

## SPECIAL SECTION EDITORIAL

# The influential child: How children affect their environment and influence their own risk and resilience

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### Abstract

Views regarding children's influence on their environment and their own development have undergone considerable changes over the years. Following Bell's (1968) seminal paper, the notion of children's influence and the view of socialization as a bidirectional process have gradually gained wide acceptance. However, empirical research implementing this theoretical advancement has lagged behind. This Special Section compiles a collection of new empirical works addressing multiple forms of influential child processes, with special attention to their consequences for children's and others' positive functioning, risk and resilience. By addressing a wide variety of child influences, this Special Section seeks to advance integration of influential child processes into myriad future studies on development and psychopathology and to promote the translation of such work into preventive interventions.

The idea of “the influential child” might appear to be an oxymoron. Infants and children are young and small, and they are less experienced, immature, and dependent, qualities that are typically at odds with influence. Yet children exert immense influence on their social surroundings. For instance, adults feel compelled to respond to them. Children continuously draw attention and elicit actions from others, as well as shape others' responses through differential reinforcement, effects that are seen not only in humans but also in other primate species (Rheingold, 1966). In addition to influencing others' behavior, children influence the well-being of others in profound ways, as seen, for example, in the greater sense of life meaning experienced by parents compared to nonparents (Umberson & Gove, 1989) or in how the quality of their relationships with their children impacts multiple markers of parents' psychological well-being (Umberson, 1989).

Depending on the context, the reactions and treatment elicited by children can vary greatly from highly positive responses (feelings of love and affection, nurturing treatment, a sense of meaning and well-being in others) to very negative ones (e.g., hostility, rage, maltreatment, a sense of meaninglessness, and depression in others). These responses in turn have profound consequences for children's adjustment. As noted by Bell (1979), “the fact that a small infant or child can induce an assault by a much larger individual, against all the sanctions of society, tells us something about the

power of the young in normal child rearing, including their ability to resist and divert the socialization efforts of their parents.” (p. 824). Thus, for good and for bad, children are influential, and their influence has consequences for their ongoing well-being and adaptation.

This Special Section was inspired and stimulated by our research group devoted to the influential child theme, which convened at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in 2013. The group's discussions and activities culminated in this Special Section, which compiles 17 new papers examining multiple processes of children's influence and their implications for adjustment and psychopathology. We next present some of the history pertaining to research on the influential child as well as key issues and topics addressed in this Special Section.

### Transformations in Views Concerning Children's Influence

Ideas regarding children's influence have undergone significant changes over the years. For many decades, socialization was viewed as a unidirectional process wherein parents and other socializing agents “mold” children and shape the individuals they will become (e.g., for reviews, see Bugental & Grusec, 2006; Hartup, 1978). This molding and shaping could be done in more or less effective ways, leading to positive functioning or to maladjustment, respectively, but in either case the socialization agent was seen as the influential party. An important turning point in outlook was the publication of Richard Bell's seminal paper in 1968, which urged researchers to pay closer attention to the influential role of the

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child. In a fascinating analysis, Bell showed how correlational findings typically interpreted as reflecting parent-to-child effects could be flipped on their head and reinterpreted as child-to-parent effects. The message was clear: Children can be just as influential as parents, and child effects are thus worthwhile studying along with parent effects.

In the decades that followed, the view of socialization as a bidirectional process became increasingly accepted, and it has eventually prevailed as the dominant view. Thus, virtually all contemporary approaches to socialization acknowledge or assume the bidirectional nature of the socialization process (Bugental & Grusec, 2006; Maccoby, 2007; Pardini, 2008; Pettit & Arsiwalla, 2008; Shanahan & Sobolewski, 2003). Children are no longer viewed as being passively molded by their environment but rather as active agents who can affect their environment as well as influence how their environment affects them. Children therefore help shape their own developmental trajectories, with important consequences for mental health and psychopathology (Cicchetti & Toth, 1997; Pettit & Arsiwalla, 2008). To fully understand (mal)adjustment, risk, and resilience, children's own contributions must also be taken into account.

