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# YOUNG CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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A Developmental  
and Ecological  
Approach

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S. KENNETH THURMAN

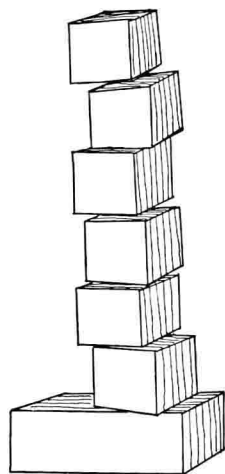
ANNE H. WIDERSTROM

# **YOUNG CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS**

**A Developmental and  
Ecological Approach**

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*To our children  
Shane and Anne  
And to children everywhere*



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# Preface

This book was written in response to a long-felt need on the part of both authors for a scholarly and comprehensive text on infants and young children with special needs. As the commitment grows to appropriately educate special needs children beginning in infancy, the need for well-trained teachers and other specialists to work in intervention programs will increase. At present the number of university-level programs for training such people is multiplying rapidly, and we have often heard the lament, indeed have expressed it ourselves, that there is a lack of good text material for the courses we teach, especially those for upper division and graduate students. This book presents a thorough examination of major issues related to intervention with handicapped infants and young children.

The book is organized around two basic premises which we consider to be of vital importance. First, to be effective interventionists with young special needs children, professionals require firm grounding in normal development. Second, professionals need to recognize the ecology of which the child is part. Normal development is a yardstick by which to measure expectations and performance. An ecological perspective suggests that the child is part of a system and, as such, is in constant interaction with it. The child's interactions with the system can be a target for intervention.

Each of these perspectives, developmental and ecological, dominates portions of the book. Section One is devoted to an examination of general issues affecting young children with special needs and to discussions of normal and abnormal development in cognitive, language, social, and motor areas. It is hoped that readers will pay close attention to the material on normal development and consider it a foundation for their knowledge of handicapping conditions. The material on abnormal development is then presented in contrast to the normal sequences.

In Section Two, screening and assessment, an ecological approach is taken to evaluating young, handicapped children. The child's total environment—home and family, preschool or day care, and community—is taken into account in the diagnostic process. In its focus on programming, Section Three also takes an ecological perspective with emphasis on the child's fit or congruence with his or her surroundings. The final section addresses models of intervention and culminates with a chapter on the implications of mainstreaming special needs children at the preschool level.

We hope that our book proves to be a useful resource for teachers, psychologists, counselors, members of the medical profession, and other professionals. We have included the latest theory and research to present a perspective which is somewhat different from that of other texts in this area. Because we see our book as a beginning to the learning process and not an end, we have included a comprehensive list of references at the end of the book. In addition, each chapter begins with a few questions to be kept in mind not only while reading the chapters but also when practicing as a professional.

While this book is our responsibility and its shortcomings may be assigned to us, we would be remiss if we were not to acknowledge the contributions of several people to this effort. First, we would like to acknowledge Dr. Terry D. Meddock. His help in early conceptualizations of this book was invaluable to its formation. He contributed significantly to the scope and structure of the book and without his contribution this book probably would never have come to pass. He was also a contributing author to Chapter 7. We appreciate his contribution.

We would also like to thank Dr. Allen Sandler who displayed his scholarship and ability as the author of Chapter 10. His lucid writing style and comprehensive coverage of material are truly appreciated.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Debbie May who went above and beyond the call of duty in reviewing earlier drafts of our book. Her insight and suggestions were indeed meaningful and useful to us.

Finally, each of us has special thanks for family members, colleagues and students who have been especially helpful to us during the preparation of this book. One of us (SKT) would like to thank his wife, Marcia, and son, Shane, for their never-ending love and support during the time when this book was being written. They both on occasion became frustrated at always hearing about "the book." Nonetheless, they always bore with me, and Marcia even generously helped to prepare the final manuscript. Both of them will continue to have my gratitude and my love. The other (AHW) owes a debt of gratitude to Diane Bryen, Bob Hofmeister, and Ken Thurman, who guided her doctoral study and introduced her to the pleasures of writing and conducting systematic inquiry. We both wish to thank our graduate students at Temple University and the University of Colorado at Denver who used early drafts of the book as a course text and provided us with valuable feedback.

