

How Families Work:

Implications for Childhood Obesity Research and Intervention

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Family Theory and Research

- I. Family systems perspective
- II. Ecological perspective
- III. Parental socialization of self regulation
- IV. Parental knowledge and beliefs



I. Families as Systems

- Family influences are reciprocal and interconnected;
- Families are embedded in a larger ecology;
- Families are open systems;
- Family systems tend toward homeostasis, but are modifiable.





Family members and family dynamics are interconnected and mutually influential:

-  Children affect their parents, including their parents' socialization strategies;
-  What happens in one part of the family system will have implications for other dynamics.





■ Families are embedded in a larger ecology, including:

- The physical environment
- The economic environment
- The cultural environment

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- Families are open systems, subject to outside influences and affecting the ecologies in which they are embedded.
 - Some families have more resources than others to pick and change their ecologies;
 - Affluence=ability to exert control over the family's environment (Bradley, 2002).



Family systems tend toward homeostasis, but developmental and ecological forces mean that families are in a constant state of change.

- Change is motivated from within and from without;
- Planned change can build on momentum from naturally occurring change.

Implications for Intervention from a Family Systems Perspective

- The complexity of the family means there is no silver bullet for change;
- The complexity of the family provides for multiple points of entry for interventions;
- Interventions should build on the momentum provided by key family transitions to effect change;
- Seemingly small changes have reverberations throughout the family system.

