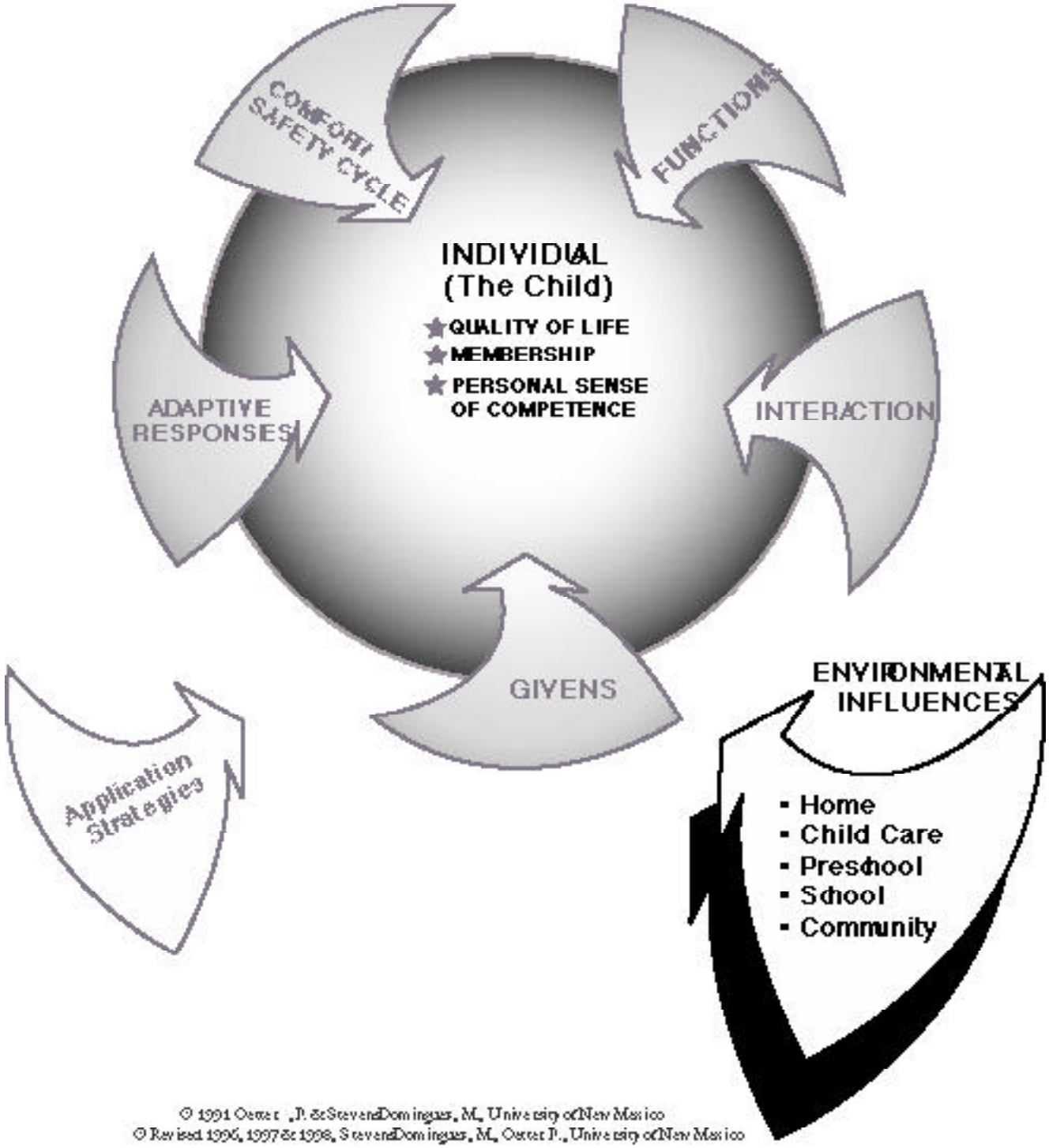
PERFORMANCE COMPETENCE LIFESPAN FRAMEWORK



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Environmental Influences: Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory provides a broad and comprehensive mechanism for understanding the core aspects of the *Performance Competence Lifespan Framework* – quality of life, membership, and a personal sense of competence. It also focuses on the most important component of environmental influences—home and family. From birth, a child's *Quality of Life* is directly influenced by the kind of care, support, stimulation and education he or she receives from family members in the home. As infants begin to develop secure attachments with significant others, particularly family members, they begin to establish themselves as members of the first and most basic unit of society—the family, which forms the foundation for secure *Membership* in other groups throughout life. The infant begins to develop a *Personal Sense of Competence* when his mother responds consistently to his distress, when he takes his first step or says his first word, or when his father praises him for using the toilet. These early beginnings, then, are at the core of what each individual child will come to know and be able to do.