S. K. T.  
A. H. W.

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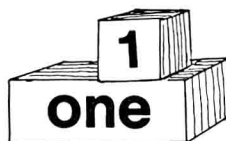
# **PERSPECTIVES AND ISSUES**





# A Perspective on Young Children with Special Needs

1. What are some challenges of early intervention besides those mentioned in this chapter?
2. In what ways are a developmental and an ecological perspective compatible with each other?
3. What do you see as the personal rewards you may gain as an early interventionist?



This book is about children from birth to age six. It is about children whose developmental patterns lie outside the range considered “normal.” It is about children whose environments and social settings place them at risk. It is about children who have special needs.

Special needs are those that require care or intervention beyond that normally required to assure the best possible developmental outcome in young children. All young children require stimulating, nurturing environments. All young children require love and trust. Children with special needs in addition require specialized treatment and interventions. Low birth weight infants, for example, may be required to spend the first weeks of life in an intensive care nursery. A three-and-a-half-year-old who is not talking may require language therapy. A five-year-old whose behavior is oppositional may require a behavior-management program in order to be ready for public school. As you read this book you will become familiar with the various types of problems and special needs that young children may have. You will also learn about ways in which these special needs can be addressed to minimize or remediate their effects.

## THE CHALLENGES OF EARLY INTERVENTION

The challenges of early intervention for young children with special needs include:

1. Provision of programs without stigmatizing through labels
2. Inclusion of family members in programs without destroying family integrity
3. Financial maintenance of programs in times of declining resources
4. Development of personnel from a variety of disciplines who understand children both with and without special needs

Each of these challenges is elaborated below.

Early intervention must counteract the effects of special needs without creating self-fulfilling prophecies regarding the developmental outcomes and potentials of these children. Thus, the first challenge is to identify and provide programs for young children with special needs without labeling the children. In order to do this, early interventionists must be aware that children with special needs fall outside of the accepted parameters of normalcy; but they must also resist placing inhibiting labels on these children. Thurman and Lewis (1979) have pointed out how the early labeling of children may actually contribute to the development of prejudice towards them. Thurman and Lewis contend that early intervention programs should stress the confrontation of difference in a positive way and, by so doing, reduce the possibilities of developing negative prejudices. In fact, early intervention programs, if properly designed, should reduce the probability of a child receiving a label. Take, for example, the case of the oppositional five-year-old mentioned above. This child has a pattern of behavior that, if left alone, could result in his being labeled as behavior-disordered or emotionally disturbed in first grade. Proper intervention designed to make the child less oppositional could prevent such labeling. In cases where labeling is unavoidable, early intervention can be useful in reducing the severity of the label. For example, a child born without arms is destined to be labeled. Early intervention, however, can minimize the child's disability and, therefore, his label, at say age six.

A second challenge for early intervention programs is family involvement. It is accepted practice to involve their families in intervention programs for young children with special needs. Some programs, in fact (see Chapter 11), are actually structured so that parents are responsible for any intervention that a child receives. Too often, however, interventionists have failed to recognize that families that include young children with special needs are families with special needs. While it is not unreasonable to expect families to put forth additional effort on behalf of their special-needs children, it must be remembered that each family is different and has individual members whose ability to respond and be effective varies greatly. Turnbull and Turnbull (1982) have suggested that pro-

professionals tend to respond to parents with a standardized set of expectations. They go on to point out the problems with such an approach. The early interventionist would do well to remember that individual family members are as different from each other as are individual special-needs children. The principle that special-needs children should be responded to as individuals is especially applicable to responding to their families. Chapter 10 addresses the needs and involvement of families with special-needs children.