This shift in perspective from a unidirectional to a bidirectional view has been an important theoretical advancement in our field. However, empirical research implementing this outlook has lagged behind (Bugental & Grusec, 2006; Kuczynski, 2003; Pardini, 2008; Pettit & Lollis, 1997). Thus, despite the wide acceptance of the bidirectional view, the bulk of the research has continued to focus on parent-to-child influences, often neglecting to take into account children's active role. Some work on children's influence has certainly accumulated, making important strides toward understanding these processes (including edited volumes and special issues or sections; for example, Crouter & Booth, 2003; Pardini, 2008; Pettit & Lollis, 1997), but overall, much less work has been devoted to processes of the influential child (compared to "the influential parent"), and much is still unknown.

The embrace of ideas of children's active role and bidirectionality in theoretical models has therefore not been accompanied by equal research efforts to examine such processes. What might account for this gap between theory and research? Kuczynski and colleagues (e.g., Kuczynski, 2003; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997) have argued that although the basic notion of a unidirectional process has been formally rejected, other tacit assumptions derived from and reflective of this viewpoint have lingered. For example, notions that parents are more agentic or more powerful than children have largely remained unchanged, and these assumptions in turn constrain researchers' thinking, channeling them toward examining parent-to-child influences. The terminology often used by researchers also reveals implicit assumptions regarding (unidirectional) causality, for example, "internalization of values," "compliance," "parenting antecedents," and "child outcomes" (Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997; Maccoby, 1992).

It is intriguing to speculate as to why implicit unidirectional assumptions and concepts have persisted (and why

the unidirectional view has been so dominant for many years). Perhaps researchers have been motivated to examine parental influences and to view parents as more influential in order to preserve a sense of predictability and control over how children develop. It is interesting to note that even children and adolescents often find it strange and challenging to discuss their influence on their parents (De Mol & Buysse, 2008). Schemas for viewing children as influential are still largely absent in our culture, making it unusual for children and parents to think about these issues. As research on the influential child continues to advance and its lessons permeate into the culture, thinking about children's influence should become more intuitive for researchers, professionals, parents, and children.

Pettit and Lollis (1997) have noted the cyclical, or periodical, appearance of the bidirectionality topic in the literature. Each wave of interest can bring new insights and advancements to the field, helping to establish new schemas, concepts, and methods for thinking about and studying children's development and their influential role. The present Special Section can be viewed as part of this progression. It consists of a collection of new empirical works addressing multiple forms of influential child processes, with special attention paid to their consequences for children's, as well as others', positive functioning, risk, and resilience. By taking a broader approach to examining the influential child (see below), this Special Section aims to advance understanding of the wide variety of ways in which children's influence can be manifested and investigated. Moreover, by drawing attention to the utility of examining such processes, this Special Section further seeks to advance integration of influential child processes into future research on development and psychopathology.

### **Multiple Forms, Targets, and Processes of Children's Influence**

Children's influence, and bidirectional influences between children and socialization agents more broadly, can take different forms (for examples, see typologies of different bidirectional models in Bugental & Grusec, 2006; Knafo & Galansky, 2008; Kuczynski, 2003; see also Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). Two broad forms of influence feature prominently in this Special Section. The first involves children's influence on others in their social environment, often as part of a complex reciprocal or transactional process. The second involves children's influences on how their environment affects them, typically in the form of moderation processes. We next elaborate regarding each form and briefly note the Special Section contributions addressing it.

#### *Child effects and transactional processes*

Children's effects or influences on others who make up their social environment include any changes in others' behavior (their actions, cognitions, affect, etc.) elicited by children (their behavior, characteristics, etc.). These child effects do not occur in isolation, although researchers can sometimes

opt to isolate them in order to call greater attention to such influences (Bell, 1968, 1979). Rather, child effects are embedded within complex reciprocal or transactional processes (Bell, 1979; Sameroff, 1975). In transactional relationships, children and their social environments are mutually influencing and changing each other over time. Thus, children's behavior can alter the caregiver's behavior, and this change or emergent quality will then influence the child in turn, leading to further transformation in the parent, and so forth. Each is influenced and altered by the other in complex ways over time, with these transactions shaping the course of development (Kuczynski, 2003; Sameroff, 1975).