As the *PC Framework* indicates, there are multiple environmental influences on *performance* and *competence*, but the family is the first and most important. The influence of family members on one another is not simple, but complex; it is not one-way, but reciprocal. The family, like a mechanical system, is made up of multiple parts that are interdependent. When one part does not function well, all other parts are impacted. Further, the family interacts with other systems, including those that provide direct services to the child—child care/preschools, schools and community agencies—and each system affects the other. Understanding how the family works as a system and how it interacts with other systems outside itself is basic to understanding and applying the *Performance Competence Framework.*

FAMILY SYSTEMS

The word "family" derives from a Latin word meaning household. The concept of family is one with which almost every individual can identify. For some, family means their family of origin; for others, it applies to the family they have biologically created; and for still others, it means the individuals with whom they have developed lasting bonds of intimacy through adoption, foster care, or other relationships. For all of these families, the social and economic foundations that underlie family life are omnipotent. The family is the basic social unit of all cultures, and through time families have represented the most significant institution for nurturing, caring for, and socializing children.

While families have consistently experienced change throughout history, most demographers and other experts have described the social, economic, and demographic changes that have occurred in families since 1970 to be so dramatic as to have revolutionized American families. Change

has been so rapid that laws and policies have not kept pace. Significant changes in families include the following: structural changes such as increasing numbers of single parents, including never-married parents, and stepparents; increased visibility of gay and lesbian parents; rising numbers of families from minority populations; a rapid influx of women, including those with very young children, into the paid labor force; increased geographic mobility of young families, resulting in shrinking access to extended family supports; smaller family size, resulting in children as a declining proportion of the population; and delayed childbearing. These changes have brought about expanded definitions of the word "family" and less traditional perceptions about the roles and responsibilities of family members (Turner, Hamner & Orell, 1993).

What is a family?

While some still cling to the traditional definition of a family--two or more persons living together related by blood, marriage, or adoption--many people in our society recognize that a sizable number of families do not fit this definition. In 1990, the Governor's Task Force on Children, Youth and Families in New Mexico adopted the following family policy:

> We all come from families. Families are big, small, extended, nuclear, multigenerational, with one parent, two parents, and grandparents. We live under one roof or many or none. A family can be as temporary as a few weeks, as permanent as forever. We become part of a family by birth, adoption, marriage, or from a desire for mutual support. As family members, we nurture, protect, and influence each other. Families are dynamic and are cultures unto themselves, with different values and unique ways of realizing dreams. Together our families become the source of our rich cultural heritage and spiritual diversity. Each family has strengths and qualities that flow from individual members and from the family as a unit. Our families create neighborhoods, communities, states and nations.

The public and private sectors shall promote the stability and well-being of families. Every public and private program in New Mexico affecting children, families. and the elderly shall:

..... • Acknowledge that families are fundamental to the health and strength of our society

..... • Recognize that every family is unique

..... • Honor the diverse cultures, traditions, and spiritual values of families

..... • Promote a work and community environment that ensures that a family can meet its health, educational, social and economic responsibilities

..... • Provide coordinated support that is family-centered

and community-based

…… • Ensure that services and systems reinforce the family as the constant in people's lives[1]

The above description captures the diversity of today's families. The policies described represent a recognition that all families need support, from both the public and private sectors, but the commitment to these policies is affected by the political climate of the state (Turner, et al., 1993).

Ways of Conceptualizing Families

The eight ages of man. Just as children develop and change, so do families. The theorist Erik Erikson was one of the first to include stages of adult development, and he emphasized that individuals continue to develop and change throughout the entire life cycle. Following his young adult stage of *Intimacy versus Isolation,* where individuals establish an intimate relationship with a single individual that often results in marriage or a long-term committed relationship, he described the stage of *Generativity versus Self-Absorption.* This stage spans most of the child-bearing and child-rearing years, when adults have desires to make the world a better place for future generations rather than being totally absorbed in their own welfare. Many people satisfy this need through child-rearing, but other activities that involve working with youth also are aspects of generativity. Finally, in Erikson's scheme, the aging person faces *Integrity versus Despair,* where hopefully he or she accepts the life cycle and is ready to defend the dignity of his or her own lifestyle against all physical and economic threats (Thomas, 1992).

