

Supporting Youth Transitions

Supporting Youth Transitions:

The role of parenting and family structures understood within a wider social context

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Abstract

This paper presents a socio-ecological systems approach for a better understanding of the challenges facing young people and their families in the transition to independent adulthood. It is argued that youth transitions do not take place in a social vacuum. The wider social context plays an important role in shaping opportunities as well as the motivations and behaviours of young people and their parents. The paper examines how economic hardship impacts on family processes and young people's adjustment, describing processes of resource deprivation, family stress and instability as well as processes of resilience and positive adaptation in the face of adversity. Approaches of how to promote positive development are introduced, focusing on support for building competencies, the parenting of parents, improving communities and social policies.

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1. Supporting Youth Transitions: The role of parenting and family structures understood within a wider social context

The term youth transitions refer to a demographically dense period in the life course, involving several role and status changes, which have been described as the ‘Big 5 Transitions’ (Settersten, 2007): completing full-time education, entry into paid employment, setting up a new home, establishing a supportive romantic relationship and making the step into family formation. The transition process has traditionally be considered as complete when an individual has experienced all of these transitions. This requirement has however been contested on the grounds that young adults and even older adults do not consider experiencing these events as the defining element of adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Furstenberg, Kennedy, McLoyd, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2004). Instead, the transition to adulthood has been described by the term ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett, 2000), referring to an extended transition period characterised by change and identity exploration that can extent until the late 20s or early 30s. The shift towards an extended transition period occurred across most developed countries since the 1970s (Shanahan, 2000). In the aftermath of changing employment opportunities and technological innovations increasing numbers of young people participated in higher education, delaying the step into paid employment and family formation (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005).

To the extent that young people are achieving even moderate economic self-sufficiency at an ever later age, they must obtain support from other sources. In many instances, it is the family that is providing financial, social and emotional support, although not all young people can call on their families to provide this support. Social change has affected all young people, but it has not all affected in the same way. Extended education participation and delayed transitions are more prevalent among relative privileged young people, where parents have the resources to invest in higher education (Schoon & Bynner, 2017). Although the term ‘emerging adulthood’ maybe useful as a synonym for a prolonged transition to independence, it does not take into account the social and economic conditions that continue to shape the life course of young people, instead offering a psychological model of free choice, focusing on the postponement of commitments (Schoon & Schulenberg, 2013).

Previous research identified a ‘short list’ of key factors that support young people’s development (Masten, 2014) which overlap with those relevant for supporting families as a whole (Masten, 2018), including:

- Nurturing, sensitive caregiving and protection of vulnerable family members
- Close relationships, emotional security, belonging (as reflected in family cohesion and belonging)
- Skilled parenting and discipline tailored to the child (maintaining boundaries, family integrity, family authority, rules, skilled family management)
- Agency, motivation to adapt (active coping, mastery)
- Problem-solving skills, planning, executive function (as well as collaborative problem-solving, family flexibility)
- Self-efficacy, positive view of the self or identity (positive views of family and family identity)
- Self-regulation, emotion regulation, co-regulation (balancing family demands)
- Hope, faith, optimism, positive outlook

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- Meaning making, belief life has meaning (coherence, family meaning making, family purpose)
- Routines and rituals
- Connections with well-functioning communities

These resource factors broadly reflect the importance of establishing feelings of competence, connection, confidence, and caring in young people (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). In an ideal world, a young person would experience these factors, enabling them to develop into well-functioning, healthy and happy individual and to succeed in their educational and occupational transitions. And of course all parents try to the best for their children. Yet, lives do not unfold in a social vacuum. The wider social context, including experiences of poverty and economic uncertainty, clearly plays an important role in shaping opportunities as well as the motivation and aspirations of young people and their parents. Recent evidence suggests that across rich countries on average almost one child in seven lives in relative income poverty (OECD, 2018a; UNICEF, 2017). Child poverty rates increased in almost two-thirds of OECD countries following the Great Recession (OECD, 2018a), and in many countries the depth as well as breadth of poverty has increased.

