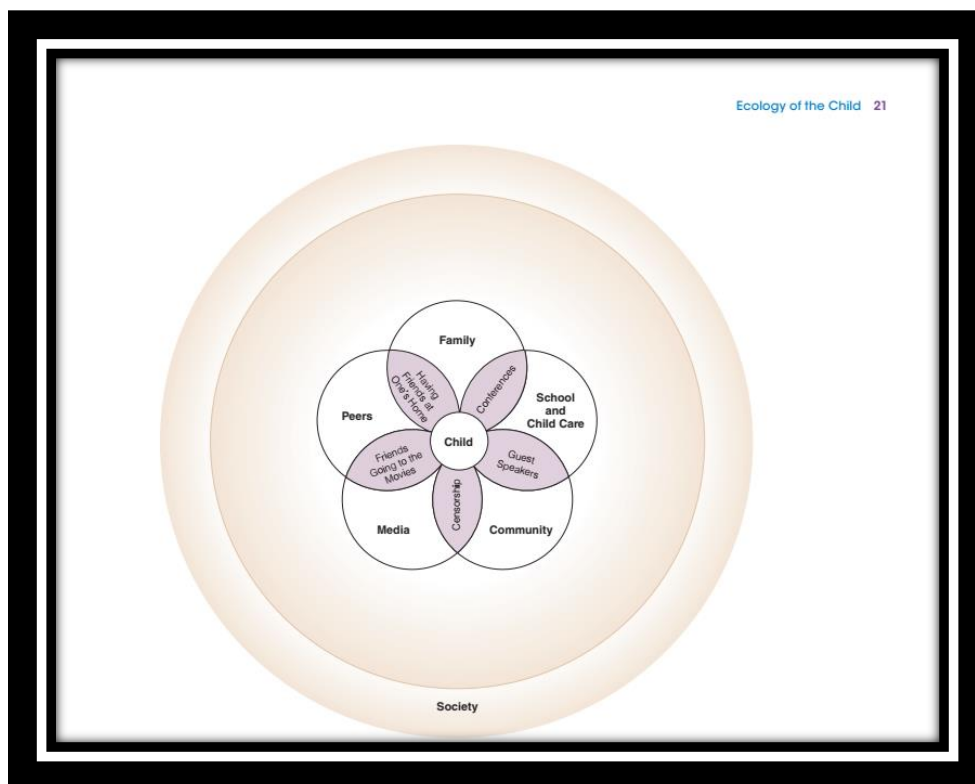


Figure 1.3. Mesosystem

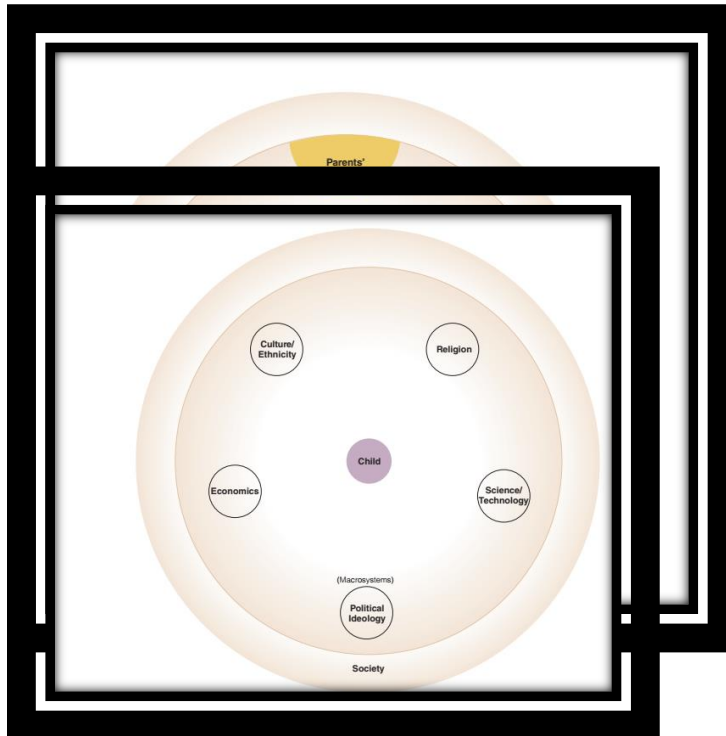


Figure 1.4. Exosystem

Figure .1.5. Macrosystem

❖ Impact of Ongoing Events

Socialization must pass on the cultural heritage to the next generation while also enabling that generation to become competent adults in society. Thus, every socializing agent engages in preparing children for both stability and change. Training for stability, which is implemented by passing on the cultural heritage and the status quo to children, involves making their behavior somewhat predictable and conforming; but paradoxically, preparation for change, enabling children to become competent for a future society, very likely involves disrupting some stable patterns and encouraging new ways of thinking and behaving.