Life cycle/developmental task theory. Other theorists and therapists have conceptualized families from a life cycle perspective, beginning with the launching of a single young adult, continuing through the couple relationship, families with young children, families with adolescents, the launching stage when children begin to leave home, and the "empty nest" stage when no more children remain in the family home and couples renegotiate their relationships. A number of theorists have used the life cycle approach, with the number of stages ranging from three to 24. Family stress is believed to be the greatest at transition points from one stage of the life cycle to the next. In the life cycle approach, having one's first child is a major transition, and having additional children represents a transition, as well. If a child is born with a disability, then the normal stress associated with this stage is exacerbated (Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993).

A related approach is Developmental Task Theory. Robert Havighurst first described individual developmental task theory, which focuses on tasks that arise at or near a certain time in the life of an individual, the successful achievement of which leads to happiness and success with later life tasks; however, failure leads to unhappiness in the individual, disapproval by society, and difficulty with later tasks. Individual developmental task theory was a springboard for family developmental task theory, which describes the developmental tasks of family members at each stage of family life, beginning with the married couple and continuing through the aging process. For example, two tasks identified for parents of newborns are the following: having, adjusting to, and encouraging the development of infants; and establishing a satisfying home for both parents and

infant. Should a child be born with a disability, the developmental tasks for parents would be more difficult (Thomas, 1992).

While both life cycle and developmental task theory can be helpful In understanding the different types of challenges at different stages of family life and how families move through time, they are not sufficient to explain how family members interact on a daily basis. Furthermore, these theories are based largely on the notion of traditional two-parent families, without consideration for teen parents, single parents, stepparents, adoptive parents who adopt older children, or same-sex parents.

Other theories. There are a variety of other theoretical approaches and models for understanding and describing families, such as conflict theory, symbolic interaction theory, social exchange theory, the circumplex model, and so on, as well as a number of economic and resource exchange theories. While these approaches do contribute to our understanding of families as unique and complex, none is completely satisfying by itself. For individuals who work directly with families, a broad conceptual framework is desirable (Boss, et al., 1993).

An Ecological Approach to Understanding Families

Urie Bronfenbrenner, of Cornell University, is one of the key individuals emphasizing the ecological approach in understanding both children and families. Bronfenbrenner defines the ecology of human development as "...the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between those settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded" (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p. 7).

In describing the ecological environment for an individual, Bronfenbrenner described three levels: the *microsystem,* the *mesosystem,* and the *exosystem.* Typical microsystems for a child would be the home, school, and peer group settings. The child is impacted by his or her perception or interpretation of the activities, roles, and interpersonal relations that occur in each of these microsystems. These three components (activities, roles, interpersonal relations) form a Gestalt or interacting behavior field (system) in which a change in one component can affect the entire configuration and produce a new meaning for the child.

Bronfenbrenner (1993, p. 22) defined the *mesosystem* as follows: "A mesosystem comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates. For a child...the relations among home, school, and neighborhood peer group; [for] an adult, among family, work, and social life." The pattern of interrelationships among microsystems for a child or an adult can influence his or her perceptions and behavior within any of the settings where he or she is presently located.

The exosystem "...refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person." For a child, these exosystems might include workplaces

of the parent(s), school board decisions that affect the child, or a sibling's network of friends. Finally, the source of influence most remote from a child's immediate experience is the array of attitudes, practices, and convictions shared throughout society at large. This *macrosystem* is composed of the cultural milieu and includes microsystems and the interactions among them and exosystems.

It is a simple matter to expand Bronfenbrenner's descriptions of the ecology of an individual to families. In fact, Beatrice Paolucci (Paolucci, Hall & Axinn, 1977), of Michigan State University, developed an ecosystem model for families similar to Bronfenbrenner's, with the key concept being family members' interaction with parts of the ecosystem. She described the near environment for families as that part of the environment physically, psychologically, and socially closest to the family, e.g., the home and the local community, which would include family, friends, colleagues, and schoolmates. One's house, clothing, neighborhood buildings, parks, etc. are examples of the human built environment that are in close proximity. The sociocultural aspects of the environment include the presence of other human beings, as well as abstract dimensions such as norms, aesthetic judgments, language, and customs. Distal environments include state and federal governments. Near environments provide the immediate physical context and primary base for personal and family activities. Near and distal environments interact with and influence one another.

