

# Assessment of the Well-being of Children in their Social Environment

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The assessment of the well-being of children in their family and wider social environments is the common brief of social workers and other family practitioners across a variety of agency settings. Whether the focus is child protection, family therapy, family assessment in family law matters or a combination of the above, the practitioner finds the necessity to derive an accurate and sensitive assessment of how a particular child is faring in his or her social environment.

There is a wealth of literature available to practitioners to use in the formation of such assessments. Nevertheless, much of the literature appears to be quite specific in its subject area. Theories of child development, the role of families and other social networks in children's development, and the experience of children in 'typical' families, for example, tend to be treated separately in the literature. Practitioners' assessments need however to be informed by all of these streams of literature.

The framework presented in this paper represents the collation of one section of this diverse literature, and the application of this to the assessment of the social and emotional well-being of children. A schematic tool for recording information gathered during assessment is also included.

## THE SETTING

The setting in which this framework has been developed is the Legal Aid Office (Queensland).

Children are assessed in this agency, by social workers, for the purpose of preparing reports for use in the Family Court. Such reports are usually requested in cases where the Court has ordered that the children be separately represented.

The purpose is assessment, not extended treatment, and children are always assessed in the context of their family and wider social network.

It is in the nature of the cases referred that the significant adults in the child's life have been unable to reach agreement as to under what circumstances his or her best interests might be met. In most cases, the child has experienced not only family breakdown, but also ongoing disruption and uncertainty about the future.

It is expected that the social worker will make a recommendation as to how the child's best interests may be met. The methods available to the social worker making such an assessment are interview and observation. The adult parties and the children are each interviewed separately, then each of the adults are observed in interaction with the children. The in-office observation of children takes place in a specially furnished children's room equipped with a variety of toys and activities for children of different ages. Home visits are also normally made.

## THE LITERATURE

I have identified three streams of literature that contribute to the practitioner's understanding of the social and emotional adaptation of children.

The first stream is that of child development. Psychology texts abound that give section by section details of various aspects of child development, (Clarke-Stewart, Friedman and Koch 1985). Other authors, such as Erikson (1963) and Freud (1977) provide details expositions of central themes in child development. The literature of child development characteristically deals with 'normal' development under 'normal' circumstances. It nonetheless provides a useful knowledge base for the study of all children.

Another stream of literature takes account of the complexities of socio-cultural circumstances surrounding children and of their inter-relationships with others in their environment. Whereas the child development literature provides a means of assessing children's developmental progress over time, the ecological literature focuses on the inter-relationship complex occurring at one point in time. The literature in this group includes Garbarino's (1982) work on children and families in their social environment, Thurman's (1985) ecological study of children in families with handicapped parents, and the literature of family systems, notably, Minuchin's (1974) work on families and family therapy.

A third stream is that of vulnerability. This includes general works on the nature of vulnerability in children such as that of Murphy and Moriarty (1976), as well as a wealth of literature dealing with particular areas of vulnerability. A notable example of the latter is Wallerstein and Kelly's study of the children of divorce.

It seemed to me that the integration of these three streams of literature would make possible an extensive and thorough assessment of a child's social and emotional well-being. Such assessment would take account of where the child is in his or her passage through life, what is happening now in the child's life, what vulnerabilities the child is currently exposed to and what possible compensations exist or can be introduced to offset these vulnerabilities.

## THE FRAMEWORK

The framework achieved to date is an attempt to integrate the theory of child development, the study of the nature and forms of vulnerability in children, and the ecological study of children in their environment.

The framework is consistent with the perspective that a child's well-being can be assessed in terms of the 'goodness-of-fit' between the child and his or her environment. Provided the child's

environment provides sufficiently for his or her physical, social and emotional needs, the child can be considered to be in a state of well-being. Well-being is assessed in terms of the nature of the child's adaptation to his or her environment and the flexibility of the environment to the child's needs rather than in terms of specific characteristics of the environment, such as, whether the child is being cared for by one or two parents. The child's environment is also viewed broadly, to include all social-cultural influences in the child's life.

There are three pillars to this framework, the Comparative Child Development Chart, the Chart of Vulnerability and Compensations and the Ecological Map.

The Comparative Child Development Chart (see Chart 1) presents relevant sections of the child development literature in a quick-reference form that allows comparison across a range of aspects of child development.

Lengthwise, five broad stages of child development are presented. These are infancy, toddlerhood, early childhood, middle childhood and adolescence.

Width-wise there are three columns. The first comprises general profiles of what children are like at various ages. I have drawn on the Ilg and Ames (1955) and Elkind (1971) in the compilation of these profiles. Aspects of cognitive and language development as well as the development of self-concept are included in the age profiles.

