Why Are Relationships Important to Children's Well-Being?

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66.1 Introduction

Children live in an environment of relationships. The quality of the home, school, and neighborhood; institutional influences; and cultural values are all important, but they are important primarily as they are mediated by children's relationships with those who matter to them. This is especially apparent early in life, when children's well-being is shaped by the quality of parent–child relationships. Early in life, moreover, children's environment of relationships extends to include child-care providers, preschool educators, extended family members, peers, and many others, and the quality of the relationships with these partners also influences children in diverse ways. As children mature, their relationships include social networks of friends, teachers, coaches and informal mentors, employers, and others who communicate social values and expectations, enculturate, promote skill development relevant to social needs, and help children make their way into social ecologies outside of the family. If we could see the world through the eyes of a child, at the center of that world are the relationships that mediate many important influences from the broader world and through which that world is understood and experienced.

A relationship can be defined as an integrated network of enduring emotional ties, mental representations, and behaviors that connect one person to another over time and across space (Laible and Thompson 2007). Relationships are distinct from other kinds of human associations because they are enduring, affective, and intimate. Although there are certain characteristics that distinguish different kinds of relationships – between family members and peers, for example – it is also true that each relationship is unique, based on the distinctive characteristics of each

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partner. Relationships are thus constructed as the compounding, transactional, and mutual influences of relational partners over time. Relationships incorporate mental representations, including conceptions of the partner's characteristics that constitute what is meant by knowing, and being known by, another. Relationships incorporate influences that are both broad (the overall "quality" of the relationship as reflected in attributes like security, mutual responsiveness, or acceptance) and narrow (e.g., familiar routines and rituals, conversations, play, and other shared activities). One reason that relationships are important to children's well-being is that they are the most intimate forum for making a personal connection to another person, and over time they influence the child's sense of self, emotional competencies, coping capacities, and security.

The conclusion that relationships are essential to children's well-being has long been central to developmental science and is crucial to the chapters of this section on interpersonal relations. But *why* do relationships assume this essential function, and why does their influence endure long after children have shed their dependence on parents for health and survival? The purpose of this integrative chapter is to outline some initial answers to these questions. To be sure, one does not have to search far for understanding of why the quality of relationships is important to psychological development. Theories of social and emotional development have inspired hundreds of research studies on the impact on children of parental warmth and affection, sensitivity, discipline practices, monitoring and gatekeeping, and other practices, and there are comparable but smaller research literatures on the importance of peer relationships and social networks outside the family. Developmental researchers know quite a lot about the importance of relationships to child development. But if the focus is narrowed to understanding the origins of children's well-being, and insights are gleaned not only from developmental science but also from other fields relevant to understanding relational influences, it might be possible to clarify some of the core reasons why the quality of relationships is such an important predictor of children's well-being.

Such is the goal of this chapter. It begins by examining the research on social support, which is primarily focused not on children but on adults and which is guided by an interest in understanding why relationships have multifaceted influences on physical, emotional, and social well-being. Why is social support important, what are the circumstances in which it contributes most to individual welfare, and are these conclusions relevant to understanding the impact of relationships on children's well-being? The discussion turns next to the conclusions of research from developmental science on children's relationships in an attempt to summarize, across different ages and relational partners, the significant processes by which relational experiences influence children's well-being. This research literature emphasizes the importance of a relational perspective to psychological development that helps to identify what happens in relationships that contribute to children's well-being across the developmental spectrum. The next section focuses on children's developing representations from their experience of relationships and how this also contributes to well-being. In this sense, relationships are important not only for their effects on children's behavior but also for how they contribute to

children's expectations, self-referential beliefs, social problem-solving skills, and other social-cognitive processes that arise from relational experience. Finally, in the concluding section, the practical and policy implications of these findings are considered.

66.2 Social Support and Children's Well-Being

Social support is readily experienced by children and adults. Friends and family offer emotional encouragement in times of stress. Neighbors and extended kin can provide material aid, information, and advice when needed. Formal helping agents, such as physicians, teachers, and care providers, can offer specialized assistance of various kinds. Although children differ from adults as support recipients, social support is an important facet of the relationships they share with family members, peers, and adults outside the family.

Social support also has positive consequences for individual well-being, including physical health, psychological functioning, and mental health (Cohen and Wills 1985; Heller and Swindle 1983; Vaux 1988). Although this conclusion is qualified in important ways – social support is provided in the context of complex relational influences, and enhancing social support for preventive or therapeutic purposes has proven difficult (Thompson 1995) – it is consistent with other research literatures indicating the benefits of positive social connections with others for physical and mental health. Because this is true of children as well as adults, the purpose of this section is to examine the functions of social support by which these benefits arise, the nature of the social networks through which social support is provided, and the complex influences on social support in children's environment of relationships.

66.2.1 Functions of Social Support

According to one definition, "social support consists of social relationships that provide (or can potentially provide) material and interpersonal resources that are of value to the recipient, such as counseling, access to information and services, sharing of tasks and responsibilities, and skill acquisition" (Thompson 1995, p. 43). In emphasizing the multiple functions of social support, this definition highlights some of the reason that social support can be valuable to recipients (see also Thompson et al. 2006).

First, social support offers *emotional encouragement*, such as esteem-enhancing affirmation, understanding, and empathy, the sense that others share one's troubles and stresses and are reliably "on your side" (what Gottlieb [Gottlieb 1985] has called "milieu reliability"). For adults, this emotional function contributes to the sense of perceived support from social network members, especially those in close relationships, that is an important component of the benefits of social support (Barrera 1986; Cohen and Wills 1985). One of the most important features of social support is the emotional understanding and companionship it typically entails.

This is true also for children. This function of social support is central to the secure attachments that young children develop in their relationships with caregivers within and outside the family when those caregivers are dependably sensitive and supportive (Cassidy 2008; Thompson 2006a). Likewise, children's friendships incorporate emotional understanding and acceptance, especially as children mature and intimate self-disclosure and support become increasingly important to friendship quality (Gottman and Parker 1987).

Second, social support provides *counseling, advice, and guidance*. This function may be combined with emotional encouragement, but this depends on the support agent. Adults may seek guidance from a workplace colleague or neighbor when facing difficult decisions without expecting emotional support, or they may obtain this advice in the context of the encouragement they would expect from a spouse or partner. Likewise, children of various ages may obtain helpful advice from a teacher, peer, or parent in the context of different expectations for emotional support. Moreover, the kind of guidance that children solicit from other people depends on who they are in the child's social network. In middle childhood and adolescence, for example, peers become significant sources of advice on matters of style (hair, dress, music) and activities, while parents retain their important role in providing guidance on questions of moral values and future goals (Coleman 2011). In this respect, different support agents are preferred for different kinds of advice.

Third, social support enables *access to information, services, and material resources and assistance*. In this respect, support agents act as brokers between the recipient and others who can provide tangible aid, or they provide this aid themselves. For adults, this may occur when neighbors and friends are consulted for advice about schools, community agencies, or child-care settings or when extended kin loan money or provide needed transportation. These activities often overlap with another function of social support, *sharing of tasks and responsibilities*, in which support agents either assist in these ways or provide access to others who do so.

For children, these functions of social support are more extensive because children depend on the adults who care for them for information, assistance, and the necessities of life. Parents also function as gatekeepers, regulating children's access to school activities, commercial and community agencies, entertainment venues, and peer activities that also provide children with information, services, and resources independently of the family (O'Donnell and Steuve 1983; Parke and Bhavnagri 1989). They do so by providing (or withholding) permission and transportation and by regulating how these external influences affect their children's behavior and thinking through the information they provide (Padilla-Walker and Thompson 2005). This illustrates one way that children's social networks differ from those of adults. Especially when children are young, access to social support from outside the family is mediated by parents, who may facilitate or restrict access to other people and thus the breadth of sources of social support.

Fourth, social support can contribute to *skill acquisition*. This occurs for adults when coworkers assist in training job-related skills, neighbors foster the growth of nonvocational abilities (such as gardening or car repair), or friends or extended family aid in personal skills related to household management, parenting, or

financial planning. Not surprisingly, skill acquisition is a central feature of the influence of support agents on children, whether considering parents, peers, or adults outside the family (such as teachers, coaches, or employers). Again, this support function is more extensive for children because many of the skills that parents and peers foster are developmentally foundational. Moreover, one of the important ways that children acquire skills from others in their social networks is through the influence of modeling as well as direct instruction. As with sources of advice and guidance, children acquire different skills from different people in their social networks. Peer relationships are, for example, rich contexts for the acquisition of unique social skills and forms of social understanding that are relevant to interactions between equals, which characterize most forms of adult social interaction (Rubin et al. 2011).

