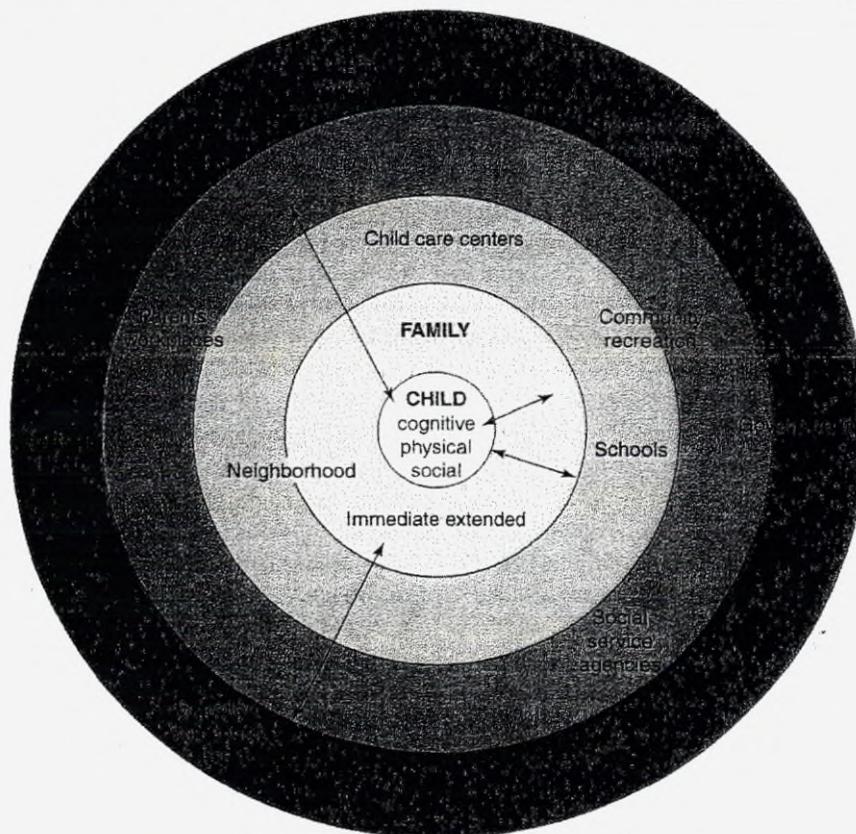


BRONFENBRENNER'S BIOECOLOGICAL MODEL

An important function of theories in the early childhood professional's life is to provide ways of thinking about and approaching our work. Over the course of his long and celebrated career, developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner contributed one of the most influential and powerful frameworks for thinking about the context of children's development. Originated in the 1970s, his initial framework broadened the existing study of child development to more authentically reflect the multiple environments and influences at work in children's lives (Bronfenbrenner, 2005a). He described this as an ecological model of human development in which children develop amid a set of nested environments, relationships, and influences. Direct and indirect settings are often represented like a cross-section of an onion with arrows signifying interrelationships, as in Figure 4-1.

FIGURE 4-1

Nested Model of Environments, Relationships, and Influences



Bronfenbrenner continued to reshape and evolve his perspective to the more recent bioecological model of human development, which integrates the following key aspects of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005b):

- Developmental maturation (biological processes)
- Environmental influences
- Dynamic relationships among all aspects of children's lives
- Children's perceptions and experience of influences
- Influences both constant and changing across time
- Children influence their world just as they are influenced

