

SECTION ONE: SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICIES THROUGH AN ECOLOGICAL AND FAMILY IMPACT LENS

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A family impact perspective in policymaking analyzes the consequences of any policy or program, even if it is not explicitly aimed at families, for its impact on family well-being. This includes the ways in which families are affected by the issue, ways in which families contribute to the issues, and how families need to be involved in solutions. In the same way that policy makers evaluate the economic or environmental impact of policies, there are methods for examining the family impact.

A family impact perspective is different from family policy (policy that directly impacts family makeup and is designed to have specific effects on family). A family perspective examines implicit or unintended consequences policies have on families. Policies developed at all levels have an impact on families. Policies such as “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) or

“Welfare to Work” have an obvious relationship to families. Worksite policies have a clear relationship to the employee’s ability to relate to his/her family. Others, such as transportation or feedlot zoning issues may not seem to have an obvious impact on families, but if one looks beneath the surface to the intended and unintended consequences for families of all kinds, an unmistakable relationship is present.

Most policymakers are familiar with the more typical family advocate approach. Advocates campaign for an under-represented group or a particular policy alternative that they believe may potentially enhance family well-being. In doing this, advocates examine options in light of their own value system, using a personal interpretation of the scientific evidence, with the aim of promoting a single policy option that they deem most desirable for families. In contrast and complement to this advocacy approach of influencing policies, policy educators do not lobby for a single policy, but attempt to inform policy discourse by clarifying potential consequences of several policy alternatives. They make an effort to educate by presenting research findings objectively without relaying personal preferences. The University of Minnesota’s Children, Youth and Family Consortium is a natural fit for portraying this perspective because of its role and responsibility within a nonpartisan institution whose goal is to advance the welfare of the state.

Family Impact is an Example of an Ecological Perspective in Policymaking

The family impact perspective recognizes that things that happen to individual family members, as well as things that occur outside the family have a profound effect on the quality and nature of the relationships and actions within the family. This idea is grounded in the ecological model of human development.

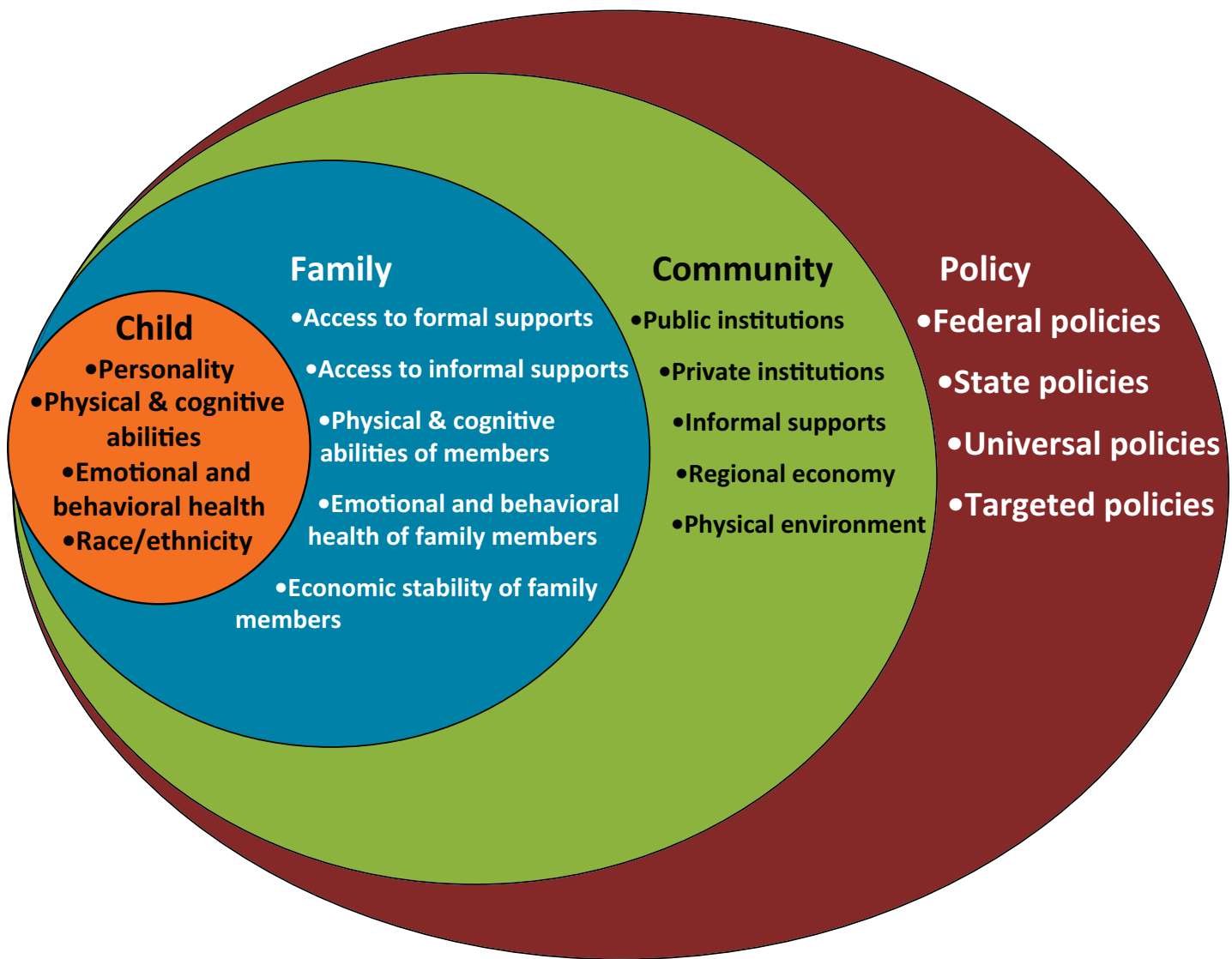
The original ecological model developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in the late 1970s is well-known to most family scholars and practitioners. The model has had many permutations and interpretations over the years, but at base level, it recognizes that each individual, as well as the family as a unit, is significantly affected by interactions among a