Finally, social support is important for purposes of *social monitoring*. This function of social support is different from those earlier described because it is based much less on the "provisioning" aspects of social support and emphasizes more the protective influence of social network members, such as when friends notice signs of depression in an adult or extended family members detect disturbing bruises on a child (House et al. 1988). It indicates, in other words, that social support is important for preventing harm as well as for promoting good and each is relevant to individual well-being.

Social support for purposes of social monitoring is extensively discussed in the literature on child abuse prevention, in which the social isolation of high-risk families is viewed as a danger to children whose maltreatment may be undetected for an extended period (Thompson 1995). When families in difficulty are embedded in social networks that include neighbors, extended family, and friends, by contrast, it is more likely that serious parenting problems will be identified early and interventions inaugurated. Thompson (1995) has noted, however, that it may be difficult to harmonize this function of social support with the others earlier identified. From the perspective of the recipient as well as the support agent, in other words, it may be difficult to combine being emotionally encouraging and helpful with efforts to monitor and correct dysfunctional behavior, especially in informal social networks. The former is perceived as "supportive," but the latter is often not so regarded.

In children's social networks, however, these functions are typically integrated in children's relationships with support agents. In the view of children, parental warmth and responsiveness is not incompatible with parental guidance, correction, and discipline, as long as parents are perceived as acting fairly and consistently with their parenting responsibilities (Grusec and Goodnow 1994). This is true even of physical punishment. Although parental physical punishment is generally associated with enhanced child anxiety and aggression, in cultures where such practices are perceived as normative, child outcomes are less adverse than in cultures where physical punishment is used sparingly (Lansford et al. 2005). If children perceive that physical punishment is typical of most families, they do not perceive being spanked as rejecting or unduly harsh and not, presumably, incompatible with parental love and warmth.

Taken together, social support potentially can enlist multiple functions in the relationship between support agent and recipient. In some relationships, individuals are "support specialists" who are valuable primarily because they have one particular form of social support to offer, and this is particularly true of formal helpers like teachers, counselors, or coaches (Bogat et al. 1985). Other individuals are "support generalists" who provide many different social support functions, and these can be found more often in natural social networks. Parents are support generalists to children, of course, and this helps to account for their unique and salient influence in child development (Cauce et al. 1990). But peers can also be support generalists of a different kind. Parker and Asher (1993) found, for example, that the friendships of children who were highly accepted among their peers provided greater validation and caring, more help and guidance, greater conflict resolution, and more intimate exchange than the friendships of children with lower peer acceptance. The extent to which children's developing social networks provide extensive support to them depends, in part, on the number of support generalists that these networks include.

More broadly, social support is viewed as having stress-preventive and stress-buffering features (Barrera 1986; Cohen and Wills 1985; Vaux 1988). As stress prevention, social support surrounds the recipient with people who provide emotional and instrumental assistance that contributes to well-being. As stress buffer, social support strengthens the recipient's effective coping through the kinds of emotional, instrumental, and material assistance provided by support agents. Although these two facets of social support are overlapping, they differ primarily in the circumstances in which support is enlisted. In a sense, the stress-preventive features of social support continuously contribute to individual well-being through primary prevention avenues, while the stress-buffering features, enlisted after difficulty ensues, contribute to well-being by aiding coping and recovery. Both of these features of social support are relevant to children as well as to adults.

Although there are many ways that social support functions similarly for children and adults, there are also differences. An important distinction is that social support is desirable for adults but essential for children's healthy development. In other words, many functions of social support are developmentally constitutive. Within the family, for example, relationships with parents as "support generalists" provide children with emotional security to enable trust and self-confidence, foster the growth of age-appropriate skills and understanding, and offer essential information and guidance on matters that concern and interest children, and parents are models of competent conduct. These features of socially supportive parent–child relationships are important to healthy development and well-being, and the absence of these features of social support poses significant psychological risks to the child. To a lesser extent, socially supportive relationships with peers and adults in the extended family and neighborhood provide similar psychological resources. Thus, one important difference is that children rely more significantly on social support in their relationships, especially at home, than do adults. This conclusion will be revisited in the next section, in which the characteristics of relational interaction that address children's psychological needs are discussed.

Another difference in how social support functions for adults and children is that children are less competent at eliciting, maintaining, and repairing avenues of support within their social networks than are adults. To be sure, there is much that children do to engage social partners of all kinds in interaction, and children are socially competent from an early age. But the freedom they have in creating and developing their own social networks is more limited than for adults. This is especially so when children are very young. Whereas adults can potentially develop new relationships, abandon dysfunctional relationships, or strengthen existing ones to create greater support resources, children are less capable of doing so because their social networks are more constrained by family membership, parental gatekeeping, and the characteristics of child-care and educational institutions and because of limitations in their social capabilities, especially when children are young. One implication of this conclusion is that when family relationships are aversive, children have fewer alternative sources of social support with which to buffer the stresses they experience at home.

A third difference in how social support functions for children and adults is in their construal of support from others. The experience of receiving assistance provokes in most adults feelings of gratitude but sometimes also of indebtedness, inferiority, and even resentment (Fisher et al. 1982; Shumaker and Brownell 1984). One-way assistance – especially if assistance is costly to the benefactor – violates expectations of adult self-reliance, and if recipients cannot reciprocate the assistance they receive, it can contribute to feelings of humiliation. This is especially so if the circumstances warranting support involve implicit judgments of the recipient's inadequacy, incompetence, or failure. These adult reactions to aid help to account for why recipients of support may resent the benefactor, reinterpret aid as less benevolent, and/or act to undermine the provision of further assistance in the future. But these recipient reactions to aid are rarely observed in children because of the universal acceptance of their dependent status and their need for care (indeed, this is one reason why feelings of gratitude, as well as resentment, are not characteristic of children's responses to the solicitude of their parents, teachers, or other adults). Children expect and readily accept the social support they receive from adults most of the time. This buffers them against the threats to self-esteem that can occur in adults who receive assistance, although it also leaves them unprepared for circumstances in which expected and needed support from caregivers is not provided.

Social support is thus a multifaceted phenomenon in the lives of children as well as adults, encompassing emotional affirmation and understanding, advice and guidance, information and resources, support for skill acquisition, and even another's monitoring of one's welfare. In light of these multifaceted functions of social support, it is easy to see why individuals who report high levels of support from others experience less psychological distress, enhanced coping, and even enhanced physical healing (Cassel 1974; Cobb 1976; Cohen and Wills 1985). In a sense, these functions of social support help to identify the processes by which supportive relationships contribute to greater well-being in adults and children. These effects can be enduring. In one study, having a reciprocated friendship in fifth or sixth grade

showed a moderately strong association with self-worth 12 years later, even when preadolescent levels of self-competence were controlled (Bagwell et al. 1998).

Where children are concerned, however, the process of receiving social support is experienced differently than for adults, in part owing to the universal acknowledgement of children's dependence on those who care for them, and also because of young children's more limited skill in creating and maintaining their own supportive social networks. Most importantly, because the effects of social support are developmentally constitutive, especially early in life, children depend significantly on the social support they receive from significant figures in their world.

66.2.2 Social Support and Children's Social Networks

Social support is given and received in the context of relationships that are accessed in social networks. Understanding how social support is given and received by children requires an appreciation of the formal and informal social networks within which this occurs. Not surprisingly, children's social networks are both similar to and different from those of adults (Cochran et al. 1990b; Fischer 1982).