The second column comprises Erikson's theory of psycho social development. The notes included are as summarised by Brophy (1977) in his text on child development and socialization.

The third column comprises notes from Carter and McGoldrick's (1980) work on the family life cycle. The inclusion of this work enables the user of the chart to view each of the various stages of child development in the context of the developmental tasks that would normally be undertaken by a family with children of that age.

These particular aspects of child development have been chosen for their relevance to the social and emotional well-being of children. The Chart is not intended to be inclusive of all aspects of child development.

The Comparative Child Development Chart shows what normally can be expected of children at difference ages in terms of various aspects of their development. As such, it provides useful knowledge for the study of children. It is not intended to be an assessment tool in itself, but rather to provide information to be used and weighed up against other information in the assessment process.

The Chart of Vulnerability and Compensations was compiled as a further information guide

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## CHART 1

# Comparative Child Development Chart

*NOTE: This chart has drawn directly from IIs and Ames (1955) (pp 10-34) (Years 1-5); Elkinel (1971) (pp 68-89 and pp 129-144) (years 6-16); Personal Social Development is drawn from Brophy (1977) and the Family Life Cycle from Carter & McGoldrick (1980).*

### AGE PROFILES

*Adapted from IIs and Ames (1955)*

#### BY 1 YEAR

Physically mobile  
Socially self-confident, friendly,  
loves an audience  
Increased motor abilities

#### 18 MONTHS

Unable to wait for anything  
Enjoys doing the opposite  
Interpersonal relations dominated by taking,  
not giving  
*Management*  
Recognise his motor, language and emotional  
immaturity  
Use physical barriers rather than verbal  
prohibition; keep words short and simple  
Allow outlets for boundless physical energy

#### 2 YEARS

Relative equilibrium  
More sure motorwise, is less likely to fall  
Can now make his wants known verbally  
Can tolerate slight or temporary frustration

#### 2-2½ YEARS

Peak age of disequilibrium  
Rigid and inflexible — cannot adapt, wait or  
give in  
Demands continuity of routine  
Domineering, demanding  
Unable to choose between alternatives.  
*Management*  
Streamline routines; make decisions for him  
Work round rigidities, rituals, stubbornness

#### 3 YEARS

Loves to conform, give and take, share  
Increased motor ability  
— daily routines accomplished with  
minimum difficulty  
— can play more successfully  
Increased language ability

#### 3½ YEARS

Period of disequilibrium prior to new phase  
of integration. Usually attained by 5 years  
Awkward, constantly falls and stumbles  
Emotionally insecure  
Attention demanding  
Tensional outlets such as blinking, nail  
biting, tics, nose picking, thumb sucking,  
masturbation, stuttering may appear for  
the first time.  
*Management*  
Try to be patient

### PERSONAL SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

*Adapted from Brophy (1977)*

#### BASIC TRUST vs. MISTRUST

Dependence on care takers for consistent  
good care, especially feeding.

#### AUTONOMY vs SHAME, DOUBT

Need to adjust to toilet training and other  
socialization demands while retaining a  
sense of autonomy. Danger of lasting  
sense of shame and self-doubt otherwise.

#### INITIATIVE vs GUILT

Need to adjust to rules re appearance, dress,  
behaviour without losing sense of  
initiative, curiosity, desire to explore and  
enjoy without becoming intolerably guilty  
and inhibited.

### FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

*Adapted from Carter and McGoldrick (1980)*

#### STAGE PRIOR TO BIRTH OF CHILDREN

The joining of families through marriage.  
P17

#### EMOTIONAL PROCESS OF TRANSITION

Commitment to new system. P17

#### REQUIRED CHANGES IN FAMILY STATUS

- (a) formation of marital system
- (b) realignment of relationships with  
extended families and friends to include  
spouse. P17

#### THE FAMILY WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

EMOTIONAL PROCESSES OF TRANSITION  
Accepting new members into the system. P17

#### REQUIRED CHANGES IN FAMILY STATUS

- (a) Adjusting marital system to make space  
for children
- (b) Taking on parenting roles
- (c) Realignment of relationships with  
extended family to include parenting and  
grandparenting roles. P17

*Chart continued over page*

AGE PROFILES

PERSONAL SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

FAMILY LIFE CYCLE

4 YEARS

- "Out of bounds" P30
- hits, kicks, breaks things, runs away
  - silly laughter alternates with fits of rage
  - repetitive, inappropriate use of bad language for shock value
  - thrives on defiance
  - does not distinguish between fact and fiction
  - seems overly secure and brashly confident

Management

Allow him to test himself out but within firm, consistent limits

4½ YEARS

- Becoming more self-motivating  
Sorting out reality from make-believe  
Improving control and perfecting skills
- play is less wild
  - better able to accept frustrations