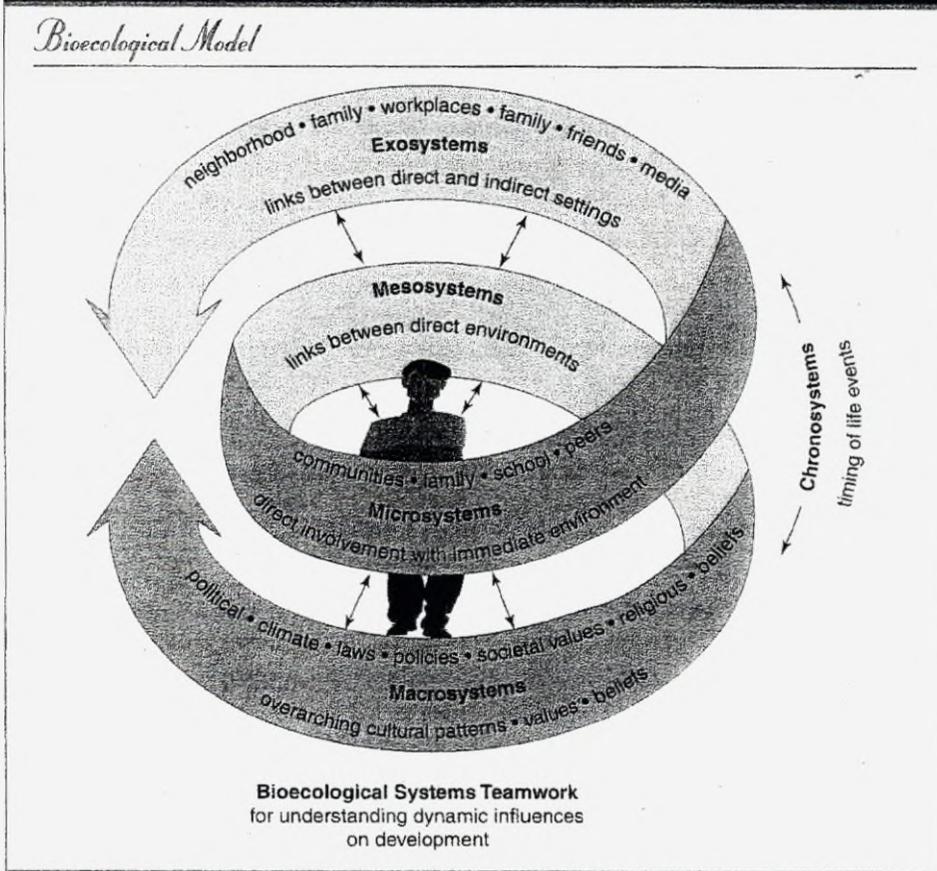
Bronfenbrenner's work is especially meaningful to early childhood practice because of the prominence of family as well as multiple other systems operating within children's lives. It provides a structured organization to the complex context of children's development. This model both acknowledges the many direct and indirect influences that affect children's lives (such as family, social policies, schools, cultures) and organizes them in a flexible, bidirectional system of five structures. In essence, it provides a map of the family, community, process, and cultural *contexts* of children's development and underscores the importance of recognizing the many influences in children's lives.

The five structures of dynamic, interrelated influences in children's lives are as follows:

1. *Microsystems*: Relationships and activities in the immediate physical, social, and psychological environments of family, home, school, and community lay a foundation for development, learning, and social interactions and have the strongest influence on development. Microsystems are the face-to-face settings within which the child has direct experience.
2. *Mesosystems*: Links and interrelations between two or more direct settings within the child's life, such as how strong involvement between family and schoolteachers improves children's academic success. Mesosystems are connections and processes among people in the child's direct environments/microsystems.
3. *Exosystems*: Links and interrelations between direct and indirect settings, only one of which is part of the child's direct contact, such as how stress at a parent's workplace is felt in the home. The psychological connections among close relationships (in the microsystems) are influenced and influential even though the child is not directly participating in one of the settings.
4. *Macrosystems*: The overarching cultural patterns, values, beliefs, lifestyles, resources, and expectations that influence child and family life experiences. Bronfenbrenner referred to this structure as "a societal blueprint for a particular culture or subculture" (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40).
5. *Chronosystems*: The constancy and change of biological developmental processes as well as environmental experiences throughout the child's life that affect developmental outcomes. Chronosystems represent the influence of timing of life and developmental events including stability and change within family economics, family relationships, maturation, home and school environments, historical events, etc.

More than a simple hierarchy, a unique feature of the bioecological model is that the relative influence of these processes, settings, and interrelationships are dynamic and shift

FIGURE 4-2



and change over the course of the child's life just as influences are different from one child to the next. This model is about the interrelationships among people, settings, and experiences. Figure 4-2 represents an illustration of the relative strength and the fluid, interrelated nature and complexity of influences in children's lives.

IN YOUR OWN WORDS: YOUR OWN CONTEXT

Think about Bronfenbrenner's work in relation to your own life. Using small adhesive notes, write down each person, agency, institution, and system that influenced your life along its course. Once you have as many as possible down, organize them by how direct the influence was. Try to structure your organization, hierarchy, or map to convey the dynamic, fluid, interdependent way these influences helped shape who you are. Will you organize your notes like a timeline, spiral, web, flow chart, or other structure?