A defining feature of children's social networks is that they are not self-created. Instead, they are shaped by parents' choices and values, and they are built upon the social networks of their parents (Belle 1982; Cochran and Riley 1990). Parents' choices of housing, neighborhoods, child care, and schools establish the contexts in which children develop social connections with others outside the family and the support they may find in these relationships (Cochran and Brassard 1979). Parents are also gatekeepers of children's social connections, as noted earlier, by facilitating or restricting access to people, activities, and venues outside the home (O'Donnell and Steuve 1983; Parke and Bhavnagri 1989) including with extended family members (Thompson et al. 1992). Consequently, influences that shape parents' social networks, such as socioeconomic status, single parenting, and residential mobility, also influence the social networks of their children and their access to social support. For example, the social networks of lower-income families tend to be smaller and more kin based than for middle- and upper-income families (Cochran et al. 1990; Fischer 1982; Vaux 1988), and perhaps as a consequence lower-income mothers tend to take less initiative in arranging and facilitating their children's participation with peers in outside social and recreational activities (O'Donnell and Steuve 1983). The number of residential moves tends to decrease the breadth of parents' social networks and also of their children (Ladd et al. 1988). In many respects, therefore, children's and parents' social networks are deeply interconnected and are affected by similar influences.

To be sure, children's social networks, like those of their parents, extend beyond the geographically local neighborhood and community (Belle 1982; Cochran and Riley 1990). They include, for example, extended family members who may live quite some distance away and friends and neighbors who have moved from the community, each of whom can provide social support at a distance. For children, however, local network members are most important because of their frequency of contact and opportunities for interaction.

Children are affected by parents' social networks in another way also. Parental networks are important to children because they influence parents' sense of well-being, provide parents with opportunities for new experiences and relationships, and directly socialize parenting behavior (Cochran and Niegro 1995). In other words, when parents experience social support from their social network members, children benefit. This begins early. Cutrona (1984) reported, for example, that an overall index of the support that mothers received during pregnancy and a measure of the integration of their social networks were together associated with diminished maternal depression 8 weeks after delivery. Findings like these are consistent with a broad research literature indicating that maternal social support from network members is associated with many aspects of children's well-being, including more secure attachment, more positive parent–child relationships, and improved peer relationships (e.g., Jacobson and Frye 1991; Jennings et al. 1991; Melson et al. 1993; see Parke and Buriel 2006, for a review). These child outcomes arise, in part, from the benefits of maternal well-being for the quality of parenting. Of course, parents' social networks can undermine as well as improve parenting practices, especially when network associates create stress or conflict. Because of this, interventions focused on at-risk children often enlist two-generation (and sometimes three-generation) approaches with the goal of improving children's developmental outcomes both through direct efforts and through the indirect benefits of improved parental well-being and parenting competence, sometimes through social network interventions. These interventions are discussed in greater detail in the final section of this chapter.

Children's social networks, like those of their parents, are constructed in a neighborhood and community context that is important to the social support they are capable of offering. Neighborhoods and communities vary in the resources they provide for families (e.g., safe play spaces, recreational activities, transportation), and, equally importantly, they also vary in the informal "human capital" on which families rely. This human capital consists of people to whom parents can turn for advice and support, such as neighbors, friends, and community agencies. In some neighborhoods, limited economic resources are combined with social impoverishment to undermine support resources for family members, and these conditions are sometimes predictive of family dysfunction (Garbarino and Kostelny 1992). In a classic study, Garbarino and Sherman (1980a, 1980b) compared neighborhoods with higher-than-expected child maltreatment rates (based on sociodemographic predictors) with neighborhoods that had lower-than-expected maltreatment rates. Sampling informants in each neighborhood, they found that mothers in higher-risk neighborhoods reported receiving less assistance from neighbors, finding fewer options for child care, and generally perceiving the neighborhood as a poorer place for raising children. By contrast with neighborhoods affording supportive social networks, these mothers perceived fewer opportunities owing to the diminished social resources of their neighborhoods, and this left them more socially isolated.

Understanding children's social networks, the social support they provide, and their association with child well-being thus requires understanding the broader

social ecology of child development. Children's access to social support is affected by parents' choices and networks, and both are influenced by broader conditions of the neighborhood and community. Child well-being is shaped by the intersection of these diverse social and relational influences. A study of Australian families by Homel et al. (1987) illustrates this. These researchers reported that the socioemotional adjustment of school-age offspring was predicted by the breadth and reliability of parental support networks, as indexed by the number of "dependable friends" that parents could list, and the parents' affiliation with voluntary organizations. However, the family's "neighborhood risk level" (indexed by the neighborhood's socioeconomic status, delinquency and school truancy rates, and related variables) also predicted child adjustment in the opposite direction, indicating that broader as well as proximate features of the family's social ecology were relevant to understanding the impact of social networks. In other words, child well-being was affected not only by the availability of immediately supportive partners but also by the broader human resources of the neighborhood and community in which the family lived.

It is important also to recognize the importance of cultural influences in the nature of children's social networks. It is not always wise, for example, to assume that parents are young children's primary sources of social support or that parents are gatekeepers to other sources of support in light of research indicating that, for some groups, connections with extended family or broader "fictive kin" networks are primary sources of support for children (e.g., Rhodes et al. 1992; Sanchez and Reyes 1999). Members of different cultural groups vary in their reliance on kinship, friendship, formal (rather than informal) helpers, and the different functions accorded different social network members, consistent with broader values like familialism or the communitarian ethic of cultural values (MacPhee et al. 1996). Taken together, young children become enculturated as they learn how to regard different social network members as potential sources of different forms of social support and draw on those sources of support as they mature.

66.2.3 Further Considerations

Social support is given and received in relationships, and relationships are complex (Badr et al. 2001). More specifically, relationships create mutual obligations that can offer support and affirmation but also create stress and difficulty, sometimes at the same time (Berscheid and Reis 1998; Collins and Laursen 1999). Extended family members can offer emotional understanding and advice, but this assistance may be colored by family conflict or intergenerational difficulties. Neighbors can provide instrumental assistance, community networking, and respite child care but may also be sources of stress owing to their own needs. The same is true for children. Peer friendships and group acceptance may enhance self-esteem and contribute to the development of social skills, but associations with aggressive or coercive peers create stress and contribute to the development of behavior problems in children (Sinclair et al. 1994).

Parent–child relationships are likewise emotionally and motivationally complex for both partners. For children, parents are sources of dependable affirmation and love but are also sources of distress and frustration when they correct child misbehavior. Although research earlier described suggests that children do not perceive normative disciplinary practices as inconsistent with parents' love and affirmation, in more extreme circumstances, parental behavior can create greater conflict for offspring. Research on children in homes characterized by marital conflict indicates, for example, that children become emotionally enmeshed in their parents' disagreements. They monitor parental moods to anticipate conflict before it occurs, and they intervene in parental arguments as they are trying to manage their own emotions (Davies and Woitach 2008; Davies et al. 2002). Similar kinds of emotional enmeshment can also be observed in children whose mothers are depressed, in which children are seeking nurturance from a parent who may be harsh, withdrawn, and hopeless (Zahn-Waxler and Kochanska 1990). Children's reliance on parents' social support (in their role as support generalists) makes them especially vulnerable when that support is threatened by parents' problems. For this reason, parental maltreatment presents children with overwhelming conflict between their dependence on an adult who might also respond to them with physically assaultive behavior or chronic indifference, and this helps to account for the emotional disturbances commonly observed in these children (Cicchetti and Toth 2006).

Finally, it is important to note that children are not passive recipients of social support from others around them. Although young children do not have the competence and autonomy to create independent social networks of their own, they are capable of eliciting supportive responses from others as their social skills mature and social motivation grows. Moreover, individual characteristics such as temperament contribute to differences in social affiliation that have important implications for social support. Peers tend to create friendships with other children who are temperamentally sociable and outgoing, for example, which provides these children with greater sources of social affirmation (Rubin et al. 2011).

These considerations pose the possibility that social support can have developmentally cascading consequences for children, in which the influences of supportive relationships cause the development in children of characteristics that enable them to elicit greater support from others in the future. The sensitive, responsive parental care that contributes to the development of secure attachment in early childhood, for example, is socially supportive parenting. There is considerable research that securely attached children behave in a more socially competent manner with adults and peers (Thompson 2008), and several studies have shown that children who are securely attached have more supportive social networks and perceive greater support from the people around them (Anan and Barnett 1999; Booth et al. 1998; Bost et al. 1998). It is easy to see, therefore, how the characteristics associated with a secure attachment lead to the conditions that expand children's socially supportive relationships.