5 YEARS

- Extreme equilibrium  
Reliable, stable, well-adjusted  
Content to stay on or near home-base  
Friendly and not too demanding in relations with others  
Tries only what he can accomplish and therefore succeeds

6 YEARS (*Adapted from Elkinel (1971)*)

- Active and outgoing  
Basically self-centered  
Proud of accomplishments  
Accomplishing basic skills at school

INDUSTRY vs INFERIORITY

- Facing and meeting family, peer and school expectations successfully  
Producing enjoyment of learning and practising childhood skills  
Coping with frustration and failure without developing generally low self-esteem and sense of inferiority

7 YEARS

- More serious, less talkative, less impulsive  
Less self-centered and less self-confident  
Sensitive to others' reactions  
Generally eager to take on responsibility, though can be complaining  
Concerned about performance at school

8 YEARS

- Outgoing, curious and extremely social  
More mature in social relations  
Friends are important  
Judgmental and critical of self and others  
Ambivalence about growing up — criticalness of adults vs eagerness to know more about the adult world and to be treated as grown-up

9 YEARS

- A new maturity, self-confidence and independence from adults  
Inner-directed and self-motivated  
Friendships more solid but intense dislike of opposite sex  
Skills learned at school at last being put to practical use

10 YEARS

- The high point of childhood  
Well adapted to his body, family, friends at school  
Co-operative, considerate and responsible to authority

**AGE PROFILES**

**11 YEARS**

Increase in energy and activity level  
 Self doubts and insecurity  
 Defensiveness about weaknesses  
 Conflictual relations with parents and siblings  
 Friendships remain unruffled  
 A new impatience with school subjects

**12 YEARS**

Outgoing, enthusiastic and generous  
 Shifts between relatively mature and relatively childish modes of behaviour  
 Relates well to peers and adults  
 Friendships are important  
 Beginning to assert 'grown-up-ness'

**13 YEARS**

Period of introspection  
 Least happy of the adolescent years  
 Preoccupation with self, self-evaluation and the search for self-understanding  
 Better organised and able to use time better

**14 YEARS**

More mature and self-confident  
 Less sensitive and 'touchy'  
 A new degree of self-evaluation and self-acceptance  
 Boys and girls mix better  
 The group and social acceptance are all-important

**15 YEARS**

A more somber, quiet demeanour  
 Beginning phase of separation from parents and adults  
 Rather guarded about themselves and relatively uncommunicative  
 Striving for independence, liberty and self-improvement  
 Tend to divorce themselves from family activities

**16 YEARS**

Equilibrium among the physical, emotional and social growth forces  
 Less sensitive, more happy and self-starting  
 More receptive to constructive criticism  
 Balance and moderation rather than extremes and exaggerations in emotional life  
 Accepting of good and bad qualities in self and others  
 New sense of independence and quality with parents

**PERSONAL SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT**

**IDENTIFY vs ROLE CONFUSION**

Need to question old values without a sense of dread or loss of identity  
 Need to gradually achieve a new more mature sense of identity and purpose

**INTIMACY vs ISOLATION**

Need to learn to share intimacy without inhibition or dread, paving way for keeply satisfying personal relationships

*Notes:*

1. Erikson includes further stages of Generativity vs Stagnation (Adulthood) and Ego Integrity vs Despair (Maturity).
2. The chart indicates the sequence of progression of stages, not the ages at which progressions occur. Individual and cultural variations in tempo and intensity are to be expected.
3. The stages depict 'critical times' i.e. "turning points" of "moments of decision between progress and regression, integration and retardation". Each item exists in some form before its critical time normally arrives. P243

**FAMILY LIFE CYCLE**

**THE FAMILY WITH ADOLESCENTS**  
**EMOTIONAL PROCESS OF TRANSITION**  
 Increasing flexibility of family boundaries to include children's independence.

**REQUIRED CHANGES IN FAMILY STATUS**

- (a) Shifting of parent/child relationships to permit adolescent to move in and out of the system
- (b) re focus on mid-life marital and career issues
- (c) beginning shift toward concerns for older generation

**THE UNATTACHED YOUNG ADULT**  
**EMOTIONAL PROCESS OF TRANSITION**  
 Accepting parent-off spring separation  
*Required changes in family status*

- (a) Differentiation of self in relation to family of origin
- (b) Development of intimate peer relationships
- (c) Establishment of self in work

*Notes*

1. Carter and McGoldrick include two further stages:
  - (a) Launching children and moving on — accepting a multitude of exits from and entries into the family system
  - (b) The family in later life — accepting the shifting of generational roles
2. The sequence of stages has been altered to better fit the child-focus of this framework. Thus, the stage 'the unattached young adult' has been placed fourth, at late adolescence, rather than first.

to be used in the complex study of children, (see Chart 2).