The family ecosystem is made up of a collectivity of interdependent but independent parts working together to achieve a common purpose. Each element is interrelated and each affects the others. The continuous exchanges and transactions among the elements (organisms, environments, and family organization) result in change and adaptation for parts of the family ecosystem. One must not only examine the persons involved, but the conditions that surround them. The family processes information from its environments and coordinates the activities of family members for the achievement of some common goal by dividing the tasks among family members and delegating the authority and responsibility for seeing that these tasks are carried out and family purposes are achieved. The environment is the source of family resources that is vital to family survival. Family organization transforms resources into useful forms for family consumption. By the way families choose to sustain and socialize members, they help to define the environment, and in turn the environment enhances or limits the potentials for human development.

From these descriptions of families and ecosystems, we can see that understanding the behavior and development of families is a complex task. No longer can we resort to simplistic, unidirectional causes to explain how families function. We can see that multiple environments impact families and families impact multiple environments. Family needs and strengths must be considered in the context of the society and the ecosystem. We must be able to interpret these interactions if we are to provide families with the support they need.

Family Systems Theory

Contemporary systems theories about families are derived from General Systems Theory, which is both a transdisciplinary field of study and a theoretical framework in which various microlevel

approaches are known as “systems theories.” These theorists attempt to explain the behavior of complex, organized systems of all sorts, from thermostats to families. Systems thinking is a way of looking at the world in which objects are interrelated with one another.

Characteristics of family systems. A key assumption fundamental to modern systems theories is that of *holism,* that is, a system must be understood as a whole and cannot be comprehended by examining its individual parts in isolation from one another--the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In a family, then, a system is something more than parent(s) and child(ren). There are properties and behaviors of the system that do not derive from the component parts themselves when considered in isolation. Together, they emerge from their specific arrangement in a particular system and from the transactions among parts made possible only by that arrangement. These are called *emergents’* because they emerge only at the systemic level (Boss, et al., 1993).

Family systems also are self-reflexive; that is, they have the ability to make themselves and their own behavior the object of examination and the target of explanation, thereby establishing goals for themselves. This characteristic is what differentiates human from non-human systems. Family processes—family functioning, family communication and transactional patterns, family conflict, separateness and connectedness among members, cohesion, integration, and adaptation to change--can be understood as the product of the entire system, shifting the primary focus away from individual family members to relationships among the members. Family systems also have *subsystems,* such as the marital subsystem, one parent and one child subsystem, sibling subsystems, etc. *Suprasystems* would define families in relation to their extended families, their racial and ethnic subcultures, their geographic regions, and the national system. *Subsystems, systems, and suprasystems* create a *hierarchy* (Boss, et al., 1993).

Changes in the structure of family systems. Modifications in the family system can occur through learning by the system, events such as population growth or economic depression, change in one member of the family system, or through completed *positive feedback loops.* These changes are processed by the entire family system rather than by a single family member. *First order changes* in the family system are minor structural changes among the system’s components that might occur as a result of one member changing his or her behavior without completion of positive feedback loops. In these cases, the system itself does not change and is vulnerable to “relapses.” Second-order change is a major, high level change that results in alteration of the entire system. This type of change is much more dramatic and enduring, as when the entire system is reorganized into new transactional patterns (Boss, et al., 1993).

Basic concepts. The concept of *boundary is* a crucial one in systems thinking. Boundaries are emotional barriers that protect and enhance the integrity of systems. Consistent boundaries contribute to functional systems. The boundary of a system defines the system and represents the point of contact between the system and other systems and between the system and its subsystems and suprasystems. Boundaries also mark the interface between the system and its environment, which is defined as everything external to the system that either directly or indirectly transacts with it. Completely impermeable boundaries are closed to interchange from outside the system and transparent or amorphous boundaries offer no impediment to interchange between the system

and its environment. Boundaries of all family systems fall somewhere between complete impermeability and complete transparency; that is, all family systems will fall along a continuum of openness and closedness.

Family systems take *inputs* and change them to *outputs.* The degree and type of inputs is related to the degree of openness or closedness of the system. There are rules of transformation that take place in the system itself that govern the way inputs are changed to outputs. For example, family systems take inputs in the form of food, various goods and services, information from many sources, and so forth and produce output in the form of behaviors by family members, contributions in the workplace, as well as tangible products such as garbage. Socialized children can be viewed as an output of a family system.