More generally, children and adults who enjoy enhanced well-being are likely to take greater social initiative and become more attractive social partners as a result, which is likely to contribute to enhanced avenues of social support. The converse is

also true. Individuals under stress are likely to experience diminished social support as they withdraw from others because of their emotional distress, difficult circumstances, or humiliation and as potential support providers also withdraw because of the demands of providing assistance to them (Shinn et al. 1984). Receiving social support may thus provide the basis for greater access to support in the future, while personal adversity may make it more difficult to obtain support even when it is most needed. Viewed developmentally, parental support in the family may create the conditions that better enable children to seek, elicit, and maintain support in the extrafamilial social networks they enter into as they mature.

66.2.4 Summary and Interim Conclusion

What, then, does the research on social support tell us about why relationships are important to children's well-being?

Relationships are important because they potentially can provide multiple kinds of support to children of all ages. In constructive relationships with adults and peers, children can find emotional understanding, advice and guidance, information, material aid, assistance in skill acquisition, and even watchful protection. Within children's environment of relationships, different relational partners afford different kinds of resources to children consistent with their roles and, in the case of peers, developmental capabilities. This helps to account for the domain specificity of many kinds of support that children receive (e.g., advice about popular styles from peers vs. planning for the future with adults).

The influence of relationships on children's well-being must be viewed in the context of the network of relationships in which they are embedded. Stated differently, relationships affect how other relationships can function to support children's well-being. Parents mediate children's access to other relationships, for example, and the support they can provide. The quality of parent–child relationships is affected by parents' own social networks and their influence on parents' well-being. Within the extended family, support to different generations is knit together. Viewed more broadly, children's relationships and their influence on well-being are also guided by cultural values and practices, as well as by the resources of the neighborhood and community in which the child lives. The importance of viewing the influence of children's relationships on well-being within a broad social context is underscored by considering how more difficult it can be for parents to support children's healthy development in the context of considerable economic insecurity, neighborhood danger, and communities drained of human capital.

The central reason why relationships are important to children's well-being is that the support provided by these relationships, especially with parents, is essential to children's health and well-being. Parental support is, in other words, developmentally constitutive. The importance of parents as the nexus of children's environment of relationships is further underscored by their importance as support generalists and the young child's dependence on their nurturance. Children cannot thrive without the multiple kinds of support that parents provide. Because of this,

when parents experience significant difficulty or parent–child relationships are troubled, children are vulnerable because alternative sources of support are not necessarily easy for them to access. In these circumstances, even one or two supportive associations outside of the family can be important to children's coping (Beeman 2001).

Parent–child relationships are not alone determinative of children's well-being, and the social support literature identifies others in the extended family, peer system, neighborhood, and community who are also influential. But these diverse relationships within children's social network are also interrelated, and they function in concert with other relationships to strengthen or undermine children's well-being. As earlier noted, one way they do so is by how relationships affect how other relationships function, such as how adults in the neighborhood or school encourage the development of positive peer associations. Relationships function in concert also because of their cumulative effects on the child. Because children are active participants in their social networks, their skills and characteristics influence the support they receive from others around them, especially as their social skills and motivation grow. Those social skills develop, in part, through children's earlier experience in relationships. Because of this, children bring the legacy of past relationships into new encounters with other people, and in this manner relationships contribute cumulatively to children's well-being.

In the next section, we consider the developmental context in more detail by "unpacking" children's experience in relationships and its consequences for children's well-being.

66.3 Relational Processes in Children's Development

The social support research underscores the importance of the quality of relationships that children share with others as essential to the social support they receive. Indeed, experience in poor relationships with adults or children undermines children's coping and well-being. But what do we mean by well- or poorly functioning relationships? What are the elements of relational experience, in other words, that are likely to contribute most to children's well-being?

In this section, these questions are considered in light of the extensive research literatures on parent–child and peer relationships. Although there are many distinguishing features to these two kinds of relationships – such as the relative ages of the partners and the hierarchical versus heterarchical nature of their association – when researchers consider relational *quality*, common themes tend to emerge. Consider, for example, the following characteristics of a well-functioning relationship for a child (from Rubin et al. 2011, p. 525):

1. Provides support and enhances self-esteem and positive self-evaluation
2. Contributes emotional security
3. Provides affection
4. Offers opportunities for intimacy and self-disclosure
5. Provides instrumental and informational assistance

6. Promotes the growth of interpersonal sensitivity
7. Validates hopes, interests, and fears
8. Offers a prototype for later intimate relationships

This list of descriptors could readily describe positive parent–child relationships, but instead, it was written to profile the functions of children's friendships. It could also describe the characteristics of friendship at most ages. That positive relationships share many common characteristics across relational partners and age may be because these relationships fulfill fundamental psychological needs in the developing person. Such a view is consistent with the conclusions of the social support literature discussed above and also of the cross-disciplinary field of *developmental relational science*, which focuses on the influence of close relationships throughout the life course (Thompson 2006a).

We turn, then, to consider different characteristics of relationships that contribute to children's well-being, drawing on research on parenting and peer relationships – especially friendships – where relevant. (Unfortunately, research literatures on children's relationships with siblings, extended family, and adults outside the family are insufficiently extensive to be informative for this purpose.) The reasons that these relational characteristics are important to children's well-being are also considered. In the discussion that follows, we consider four relational processes in particular: mutual responsiveness/reciprocity, warmth/affection, approval/acceptance, and security. Each is important to children's well-being.

66.3.1 Mutual Responsiveness/Reciprocity

In infancy, one of the most important qualities of parental behavior is the adult's responsiveness to the baby's signals and needs. Also characterized as "sensitivity," the parent's prompt and appropriate responding provides helpless young infants with the perception that their actions make a difference and that they are capable of eliciting a predictable and helpful response from the social world. This is a salient, emotionally powerful early experience. Infants as young as 2–3 months quickly learn the association between their leg movements and the actions of an overhead crib mobile to which the leg is tied, and, when they do so, their kicking is regularly accompanied by smiling and laughter (Rovee-Collier 1997; Watson 1972, 1979). When social rather than nonsocial partners respond in such a contingently responsive manner, it contributes further to the infant's expectation that these adults will be responsive in the future and their positive emotional engagement with them (Gekoski et al. 1983; Lamb and Malkin 1986). Infants become so attuned to the responsiveness of familiar adults that they withdraw and protest when an ordinarily responsive adult abruptly ceases doing so and instead presents an impassive, nonresponsive demeanor (Adamson and Frick 2003). Sensitive, responsive social partners become imbued with considerable affective significance during the first year, and this contributes to the development of emotional attachments to them (see generally, Thompson et al. 2005).

The adult's responsiveness has other developmental consequences. Mothers who are verbally responsive to the behavior and utterances of young offspring facilitate early language acquisition (Tamis-LeMonda and Bornstein 2002). Maternal responsiveness to the infant's distress signals contributes to the development of secure attachments, while maternal responsiveness in play and other nondistress contexts fosters cognitive and language development (Bornstein and Tamis-LeMonda 1997). An adult's responsiveness contributes not only to a young child's sense of efficacy but also helps to scaffold the development of new conceptual and linguistic abilities as the child's skills are refined by the reciprocal activity of the adult partner.

In infancy and toddlerhood, responsiveness consists primarily of the parent's sensitivity to the child. But as children mature, responsiveness becomes more mutual and reciprocated. One approach to early socialization argues, in fact, that the parent–child relationship begins to introduce young children, for the first time, to a relational system of mutual commitment and obligation (Kochanska 2002; Kochanska and Aksan 2004; Maccoby 1984; Waters et al. 1991). In this context, a young child is motivated not just to accept the parent's warm, responsive care but also to respond constructively to the parent's incentives, attend to parental goals and values, and seek to maintain a positive parent–child relationship. Young children who enter into this kind of parent–child reciprocity are, in essence, more eager and willing to be socialized because they experience an internalized obligation to respond constructively to the parent's initiatives owing to their history of responsive care by the adult. To be sure, not all parent–child relationships in the early years become mutually responsive in this manner, especially when parents are more coercive and authoritarian in their practices. But when they do, it contributes to a more positive parent–child relationship that is the foundation for values acquisition and cooperation, which are each constituents of children's well-being. Kochanska has found, for example, that children in such relationships are more advanced in conscience development, indexed by their willing cooperation and compliance with the mother's requests (Kochanska 2002; Kochanska and Aksan 2004).