The layout of this chart underscores the perspective that vulnerability in children is neither a static nor absolute phenomenon. The chart sets out indicators for vulnerability and directions for compensatory processes. A circumstance that renders one child vulnerable may have a neutral or even positive effect on another. A circumstance that could be expected to indicate vulnerability may be offset by another, either in the child's constitution or his family or wider environment. To give a simple example, the child who lacks adequate support and encouragement at home may be compensated by a particularly close relationship with a teacher or youth leader.

This chart also includes the major social systems that influence children. Too often, the assessment of children focuses only on the family environment and ignore the wealth of other influences in a child's life. This narrow focus can lead to a hasty assessment of a family environment as being "wanting", without taking account of compensating factors in other areas of a child's life.

Four systems, as identified by Garbarino (1982) were found to be useful in the compilation of the chart.

1. Microsystems are the primary venues in which the child's day to day life is carried out. They include the custodial home, the access home, school, church, peer and neighborhood groups.
2. Mesosystems are the links between microsystems. The stronger the links and the less conflict between microsystems, the greater will be the well-being of the child.
3. Exosystems are those systems that the child is not directly involved in that nonetheless exert an influence on the child's life. The parental work place and authorities with responsibility for the provision of service for children are examples.
4. The macrosystem includes broad political and economic structures and societal assumptions about the nature of social relations, particularly as they affect children.

There is a wealth of useful literature dealing with vulnerability in children. The particular authors drawn on for the compilation of this chart were Garbarino (1982), Murphy and Moriarty (1976), Burns and Goodnow (1988) and Edgar and Ochiltree (1982).

Although each of these authors focus on different aspects of children's development, the themes of vulnerability and the possibility of off-setting compensations in the child's environment are common to them all. Garbarino, for example, uses the concepts of socio-cultural risk and socio-cultural opportunity. According to his definition, opportunities for development occur when the developing child is offered material, emotional and social encouragement compatible with his or her needs and capacities at a given time. Risks to development can come as direct threats to development or as the absence of opportunities for development (Garbarino (1982)).

'Families and family therapy' (Minuchin (1976) was also used in the compilation of the Chart of Vulnerability and Compensations. His clear descriptions of ideal and dysfunctional family

## CHART 2

# Chart of Vulnerability and Compensations

*NOTE: The Chart of Vulnerability and Compensations is adapted from Murphy and Moriarty (1976), Garbarino's (1982), Socio-Ecological Framework; Edgar and Ochiltree (1982), Burns and Goodnow (1985) and Minuchin (1974)*

### VULNERABILITIES

#### Microsystem

#### 1. QUALITIES OF THE CHILD

Disintegrative tendencies disintegrative reactions to stress in motor and speech areas.  
 Implusiveness, difficulties in control, overwhelmed by strong stimulation  
 Tendencies to be defensive, demanding, aggressive, antagonistic (that is coping patterns likely to endanger the child's relationships with others)  
 Fatigability, giving up easily  
 Fears and anxieties  
 Tensions and conflicts  
 Difficulties with peers  
 Difficulties with primary caregiver, family and environment

*(Adapted from Murphy and Moriarty (1976) P219*

#### 2 FAMILY SIZE AND COMPOSITION

*Demographic factors may present*

- vulnerabilities
  - more one parent families
  - fewer siblings
  - fewer relatives
  - greater housing mobility
  - more mothers working
- "Emptying of the family microsystem"  
 (Garbarino 1982, p36)

- (i) Continuity and sameness are essential elements of trust, a sense of meaning and predictability in the child's social environment, the development of a sense of control and an affirmation of identity (Edgar and ochiltree 1982, p10)
- (ii) There may be insufficient participation by adults of both sexes

### COMPENSATIONS

#### Microsystem

#### 1. QUALITIES OF THE CHILD

*Motor capacities*  
 Ability to use motor skills to cope with environmental demands  
 Efficient discharge of tension

*Self-Feeling*  
 Sense of self worth  
 Confidence in ability to do  
 Pleasure in being oneself — healthy narcissism  
 Independence, self-reliance, autonomy  
 Ability to balance dependence-independence  
 Freedom from doubt and ambivalence  
 Resilience following disappointment, defeat

*Affect*  
 Range of interests, areas of enjoyment  
 pleasure outweighs frustration experience  
 Gives warmth and support to others  
 Ability to accept warmth and support  
 Range of moods in relation to stimuli, flexibility of emotional management and control  
 Ability to sublimate aggression

