

Disruptions and dynamic processes in early development: Issues of assessment and intervention

The set of reports in this issue share a concern about disruptions in early development, about how such disruptions relate to the dynamic processes underlying that development, and about how decisions are made about whether disruption is likely to affect the course of normal development. Transactional exchanges, over time, between contexts and within-child factors can occur smoothly in the dynamic operation of “travelling” a developmental trajectory through transition probabilities to increased competence. When developmental change involves stress and difficulties in coping, the consequences can be minor and need have no developmental salience. Such disruptions can be normal transient events in the developmental trajectory, as normally developing children meet unfamiliar challenges, learn new skills, and replace immature coping strategies. In this conceptual framework for early development, contextual support and adversity are involved in an ongoing balancing act with competent developmental coping.

The dynamic balancing process, however, can distribute the risk of disruptions unevenly, so that what is a momentary difficulty for one child is a potentially serious risk for another and so that what is a new opportunity for one child is a confronting turning point for another. Trying to understand the range of what is normal progress and what does not meet reasonable expectations for the developing child is a task with many facets for researchers and practitioners and for individual children, their parents, peers, and teachers.

Early competence in the child does not predict later competence, and, “in order to complete an equation predictive of later development, one needs to add the effects of the child’s social and family environment that act to foster or impede the continuing positive developmental course of the child” (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000, p. 137). In a traditional, stable model of development, children who were identified as doing poorly in life were expected to continue to do poorly (Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). Within a transactional model, the link between risk assessment and intervention is not a straight line, and the decision making starts from this assumption.

The contributors to this issue have considered various aspects of how to obtain an accurate assessment of how well a young child is developing and, in tandem, how to target interventions. Young children have all kinds of social, cognitive, and physical problems, and they often are coping with such problems in environments that are unhelpful, for various reasons. In the normal dynamics of developmental change, adequate support from the context can help most children to maintain a successful developmental course. For some children, however, years of schooling result in more entrenched difficulties and fewer options to free themselves from these difficulties.

There has been increasing awareness that many of these problems will not resolve without intervention (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001). However, there are difficulties in making decisions about which young child needs extra support, and there are difficulties in establishing how they need to be supported. The studies in this issue provide an interesting variety of works on early assessment and intervention and generate different types of evidence and argument about early developmental processes. In concert, this work shows that these processes are truly dynamic in nature and that there is good reason that professional decision making can be tricky, risky, and consequential.

Roberts and Quayle examined assessment and intervention issues for the lonely child in late middle childhood and argued these issues in terms of the balance of risks and protections in the child's life. They studied child self-reports and peer reports. They showed that shy behaviour and a lack of mutual friends contributed to loneliness. Roberts and Quayle suggested that the child most at risk was the withdrawn child who was rejected by others. They noted that this child was least likely to be noticed and called for education of teachers and parents about the risks of internalising behaviour. They identified more loneliness in children who blamed themselves for being alone but found no link between loneliness and self-depreciation for social success. Thus, they recommended that therapy for the lonely child aim to change attributions for social failure and, thus, provide protection against the negative emotional consequences of rejection. They also suggested that a close peer relationship can provide protection against loneliness. However, they questioned the value of efforts to improve general peer acceptance.

McKenzie-Keating and McDonald explored developmental assessment of behaviour problems in young children. They argued that effective intervention depends on early assessment, that preschool teachers need better screening instruments to identify serious risk, and that the contextual variables around the child need to be incorporated in child assessments. They supported a developmental reconceptualisation of behaviour problems as contextual and relational problems. They discussed recent Canadian efforts to specify how interactions between young children and their families can disturb development. They also reviewed transactional processes, prevention strategies that balance risk and protections, and parent-based interventions. Because limited language skills in young children can limit direct intervention, they supported indirect, contextual interventions through changes in parental monitoring and support practices. McKenzie-Keating and McDonald addressed issues involved in making decisions about children's developmental progress, themes echoes in the other reports in this issue.

Davies and Fletcher used focus group methodology to examine teacher recommendations to repeat the preprimary year instead of making the transition to the first formal year of school. That is, they examined how teachers assessed the likely success of children in making the transition to primary school. Teachers considered that the factors contributing to their decisions were

home (e.g., parent wishes and level of home-based support), school (e.g., level of classroom support and school policy), and child (i.e., critical language, motor, and social skills for “mature” coping with Year 1). The qualitative data helped to clarify the complex basis of teacher decisions, which seemed to involve specific concern about language skills and, apart from child skills, contextual differences. These West Australian teachers emphasised the need for case-by-case decisions rather than across-the-board testing. Davies and Fletcher made some thought-provoking remarks about the rapidity of teacher decisions and the anecdotal rather than empirical basis of those decisions.

Davies and Fletcher also examined the actual effects of intervention (i.e., decision to place at-risk children in either a preprimary repeat or primary class). They compared competent and at-risk first year students with children repeating a preprimary year at two times in the educational year. Teacher assessments of deficits in the skills of repeating children were accurate. However, at-risk and repeating children made similar skill improvements, especially in motor and social skills. Davies and Fletcher suggested that further monitoring was needed to determine whether the repeating children could have coped with Year 1 or whether language, motor, and social skill demands of Year 1 might disadvantage the at-risk children. Thus, transactional dynamics were again seen to be inherent considerations when assessing and intervening in child problems.