In peer relationships, reciprocity defines friendship. Indeed, reciprocity is a cornerstone of what distinguishes friends from nonfriends: in friendship, there is mutuality of affection, intimacy, interests, initiative, and other aspects of relational interaction (Newcomb and Bagwell 1995). This is true not only of observations of the behavior of children with friends and nonfriends but also of children's conceptions of friendship. When asked, "What is a friend?" children of a variety of ages talk about the reciprocity or mutual give-and-take of interaction with friends (Hartup and Stevens 1999). Recognizing this, developmental scientists identify friendship pairs in their research by asking children individually to nominate their friends and then determining whether each nomination was reciprocated by the other child. When they are, a friendship pair is identified (Rubin et al. 2011). In a manner similar to but also different from the parent–child relationship, then, reciprocity in friendship also enfranchises children into a relational system of mutual responsiveness, obligation, and support.

Why is reciprocity so important to the closeness of peer relationships? By contrast with the social and moral capacities fostered by the development of mutually responsive parent–child relationships, reciprocity in peer relationships is a basis for mutual respect, affection, and intimacy between equals. It provides a basis for a variety of important social skills that develop in the context of peer relationships but are especially fostered in friendship, including the ability to cooperate around shared goals, developing capacities to understand and respond appropriately to another's feelings, skills of negotiation, compromise, and other constructive forms of conflict management, and the motivation to act helpfully and altruistically toward another. This may be one reason why having a friend is associated with children's adjustment and well-being (Rubin et al. 2011).

66.3.2 Warmth/Affection

Warmth has been almost universally recognized as a central influence on the quality of parent–child relationships for children of all ages. Warmth has traditionally been characterized as an attribute of parents that promotes relational harmony and the young child's developing trust and cooperation (e.g., Sears et al. 1957). Warmth has also been portrayed as a mediator of the efficacy of other parental practices, such as the warmth that is a component of authoritative parenting or inductive discipline (Baumrind and Black 1967; Hoffman 1970). More recently, warmth in the parent–child relationship has been portrayed as a dyadic process, part of their mutually responsive relationship, with the "shared positive affect" of the mother-child dyad found to be an important contribution to early socialization (Kochanska 2002).

However it is conceptualized and measured, warmth in the parent–child relationship is important to children's well-being for several reasons. First, it provides children with a sense that they are loved and respected which they, in turn, reciprocate with trust in the adult's good intentions and a willingness to share activities, feelings, discoveries, and other features of personal experience (Waters et al. 1991). Second, warmth in the parent–child relationship enhances children's motivation to comply and cooperate with their parents (Dix, 1991; Lay et al. 1989). Third, parental warmth inspires positive affect in offspring, which is a direct contributor to children's well-being and a mediator of other outcomes that also contribute to well-being (Dix 1991). Mothers' heightened positive emotion and diminished negative affect while assisting their elementary school children with homework, for example, predicted heightened positive emotion and diminished negative emotional functioning in their children 6 months later (Pomerantz et al. 2005). Parents' confidence and positive emotion also predict children's motivation to achieve in school (Pomerantz and Dong 2006). By contrast, negative affect in the parent–child relationship undermines these benefits and creates other negative consequences, with the potential of developing escalating patterns of mutually reinforcing antagonistic behavior among family members (Snyder et al. 2005).

Warmth and affection is also an important aspect of children's friendships. Compared to their interactions with nonfriends, children exhibit greater amounts of positive affect, cooperation, and mutual liking with friends (Newcomb and Bagwell 1995). This is a remarkable conclusion in light of the fact that, contrary to what one might expect, friends experience greater conflict in their interactions than do nonfriends (Hartup and Laursen 1995; Hartup et al. 1998; Simkins and Parke 2002). The reason, it appears, is simply the greater amount of time that friends are together, and when disagreements emerge, friends also exhibit greater skills at conflict management, such as backing away before the disagreement becomes heated and negotiating and compromising (Newcomb and Bagwell 1995).

This relational dynamic – greater mutual liking, greater conflict – helps to account for the importance of friendship warmth to children's well-being. In a sense, relational warmth creates the motivational incentives for the development of social skills that enable children to manage conflict and maintain comity even in the face of disagreement. Outside of friendship, conflict can disrupt interaction and children walk away. But the positive emotion incorporated into friendship helps to commit children to finding ways of working things out, and this helps to account for some of the unique social skills of negotiation and compromise that develop in a peer context. Beyond this, warmth in friendship is also infectious, as it is with parents. Warmth thus enhances the mutual pleasure of interacting with a friend and contributes to the motivation to act in ways to maintain that pleasure.

66.3.3 Approval/Acceptance

An important function of constructive relationships is contributing to the development of self-understanding and positive self-esteem. This is especially so in early childhood when, consistent with Mead's (1934) classic portrayal of the "looking glass self," children derive from parents' responses to their behavior a sense of themselves, their capabilities, and shortcomings (Stipek 1995). It is common to find young preschoolers checking back regularly with the parent as they work on a challenging task or are engaged in misbehavior or proudly displaying to the parent a drawing or another accomplishment, and the adult's response to their behavior in these circumstances significantly shapes the child's self-evaluation. Early childhood is also when self-conscious evaluative emotions like pride, shame, and guilt emerge, and young children's experience of these emotions is tied to parents' evaluations of them and their actions (Lagattuta and Thompson 2007). Because of the emotional significance of the parent–child relationship, these evaluations are salient and provide a foundation to the development of self-concept. The approval of adults who matter is important to children's positive sense of self and well-being.

Parental approval remains important as children mature. Frome and Eccles (1998) found, for example, that children's grades in math and English predicted over time parents' perceptions of children's competence in these school subjects, such that the higher children's achievement, the more positive were parents'

perceptions. These investigators also noted, however, that beyond children's actual achievement, parents' perceptions of children's competence in math and English predicted children's subsequent perceptions of their competence. In other words, parents' confidence supported children's self-confidence even beyond what would be expected based on their actual achievement. Parents' perceptions also contribute to the reasons that children work on school assignments, with more positive perceptions of children contributing to children's intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation (Pomerantz and Dong 2006).

Approval and acceptance are also fundamental to children's peer relationships. The importance of peer acceptance to children's well-being increases significantly through childhood and adolescence owing to the greater time that children spend with peers and the emotional salience of these interactions (Coleman 2011). Whereas warmth and reciprocity are important especially in the context of friendship, peer acceptance is a more generalized phenomenon characterizing children's relationships with a broader network of friends.

A large research literature that is primarily focused on the consequences of peer rejection shows how important the lack of acceptance by other children is for social and emotional development (see reviews by Bukowski et al. 2007, and by Rubin et al. 2011). There are a number of ways that children can be rejected by their peers, both in their interactions with them and in how (for research studies) peers explicitly identify them as being disliked. Children can be rejected because of their aggressive conduct, which can sometimes also be manifested in bullying behavior. These children use hostile behavior to accomplish their goals, tend to be deficient in social problem-solving skills, and are relatively insensitive to the effects of their behavior on their status among peers. These children are also at greatest risk for the development of externalizing problems in later years, which can be manifested in conduct problems, delinquency, and criminality. Another group of children are rejected because of their withdrawn, socially incompetent, and anxious behavior with peers. They are sometimes the victims of others' bullying, they are aware of being disliked by other children, and they suffer from feelings of isolation and loneliness as a consequence. These children are at greatest risk for the development of later internalizing problems, which can be manifested in depressive and anxious symptomatology. Importantly, the risk of later problems is increased when peer rejection begins early.

These findings compel the question of why the lack of peer acceptance is so developmentally significant. One reason is that peer rejection maintains and exacerbates emerging characteristics in children that are socially and personally dysfunctional (Ladd 2006). For some children, for example, aggression and other behavioral problems develop initially in the context of aversive family environments, but with school entry and the establishment of negative peer reputations and hostile expectations for others, peer rejection contributes to a consolidation of these behavior problems, which become more serious with the child's growing maturity (Bukowski et al. 2007). Another reason that peer rejection is so influential is that it affects many aspects of psychological growth. Social skills, self-esteem, capacities for negotiation and compromise, biased attributions of others' motives,

self-efficacy, defensiveness, and the selection of peers with similar characteristics are among the developing social and emotional skills and characteristics affected by peer rejection, depending on the reasons that children are disliked (Rubin et al. 2011). Finally, peer rejection is influential because it tends to be stable over time, which means that developmental trajectories become established that move children into adolescence and young adulthood with significant problems in their interactions with others (Coie and Dodge 1983).