*Coping with the environment*  
 Tolerance for obstacles, difficulties  
 Ability to balance self and social demands  
 Ability to control impact of the environment — strategic withdrawal to safety — ability to limit or fend off excessive stimulation  
 Capacity to mobilise resources under stress — ability to ask for and get help — differentiated response to stress  
 Ability to positively assert own needs and preferences  
 Freedom from inhibitions and rigidity in thinking  
 Ability to synthesise thinking, affect, action

*(Adapted from Murphy and Moriarty (1971) p117-119, p400-402)*

#### 2. FAMILY SIZE AND COMPOSITION

- (i) The family may be augmented from outside to produce a richer range of roles, activities and relationships for the child to use in his development
- (ii) School and the wider community may provide male and female adults for children who lack one or the other, and may also provide opportunity for the development of social competence (Edgar & Ochiltree 1982, p9, 13-14)
- (iii) "Quality day care can supplement the direct child rearing functions of the family, by serving as a source of nurturance, affection, instruction and socialization" and "Can offer rich opportunities for children to interact and form relationships with other caregivers and peers" (Garbarino 1982, P14)

*Chart continued over page*

- (iii) A sense of industry, the experience of producing things beside and with others is crucial to the child's appreciation of the division of labour, of differential opportunity, of self worth rather than inferiority. (Edgar and Ochiltree 1982, p10)
- (iv) Learned helplessness may result from successive experience of failure
- (v) Fewer siblings. Along with peers, siblings are as significant as adults in the development of moral values and in achieving a sense of worthwhile identify (Edgar and Ochiltree 1982, p13)

"Only children develop an early accommodation to an adult world, which may be manifested in precocious development, at the same time they may have difficulty in the development of autonomy and the ability to share, co-operate and compete with others." (Minuchin 1982, p59)

### 3. PARTICULAR FAMILY SITUATIONS

- (i) *Lone parent families*  
(1982 — 14.75% of Australian families were one parent families. Most of these were female headed.)

#### Parents

- (a) Poverty
- (b) Lack of continuous interaction between two adults
  - lack of adult company
  - facing crises and taking difficult decisions alone
  - need to manage one's own needs for affection and sex
  - sole authority figure, guide and role model for children
  - feel pressure not to deprive children due to lack of two parents — may lead to over indulgence

#### Children

- (a) Tendency to poorer school achievement and lower educational aspirations
- (b) Depression; behavioural problems; over compensatory masculinity in boys
- (c) Passive, ineffective attitudes of poor, low educated, isolated, female parents may be transferred from one generation to another (locked into depressed futures)
- (d) Sibling rivalry often intensified due to children's need for reassurance of their own special importance to the parent

- (ii) *Parental Unemployment*

- Stages — Shock
  - Active job seeking
  - Loss of self-confidence
  - Anxiety and depression
  - Adjustment may involve apathy, boredom, isolation

#### Children

- (a) Reduced living standards
- (b) Increased family tension and conflict
  - psychosomatic symptoms; regression, sibling and friend squabbles; acting out; lower school performance
- (c) Relatively high incidence of child abuse

- (iv) Children from stressed, deprived or isolated home backgrounds are likely "to show social, emotional and cognitive gains in good substitute care". (Burns and Goodnow 1985, p96)
- (v) Children's basic psychological necessities for development may be met regardless of family composition (Burns and Goodnow 1985, p55-58)

### 3. PARTICULAR FAMILY SITUATIONS

- (i) *Lone parent families*

#### Parents

- (a) Social and emotional support of friends, relatives, neighbours, churches, clubs
- (b) Work may be a source of social support and self-esteem
- (c) Personal resourcefulness — energy, confidence, self-esteem, cheerfulness
- (d) Resources gained
  - independence
  - relief from conflict and tension
  - better relationship with children
  - new friendships
  - achievement of new skills

#### Children

- (a) Relief at departure of a violent parent and the termination of other forms of family tension
- (b) Often, results in increase in child's well-being, improved school performance and social relations
- (c) Often develop an early confidence in own capacity to manage
- (d) Adolescents often achieve a sense of independence more easily
- (e) Experience of working together with parent may develop strength of character, empathy and a realistic view of life.

The quality of family functioning and interpersonal relationships are more important than the number of parents in the home.

- (ii) *Parental Unemployment*

- (a) Psychological impact may be buffered by:
  - income maintenance programmes
  - sex role de-stereotyping; diminished centrality of work as the course of male identity
- (b) Mediating factors
  - adaptability
  - resourcefulness
  - previous good quality of family relationships
- (c) Children may benefit from greater contact with father, especially where relationship is already good

structures provide further illumination as to possible vulnerabilities and compensations in childhood.