Brack and Erikson examined maternal input to the assessment and treatment of the defiant child in early middle childhood. They gathered qualitative data on maternal perceptions in order to supplement the more typical and perhaps biased quantitative input from forced-choice or directed questioning used in most referrals. They showed that there were significant differences between the comments of mothers of problem children and mothers of children without problems. They noted that mothers of problem children were more likely to qualify even positive comments about their children and that these mothers tended to be the most negative in their comments about their child. Maternal reports about physical and verbal aggression correlated with CBCL Externalising scores. “Bossy and bullying” comments and child defeatism correlated with both CBCL Externalising and Internalising scores. Brack and Erikson briefly analysed the basis for escalating behaviour problems in terms of dynamic processes: They suggested that the strain of dealing with defiant behaviour fostered maternal tendencies to use qualified positives and that, at the same time, the mother’s negative comments about problem behaviour discouraged her attention to and support for positive behaviour.

Bond, reviewing a body of quantitative work on across-the-board developmental testing in schools within a Rasch paradigm, provided a different perspective on early assessment and professional decision making about repetition. Investigation of teacher decisions by Davies and Fletcher highlighted how teachers felt safer making decisions for specific individuals after balancing, for example, a child’s limited ability to learn from repeating with perceived difficulties in home environment and school support and how

teachers relied on their intuition and personal experience in each case. In contrast, Bond observed that teacher reliance on personal judgement rather than test data sometimes results in at-risk assessment for some capable children and not for some less capable children. He also noted that tasks assessing school success probably include contextual elements in addition to actual cognitive demands.

Moreover, Bond commented on the emotional pressure on teachers who have made consequential decisions about risk status: He showed teachers the spread of cognitive levels in any single class year, demonstrated through Rasch analysis. Teachers who saw that their decisions about students were confirmed were relieved. Others whose decisions were not confirmed were chagrined.

Bond proposed that a developmental approach would improve educational assessment. He noted that age-grade locked progression contributed to the spread of cognitive performance. Davies and Fletcher also noted that boys and younger children were overrepresented in repeating children. They also noted that, although teachers commented on delayed development, they did not directly refer to the skills of boys or younger children in their decisions. While MacKenzie-Keating and McDonald have argued that development must be viewed within surrounding contexts, Bond has argued that educational contexts can cloak developmental progress. Rasch users have ways to straighten the line of sight along a developmental path for a child or a task, but how this approach revisits the traditional model of competence predicting competence needs further discussion.

Grimbeek reviewed the Bond and Fox (2001) book on educational and other applications of Rasch modeling. He noted that some multicomponent tasks might not fit the developmental pathway analogy underlying the model. Yet he reported a demonstration by Bond and Fox in which Rasch analysis identified a nonunitary "computer anxiety" construct, thus challenging an interpretation of counterintuitive data.

The contributors to this issue have thus raised many points worthy of further discussion. Readers are invited to comment on systems and strategies of making decisions about risk status and intervention in the next issue, to be published shortly. Possible cost overruns from the large 2000 issues delayed publishing the 2001 issues, but the 18(2) issue will be published soon after the 18(1) issue. The 2002 issues can be expected later in the year. The point is that comments of around 300 words on the arguments in this issue can be distributed quickly to readers.

Some developmental concepts discussed in this issue already have great influence on assessment and intervention at this time and are still evolving. For example, one topic that threaded through the reports in this issue was that of risk and protection. Many lists of risks within the child and across contexts have been published, and these lists describe many factors that may affect developmental trajectory. Yet these lists are often constructed around different sets of principles and for different purposes and, thus, do not fit together well. For any list of risks, moreover, lists of protections have been published. A

penultimate list would have to establish common principles. Moreover, the constructs have been refined over time. For example, Rutter (1996, 2000) distinguished between indicators and mechanisms of risk and protection. Mechanisms are change processes that can operate in negative and positive directions. These mechanisms may (a) reduce the personal impact of risk experiences, (b) reduce a negative chain reaction, (c) establish and maintain self-efficacy, (d) open up positive opportunities, and (e) generate positive cognitive processing of negative experiences. Lists of risks have also been reconceptualised in more dynamic mode of what ratio of risk (i.e., less or more) to protection (i.e., less needed or more needed) and context-specific type of risk or precursor to problem (Luthar, Cichetti, & Becker, 2000). Assessment of early developmental processes and problems in these terms may require complex qualitative judgments.

The most radical proposal under consideration at this time appears to be that the absence of risk is the mechanism underlying resilience (Luthar et al., 2000; Rutter, 2000). This position reflects earlier work that linked the quantity of risks to increases in vulnerability. This view appears to indicate that resilience is an environmental construct rather than a personal construct and that child differences in resilience reflect quantitative rather than qualitative differences. In this view, many children at risk for escalating difficulties and secondary complications of inappropriate management are exhibiting the same problems at higher rates, severity, or adverse life impact and not some "other" problem. Assessment of problems in these terms may need to revisit the risk list.

Please take this opportunity to share your ideas and experiences on the current and next generation of risk assessment instruments or to reflect on other ideas prompted by this issue. Making decisions about children is an important professional topic for discussion.

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