Protective Factors in Family Relationships

Ann Buchanan, Centre for Research into Parenting and Children, University of Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

Professor Sir Michael Rutter, the distinguished UK child psychiatrist, was one of the first to highlight that although there are many risk factors associated with poor child outcomes, there are also ‘protective’ factors which can mitigate the risks. Rutter’s ideas, together with those of Bronfenbrenner (1979) who highlighted the importance of the wider ecology on children’s development, have been at the core of the research at the Centre for Research into Parenting and Children in Oxford for over 20 years. This paper focuses on one domain of the Ecological framework: protective factors in family relationships. It discusses new brain research that shows that positive relationships in the early years have a measurable impact on the child’s cognitive and emotional development and hypothesises that relationships with the wider family may also support better child outcomes. In Confucian societies, intergenerational family relationships are crucial in providing care for the elderly. As the ‘One child’ norm extends (not only in China) but across many Asian societies, the challenges for young people in supporting their parents and grandparents may become overwhelming. This article suggests families need state support to carry out their protective role in mitigating the risks experienced by both the young and the old. A state/family partnership approach is likely to be more acceptable, more effective, and more economic than state care alone.

Keywords: Asian Societies, Confucian Societies, Family Relationships, Protective Factors, State/Family Partnership

INTRODUCTION

己所不欲,勿施於人

“What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others.”

-Confucius Analects XV.24

This study focuses on ‘protective factors’ in family relationships. In the West with the growth of unmarried parenthood; increase in divorce, growth in single households, it is no wonder newspapers are using the statistics to claim the Western family is dead (Wallop, 2009).

For those brought up in Confucian tradition, the value and importance of the family is ingrained in their very psyche. In thinking about family relationships the above quote from Confucius is perhaps appropriate. Despite, the changes in family life in the West, the ‘family’, however reconstituted, remains one of the most powerful agents of influence in young people’s lives. Although the coming of the Welfare State has brought enormous benefits, particularly to those are the margins of society, there has been

DOI: 10.4018/ijpphme.2012070104
a tendency, often seen in British social workers, to ignore the strengths of the family. The argument in this paper is that the best outcomes for vulnerable families are when the state works in partnership with families at risk. Children, we need to remember, are our economic future and for both humanitarian and economic reasons it makes sense to invest in children maximizing the potential of those who may be socially excluded (Buchanan & Rotkirch, in press). Only in situations of ‘significant risk’ of harm to a child is it right to separate a child from his family.

RISK AND PROTECTION AND THE CHILD’S ECOLOGY

Professor Sir Michael Rutter, the distinguished child psychiatrist, highlighted that although there are many risk factors associated with poor child outcomes, there are also ‘protective’ factors, which can mitigate the risks and promote ‘resilience’. Environments for those at risk can be artificially created to compensate for the risks. Children who are exposed to a variety of adverse experiences in the early years can suffer long-term damage or negative psychological outcomes. Yet, studies have demonstrated a diversity of responses to events, even within similar environments and conditions (Rutter, 1989). Outcomes vary because individuals differ in terms of their susceptibility to risk and because there may be protective mechanisms, which reduce risk (Rutter, 1985). The hopeful news is that many problems are not irreversible and negative outcomes are dependent on whether risk experiences are intensified or ameliorated by subsequent experiences. Improvements in the child’s economic situation can have a significant impact across a number of intellectual indicators, including IQ (Kolvin, Miller, Scott, Gatzanie & Fleeting, 1990). Similarly, negative childhood experiences may be ameliorated by economic security and supportive relationships in adulthood (Quinton & Rutter, 1985).

Linked into Rutter’s idea of risk and protective mechanisms are those of Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This theory looks at a child’s development within the context of the system of relationships that form his or her environment. Bronfenbrenner’s theory defines complex “layers” of environment, each having an effect on a child’s development. Basically, there are four layers or ‘domains’ each with their own risk and protective factors. First there is the Child and his/her genetics; secondly there is the Family; thirdly there is the School/Community and finally there is the Wider environment. The final domain is often the focus for Social Policy interventions to ameliorate the impacts, for example of structural inequalities such as severe poverty, discrimination.

This paper will focus on one domain of the Ecological framework: protective factors in family relationships. It will take a life course perspective starting with pre-birth and the Early Years, childhood, adulthood and old age.

PREGNANCY AND THE FIRST THREE YEARS

Every since Bowlby, we have been well trained on the importance of ‘attachment’ and how a baby bonds with his/her primary caregiver in the early months. This relationship is crucial to the child’s subsequent development (Bowlby, 1969). Research showed us that children who were more or less attached in the early years had very different patterns in later life (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978). However in the last two decades, we now know that early care giving relationships can have both a psychological and physical impact for better or worse.

Work by Rutter on the children rescued from the Romanian orphanages opened our eyes (Rutter, 1998). There was a vague assumption that given a move to a nurturing environment, effective attachment and love, babies would recover from their early deprivation. Rutter, however, showed that it all depended on the amount of time the infant stayed in the institution. Those removed to loving adoptive parents before they were 6 months did just fine... but those who had languished in the orphanages for more than 18 months had ongoing cognitive