A third challenge facing the early interventionist is the financial maintenance of programs. This challenge is salient in times of declining federal and state support. Early interventionists must provide cost-efficient programs and use each resource to its maximum. Effective use of volunteers, for example, may reduce overall program cost. Staff-made materials often are less costly than mass-produced ones and at the same time can be more responsive to the individual needs of the children. The financial stability of a program is critical if high-quality services are to be maintained. When direct-intervention staff are constantly concerned with whether there will be money to run the program their morale and effectiveness decline. The challenge to provide financial solvency lies primarily with program administrators, who should be prepared to tap a variety of different funding sources. One mistake often made by program administrators is to rely too heavily on a single source of funds. Generally, a program ought not to rely on one source for more than 25 to 30 percent of its operating funds. While this is not always possible, the challenge of financial solvency can be more readily met if programs are developed with multiple funding bases. As you read the program descriptions in Chapter 11, you may want to recall this point and think how well each program seems to be meeting the challenge of financial solvency through the use of cost-effective methods and multiple funding bases.

The fourth challenge to be discussed deals with the development of personnel to provide early intervention to young children with special needs. These people need to come from a wide variety of disciplines including special education, psychology, early childhood education, speech and language pathology, occupational therapy, physical therapy, nursing, social work, and pediatrics. These professionals must be provided with expertise on the needs of children both with and without special needs. While it is up to colleges, universities, and professional schools to offer pre-service programs to train early interventionists, it is not their responsibility alone. Individual early intervention programs must take the responsibility for providing meaningful, ongoing staff development programs. These programs should inform staff of the latest theories and techniques as they are applicable to young children with special needs. The bases of both pre-service and in-service training should be familiarity with the normal theories of development and their relationship to intervention with young children who have special needs. Our commitment to this belief, in fact, is manifest in this book which has as one of its major foci normal developmental patterns in children from birth to age six.

Each individual professional involved in early intervention must take up the challenge of his own professional development. Interventionists must think of

themselves as self-directed learners and must stay abreast of the field by reading professional literature and by attending conferences. At the same time, they must use their own programs as a source of knowledge and professional development. They can learn not only from peers but also from the children and families for whom they provide services. Careful record keeping and data collection can provide important information about the effectiveness of various techniques and procedures. Systematic observation can provide valuable insight into children's development as well as into their patterns of interaction with their environments. Many of these themes are further elaborated in later chapters of this book.

The future of early intervention programs for children with special needs depends on how well we are able to respond to these four challenges. We hope that through reading this book you will become better able to meet the challenges of early intervention. The knowledge that you gain should be a point of departure and not an end to your own professional development. To that end each chapter, including this one, begins with a series of thought questions designed to let you continue to think about the issues raised in each chapter.

## A DEVELOPMENTAL ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

As you read this book, you will find that it approaches young children with special needs from two separate yet interrelated perspectives. On the one hand, the first section of the book is developmental in approach. Our concern is to provide the reader with a knowledge of normal patterns of development as they characterize cognitive, language, social/emotional, and motor functions. In addition, specific problems that may occur in children from birth to age six are addressed. Our focus on development stems from our belief that one of the major functions of early intervention is to facilitate development and a second, as will be discussed in the next chapter, is to reduce risk to young children. Effective early intervention, then, should improve the quality of development beyond the point that would be expected were intervention not provided. To improve it, we must understand development and the problems that may occur in normal developmental patterns.

An equally important perspective that characterizes this book is an ecological one. An ecological perspective recognizes that a child is not a free-floating developing human being but assumes rather that she is part of an ecological system. An ecological approach is concerned with the child as a developing organism *in interaction with* the environment. *Ecology* is defined as the study of an organism's interaction with its environment. In an ecological approach, attention must be given to the goodness-of-fit between the child and the environment. To elucidate goodness-of-fit, Thurman (1977) developed the concept of ecological congruence (the degree to which an individual and his environment are mutually tolerant). This tolerance is in part a function of the developmental status of the individual child.