The third element in the framework is the Ecological Map of the child in his or her environment. The Ecological Map that I have constructed is loosely based on Garbarino's (1982) figure of the ecology of human development. It is intended to be used as a working tool during the assessment of children. It provides a schematic means of plotting the vulnerabilities and opportunities that present both within the child and in his or her socio-cultural environment.

The blank Ecological Map is simply a series of circles, each providing a separate recording space for each microsystem in the child's environment. Microsystems that would commonly be included are the home, the access home, extended family, school, pre-school, church, sporting or youth clubs and the neighborhood peer group (see Table 1). The user should be guided by the particular circumstances of the subject child when choosing which microsystems to include in a Map.

The Map is primarily a working tool for the user. The criterion for its usefulness is the extent to which the notes recorded enable the user to gain a better sense of the relative well-being of the child being assessed.

The recording symbols used are straightforward, and should facilitate interpretation of Maps to colleagues and clients.

The list of basic symbols I have used in my examples is presented in Table 2. Some of the symbols included are those used by Hartman (1978) in her diagrammatic assessments of family relationships. The symbols devised to date are used to record relationships from the perspective of the subject. It would certainly be of value to devise a further set of symbols, or variations of those used, to record the user's assessment of situations.

Figures 1 and 2 are the Ecological maps compiled in relation to a brother and sister who were the subject children of a social work report prepared at the request of a staff solicitor. The situational details of the case are outlined below:

#### CASE EXAMPLE

Ann J. is 13 years of age and Bill J. is 10 years of age. Ann and Bill's parents separated twelve months ago. At the time the report was prepared Ann was living with her mother, Mrs J. and her de-facto husband and Bill living with Mr J., his de-facto wife and her 13 year old daughter. This arrangement has been in place for about three months. Bill has resided with his father since his parent's separation. Ann had resided about half the time with each parent but had not resided in either household for more than three consecutive months. At the time the report was prepared, neither child had had access to their non-custodial parent for nearly three months.

Mrs J. had applied to the Family Court for access to both children. She regarded Ann's stay with her as temporary and was not seeking custody of her. The relationship between Mrs J. and Mr J. was so poor that they refused to even jointly discuss matters relating to the children. The relationship

between Mrs J's de-facto husband and Mr J. was worse. They had come to physical blows on a number of occasions. Mrs J. would have liked to obtain custody of Bill but accepted this was not possible because Bill did not get on at all with her de-facto husband. Furthermore, she stated that she believes the children should not be separated.

Mrs J's mother and father also live in the same area. They are generally supportive of their daughter but are concerned about the effect of the conflict on the children. When access does occur, the 'handover' takes place at their residence.

Mr J. had applied to the Family Court for custody of Bill and access to Ann. He was not seeking custody of Ann because of the poor relationship between Ann and his de-facto wife and her daughter.

Ann wished to remain living with her mother. She wished to see her father regularly but at a time when his de-facto wife and daughter were not present. Ann was performing poorly at school and was frequently in trouble for fighting with other students. She had also been caught stealing. Her family and teachers consider that she mixes with a 'rough crowd' at school and socially. Ann insisted that her father's de-facto wife's daughter and her friends teased her. Ann had spoken to the School Guidance Officer about this and the family problems a number of times. Ann attends a netball club when she is staying with her mother. Her father does not allow her to go because he considers the location and times to be inconvenient. Ann likes her brother, Bill, and at the time the report was prepared, was missing him.

Bill wishes to remain living with his father. He likes his father's de-facto wife and her daughter and considered that they had more than adequately replaced his mother and sister. Bill insisted initially that he did not want to see his mother and sister at all. He later reluctantly agreed to see them provided his mother's de-facto husband was not present. Bill was an average student and his school performance was not appreciably affected by the family trauma of the past twelve months. Bill's preferred play activity was bike riding and fishing with his friends.

There is clearly a lot of hurt and anger in this family and considerably unwillingness on the part of the adults to work towards resolution of the current difficulties. Prior to the preparation of the report, the family had attended counselling, without success. Bill appeared to be coping with the family conflict by aligning himself closely with his father and rejecting his mother. Ann lacked clear support from either her father or her mother and appeared to be seeking approval in her peer group, through 'acting out' behaviour.

Initial evaluation suggests that the Ecological Map is a useful tool to incorporate into the process of assessing the well-being of children from an ecological perspective.

Information about all the significant systems in the subject's environment can be displayed on the one Map. The interrelationships between these systems can also be readily identified.

