

## **Social Ecological Theory**

Children develop based on the social ecology that surrounds them. This ecosystem is built in natural layers that allow the child to bond and develop naturally. Numerous studies find that when these social ecology zones are disturbed, children begin to exhibit stress and behavioural variance that compensates or exaggerates their condition. The theory states that children bond first and most importantly with the parents, especially a primary caregiver, then with the family unit. This ecology is extended into the school and local social environments, and out into work and wider social settings as children reach adulthood. The key to the theory is the use of relationships to create accountability structures.

## **Family Stress Theory**

Family Stress Theory defines and explores periodic, acute stressors (sudden onset) that occur in the lives of everyone. When these stressors become more frequent or are not attended to by significant relationships, they leave a residue of insecurity in people that accumulates, which can lead unexpectedly to personal and family crises, including physical, emotional, or relational trauma. Examples of such family crises are episodes of domestic violence, recurring or chronic substance abuse (and relapses), illness from weakened immune systems, divorce, accidents, child abuse/neglect, etc.

The research suggests that among the most significant factors that create or disturb the sense of security children require are the daily routines we apply to our lives. These routines include personal and shared schedules, habits, rituals, and repetitious environmental stimuli. Three aspects of routines that can be associated with such acquired stress are:

- The changes in daily routines
- The number of changes in daily routines
- The length of time since there were changes in daily routines, (i.e. the family stressors);

Importantly, the impact of erratic personal activities and the lack of consistent behaviour patterns can be muted or buffered with protective factors. These positive factors help families to cope, so they can survive multiple contextual stressors and to continue to competently parent despite chronic and acute stressors.

## **Family Systems Theory**

Family Systems Theory establishes a series of "normal" and natural interactions within and between families that builds cohesion and stability. Many researchers have demonstrated optimal and effective mechanics in everyday lives that helps bring children into alignment. These activities and norms become buffers and resiliency factors for the stresses that can cause insecurity and sudden instability.

The activities of well-functioning family systems include:

- Parental authority
- Parental empowerment
- Parental service to child
- Child service to parents
- Experiential communication
- Experiential habit forming
- Play and nonverbal communication
- Meal rituals and hospitality
- Social rituals, song, meeting space, informal rules
- Trust in the wisdom and decision of parents
- Family pride
- Winning and celebration
- Family projects
- Personal expression within the family

### **Social Capital**

Recently, social scientists have embraced the concept of "social capital". It refers to relations of trust, mutual expectations, and shared values embedded in social networks. Social capital builds up like the compounded interest of saving money in a bank. However, unlike other forms of capital, social capital is not possessed by individuals, but resides in the relationships individuals have with one another. It can be said that social capital exists in communities and in society. Individuals within a social network may vary in how they draw on social capital, but the resource exists independently of individual actors. A similar and familiar concept underlies the impact of the Internet as a burgeoning form of social computing. Social capital has value for individuals because it provides an avenue for exchange of information, and it encourages the emergence and enforcement of social norms.

There is a tremendous amount of research on this subject. If the social capital is based on natural, positive values, it can become a significant environmental factor for protecting children and maintaining social harmony. But it works the other way too. We see in children with a high number of risk factors that derive from families that are not functioning well, a tendency for them to turn to other insecure peers and even gangs. When entire neighbourhoods and communities contain a threshold of people with negative social factors, risk factors and behavioural disorders, social capital dries up as trust erodes and people begin to insulate themselves from one another. In these circumstances, a "tipping point" can be reached and the communities struggle to escape the cycle. We believe in adding social capital to the environment by connecting people and building trusting relationships. From there values can arise that are shared and that support improved lives. In this way, children have their best chance to avoid unwise and unhealthy choices.

## **Parent Empowerment**

A core component of all of our child/ student success series is the emphasis on parent empowerment. The FAST program believes that parents are capable of being the primary teachers and nurturers for their own children. This rule applies to all socio-economic groups. Exceptions to this rule must be handled by other indicated therapies, including legal and medical treatments.

Based on this underlying respect for the parent role, we believe in helping parents assure that they become accountable for the task of child care. Our goal is to build a trusting relationship with parents so they allow us to help them build protective factors around their kids and function better as a family. It is the empowered parents that can begin to empower their children and work with them to reduce conflict and increase alignment. Children who feel empowered and secure tend to do well in school and in relationships. With the basics in place, parents can impart values and rules, and watch their children grow, thrive, and find themselves. As problems and stresses occur, parents and kids can cope better and make good decisions.

Along with this empowerment foundation, we believe schools should be welcoming to all families, and that policies and practices of organizations should always support and include parents to enhance the parent-child relationship. Our programs make that support easy for schools and enables reciprocity in the form of parent involvement.