To gain a better understanding of how parents can support young people in their transition to independent adulthood it is thus important to take into account the role of the wider social and economic context. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the dynamic interplay of contextual and individual level factors shaping youth transitions. The focus lies in particular on the role of families in supporting young people in their transition, taking into account the impact of family hardship, i.e. poverty, as well as family instability on young people's life. A social-ecological life course approach is introduced, examining the factors and processes supporting young people in the transition to independent adulthood.

2. A Socio-Ecological Systems Approach

The interplay of structural conditions and individual adjustment can be conceptualised within a socio-ecological system approach (Schoon, 2006, 2012, 2017). The framework is informed by ecological models of human development, taking into account the multiple interacting levels of influence ranging from the micro- to the macro-context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986), the importance of timing and the wider socio-historical context in which development takes place (Elder, 1998; 1999), assumptions of human agency (Bandura, 2006; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Heckhausen, 2000) and human plasticity (Lerner et al., 2013). It is assumed that both individuals and their environments are potentially malleable, whereby individuals can shape their environment, which in turn influences them. The socio-ecological perspective provides a heuristic for understanding how multiple levels of influence contribute to individual development and adjustment in a changing context, and seeks to describe, explain and optimize individual development in context.

Human development cannot be separated from the social context. Individual and context are understood to mutually constitute each other through processes of co-regulation (Sameroff, 2010). The developing child is rooted within many inter-related systems, such as families, schools, and neighbourhoods, as well as the wider socio-historical context. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) conceptualisation of context differentiates between the proximal environment, which is directly experienced by the individual (as for example lack of economic resources in the family context) and more distal cultural and social value systems that have an indirect effect on the individual, such as an economic slump, which is often

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mediated by experiences in the more proximal context, but can also have direct effects. In the following the effect of economic hardship on family processes and young people's adjustment in the transition to adulthood will be examined in more detail.

2.1. Economic Hardship in the family context

Many families today face significant economic hardship and child poverty is a persistent problem, even in highly developed countries (OECD, 2018a; UNICEF, 2017). Poverty constitutes a pervasive developmental hazard draining family resources and bringing with it multiple sources of risk, affecting families economically and socially, as well as on an emotional level. There is persistent evidence that the experience of economic hardship, i.e. lack of material resources, poverty, loss of employment or lack of employment opportunities are associated with adjustment problems (Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). For example, children born into less privileged families show, in general, lower levels of educational attainment (Engle & Black, 2008; Schoon et al., 2002), self-confidence and educational achievement motivation (Duckworth & Schoon, 2012; Mortimer, Zhang, Hussemann, & Wu, 2014; Schoon, 2014), are leaving education earlier and are less likely to continue in higher education than their more privileged peers (Schoon & Silbereisen, 2009; Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005; Shanahan, 2000). Compared to relative privileged parents, parents lacking socio-economic resources have generally lower education and career aspirations for their children, although against the background of educational expansion, parental education aspirations have increased, especially for their daughters (Schoon, 2010).

Family processes

To date most research examining family processes linking poverty to children's adjustment are based on assumptions formulated within *resource deprivation (or investment models)* and *family stress models*, capturing key mechanisms that have been found to explain differences in child outcomes across different family structures, such as variations in access to economic resources and investment of parental time and attention, family stress, and parenting practices (Amato, 2005; Brown, 2010; Carlson & Corcoran, 2001; McLanahan, 2009; Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010).

Resource deprivation, or investment models (IM) suggest that high income families have greater resources in terms of time, money, and energy that they can offer to support their children than less privileged parents (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Linver, Brooks-Gunn, & Kohen, 2002; Mayer, 1997; McLanahan, 2009). Investments supporting the development of children include the purchase of learning materials (i.e. books, educational toys, or media), paying for extra tuition, and engagement in education-enriching practices, such as visits to libraries or museums (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002), as well as the provision of adequate food, housing, clothing and medical care (Conger et al., 2010). The IM suggest that higher income promotes parental investments to support child development, yet does not specify how economic circumstances might impact the quality of parent-child interactions or parenting practices.