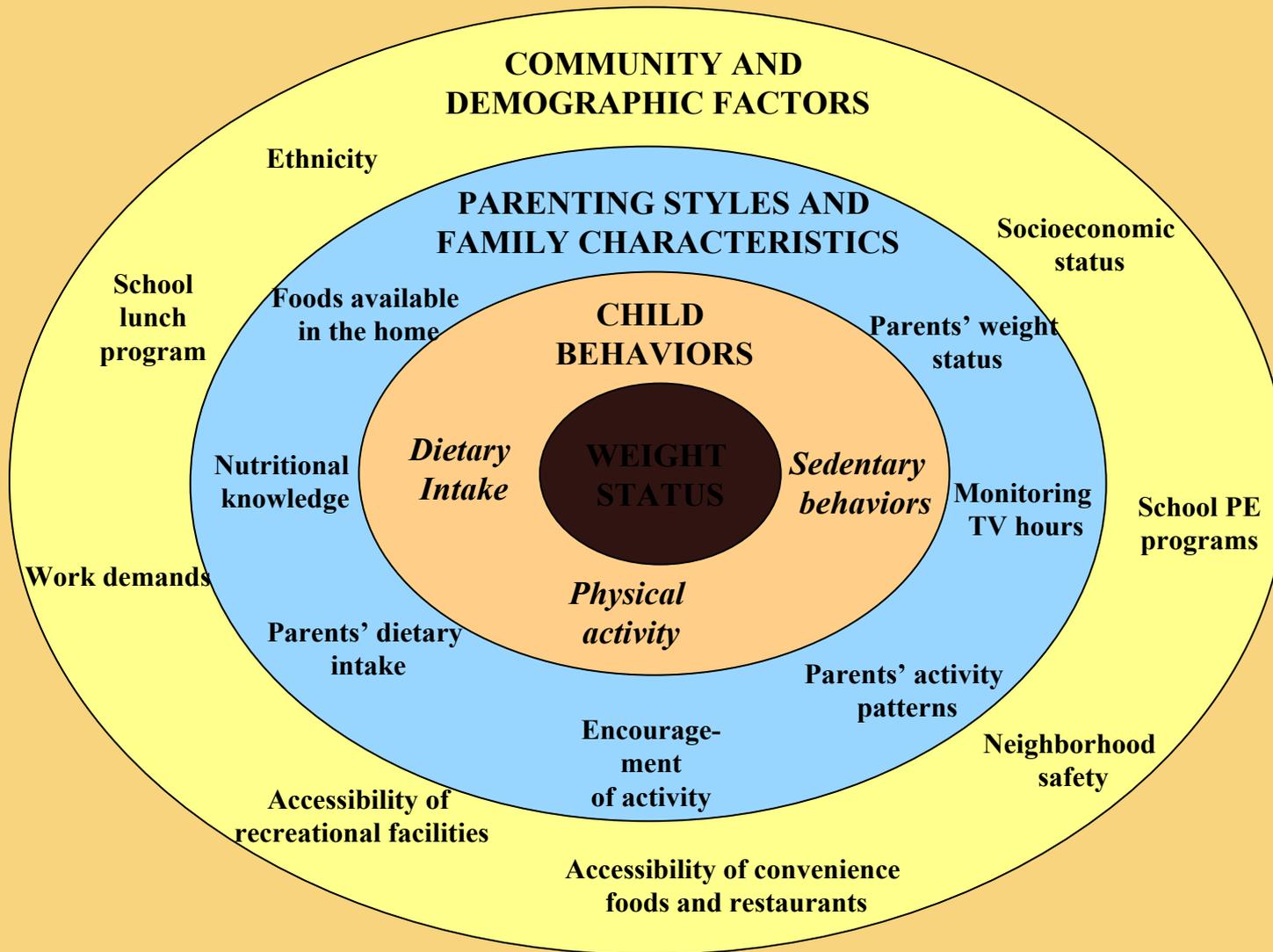


II. An Ecological Perspective on the Family

- Families are embedded in a larger, multi-layered ecology that affords opportunities and resources and sets constraints on their choices;
- Environments define the family's subsistence demands.



Ecological Model of Childhood Obesity



Davison & Birch (2001). Obesity Reviews, 2, 159-171



Environments define subsistence demands for families:

-  Parents' child-rearing behaviors are grounded in their understanding of their environment's subsistence demands;
-  A fundamental child-rearing goal is the development of competencies required for subsistence within a particular environment.



Implications from an Ecological Perspective for Family Intervention

- To the extent that parental behavior appears irrational, unhealthful, and/or difficult to change, we must understand “where parents coming from,” that is, recognize the ways in which parenting styles and behaviors represent *adaptations to particular family settings and circumstances*.



III. Parental Socialization and Child Self-Regulation

■ In developing self regulation abilities, children move from:

- *Compliance* to external contingencies →
- *Internalization* of those contingencies →
- *Intrinsically* motivated behavior.



How Can Parents Promote Self Regulation in Children?

- Self regulation is grounded in children's feelings of *competence*, *autonomy* and *connectedness*.
- Parents promote self regulation by providing structure, supporting autonomy and establishing a "socializing relationship" with their child.



Parenting Practices for Self Regulation

- Structure: clear guidelines; providing reasons behind guidelines motivates compliance and internalization.
- Support for autonomy: children take the lead within a parent-engineered environment.
- Socializing relationship: warmth, shared positive affect motivates children's compliance, promotes modeling of/ identification with parental values, and affirms competence.



IV. Parental Beliefs and Child Development

- Parental beliefs →
- Parent behavior →
- Child outcomes



Parent Education to Promote Parents' Knowledge and Beliefs (Goodnow, 2002; Dunst et al., 1994)

- Information must be relevant to family circumstances;
- Information should come from a trusted source;
- Information should be both accessible and useable.



1. Information Must be Relevant to Family Circumstances

- Parents' world views have implications for their responses to information;
- Knowledge is constructed;
- Parents use their knowledge to make tradeoffs within a hierarchy of child-rearing goals.



Parents' world views affect their reactions to information

■ Parents' ideas about their role:

■ *“My child loves this food and I want to make her happy.”*

■ Parents' ideas about their influence:

■ *“I can't get him to eat anything but burgers and fries.”*

■ Parents' ideas about the child's world:

■ *“A big child can defend himself.”*



Knowledge is Constructed

- There is comfort in the familiar
 - *“This is a dish my mother always made.”*
- Knowledge reflects self identity and group belonging
 - *“If I feed my children fresh fruit and yogurt my family will think I’ve forgotten where I come from.”*
- When things seem to be working, current knowledge is sufficient
 - *“He’s so healthy and growing so well, this food must be good for him.”*





Parents make tradeoffs within a hierarchy of child-rearing goals.



“It’s 7 PM, I just got home from work, and my kids are tired and grouchy. Fast food is the answer.”



2. Information Should Come from a Trusted Source

■ Parents' history with professionals will affect their trust in the message

■ *“I’m tired of these people telling me how to raise my kids; do they think I’m stupid?”*

■ Parents have many sources of information and advice

■ *“My mother says kids with good appetites are healthy kids.”*



3. Information Should be Accessible and Useable

- The *message* can be acted on
 - Parents need to know *what* practices are healthful but also *how* they can carry out those practices given constraints and opportunities of their environments
 - *“I can’t afford to buy fresh fruits and vegetables and there’s no place to buy them anyway.”*
- The *modality* matches parents’ learning style
 - Reading data-based accounts of universal principles written by unknown experts can work for educated middle class parents.
 - *“Read books about child development?!”*



Implications of Family Studies for Childhood Obesity Research

■ What parenting practices influence child nutrition and health?

■ Structure, support, and a socializing relationship

■ What are the most effective strategies for influencing parenting?

■ The timing, the source, the modality, and the content of the message all make a difference; a multi-pronged approach is essential.

■ Understand the ecology that shapes parents' child-rearing beliefs and practices; fit the message to the context.