Viewed in this light, peer acceptance is an important contribution to children's well-being not only because it buffers against the consequences of peer rejection but also because it makes positive contributions to psychological growth in the enhanced self-esteem, strengthened social skills, constructive social understanding and problem-solving, and other positive qualities afforded by interacting constructively with others.

66.3.4 Security

The social support research underscores the importance of *perceived support*, the expectation that others will be available to help when needed, or what Gottlieb (1985) has called "milieu reliability." As a coping resource, perceived support can be even more helpful than a past history of received support because it concerns expectations for future assistance that can inspire hope and confidence in the present (Thompson 1995). In developmental relational science, this concept is most often discussed as the security provided in close relationships with others. Like perceived support, security provides a child with the expectation that others will be reliably available to help when needed, and this expectation offers children confidence, especially when facing difficult or challenging circumstances.

A large research literature has focused on the security of parent–child attachment relationships as a foundation for healthy psychological development (Ainsworth 1973; Bowlby 1969; for a review, see Cassidy and Shaver 2008). Secure attachments are inspired by shared warmth, mutual responsiveness, and other parenting qualities described above, but they are assessed in infants and children in a manner that focuses on the child's confident expectation that the caregiver will provide assistance when the child is stressed or challenged. In this manner, a secure attachment is more than parental sensitivity or warmth: it is based on the child's representation of the parent and of the relationship they share. As a consequence, according to attachment theorists, a secure attachment in childhood is important not only to the development of social skills and emotional competencies associated with a positive parent–child relationship but also to internal constituents of healthy psychological development, such as more positive self-concept, enhanced understanding of others, better social problem-solving skills, aspects of personality development, conscience development, and other internal capacities likely to be inspired by security (Bretherton and Munholland 1999; Dykas and Cassidy 2011; Thompson 2008). These theoretical formulations are based on the view that the child's confidence in the caregiver contributes to the development

of other mental representations of the parent, the self, people, and relationships that are carried into other experiences, and this is formulation discussed further in the next section.

Attachment theorists believe, in brief, that security in the parent–child relationship is important to the development of positive behavioral and belief systems inspired by a relationship in which the child has confidence and a sense of security. In this manner, they argue, secure parent–child attachments contribute to children's well-being. In the research based on this theory, many of these expectations have been confirmed, although there remains debate about how best to understand the place of early parent–child attachment in psychological development (see Thompson 2008). Nevertheless, it is clear that a secure parent–child attachment is important to children's well-being.

Peers also contribute to a child's security. As with parents, children who are in the company of a friend can better manage the challenges and stresses they face. Ladd and his colleagues found, for example, that children entering kindergarten have fewer adjustment problems and like school more when they are in the company of friends than when they are not (Ladd et al. 1996; Ladd and Price 1987). Similar findings have been reported for the transition to junior high school (Berndt et al. 1999). Friends can also provide support when children are weathering family difficulty, such as when parents are experiencing marital problems. In these and similar circumstances, what may be most important to children is having a friend available to help if needed and the confidence inspired by this security.

66.3.5 Summary and Interim Conclusion

The four relational processes discussed in this section – mutual responsiveness/reciprocity, warmth/affection, approval/acceptance, and security – certainly do not exhaust the range of relational influences that contribute to children's well-being across different ages and relationships. In the next section, for example, the importance of relational processes that contribute to children's understanding of themselves and others is underscored. Relationships are also important for presenting children with challenges from parents and peers that foster developmental skills (Rogoff 1990). But focusing on these four contributions of relationships to children's well-being underscores several general points.

First, as different as they are, parent–child relationships and peer relationships address certain common needs in childhood and adolescence that may be fundamental to psychological health and well-being. These needs include the ability to see oneself as effective, respected, loved, and competent. They include the development of positive self-esteem, confidence in the reliability of the support of others, and positive emotion that derive from constructive relational experience. Equally important, these needs include the challenges of acting within the mutual obligations of relationships that lead to developing social skills, understanding, and values. Pomerantz and Thompson (2008) have argued that parents are central to children's personality development because they provide some of the fundamental

psychological resources required for healthy growth. In this chapter, this view is extended to argue that many of these essential psychological resources are provided by multiple partners in children's environment of relationships.

Second, parents and peers contribute to these needs in different ways. The dual nature of parental and peer relational influences is reflected in the subheadings of this section, which reflect the fact that somewhat different terms are necessary for similar relational influences as they are experienced with parents (mutual responsiveness, warmth, approval) and peers (reciprocity, affection, acceptance), with security the single common denominator for both. The approval that parents provide their children is similar to the acceptance that is central to peer relationships, but approval from an adult is a much different affirmation of the self than is acceptance from the peer group. Moreover, this discussion has not emphasized, but we must recognize the many unique benefits for children's well-being afforded by parent–child and peer relationships. Parents support children's well-being by providing structure and stability to everyday experience and offering autonomy support for developing competence in a manner that is not as evident in peer relationships. Peers support children's well-being by fostering capacities for interpersonal understanding that are unique to social encounters between equals and enlisting social comparison for the development of self-understanding. In this respect, while many fundamental psychological needs can be addressed by multiple relationships that children experience, many needs are also addressed uniquely by specific kinds of relationships.

Finally, as with the social support literature, the importance of relational quality cannot be overemphasized. In describing the significance of relational experience for children's well-being, the emphasis is on how the quality of relationships is determinative of children's well-being. In parent–child relationships characterized by emotional neglect or high levels of punitiveness, for example, children do not develop the security, positive self-esteem, or ability to establish a relationship of mutual responsiveness that they do in more constructive parent–child relationships. In peer relationships characterized by rejection or coercion, children do not develop the self-confidence, emotional understanding, or constructive social skills that derive from the motivation to maintain relationships with other children that are mutually satisfying. Developmental relational science does not argue that all relationships are comparably beneficial but that strengthening the quality of relationships is important to enhancing children's psychological health and well-being.

66.4 Children's Representations of Relationships and Well-Being

Children are not passive relational partners. As this discussion reveals, even young children provide many relational rewards that engage parents and peers, such as their social responsiveness, positive emotion, warmth, and affection. Their developing social skills enable them to contribute significantly to the initiation,

maintenance, and growth of supportive relationships within their social networks, and children's temperamental qualities often contribute to their attractiveness and competence as social partners.

One of the most important ways that children contribute to the relationships that support their well-being is through their mental representations of relational experience. These representations are important influences on how children respond to other people and the kinds of relationships they develop. From the beginning of life, infants and toddlers construct representations of social experience based on their understanding of others as agentic beings, their rudimentary social expectations for the behavior of other people, and their understandings of the organization of recurrent events in which they participate with others (i.e., generalized event representations) (Thompson 2006a). With further social-cognitive development, children represent social experience through an expanding network of belief systems, including inferences of others' mental and emotional states, causal attributions for the behavior and motives of others, individualized and generalized social expectations, knowledge of social and cultural norms, self-referential beliefs, and other cognitive processes. Some of these forms of social understanding (such as those related to sociocultural norms and generalized event knowledge) are widely shared, while others (such as attributional biases and self-referential beliefs) are more individualized, based on each child's personal history. Importantly, based on social experiences in general and relational experiences in particular, children develop understanding of other people, the self, and how to interact satisfactorily with others that affect how they function as social partners and how they are affected by relationships.

Children represent social experiences based on their developmental capabilities and personal history, and thus their interpretations may differ significantly from those of adults who share the same events. This is illustrated in a study by Levine et al. (1999), who asked parents and their preschool children to independently recall shared events in the recent past in which the child had felt happiness, sadness, anger, or fear. The agreement between parents and their children about what the child felt on these occasions was surprisingly low, and these researchers noted that this was often due to parents and children having different perceptions of the situation (see Waters et al. 2010 for similar results). Even though they shared the same experience, in other words, preschoolers and their parents construed it differently because their representations of that experience were shaped by a different attentional focus (e.g., monitoring the score of a ball game vs. watching what other people nearby were eating), different interpretations of what occurred, and different interests.