The *family stress model (FSM)* by contrast suggests that the influence of family economic hardship on child adjustment is mediated through parental emotional distress, which in turn influences parenting practices, which in turn are associated with poorer child outcomes (Conger et al., 1992; Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994). Parental mental health is understood as a crucial mediator of the relationship between economic hardship and parenting behaviors, reflecting the psychological consequences of enduring economic hardship. It is generally operationalized as depressive symptoms, which may be most harmful for low-income families, given the multiple risks that these families face (Conger & Elder,

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1994; Jeon & Neppl, 2016; McLanahan, 2009). Parental psychological distress also impacts on parents' ability or willingness to invest in their children, suggesting the appropriateness of combining both models (Conger & Donnellan, 2007; Gershoff et al., 2007; Kiernan & Huerta, 2008; Linver et al., 2002; Schoon, Hope, Ross, & Duckworth, 2010; Yeung et al., 2002).

2.2. Family instability

Poverty and family instability are closely interlinked, and economic hardship has been associated with greater risk for relationship break-up (Conger & Elder, 1994; McLanahan, 2009; Lee & McLanahan, 2015). Family instability, in addition to poverty, has become recognized as a salient risk factor affecting parenting effectiveness and children's socio-emotional adjustment (Amato, 2005; Brown, 2010; Conger & Elder, 1994; McLanahan, 2009). Since the 1970s family life and the living arrangements of parents across the western world have become increasingly diversified with a decreasing percentage of children living in traditional two-parent families and more children experiencing family structural transitions even early in childhood (Kiernan, 2008; McLanahan, 2009; Waldfogel et al., 2010).

While the effects of poverty and family structure on family functioning and children's developmental outcomes are well researched, there is less knowledge about family-based processes that take into account both the structure and the dynamics of family living arrangements (Barnett, 2008; Brown, 2010; Cooper, McLanahan, Meadows, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Lee & McLanahan, 2015; Sun & Li, 2011). Most research using *FSM*, *IM* or similar models has examined family processes in two-parent (Conger, et al., 1992; Elder, Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985), or predominantly single parent families (Brody & Flor, 1997; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002). Family instability is associated with many co-risk factors, such as loss of social and economic resources, changes in parenting behavior, and socio-emotional adjustment of parents and children (Elder & Caspi, 1988). For example, loss of a partner is associated with loss of income, while gaining a partner might be associated with increase in family income (Kalil & Ryan, 2010). Establishing new family unions and termination of existing ones can introduce changes in family resources, rules and parenting practices that might adversely affect children's behavioral adjustment (Beck, Cooper, & McLanahan, 2010; Demo & Fine, 2010). According to the *instability hypothesis* (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007) growing up in a single mother household may present a risk to child development, yet an even greater risk may be associated with family instability. For example, the addition of a step-parent might lead to an increased stress level among children adjusting to a new routine, or lead to conflict with the stepparent, as the mother pays more attention to the new partner (Cavanaugh & Huston, 2006; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Hadfield et al., 2018).

3. Resilience

Although there is a significant association between poverty and less positive parenting, many parents living in poverty show effective and sensitive parenting behaviors, which can act as an important resource or protective factor for children facing hardship and adversity (Klein & Forehand, 2000; Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004). Not all individuals and families are affected in the same way, and some show resilience in the face of adversity. For example, in a path-breaking study of families in the Great Depression of the 1920s Glen Elder (1974/99) portrays the devastating impact of a global economic downturn on the capability of families to cope. Parents were confronted with poverty and lack of material resources, some fathers had to face loss of employment and the associated status and

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authority, while some mothers were forced to assume domestic dominance. Nonetheless, their children showed a considerable degree of resourcefulness. Some were pushed into early employment or household responsibility, often enabling them to gain more confidence, and some developed mixed or negative images of their stressed parents. Yet they managed well on the whole, especially if they were young enough not to take on the full duties of adults (in particular regarding family formation and parenthood) and old enough to have passed through critical early stages of development to assume pre-adult awareness and responsibilities.