- (d) Role model effects — may lose sense of leadership by father
- (e) Peer relations — may lose prestige — effects of having less money
- (f) Generally, when parents are not happy about their work arrangements (whether at work, unemployed, or homemaking), children get along somewhat less well at school and with friends (Burns and Goodnow 1985, p58-88)

#### 4. FAMILY STRUCTURE — problems with internal boundaries

##### *Enmeshment*

Internal boundaries are too diffuse  
There is over concern among family members  
Autonomous exploration and mastery of problems is discouraged  
The development of children's cognitive and affective skills is limited  
Parental interference in the sibling subsystem impedes learning of skills for negotiating with peers

##### *Disengagement*

Internal boundaries are too rigid  
Communication across subsystems becomes difficult  
Protective functions of the family are handicapped  
Members lack feelings of loyalty and belonging  
Members also lack the capacity for interdependence and seeking support when needed  
parents are unresponsive to children's needs and may be rigid, domineering or permissive  
There is little reciprocal interaction (Minuchin 1982, p53-56)

##### *Neighbourhoods*

Socially undeveloped neighbourhoods may impoverish the social experience and knowledge of children (Garbarino 1982, p157)

#### MESOSYSTEM

##### *Source of difficulties*

Absence of connections between microsystems  
Conflicts of values between one microsystem and other

There is considerable potential for developmental risk in the home/school mesosystem (Garbarino 1982, p40-42)

##### *Family Boundaries with other microsystems*

- (i) If too rigid — leads to social isolation, family isolated from neighbours, institutions and social supports; discourages normal social relations of children

- learn new skills
- doing things together
- greater identification with father (Burns and Goodnow 1985, p58-88)

#### 4. AN EFFECTIVE FAMILY PROVIDES

Adequate opportunities for interaction with others.

Acceptance, nurturance  
Appropriate maturity demands  
Discipline, structure, sufficient control (Garbarino 1982, p34-40)

Accommodation of members' concerns; all are able to meet their goals (Garbarino 1982, p71)

Clear but not rigid internal boundaries  
Continuity of structure whilst successful adapting to changes in internal and external conditions (Minuchin 1982, p65-66)

To focus on the family as a social system in transformation highlights the transitional nature of certain family processes. This approach is more useful than a static problem orientation (Minuchin 1978, p60)

##### *Neighbourhoods*

A well developed neighbourhood provides:

- (i) an informal support system families can call on in time of need
- (ii) a territorial base, a sense of familiarity and belonging (Garbarino p163)
- (iii) a sense of security and peace of mind for the parent
- (iv) multiple connections and multiple situations that permit children to make the best use of their intellectual and social equipment (Garbarino 1982, p163)

Neighbourhood networks may be natural or created, via social intervention, to fill perceived needs (Garbarino 1982, p156)

#### MESOSYSTEM

"Family makes good use of external resources." p71 (Garbarino 1982)

Parents encourage children's development of social relationships and their need to respond to peer influences (Garbarino 1982, p71)

Good connections between home, school, church etc.

Absence of value conflicts in connections between these microsystems.

- (ii) If too diffuse — no demarcation from society; provides inadequate identity, support and guidance (Garbarino P71)

### EXOSYSTEM

#### Community

Inadequate local provision of services for children and families

#### Work

Inadequate consideration by the economic system of job demands on parents

- inadequate child care
  - inadequate time off to fulfil parental functions
  - inflexibility of working conditions
- (Edgar & Ochiltree 1982, p15)

### MACROSYSTEM

“Cultural blueprints that underlie the organisation of institutions, the assumptions people make about social relations and the workings of the political and economic system” Garbarino 1982, p45)

### VULNERABILITIES

Inconsistent development of children’s policies and the unequal provision of child support services reflect indifference to children (Edgar and Ochiltree 1982, p14)

Sexist attitudes restrict children’s career choices and force children into personality styles that may be temperamentally incompatible (Garbarino 1982, p53-54)

“Racism undermines the development of the children it defines as inferior” (Garbarino 1982, p54)

### EXOSYSTEM

Adequate range of and availability of child care services

Flexible working arrangements for parents

Adequate income security for families

### MACROSYSTEM

Opportunities occur when political and economic forces work on behalf of and in support of children and families (Garbarino 1982, p44-45)

### COMPENSATIONS

The Map can be used as a guide to the themes that need to be addressed in the report. Information caps can also be identified at an early stage of report preparation, leaving the reporter time to collect the necessary information to ‘complete the picture’.

The Map can be completed at the time of interview, as a type of shorthand notetaking or afterwards, during the process of piecing together information obtained during interview. I have found that Map to be particularly useful at this stage of mulling over what is happening in a particular situation. The Map can also be used in the process of providing feedback to families after the assessment has been made.

### SUMMARY

The Comparative Child Development Chart, the Cart of Vulnerability and Compensation and the

Ecological Map, comprise the three separate but integrated units of this framework for the assessment of children. The Ecological Map is the recording tool, to be informed by the knowledge contained in the Charts.