Children's representations thus influence how they understand relational experience. As a consequence, these representations alter how children act in relationships. An important conceptual achievement in early psychological understanding, for example, is when preschoolers comprehend that what another person is thinking may – or may not – accord with reality (Harris 2006). Prior to this advance in developing "theory of mind," younger children believe that the mind's representations of events are essentially a copy of reality; after this advance, they

realize (as do adults) that a person can mentally misrepresent events owing to inadequate knowledge, mental biases, or for other reasons. Once this advance in psychological understanding has occurred, it changes the nature of children's social interactions. Older preschoolers become capable of deception, for example, as they realize that they can deliberately mislead another person into having an incorrect understanding of what happened. For this reason, children at age 5 or 6 sometimes feign delight after opening a disappointing gift in the presence of the gift giver, acting deceptively but conforming to sociocultural norms concerning gift receipt (Cole 1986; Saarni 1984). At this age, children also begin to comprehend the privacy of their own feelings: others do not necessarily need to know how you are feeling if you conceal them. None of these characteristics of social interaction appear in younger children before the advent of this advance in psychological understanding.

Children's representations also affect how children behave in relationships by mediating their interpretation and response to relational partners. These representations can cause children to interpret a parent's or peer's actions as helpful or unhelpful, appropriate or inappropriate, and supportive or nonsupportive. Children's interpretations of parental discipline illustrate this. As earlier noted, most children do not perceive parental discipline practices as an inappropriate exercise of parental authority or incompatible with parental love, as long as these practices are consistent with social and community norms. However, if parents use practices that are unduly harsh or coercive in relation to the misdeed, or seek to regulate behavior that is not appropriate for parental monitoring (such as children's preference for which toys they choose to play with), or fail to exercise due process with respect to determining wrongdoing, children are likely to perceive parental discipline as unwarranted or unfair (Grusec and Goodnow 1994). Similarly, mothers often help children with their homework in the elementary and secondary grades, but with increasing age their children perceive their mothers' helping, monitoring, and praising as reflecting mothers' views of their incompetence (Pomerantz and Eaton 2000). This occurs as children's own conceptions of academic ability change and they increasingly view competence as a stable attribute, which means that the more that mothers are trying to help, the more that children interpret such efforts as indicating maternal perceptions of the child's inability (see generally Pomerantz et al. 2007). Thus, even when parents are motivated by efforts to improve children's welfare, the effects of parental interventions are mediated by children's representations of parental behavior and its motives, and children may perceive parental behavior much differently.

66.4.1 Relational Contributions to Social Representations

As children mature cognitively, therefore, they grow in their understanding of social behavior in ways that influence how children interact with others. But relational experience also affects children's representations. Stated differently, relationships are forums for the child's developing understanding of other people, social connections, and even the self. This is perhaps inevitable owing to the

frequency of interaction children share with parents, family members, and friends; the emotional salience of these interactions; and the child's growing conceptual understanding of relational processes. This is, in part, what attachment theorists mean by the mental representations deriving from the security of the parent–child attachment relationship discussed above. In this view, the beliefs, emotions, and expectations arising from relational experience color children's developing self-perceptions, their orientation toward other people and their motives, their conceptions of how to interact with them, and other features of personal and relational development. Because these representations are emotional as well as conceptual and function preconsciously as well as in explicit knowledge systems, they are different from the broader kinds of informational support provided by social network associates. These representations – or, according to attachment theorists, "internal working models" of other people, the self, and relationships – mediate between children's prior relational experience with the parent and their interactions with other people.

There is considerable research evidence that children with secure parent–child relationships view other people and themselves differently than children in insecure relationships (see reviews by Dykas and Cassidy 2011; Thompson 2008). Secure children exhibit enhanced emotion understanding, for example, along with greater social problem-solving skills and more positive views of the motives and intentions of other children. Securely attached children are more advanced in conscience development, reflected in their ready willingness to cooperate with their mothers' requests, compared to insecurely attached children. Children in secure parent–child relationships also view themselves more positively and as more competent. These differences in how children represent others and themselves are important to social behavior and may help to account for the more positive, constructive interactions observed between securely attached children and their parents and the more positive peer relationships they share (Thompson 2008). The security of parent–child attachment thus influences how children think about people, themselves, and how to interact with others, which in turn affects behavior.

Children's representations of relationships are based not only on their experiences with each parent but also on the network of relationships within the family. As earlier noted, children living in families with marital conflict become emotionally enmeshed in their parents' disagreements and intervene into these disputes in order to make things better in the home (Davies and Woitach 2008; Davies et al. 2002). They also develop beliefs about their parents' marital relationships that can either be secure or insecure, based on their expectations for the future of their parents' marriage and its effect on the child's relationships with each parent. Children with insecure representations of their parents' marriage have experienced greater interparental conflict in the past, and they also are at greater risk for the development of internalizing and externalizing symptomatology and school problems that are associated with their distress at home (Davies and Forman 2002; Sturge-Apple et al. 2008).

There has been much less research attention to the mental representations that develop from children's experience of peer relationships. However, considerable research has examined the representational biases of children who have been

rejected by their peers, concluding that these children are deficient in social problem-solving skills compared to nonrejected children (see review by Rubin et al. 2011). Children who are rejected because of their aggressive conduct are more likely to perceive hostile intent in the behavior of their peers, to endorse social goals that involve dominance, and to believe that aggressive solutions are appropriate to social conflict. They also believe that other children, not themselves, are responsible for their poor peer reputations. Children who are rejected because of their withdrawn, socially incompetent behavior also have deficient social problem-solving skills and, in addition, are more likely to report greater loneliness and negative self-image compared to nonrejected children.

Significantly, research in this area also demonstrates the impact of relationships on other relationships through children's representational processes. For example, Cassidy et al. (1996) found that kindergarteners and first graders with secure attachments to their parents were more likely to attribute benign motives and insecurely attached children to infer hostile intent when responding to stories about children of the same age engaged in actions with ambiguous intent. These attributions concerning the motivations of story characters were also found to mediate the association between attachment security to the parent and children's peer friendship nominations.

How children in secure and insecure parent–child relationships represent other people and themselves derives, attachment theory predicts, from their experience in these relationships. Consistent with these expectations, research indicates that parents respond in a more sensitive and mutually responsive manner to their children in the context of secure relationships (De Wolff and van IJzendoorn 1997). Thus, as earlier noted, secure attachments reflect socially supportive parenting practices that contribute to children's well-being by fostering more positive behavioral and belief systems in the child. Other influences on the development of these representations are also important. One is the quality of parent–child conversation that, as children become capable understanding their experiences linguistically, contributes to the development of a "psychological secure base" in the parent–child relationship from which children can explore their experiences, feelings, and needs with a sensitive parent (Oppenheim et al. 2007).

Conversational quality is an important relational catalyst to children's understanding, especially their understanding of themselves and other people (Thompson 2006b). According to attachment theorists like Bretherton (1993), in a secure parent–child attachment, there is greater "open, fluid communication" that enables the child's emotional sharing and understanding with the parent's help, particularly of negative emotions that might be more troubling, disturbing, or confusing to young children. Ontai and Thompson (2002) found that more secure 5-year-olds had mothers who, in discussions with them of recent past events and in storybook reading, used a more descriptively rich, elaborative style of conversation about emotion (see also Laible 2004, for similar findings). A number of studies have found that the mothers of secure children are more elaborative in their style of conversation with offspring (see Reese 2002, for a review). This is important because this conversational style has also been found to enhance

young children's memory representations and contribute to the construction of autobiographical recall (Nelson and Fivush 2004). In reciprocal fashion, preschool children in secure relationships spontaneously talk about emotions more often in their everyday conversations with their mothers (Raikes and Thompson 2008).

The quality of parent–child conversation is thus an important mediator between children's experience of attachment relationships in the family and the development of more positive, constructive social representations. Conversational influences like these are evident not only in research on developing emotion understanding and autobiographical memory. A secure attachment is associated with enhanced conscience development, as earlier noted, and how mothers talk about the child's misbehavior and good behavior in conversations about past events is an important influence on conscience. In one study, mothers who spoke more about people's feelings and who used moral evaluatives (e.g., "that was a nice thing to do") in their recounting of past events had children with enhanced conscience development (Laible and Thompson 2000). By contrast, in this study and in a follow-up investigation (Laible and Thompson 2002), maternal conversational references to rules and the consequences of breaking them was never a predictor of children's conscience development. Similarly, Laible and Thompson (2002) and Laible et al. (2008) each reported an association between the security of attachment and mother's conflict-resolution strategies in disputes with their young children. Mothers of secure children were more likely to use justifications and compromises with their children and were less likely to aggravate conflict, even though the frequency of mother-toddler conflict did not differ from that of insecure dyads. Conversation, especially in the context of secure parent–child relationships, is an important influence on the development of moral values and compliance by helping children understand the association of morality with people's feelings and reconciliation.