Similarly, a study of families in the Iowa farming crisis demonstrates processes of resilience in the face of economic hardship that occurred in situations where the parents emotionally supported each other, demonstrated effective problem solving skills, and showed a sense of mastery and self-confidence that allowed them to persevere and reduce the level of economic stress (Conger & Conger, 2002). A more recent study of young people in England making the transition to adulthood during the 2008 economic recession showed that in addition to family hardship, living in a highly deprived neighbourhood, characterised by high levels of unemployment and low levels of resources was a significant risk factor, undermining young people's life chances (Schoon, 2014), illustrating the effect of cumulative disadvantage. However, the study also showed that parents, even if they experienced worklessness themselves, can motivate their children to achieve despite of their own precarious situation and the experience of an economic downturn (this applied in particular to parents with higher levels of education). The potential buffering effect of parental education has also been reported in a study using the US longitudinal Youth Development Study to examine whether a positive familial context of achievement, as indicated by the parents' orientations to achievement when they were adolescents and the parent's' educational attainment, will reduce the effects of economic hardship experienced within the family and the wider social context (Mortimer et al., 2014). The findings suggest that parents with higher levels of education may be able to buffer the effects of economic hardship, and encourage their children in ways that are protective, irrespective of the immediate economic situation of the family and the exposure to an economic downturn in the aftermath of the 2008 Recession.

4. What can be done to promote positive development?

This last section of the paper discusses different strategies to support young, comprising efforts to build competencies, to support families, to improve communities, and to eliminate or reduce risk. It is argued that efforts to promote positive adaptation among young people have to focus both on both individual and contextual resources, create supportive and sustainable relationships, adopt a holistic approach, and offer stable and dependable structures to create opportunities for positive development across time.

4.1. *Support for building competencies*

As highlighted in the 'short list' of protective resources (Masten, 2014, 2018), research has identified a set of key factors that can promote positive development and effective functioning even in the face of adversity. These resources are relevant in early childhood, adolescence and during the transition to independent adulthood. Moreover, significant advances in developmental prevention science have generated new interventions which aim to enhance competence and coping skills by working directly with children and young people in their social contexts, i.e., families, schools, communities, and peer groups (Catalano et al., 2012; Masten, 2011; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). Here I want to emphasise in particular four types of interventions that have shown to be effective in improving the behaviour, attitudes, outlook and coping strategies of young people. They include mentoring, experience learning,

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outdoor activities and social and emotional learning (Gutman & Schoon, 2015). There is consistent experimental evidence to show that these interventions can effectively promote positive and prevent problematic behaviours. These interventions focus on specific risk populations and specific outcomes, and the selection of appropriate intervention strategy should be based on a thorough assessment of the needs and resources of the specific target group and/or problems areas in question.

4.2. The Parenting of Parents

The importance of parents and effective parenting has consistently been shown in resilience research, and the family constitutes the single most important contextual influence in young people's lives (Masten, 2018). In programs to foster resilience there must always be a consideration of the family environment, and the support for effective parenting. Yet, while developmental science has produced a lot of knowledge about what parents should and should not do, there is very little attention to how parents might be helped to sustain positive parenting in difficult situations and over time, especially when they are highly stressed themselves (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2015). Parents, in particular mothers who are facing chronic poverty and lack of resources, are also experiencing major mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse. Indeed maternal or parental distress is a potential mediating process through which socio-economic disadvantage affects parenting behaviour, which in turn affects children's outcomes (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). Parents facing multiple adversities need support, and access to other adults that can help them to develop effective coping strategies. More needs to be done to create dependable and mutually supportive relationships which can be sustained over time and in different contexts, i.e. in the family, the workplace, in clinics and neighbourhoods.