❖ Contemporary Ecology

Some contemporary societal affecting the future of families and children are outlined as follows:

- **Biotechnology:** Genetic engineering can potentially cure inherited diseases by substituting normal genes for defective ones; but what about using such techniques to increase intelligence? Will children have “designer” genes? Assisted reproductive techniques (sperm donation, egg donation, in-vitro fertilization, frozen embryos, surrogacy) enable adults who have fertility problems to become parents; but what about medical, legal, and ethical risks regarding the child’s welfare? For example, if a male and female contribute sperm and egg for conception to take place in a dish, several resulting embryos are frozen, one or two are implanted in a surrogate who is paid to carry through with the pregnancy, and the biological parents die, what happens to the children to who do the babies and embryos belong? What makes one a parent—genes, prenatal environment, postnatal environment? Large businesses, especially electronics and computers, rarely provide on-site personalized service for problems with equipment. Instead, you, the consumer, must consult the manual and try to diagnose the problem before calling the manufacturer. How will such business practices affect how children are educated; will they need to be exposed to more “hands-on” problem-solving?
- **Reconceptualization of Societal and Individual Responsibilities:** Government, too, is shifting from “paternalistic” policies (a strong authority takes care of less able citizens) to “empowerment” policies (any individual can learn to care for him- or herself). For example, government welfare support is waning while “workfare” is waxing. Government funding of Social Security plans is yielding to private insurance and investment programs. How will children whose parents must become more economically responsible be affected?
- **Information Technology:** The concept of information technology (IT) is broadening to include not only traditional computer hardware and software but also a wide range of communication tools (such as cell phones, smartphones, and scanners), media (such as television, cameras, and recorders), and data. Wireless networks allow users to work, play, and shop any time, any place. For businesses, operations can be streamlined and efficiency increased by enabling workers to make plans, make decisions, and generates sales reports without going to the office. For consumers, mobile commerce offers the ability to shop for tickets, books, or pizza while waiting in line or at the doctor’s office. People can also download music, videos, and games on hand-held devices. For parents, children might

require less time in daycare due to eliminating the work commute and having more flexible time available for family matters.

IT enables knowledge creation and capitalization (one can get medical information from numerous Internet sources and go to the doctor requesting an advertised medication rather than allowing the doctor to diagnose and prescribe).

- ✓ How do individuals cope with even more choices, advertising, and distractions?
- ✓ How do you feel when you need information or assistance and a computer answers the phone rather than a live person?
- ✓ What about privacy issues, personal security, and information errors?
- ✓ Will IT foster closer connections among family and friends, or come between them, competing for time and space?

Technology has enabled people to multitask. It slows children's productivity, changes the way they learn, and may reinforce superficial social relationships.

- **Globalism/Nationalism:** Telecommunications and transportation facilitate a global economy. Labor, production, marketing, and consumption can occur in different places in the world. Does such globalism affect standards of production? For example, in 2007, some toys made in China containing unsafe parts were recalled because some children got hurt. Does globalism affect the work families do job competition, type of job, location of the job, skills needed?

As people throughout the world are exposed to greater homogeneity through travel, media, and telecommunications, they sometimes become more nationalistic, clinging to their religious/ethnic traditions for identity.

- **The shift in Decision-Making Responsibility:** New advances in science, medicine, education, economics, communications, media, transportation, security, privacy, and ecology require skills to cope with massive amounts of information. Recently an exterminator asked me to decide which of several available pesticides should be used in my house to get rid of ants. Even though I was informed of the varying effectiveness and safety of each, I did not

have the appropriate background knowledge on which to base such a decision; yet the responsibility for consequences was shifted to me.

- **Information Intermediaries:** One way the business world has capitalized on today's information glut is to offer endorsements (celebrity), enticements (rewards), and services (consulting) to help consumers make decisions. When you buy a book, isn't it easier to choose one from the New York Times Best Seller List or Amazon's recommendations than to read the book jackets? Do you choose an airline because of its rewards program or the convenience of its schedules and destinations? Do you need to hire a wedding planner or an investment counselor? Will children learn to look to others for decisions, rather than themselves?

Thus, a challenge resulting from these societal trends is the need to create caring communities in which children can learn to think to apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information, not just regurgitate facts or form opinions based on conformity to a celebrity. The ability to think and use knowledge becomes critical in a world plunged into machines and bombarded with information and choices. Because of new technology and new information, children will have to learn to solve problems not previously encountered. They will have to extrapolate from previous experiences. How will we teach them?

In sum, these contemporary societal trends affect how people use available resources economic, social, and psychological in their daily lives; their choices ultimately have consequences for children. Next, we examine ecological trends affecting children's well-being.

Effects of Change on the Well-Being of Children

- Family and social environment indicators document the number of children as a proportion of the population, racial and ethnic composition, and several non-English-speaking children, family structure and children's living arrangements, births to unmarried women, child care, and child maltreatment.
- Economic circumstance indicators document poverty and income among children and necessities such as housing, food, and health care.
- Health care indicators document the physical health and well-being of children, including

immunizations and the probability of death at various ages, dental care, and the number of children with health insurance.

- Physical environment and safety indicators document the number of children living in counties with an excess concentration of pollutants, children living in communities with substandard water, children with elevated blood lead levels, housing problems, crime, injuries, and death.
- Behavior indicators document the number of youths who are engaged in illegal, dangerous, or high-risk behaviors such as smoking, drinking alcohol, using drugs, having sex, or committing violent crimes.
- Education indicators document success in educating the nation's children, including preschool, reading, overall achievement, completion of high school, and college attendance.
- Health indicators document the number of infants with low birth weight, children with emotional or behavioral difficulties, children who are overweight, and children with asthma.