Feedback. A feedback loop is a path along which information can be traced from one point in a system, through one or more other parts of the system or its environment, and back to the point of origin. This system is capable of regulating its own behavior because information entering the loop is transformed and ultimately fed back into the loop. Once established, the system maintains a pattern of behavior determined by one of two particular forms of feedback: positive or negative. *Negative feedback loops* operate to restore or maintain equilibrium. When any deviation from homeostasis occurs, the system responds by enacting negative feedback to bring the system back to a state of equilibrium. Negative feedback plays a very important role in achieving and maintaining the stability of a system. In families, negative feedback is often seen when change is attempted by one or a few family members. That is, once a family's homeostatic state is established, members will try to maintain their transactional patterns so they can maintain their sense of balance, even if that balance is dysfunctional. All negative feedback loops function to return a family to "the way things were." Therefore, the resistance of the family to change through intervention with a single individual is accounted for by negative feedback (Boss, et al., 1993).

When deviation from equilibrium or homeostasis is amplified rather than reduced and more variation in the system occurs, a *positive feedback loop* has been completed. Systems dominated by negative feedback are characteristically stable and homeostatic. On the other hand, families highly regulated by positive feedback may "run away" with new ideas or behaviors introduced as inputs. Such systems, dominated by positive feedback, show more variability and, if unchecked, tend to be unstable. Thus, healthy families counter positive feedback with negative feedback.

Tension is ever present in one form or another in the family system. Some level of tension is characteristic of and vital to systems. When tension occurs, families use one of three types of strategies; strategies of maintenance to preserve the relationship of parts as is; strategies of stress that accentuate and accelerate the tension and occasionally push the family's relationship of parts into confusion and turmoil; or strategies of repair that offer the family a chance to modify itself in order to remain a livable, workable system. A multitude of different strategies is potentially available to a family system. In order to compile a comprehensively complete and detailed portrait of a family, one must identify and analyze its strategies.

One additional concept is key. *Triangulation is* the tendency of a two-person emotional subsystem under stress to recruit a third person who acts as a go-between and disrupts partners'

chronic patterns of relating to each other (Boss, et al., 1993).

Application of family systems theory. It is easy to see the commonalties between ecological models of studying/working with families and systems approaches. Both recognize the importance of near and distant environments on the ways family members function and relate to one another. Both recognize that relationships and behaviors are complex and almost never tied to a single cause or event. Both recognize that the target of intervention includes the entire system and its ecosystem. Systems theory helps us to understand the complexity of subsystems, systems, and suprasystems and the intricate nature of each part. More and more family therapists are employing both ecological and systems approaches in understanding a family's rules, boundaries, transactional systems, and strategies for dealing with tension.

The concepts described in these approaches can be quite useful in working with families of children with developmental delays and/or disabilities. Professionals can identify each family's subsystems and suprasystems, ascertain the degree of openness or closedness, observe for evidence of positive and negative feedback, become familiar with the strategies families use to deal with tension, and note both first-order and second-order change. Using a systems approach is uniquely appropriate for a family-centered philosophy in early intervention since the target for intervention is the family system rather than the child.

Family Systems Theory provides us with increased knowledge about what factors may influence a family's (and child's) *Quality of Life, Membership, and Personal Sense of Competence.* The *Performance competence Framework* enhances the application of Family Systems Theory and Practice by providing insight into what are key issues for individuals within the family system. The *Framework* assists in identifying what is supporting an individuals performance (behavior) and what is compromising that performance. Serious threats to comfort and safety both to the child, family member or family system will result in specific responses both negative and positive. It is understanding that comfort and safety is threatened that allows us to consider and respond in ways that support the positive stabilization of child, family member and family system. It also encourages us not to provide inputs or interventions in ways that do not support or enhance the *Quality of Life, Membership, and Personal Sense of Competence* of children and families.

When families are studied and understood as systems, intervention services can be designed and implemented that enhance the *Quality* of Life, security of M*embership* and *Personal Sense of Competence* of each family member. Using the systems approach, all major environmental influences on the developing child can come together collaboratively to enhance each child's level of performance and competence.

> In a mobile all the pieces, no matter what size or shape, can be grouped together in balance by shortening or lengthening the strings attached, or rearranging the distance between the pieces. So it is with a family. None of the family members is identical to any other; they are all different and at different levels of growth. As in a mobile, you can't arrange one without thinking of the other...[T]he strings are...rules and communication patterns.
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> Satir, 1972, pp. 119-120

[1] Developed and adopted by New Mexico's House Memorial 5 Task Force on Children and Families and the Coalition for Children. 1990.