Yet reaching out to those most in need is a major challenge in itself. All too often families or individuals in greatest need receive the least support, although adequate material benefits and support would be vital to their well-being. One critical aspect of living in hardship are high levels of isolation and anxiety, and the way in which services are provided is as important as what is provided. Services need to be based on trust and respect in order to be effective (Bartley, 2006). One of the critical aspects of service provision is to offer a space, where people in hard-pressed neighbourhoods feel welcome and listened to, without being patronised or judged. Services must rid themselves of the perception that those in hardship and poverty are of less moral and social worth (Schoon & Bartley, 2008). Well-designed services, offering for example activities with people who share similar experiences, or information and guidance regarding education and employment opportunities, can provide opportunities for families to build trust, self-esteem and confidence, to identify skills and aptitudes, and play a key role in acknowledging and releasing often hidden capabilities.

4.3. Improve communities

Bringing the living standards of the worst-off closer to the average will bring with it a fairer distribution of resources and opportunities. Yet, it is not just a question of commodities or goods people have, but what these enable them to do (Sen, 1993). Changes in the physical or social environment should increase the choices available, open up new possibilities, enhance the space and enjoyment of functioning. Living in poverty not simply means not having enough money, it also means being excluded from normal social interactions in society. Poorer families are more likely to live in places where facilities and services have been stripped away and are often unable to access even essential services such as health care, education, or have access to viable employment opportunities (Townsend & Gordon, 2002). Improving these services, making the regeneration of poor areas a priority, building up the

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local infrastructure and preventing ghettoization, would be key steps towards a fairer society (Schoon & Bartely, 2008). A stable community, where facilities such as effective schools, libraries, parks, and leisure centres provide opportunities for education, sports, hobbies and social activities, invite participation in community life, thereby encouraging the ability to learn, to acquire skills, and enabling a neighbourhood to become a community. They also provide access to social networks and significant others that can provide help and guidance regarding education and employment opportunities.

4.4. Eliminate or reduce risk

In addition, there has to be a reduction of the risk factors that undermine children's development. The costs of allowing children to grow up in poverty are enormous (Yoshikawa et al., 2012). Children growing up in families experiencing poverty and adverse living conditions, such as poor housing, do less well in school, show more behaviour problems, experience more mental health problems, more problems in establishing themselves in the labour market, and are less likely to be engaged in society than their more privileged peers. Given the persistence of poverty even in a highly developed country it is essential to do something about it. A basic requirement is for families to be able to live on the wages they earn, and to have a safe home. Yet, wages especially for low-skilled jobs have declined since the 1970s – a trend that needs to be reversed. Since the 1970s, on the background of continued economic growth, the incomes of the poorest fifth have increased by just 16%, while incomes of the richest fifth have soared by 95% (Mishel & Shierholz, 2013), and wealth being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands (Piketty, 2014).

There is evidence to suggest that increases in income among poor families can have long-term beneficial effects regarding educational and behavioural outcomes, as well as the mental health of children. Evidence from the North Carolina Great Smoky Mountains study show that lifting families out of poverty influences children's development in their transition to adulthood (Costello, Erkanli, Copeland, & Angold, 2010). For example, an additional \$4000 per year for the poorest households increased educational attainment by one year at age 21, and reduced the chances of committing a minor crime by 22 percent for 16 and 17 year olds (Akee, Copeland, Keeler, Angold, & Costello, 2010). Improving the income and living conditions of poor families with children can thus go a long way in reducing the risk of adjustment problems and poor health. Moreover the study showed that the timing and duration of the intervention mattered: children who were youngest and had the longest exposure to increased family income showed the largest effects.

Generally, the evidence suggests that programs and policies that directly reduce poverty, such as childhood allowances and tax credits, conditional cash transfer and income supplement programs can be effective, although their effect differs by developmental period and degree of poverty-related risk highlighting the contextual dependency of individual adjustment (Yoshikawa et al., 2012).