Another key element of Bronfenbrenner's theory that is particularly important for early childhood practice is that the influences are *bidirectional*. This means that the many influences shaping the course of a child's development are also affected by the child (Darragh, 2007). Many professionals are drawn to his framework because emphasizing



Traditions and activities of children's home lives are essential aspects of their identity and family experience.

the bidirectional nature of influences views children as a more empowered agent in their own development. Children can affect their world in the following ways:

- Parents' choices and decisions are based on goals for their children and their children's needs (living near extended family, schools, or health care).
- Employers often create policies in light of family needs (family leaves, family health insurance, flexible schedules).
- School district policy and practice are shaped by parent input and enrollment patterns.
- Community parks are placed in neighborhoods where children reside.
- Operation of child care facilities is based on family needs (schedule, cost, access).
- A variety of child-welfare issues are regular features of political platforms.
- Public funding and support for social service agencies serving children and families varies, in part based on parent lobbying.

Bronfenbrenner's dynamic, multidimensional model provides a way for early childhood professionals to carefully consider the many, varied influences in children's lives as well as the unique interactions in each child's particular contextualized experience. Bronfenbrenner's prolific writings and sought-after advice about family well-being policies and structures advocate a passionate and compelling message: ensuring successful development and outcomes for children demands that we value, support, and actively engage families in shared child-raising and education efforts (Bronfenbrenner, 2005b). Take a few minutes to see how one school community is coming together to support its members on behalf of their children in this **video**. For early childhood professionals, this translates into deliberate and intentional practices that both provide robust support *to* families and seek and access support *from* families. Examples of this reciprocity might include

- knowing and supporting family goals for children's development,
- promoting family activities that support program learning goals (such as take-home book packs),
- helping families access services and programs as needed (such as economic assistance or developmental screenings),
- seeking family input on program/school policies and activities,
- regular conferences with families about their children's experiences and progress in program or school,
- welcoming family participation in program/classroom activities (facilitating transportation or child care as needed),
- voting for and promoting family-supportive laws and policies, and
- dialoguing with families and community members about existing and needed programs and services that support child and family well-being.

OVERVIEW OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

Putting It Into Practice

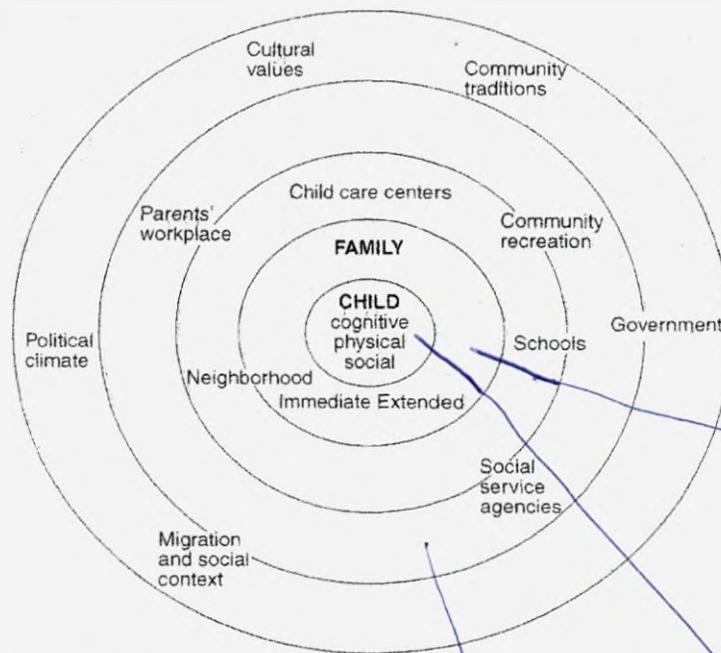
Systems of Influence

In 1979, Urie Bronfenbrenner developed his ecological systems theory. In this theory, he identified the many direct and indirect influences that impact children. He designed a diagram to represent the interrelationships, which looks like a series of concentric circles. At the core, representing the strongest influence, are the child and immediate family. From here the child's extended family, school, community, political systems, and so on, branch out to show the widespread systems that impact children (see the following figure). A key element of Bronfenbrenner's theory that is particularly important for early childhood practice is that the influences are bidirectional; this means that the many layers of influences shaping the context of children's lives are also impacted by the child (Darragh, 2007). Children impact their world in the following ways:

- Parents' choices and decisions are based on goals for their children and their children's needs.
- Employers often create policies in light of family needs (family leaves, family health insurance).

- School district policy and practice are shaped by parent input and enrollment.
- Community parks are placed in neighborhoods where children reside.
- Operation of child-care facilities is based on family needs.
- A variety of child-welfare issues are regular features of political platforms.
- Public funding and support for social service agencies serving children and families varies, in part based on parent lobbying.

Think about this in relation to your own life. Using small adhesive notes, write down each person, agency, institution, and system that influenced your life along its course. Once you have as many as possible down, organize them by how direct the influence was. Try to design your own visual representation to convey the dynamic, fluid, interdependent way these influences helped shape who you are.



An ecosystem view.