*(Refer to theory framework presented in slide #3)*

**Ecological Framework for Nurturing Families**

- An ecological framework understands human development as “the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the life course, between an active, growing human being, and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives… this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded” (Bronfenbrenner, 1986a, p. 188).

- Human development takes place within a context of reciprocal interactions between a biopsychological individual and the people, objects, and symbols in her/his immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). The environment is formed by five layers/dimensions of systems that are in continuous interaction affecting the individuals’ development; such interactions influence the environment as well (Bronfenbrenner, 1986b). Those dimensions include the microsystem (individuals or groups of individuals within immediate settings e.g., a child and home); the mesosystem (inter-relations among two or more microsystems for example relationships between the child’s home and school); the exosystem (e.g., local economic indirectly affecting the developing child); the macrosystem (e.g., cultural values and belief systems influencing the child, the family, and family policy); and the chronosystem, which refers to the changes of the environment or individual overtime affecting his/her development (e.g., a divorce) (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).
Understanding and addressing family trends/issues from the Ecological Systems Framework

The next section provides examples of the ways an Ecological Systems Framework understands family dynamics and/or problems.

1. To work with families, we must see caregivers and the people they care for as positioned within “societal, political, and scientific [forces] that shape the context of care,” (Talley & Crews, 2007, p. 227 cited in Eckenwiler, 2007; Eckenwiler, 2007). This framework identifies the needs of individuals and their caregivers as intertwined and reveals that all the decisions that are made in different policy areas, for instance, health, employment, economics and immigration, affect the decisions made in other areas and affect the lives of caregivers (Eckenwiler, 2007) and the families they care for. A good example of this fact is children who are separated from their parents as a result of court decisions (imprisonment or deportation). Grandparents often have to raise their grandchildren because their parents are unable to do so. Grandparents have to learn to work with different systems (school and health care) so they are able to provide the best care for their grandchildren.

2. Bullying and peer victimization in school can be understood from the Ecological Systems Framework. Bullying victims and offenders are part of different interrelated system levels (micro, meso, exo, macro, and chronosystem) (Sun Hong & Espelage, 2012). First, we need to recognize the socio-demographic characteristics of these youngsters, for example, age, gender, and race/ethnicity, as these have been observed predictors of bullying behavior in school (Sun Hong & Espelage, 2012). Middle school students, African American and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning) youth are more likely to experience peer victimization (Sun Hong & Espelage, 2012).
• At the microsystem level, it is important to consider parent–youth relations, inter-parental violence, peer relationships, school connectedness, and school environment. For example, lack of parent-youth communication have been linked to bullying among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites (Spriggs et al., 2007).

• At the mesosystem level, research finds that teachers’ involvement is a significant risk factor for bullying in school. Experiences in one microsystem (i.e., relationships between the student and teacher) can influence the interactions in another (i.e., relationships between the student and his/her peers) (Spriggs et al., 2007).

• One example of the exosystem level in bullying is the interaction between media violence and neighborhood. Youth may or may not be directly part of one of those systems but both can affect youth. Media violence or at risk neighborhoods can negatively influence youth interactions with their peers in school (Spriggs et al., 2007).

• The macrosystem level refers to cultural beliefs and norms that perpetuate inequality, aggression, and oppression (Spriggs et al., 2007).

• At the chronosystem level there are factors that can result in youth peer aggression, for instance, divorce or changes in the family structure (Spriggs et al., 2007).

3. **Child abuse** is another problem that can be explained through the Ecological Systems Framework.

• At the microsystem level, negative parent-child relationship, intergenerational transmission of abuse (parents who are abused as children tend to abuse their own children), and domestic violence are salient risk factors for child abuse and maltreatment (Kim & Seok, 2003; Egeland, 1993). At the individual level is important to consider the child’s age as a child-level risk factor. Young children are more vulnerable to be abused.
Other risk factors at that level include child’s behavior problems, and mental retardation (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005; Crosse, Kaye, & Ratnofsky, 1993).

- The mesosystem level includes the family. Specific characteristics of the family are associated with child abuse. Substance and partner abuse and lack of parenting or communication skills have been found to put a child at risk of abuse and maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2004). Another factor is the parents’ childhood history of abuse (history of corporal punishment or witness family violence as a child).
- At the exosystem level, poverty, unemployment, isolation and lack of social resources have been linked to child abuse and maltreatment (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2004).
- At the macrosystem level, we find aspects of the U.S. society that may perpetuate child abuse and maltreatment (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005). For example, the social approval of violence (through video games, TV, films, and music lyrics) (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2004) and the reluctance shown by individuals (including the State) to get involved in family affairs (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005).
- The chronosystem level refers to changes overtime in the characteristics of the child and his/her environment. For instance, during puberty, adolescents experience a number of biological and cognitive changes predisposing them to conflicts with their parents (Steinberg, 1996).

In choosing a program to address a family problem/aspect, it is important to take into account these different levels and recognize the role they play in the families we work with. If we want to address or prevent child abuse through programming, we can think about activities focusing on fathers’ involvement in the different aspects of raising his child (microsystem). We can also
choose programs that help parents to improve their communication and relationships with their spouse and their children (mesosystem). Lastly, we can work towards educating the public about the nature of child abuse/neglect and ways to prevent it at school and community spaces (macro-system) (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2005).

* Please go to this link to get more information about applying the Ecological Framework to families within school and health environments: http://www.schools-for-all.org/page/Ecological,+Systems-based+Understanding+%26+Approaches+to+Schools+%28EE%29

References