An important implication of this analysis is that a polarized view of parent effects versus child effects is not particularly meaningful or useful. Children's and caregivers' influences are intertwined throughout development, each bringing about the other; hence, asking who is more influential or "who started it" can be nonsensical (Shanahan & Sobolewski, 2003). Similar to those prompting theorists to move beyond the nature versus nurture dichotomy, the central questions here are those pertaining to the nature of the processes involved; that is, how do children and socialization agents influence each other, and what are the consequences of different patterns of influence for children's (and others') well-being and psychopathology. This is the focus of the present Special Section.

*Pertinent contributions.* In order to address these questions, researchers must include child influences as a component in the developmental models that they are testing. Many of the contributions to this Special Section examine reciprocal or transactional influences between children and parents/socialization agents over time.

Thus, Eisenberg, Taylor, Widaman, and Spinrad (2015) examine the relationships between mothers' intrusive parenting and children's effortful control and externalizing symptoms during early childhood, with evidence for bidirectional longitudinal influences. Serbin, Kingdon, Ruttle, and Stack (2015) examine the interplay between children's behavior problems and the nature of mothers' parenting from middle childhood to early adolescence, revealing evidence for different patterns of reciprocal influence depending on the specific nature of the child and parent behaviors involved. Focusing on the positive influence of children, Kochanska, Kim, and Boldt (2015) test a transactional model in which children's willing stance toward mothers and fathers, rooted in an earlier secure attachment relationship, predicts children's subsequent adjustment as well as how they are treated by their parents in return.

Other contributions in this Special Section examining children's influences and reciprocal exchanges with parents include Feldman's (2015) paper on the mutual influences between child emotion regulation and parent-child reciprocity and their role in children's adjustment in a sample of premature infants followed from birth to middle childhood; the study by Marceau and colleagues (2015) examining adolescents' and parents' influences on conflict resolution during mutual disagreements and implications for subsequent

psychopathology symptom severity; and Yirmiya, Seidman, Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, and Dolev's (2015) longitudinal study on mothers and fathers coping with their children's autism in the form of their resolution with the child's diagnosis and how it is predicted by child and parent variables.

Whereas most prior work on child effects has focused on parent-child relationships (Crouter & Booth, 2003; Pettit & Arsiwalla, 2008), children's influence is by no means limited to parents (Shanahan & Sobolewski, 2003). Several of the current Special Section contributions address child influences on other targets: Snell, Hindman, and Belsky examine child effects on the quality of child care experienced by children (with a focus on language stimulation) as well as on the quantity of nonparental care that they receive, with stronger evidence for child effects on quality of care. Two additional papers focus on peers: Van Zalk and Van Zalk (2015) show that adolescents with psychopathic personality traits are particularly influential in increasing violent behavior in their peers, with low self-esteem peers being particularly susceptible to such influence, and that these two types of adolescents are more likely to selectively form friendships with each other. Moreover, in a genetically informed longitudinal design, Hasenfratz, Benish-Weisman, Steinberg, and Knafo-Noam (2015) provide evidence that children's genetically based temperamental characteristics can elicit negative treatment from their peers (rejection, victimization). Another target of influence is examined by Conger, Martin, Masarik, Widaman, and Donnellan (2015). Their study examines a transactional model in which adolescents' aggressive personality, rooted in earlier familial and contextual influences, leads to adjustment problems in adulthood, including eliciting negative, hostile behavior from the individual's romantic partner.

#### *Child characteristics and behaviors as moderators*

In addition to changing the behavior or well-being of others, children also influence how their social environment affects them. Thus, children's own behavior or characteristics can modify, or moderate, how they respond to environmental experiences, with consequences for their mental health and adjustment. In these cases children are influential in the sense that the environmental effects are *contingent on* children's behavioral tendencies, perceptions, socioemotional capabilities, and so on. Goodness of fit models are an example of this form of influence or bidirectionality (Bugental & Grusec, 2006; Kuczynski, 2003). In such models, the consequences of parental (or other socialization agent's) treatment depends on whether it matches the characteristics (e.g., behavioral tendencies, capabilities, needs) of the child (e.g., Crockenberg, 1981; Kochanska, 1997; Stoolmiller, 2001).