4.5. Improve institutional structures

Another leverage is to improve the institutional structures supporting youth transitions. For example, in the UK and the USA the dominant view is that it is the individual's responsibility to invest in their education, which will in turn influence their prospects for employment. Following a neo-classical belief in the power of the market both countries are characterised by a very flexible labour market with minimal restrictions on how employers recruit, train and use employees. Moreover, both countries did not develop an effective system of vocational training, and the government was not charged with providing job opportunities (Schoon & Bynner, 2017). Young people are expected to build up their skills and find their

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own jobs. When the Great Recession hit, young people in both countries suffered most, and the youth unemployment rate reached about 20%. In Southern European countries the situation of young people was arguably exacerbated by extremely low levels of welfare provision for young people in these countries.

In Germany however, the impact of the Great Recession on young people was somehow buffered through a ‘social partnership’ approach, where labour market issues are negotiated between strong employer associations, trade unions and the state, and the availability of a dual education and training system preparing young people for the world of work in close collaboration between education institutions and employers (Schoon & Bynner, 2017). In the dual education and vocational training system the relationship between employers and labour market entrants is actively managed, both in terms of the way in which young people are matched with the requirements of firms, and in terms of the skills which they are taught. To some extent, the dual education and training system provided shelter from unemployment, and Germany became one of the exceptions, with youth unemployment falling from 13.5% in 2005/7 to 11% in 2009 (Bell & Blanchflower, 2011).

There is thus nothing inevitable about labour market outcomes, and national institutions and policies play an important role in shaping young people’s experience of the transition from school to work, providing structures and support over and above the influence of the family. The measures introduced by the German government are of course not beyond criticism, and even those young people on the relatively protected and advantaged pathways through higher education to the professions may confront increasing transition difficulties as career opportunities close down or are replaced by unpaid internships (Schoon & Bynner, 2017). Following the recent global recession, there are now increasing concerns regarding the value of a degree, prolonged education periods without income, drop-out and rising student debt. A recent OECD report suggests that approximately one in four students who enrolled had not graduated after two years from the theoretical end date of the programme and four out of five of these students have dropped out of education altogether (OECD, 2018a). Moreover, a considerable number of graduates are overqualified for their job, i.e. workers with a degree are in jobs that do not require higher education (OECD, 2018b).

Leaving education relatively early with a good post-secondary qualification and engaging in continuous full-time employment might thus not necessarily be a bad strategy - if there are jobs available that pay a decent salary and provide prospects for skill development and promotion. Income earned through longer-term full-time employment enables financial independence, the move into one’s own home, and supporting one’s own family at an earlier pace than among those who continue in higher education. Young people have to carve their pathways to adulthood based on the resources and opportunities that are available to them. Not all young people can or want to pursue an academic career, and many young people fail to achieve their ambitious educational goals. After spending several years in higher education they leave without qualifications, are left unprepared for alternative pathways, and struggle to establish themselves in the labour market. What is required is the creation and provision of viable pathways to prosperity among future workers at every education level (Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011) and the provision of effective career advice and information.

5. Conclusion

The developmental-contextual approach to the study of youth transitions avoids simplistic individual-focused interventions, which do not account for the wider social context in which the developing individual is embedded. It takes a holistic approach, considering the multi-dimensional forces and relationships between individuals, their families, their

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neighbourhoods and wider social context. It recognises that risk factors cumulate over time, making it difficult to pinpoint one single factor or causal mechanism. Moreover, disadvantaged families and their children are highly diverse, rendering the quality of the implementation and service delivery a crucial issue. To be effective, interventions should be community-based and provide integrated service delivery, building up resources and sustainable relationships from inside the community, thereby strengthening the social fabric (Schoon, 2006; 2017; Schoon & Bartley, 2008; Schoon & Bynner, 2003). In addition, the recognition that developmental processes are profoundly affected by the wider social context draws the attention to the role of public policies and practices that influence the nature of the environment, and thus can have significant effects on the development of children, young people and their families (Lerner et al., 2013). Providing effective education, and employment opportunities are basic requirements for families, children and young people to thrive. There is not one major factor that enables individuals to cope with adversity. What is important is the combination of multiple influences that make a difference, and social policy and structures that create opportunities and resources, optimizing the life chances for all.

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