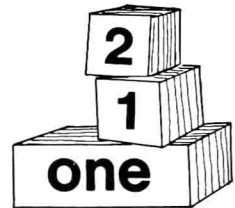
An ecological approach complements a developmental one because it provides the context within which developmental intervention occurs. Development can only be improved in some context. The ecological system provides the context. So, while it should be designed to improve the developmental status of a child, early intervention should also be designed to recognize that the child's development has meaning only within its ecological context. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss the ecological congruence model in detail and describe how to design early interventions that develop a higher level of tolerance or congruence within the ecological system. In short, to be concerned with a child's development without having equal concern for the ecological system is to overlook a major aspect of early intervention. It is only in a well-balanced ecology that development is facilitated and maintained.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This brief chapter was designed to familiarize the reader with the perspectives and orientation of this book. The book is a resource, a beginning point for the student who is concerned with early intervention for special needs children. Readers are urged to use the thought questions at the beginning of each chapter and to extend their knowledge by consulting sources from the references at the end of the book which relate to their own areas of interest. The challenges of early intervention are great. A commitment to meeting those challenges can result in meaningful personal rewards. It is to be hoped that those rewards will be yours.

# Determinants of Risk in Young Children

1. What factors can put a young child at risk?
2. Does being at risk necessarily imply a negative outcome?
3. What are the implications of incidence and prevalence for the study of young children at risk?
4. Why is it important for interventionists to understand the concept of risk?



The purpose of this chapter is to identify the determinants of risk and disability in young children. The concepts to be discussed are derived from psychology, sociology, and medicine. Simply, this chapter addresses factors that help determine the degree of risk experienced by children in infancy and early childhood. It also provides perspective on the pervasiveness of developmental problems in young children through a discussion of incidence and prevalence.

## THE CONCEPT OF BEING AT RISK

In one sense, we are all at risk. That is, every time we get into a moving automobile, cross a street, or participate in sports, we are risking personal injury or even death. Most of the risks we take as well-adjusted adults are voluntary risks. No one forces us to play football or jog across a busy street. As a matter of fact, most of us have a point beyond which we will not take risks. For example, you may be



perfectly willing to drive your car down the highway at 55 miles per hour but not at 100 miles per hour, since the latter speed would not only increase your likelihood of receiving a stiff fine but would also put you at a much greater risk of injuring or killing yourself. Essentially, we are all at risk to a certain extent but at the same time we have a certain amount of control over the degree of risk to which we are exposed.

Unfortunately, the same thing could not have been said about us during prenatal and early postnatal periods. While it is obvious that we are exposed to risk every day, being at risk actually begins with the moment of conception. Developmental risk that occurs either prenatally or in the first several years of life provides the most basic rationale for early developmental intervention. The roots of much of our early developmental programming for young children are found in the desire to decrease exposure to risk for these children. Thus, we have established special programs for those young children whom we consider to be especially at risk. By reducing the risk to which a child is exposed, we maximize the probability that she will develop to the fullest extent possible. Typically, the greater the degree of perceived risk, the more intensive the intervention.

## FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO RISK

Solnit and Provence (1979) have suggested that the degree of potential risk is determined in part by the *vulnerability* of the child. They suggest that “vulnerability refers particularly to the weaknesses, deficits, or defects of the child, whereas risk refers to the interaction of the environment and the child” (p. 800). This section examines a number of factors related to the vulnerability of infants and young children as well as to the risk they may encounter in their environments. These factors include socioeconomic status, prematurity and low birth weight, hereditary and genetic conditions, prenatal factors, and events during birth and delivery.

### Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status (SES) relates more often to vulnerability and risk than does any other identifiable variable. For example, lower SES mothers are more likely than higher SES mothers to give birth to premature infants (Butler & Alberman, 1969; Guthrie et al., 1977) and SES remains the single best predictor of later IQ scores (McCall, Hogarty, & Hurlburt, 1972). Put another way, infants and young children born and reared in lower SES environments have a greater risk of exhibiting lower IQ scores in subsequent years than do their higher SES peers.

Generally, children born into lower SES environments tend to be more vulnerable throughout infancy and preschool years than those born into higher SES environments. This is true, of course, if we base our conclusions solely on statistical evidence, for the statistics show that such factors as nutrition, mother/child