The purpose of this framework is to provide a comprehensive means of weighing up the wealth of information presented to the user in the assessment process. It takes account of the complexities of the child and his or her environment at a variety of levels. It thus enables a thorough assessment, one that neither excludes vital information through being too narrow nor glosses over important detail by being too global in perspective.

The Ecological Map is as yet at the beginning stage of development.

Its ultimate usefulness will be determined through field practice. The author would welcome any comments as to the usefulness of the Map, including possible modifications as well as suggestions for practical applications.

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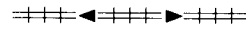
**TABLE 1**  
**List of Possible**  
**Microsystems**

- Home (primary residence of child)
- Home of non-custodial parent.
- Extended family
- School
- Pre-school
- Church
- Sporting club; other youth group
- Neighbourhood peer group
- Any other organisation, person or group of persons significantly involved in the life of the subject child may also be recorded as a microsystem on the Ecological Map.

**TABLE 2**  
**Recording Symbols**

- Lines indicate existence of relationship.
- ===== Strong relationship
  - Adequate relationship
  - ..... Tenuous relationship
  - + + + + + Stressful relationship
- Arrows indicate flow of relationship, energy, resources etc.
- >————
  - <————
  - <————>————
- Reciprocal relationship

Eg. A relationship that is highly stressful for both parties would be recorded:



A circle around one section of a microsystem, and linked to a relationship line, indicates a particular relationship with that subsystem.

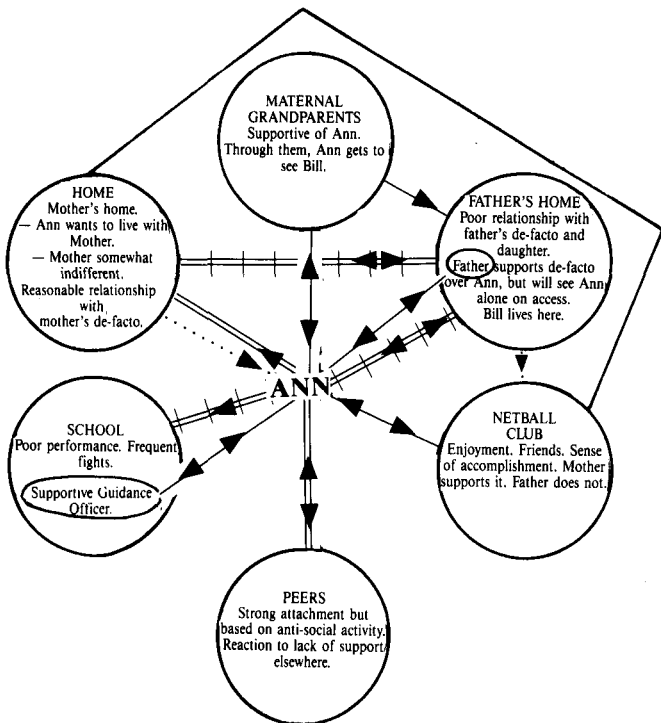


FIGURE 1 — Ecological Map: Ann J.

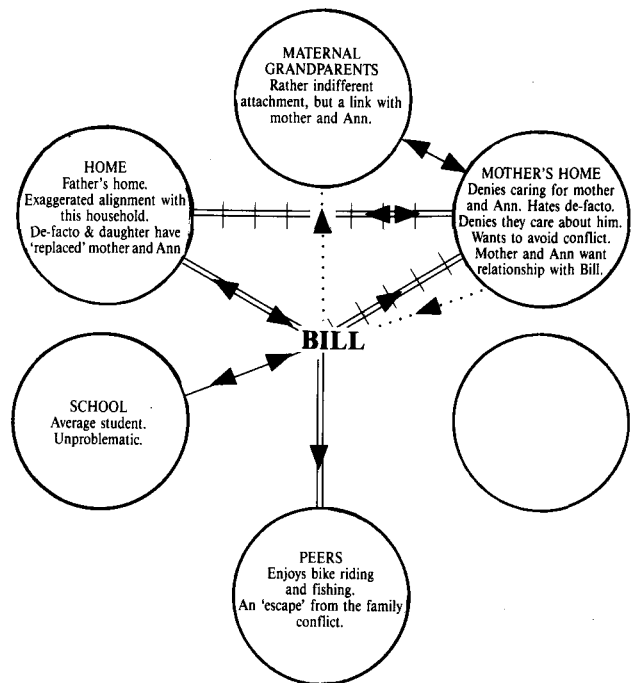


FIGURE 2 — Ecological Map: Bill J.