



University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development

## Neighborhoods

The roles they play in the development of a child

# Circumstances That Count

*How Neighborhoods Affect Child Outcomes*

**S**chools, relationships, and how strongly neighbors embrace shared values are just a few of the characteristics of a neighborhood that can influence important measures of children's well-being, such as education, health, and behavior.

How neighborhood traits contribute to the development and outcomes of children is still a question without a complete answer. But the prevailing belief among researchers is that neighborhood influences work indirectly. Employment and income, for example, may affect children by influencing the behavior of their parents.

The potential mechanisms through which neighborhoods influence children and youth include institutional resources, such as schools, child care, hospitals and health clinics, and the availability of jobs; relationships, particularly those between parents and children; and what researchers refer to as norms/collective efficacy – for example, the extent of social connections in a neighborhood and whether those who live there are willing and able to effectively monitor behavior according to a shared set of values.

### **Institutional Resources**

The availability of learning opportunities, child care, and health care are important to child outcomes. Perhaps just as important is the quality of those resources and whether residents can afford to take advantage of them.

Generally, community learning opportunities, such as libraries, family

resource centers, and literacy programs, are seen as important influences, particularly for children's school readiness and achievement.

Parents tend to see these resources as important. When they cannot find them in their communities, they may seek them elsewhere.

In one study, however, learning experiences at home had more of an influence on 3-year-olds than learning experiences received outside the home.<sup>1</sup>

### **Child Care**

Child care is a neighborhood resource of growing importance given recent trends that include more demanding work schedules, greater numbers of mothers in the workplace, and the employment demands of welfare-to-work reform.

Quality matters here. When the quality of care is high, children benefit.

## Related Reports

*Neighborhoods matter. The socioeconomic status of a child's family and neighbors, in particular, is associated with school readiness, behavior, even sexuality.*

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When care is little more than babysitting, children don't get the benefits that early education promises. For example, children whose caregivers provide verbal and cognitive stimulation, are sensitive and responsive, and give generous amounts of attention and support are more advanced in all areas of development than children who do not receive such care.<sup>2</sup>

### **Schools**

Quality of education and other characteristics of schools that contribute to the developmental outcomes of children are shaped by neighborhood resources. But how strong an influence schools are remains unclear.

Research does suggest that school can blunt the affect of neighborhood characteristics on adolescent outcomes.

The Philadelphia Teen Study reported, for example, that once school norms and attitudes toward sexual initia-

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tion and parenting were accounted for, neighborhood factors, such as poverty, were not associated with neighborhood-level differences in adolescent sexual activity.<sup>3</sup>

### Employment

Employment is an important neighborhood resource, although its impact, as reported in studies, is mixed.

Some studies report negative consequences associated adolescent employment, such as increases in problem behavior and drug and alcohol use. But among low-income youth, benefits have been seen, including economic gains and greater adult monitoring – factors associated with lower delinquency and with children becoming more engaged with school.

### Parent-Child Relationships

A parent's mental health, level of irritability, physical health, and coping skills may play a role in determining the impact of certain neighborhood characteristics on children when those factors influence the way the parent behaves.

The social support available to parents may influence the level of stress experienced by parents who live in dangerous and impoverished neighborhoods. And stress can affect the way they parent.

Harsh and controlling parenting behaviors have been associated with neighborhood characteristics. For example, parents in dangerous neighborhoods report using more harsh control and verbal aggression with their children than parents who live in less dangerous neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup>

### In the Home

Children in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to live in poor

quality home environments as measured by cleanliness, safety, available space, and other factors. Health is a concern here. Higher rates of child injury, likely due to unsafe play areas within the home, is associated with living in poor neighborhoods.

Violence in the home and in the community is another concern, and children in disadvantaged neighborhoods, again, are more likely to be exposed to such risks.

### Collective Efficacy

Collective efficacy describes the breadth of a neighborhood's social connections and the extent to which residents are willing and able to monitor behavior, particularly among children and adolescents.

Some of the more telling factors include how likely neighbors are to

intervene in situations, such as children skipping school, a fight in front of their house, or a threat to close the local fire station because of budget cuts.

When collective efficacy is high, lower rates of community violence and lower delinquency rates among adolescents tend to be seen.

Finally, serious risks found in certain neighborhoods – crime and easy access to drugs and alcohol, for example – may influence the development of children and adolescents.

These risks are more likely to be widespread in neighborhoods where collective efficacy is weak and norms are lacking. Perhaps it is not surprising that the chief reason parents want to leave public housing neighborhoods is concern for the safety of their children.

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## references

*This report is largely based on the following article.*

Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). The neighborhoods they live in: The effects of neighborhood residence on child and adolescent outcomes. *Psychological Bulletin*, **126** (2), 309-337.

*References noted in the text follow:*

<sup>1</sup> Klebanov, P.K., Brooks-Gunn, J., McCarton, C.M., & McCormick, M.C. (1998). The contribution of neighborhood and family income upon developmental test scores over the first three years of life. *Child Development*, **69**, 1420-1436.

<sup>2</sup> Lamb, M.E. (1998). Nonparental child care: Context, quality, correlates. In W. Damon, I.E. Sigel, & K.A. Renninger (Eds.), *Handbook of Child Psychology*, **4: Child Psychology in Practice**, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, pp.73-134. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc..

<sup>3</sup> Teitler, J.O., & Weiss, C.C. (1996). *Contextual Sex: The effect of school and neighborhood environments on the timing of first intercourse*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, New Orleans, LA.

<sup>4</sup> Earls, F., McGuire, J., & Shay, S. (1994). Evaluating a community intervention to reduce the risk of child abuse: Methodological strategies in conducting neighborhood surveys. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, **18**, 473-485.

<sup>5</sup> Sampson, R.J., Raudenbush, S.W., & Earls, F. (1997, August 15). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*, **277**, 918-924.

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