This form of child influence can also include other types of Child  $\times$  Environment interactions, such as models of biological sensitivity to context or differential susceptibility (Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2007; Ellis & Boyce, 2011). According to these models, children vary in the degree to which they are susceptible to environmental condi-

tions; whereas some children are strongly influenced by the quality of treatment they receive, for better or for worse, other children can be relatively impervious to such variations. These and other forms of Child  $\times$  Environment interactions highlight the moderating role of child characteristics, in that environmental influences depend on the child (Shanahan & Sobolewski, 2003).

It is important to note that, viewed from an influential child perspective, these Child  $\times$  Environment interactions can involve active child influences, not merely different levels of passive “influenceability.” For example, some children may elicit different levels of treatment as a function of their behavior or personality. Moreover, different children might interpret their environment in different ways, resulting in differential responses to various environmental conditions. The latter example highlights the constructivist element of transactional models that we have not yet emphasized: Children (and adults) are continuously and actively engaged in attempts to construe, make sense of, and organize their world (Sameroff, 1975, 2009). How children are influenced by others depends on these interpretations; similarly, how children influence parents also depends on parents’ construals (Bugental & Johnston, 2000).

*Pertinent contributions.* Several of the contributions to the present Special Section examine how child behavior or characteristics can modify the effects of the social environment on children’s adjustment and risk for psychopathology. Cline et al. (2015) examine how children’s genetic makeup moderates the effects of environmental risk on levels of behavior problems and how children’s own coping strategies account for some of these interactions. Another study that includes a genetic component is by Wazana et al. (2015), which examines the interplay among infant birth weight, genetic makeup, and quality of maternal caregiving in shaping the risk of a disorganized attachment in early childhood.

Several contributions examine aspects of children’s temperament as moderators of parental effects. Degnan et al. (2015) investigate the interplay between temperamental avoidance and maternal caregiving behavior in shaping early risk trajectories of social reticence behavior. Barnett and Scaramella’s (2015) study illustrates how children’s fear reactivity and sex can moderate links between observed parenting dimensions and children’s behavior problems. Pratt, Singer, Kanat-Maymon, and Feldman (2015) examine different patterns of interaction between infant temperamental negativity and maternal synchrony in the prediction of distinct dimensions of stress regulation. The paper by Rajhans, Missana, Krol, and Grossmann (2015) addresses how infant temperament dimensions and maternal empathy and their interaction predict infants’ neural processing of emotional stimuli.

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Additional contributions examine emerging psychopathology as the moderating variable. Véronneau, Serbin, Stack, Ledingham, and Schwartzman (2015) show interactions between parents’ socioeconomic status and child adjustment problems on children’s subsequent educational attainment, illustrating how emergent psychopathology prevents children from benefitting from the mobility opportunities provided by their parents. The study by Conger et al. (2015) likewise includes an interactive effect, with adolescent aggression as a moderator, illustrating how it can intensify intergenerational continuity in hostility toward a romantic partner.

## *Diversity of processes and implications for developmental psychopathology*

As evident from the brief description of the papers comprising this Special Section, they address a wide array of influential child processes. Some of the studies examine influences on mothers and fathers, while some address influences on other socialization agents. The studies examine processes across a wide range of ages and developmental periods; they include genetic as well as environmental influences; and they examine different child characteristics as moderators, predictors, and mediators. This multiplicity of processes serves a purpose. By casting a wide net, we aim to show that influential child components could be integrated into studies on many aspects of child development and developmental psychopathology. Examining child influences need not be done in isolation; it can be incorporated into most (if not all) developmental models and studies aiming to shed light on the processes leading to positive adjustment and psychopathology. Doing this may require a shift in researchers’ thinking or habits; it requires us to make an effort to include questions of child influence into our investigations (often along with questions of parental or other influences). Acquiring such new habits is well worth the effort, however. As more and more evidence regarding processes of child influence accumulate, the gap between bidirectional theory and unidirectional scientific practices will be reduced, and our understanding of development and psychopathology will deepen.

A nuanced understanding of influential child processes can also facilitate more effective and better tailored interventions. Thus, all the papers in this Special Section address the implications of their findings for psychopathology, risk or resilience, and each paper concludes with a section on future directions for translating research on the influential child into preventive interventions. It is our hope that this collection of papers will draw the field’s attention to influential child processes and their implications for theory, research, and intervention.

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