number of overlapping contexts, systems or environments. This includes systems in which the family and/or its members are directly involved, such as neighborhoods, child care settings or schools, as well as systems that are more distant from direct interaction or influence, such as society, culture, and policy.

A model is illustrated here, using the language of individual, family/informal supports, community, and policy. A detailed example of the “Circles of Influence” model is available from the University’s Children, Youth and Family Consortium (www.cyfc.umn.edu/eddisp). No matter how one describes it, some fundamental principles apply:

- The influence of all contexts/systems/environments on the individual and the family must be recognized in order to completely understand and assist in family functioning.
- Individuals and families also have an influence on the systems beyond themselves.
- As children grow and develop, they interact directly with more and more systems.
- The larger, macro systems such as society and policy, may not interact directly with families, but they still have a significant influence on families. Some of these influences are unintentional.
- The most effective approach leading to healthy behaviors is a combination of efforts at all levels.



CIRCLES OF INFLUENCE IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Adapted for Family Impact Seminars by the University of Minnesota Children, Youth and Family Consortium. Based on Bronfenbrenner’s Ecology of Human Development.

Assessing the Impact of Policies on Families: The Family Impact Checklist

The first step in developing family-friendly policies is to ask the right questions:

- What can government and community institutions do to enhance the family's capacity to help itself and others?
- What effect does (or will) this policy or program have for families? Will it help or hurt, strengthen or weaken family functioning?

The National Consortium of Family Organizations developed a framework to assess the intended and unintended consequences of policies and programs on family stability, family relationships, and family responsibilities. Each of the six principles serves as a criterion to assess the ways in which policies and programs are sensitive to and supportive of families. The principles are not rank ordered and sometimes they conflict with one-another, requiring trade offs. Cost effectiveness also must be considered. Some questions are value-neutral and others incorporate specific values. People may not always agree on these values, so sometimes questions will require rephrasing. This tool, however, reflects a broad nonpartisan consensus, and it can be useful to people across the political spectrum.

Policies are most beneficial to families when they:

- Foster and support rather than hinder or replace the major functions of families - family creation, economic support, childrearing, and caring for their members
- Encourage and reinforce family membership and stability
- Recognize the interdependence and strength of family relationships, even when those relationships may be conflicted
- Encourage families to be involved in addressing issues that affect them
- Recognize that there are many forms and configurations of families, and the effects of policies on diverse families may be very different
- Recognize and act on the need to support families who are vulnerable economically and/or socially

The checklist can be very helpful in pinpointing specific changes that need to be made in policies or programs. The family impact assessment or analysis process can range from a simple paper and pencil exercise—lasting a couple of hours—to an in-depth study that reviews existing data and gathers new information—which may take several months or even years.¹⁷

Special education financing is an example of an issue that is directed more at the educational *system* than specific children or families. But policies that are made regarding the funding of special education are most felt at the local level, and have a direct effect on families who have children in public schools. Their opportunities, actions and decisions regarding special education for their children are impacted by funding decisions at the federal, state and local level.

Where Can I Learn More About the Family Impact Checklist?

A copy of the framework, titled "Family Impact Checklist", can be found as an insert with this briefing report, as well as at www.cyfc.umn.edu/policy/fis.html.

Although specific details about how to use the checklist is beyond the scope of this report, CYFC can provide training with more information on its use.

The intent of the framework is to provide individuals or groups with a tool to help think in more depth about a policy or program in relation to the family. It provides the user an opportunity to formally or informally assess the possible benefits, as well as the possible negative impact, of a policy or program on families.¹ Sometimes, it might be used to compare and contrast two or more different policy or program options. In other cases, it may be used solely to identify the reasons for and reasons against one specific policy or program. The framework can also be used to help in the initial stages of policy or program development as a way to encourage critical thinking about the potential policy or program and the possible impact it may have on families. The framework is not designed to be an evaluation tool in the sense of determining if the goals of a policy or program have been met.