Taken together, these findings suggest that one of the benefits of a secure parent–child attachment is that the behavioral responsiveness experienced by children in their infancy becomes extended to sensitivity in conversation when children are preschoolers and each contributes to the more constructive social representations that are associated with secure attachment. Throughout, but especially with the conceptual sophistication of language, a secure parent–child relationship provides young children with the emotional and cognitive tools for better understanding the psychological dimensions of human interaction and the mutual obligations of human relationships (Thompson et al. 2003).

There is more limited, but important, evidence that conversation with peers also contributes to the development of psychological understanding in children. Young children's emotion understanding is enhanced through their conversation with other children (including siblings), for example, and there is evidence that children talk about emotion more frequently in conversation with other children than with parents (Brown et al. 1996; Hughes and Dunn 1998). In comparing their thoughts and attitudes toward shared experiences, discussing divergent intentions and goals, and in pretend play, young children frequently talk about emotions and other mental

states in their conversations. Similarly, in studies of children's conversations with their friends in middle childhood, researchers have noted that sharing intimacy, seeking psychological understanding and support, self-disclosure, loyalty, and sharing attitudes, values, and interests are important elements of peer conversation (Gottman and Parker 1987; Parker and Gottman 1989). Although much less is known about how these conversations influence children's representations of themselves and others, it is clear that these conversations are important to the development of psychological understanding.

66.4.2 Summary and Interim Conclusion

As the research discussed in this section illustrates, children's development is not simply a product of the multifaceted influences of parents, peers, and others in the environment of relationships, but is also shaped by how children interpret, represent, and reason about their social experiences from an early age. As children mature conceptually, their social representations become significantly more refined, insightful, and subtle as they become more sensitive to the complexity of people's thoughts, feelings, motives, and other influences on their social behavior. At any age, however, children's interpretations can cause them to perceive social actors and events in a manner much different from how adults do, and this can cause children to respond in ways that adults may perceive as confusing, paradoxical, or even oppositional. More importantly, the effects of events and people on psychological development are mediated by children's representations of them, and this is an important contribution to our understanding of how the environment of relationships affects children's well-being.

First, it means that children incorporate their relational history into their encounters with new people and experiences. As research guided by attachment theory demonstrates, for example, children who are securely attached behave and think somewhat differently than do insecurely attached children about their interactions with adults and peers, based on the sensitivity and responsiveness of prior parent–child interaction. Similarly, children who experience peer rejection think about other children and themselves much differently than do children who are not rejected, and these beliefs and attributions color children's interactions with other children. Consequently, each child's history of relationships influences how children respond to new social experiences, and this can make some children more positive and responsive to new people, while others are more cautious or distrustful. Not surprisingly, these responses can make it easier or more difficult for these children to develop new relationships that have the potential of providing them with support.

Second, this means that how children experience their environment of relationships is influenced by their representations of relational experience. The availability of supportive partners at home, neighborhood, or school is important, but their influence is mediated by children's perceptions of these partners as helpful and beneficial. Stated differently, the effects of relationships on children's

well-being must be considered in the context of how children interpret these relational experiences.

Third, one implication of this conclusion is that different children will respond differently to relationships affording support. In some cases, their interpretation of the support offered to them may undermine their capacities to receive it or benefit from it. This is illustrated by the recipient reactions to social support discussed earlier, in which receiving assistance from another evokes feelings of gratitude but also of humiliation because of social norms emphasizing adult self-reliance and independence (Fisher et al. 1982; Shumaker and Brownell 1984). As a result, adults may resent the benefactor or reject the assistance they are offered because aid is interpreted as reflecting their inadequacy or incompetence. Although children are less susceptible to these reactions, those with a history of parental inadequacy or abuse may likewise be distrustful of the assistance offered to them by others, deficient in their interpretation of social initiatives and assistance, and they may also act in ways to paradoxically undermine opportunities to obtain the support they need (Cicchetti and Toth 2006; Cicchetti and Valentino 2006). Taking into consideration children's history of relationships can add insight into how best to provide them with the support they need in new relationships.

66.5 Summary and Conclusion: Implications for Policy and Practice

This chapter has explored why relationships are important for children's well-being. In adopting a multilevel analysis, the goal has been to understand relational influences and the risks to children of relational dysfunction, from several complementary perspectives.

From the research literature on social support, the discussion focused on the *functions* of relationships in supporting children's well-being. Relationships support children's well-being by providing emotional affirmation and understanding, information and assistance, guidance in the development of skills and capabilities, advice and counseling, and concern that leads to monitoring another's well-being. For children, especially those who are young, these relational resources are essential to physical and emotional health, and this is one reason why children rely so significantly on the support generalists in their lives, particularly parents. Children's experience of support differs from adults in other ways as well. Children's environment of relationships is not self-created but is instead built on the social networks of their parents, and thus the assistance, stresses, provisioning, and demands of parents' network associates have direct and indirect influences on children also. Children's access to relational support is also mediated by parents as gatekeepers of children's interactions with extended family members, peers, and others outside the home. These processes reflect how much children's social support is intergenerational, and thus when parents are troubled or stressed, it directly affects children, and providing assistance to children requires working

within intergenerational networks in the family. This research literature underscores that different social partners in the environment of relationships afford different kinds of support, that neighborhood conditions yield the human capital that can potentially provide relational support to children, parents, and families, and that relational support can have developmentally cumulative consequences for children, with early support fostering the characteristics by which children become more competent at eliciting greater support in the future. The research on social support portrays relationships as functioning within broader social networks and having multifaceted potential benefits for children's well-being as a consequence of the supports and stresses of those broader networks.

From the research literature on developmental relational science, the discussion focused on the *interactions* characteristic of relationships and their influence on children's well-being. Relationships support children's well-being by addressing some of the basic psychological needs of all people to feel loved, respected, and competent, have positive self-regard, confident in others' assistance, and engaged in social interactions that provide mutual pleasure but also mutual obligations. This is reflected in the fact that relationships with parents and peers, the best-studied and most important relationships that children experience, address these basic needs in different but complementary ways. These needs are important in themselves, but they are important also because the manner in which relationships address them provides the basis for the development of social skills, emotional and psychological understanding, and personal qualities important to healthy development. From the relational experiences associated with mutual responsiveness and reciprocity, the giving and receiving of warmth and affection, seeking and obtaining approval and acceptance, and experiencing security from the reliability of others' support, children develop capacities for cooperation, empathy, the motivation to maintain positive sociability even in conflict or difficulty, and other constructive social skills. Although this discussion has emphasized the importance of relationships for addressing psychological needs, it is important to recognize that these processes also provide the basis for other aspects of children's well-being to be supported by the same relational partners, such as the promotion of health and safety, access to good education, and living in safe homes and neighborhoods. The research from developmental relational science portrays relationships as providing multidimensional experiences with different partners that contribute to the growth of constructive social and personal qualities that contribute to children's well-being.

From the research literature on children's developing representations, the discussion focused on the *meaning* of relationships to children and how this affects their well-being. Relationships support children's well-being by guiding children's understanding of who they are, what others are like, and how to interact satisfactorily with other people. As laboratories of human interaction, relational experience provides children with insight into the emotional, motivational, dispositional, and other psychological processes governing human interaction, and with the growth of conversation, relational partners explicitly contribute to this understanding through the content and style of their discussions about shared

experiences. This means that children bring the legacy of past relationships into new social encounters through the mental representations generated by these relationships, whether positive or negative. The research on children's representations portrays relationships as "going underground" to shape the growth of constructive expectations and beliefs about the self, other people, and the rewards of relational interaction to contribute to children's well-being.

These conclusions are important for our understanding of children's development, but they are also important in their implications for efforts to promote, support, and remediate problems with children's well-being. Although an examination of public policies and professional practices is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to recognize what these research implications are.

Children's well-being can be strengthened through intergenerational and community interventions. By contrast with the person-centered interventions characteristic of adult support, the reliance of children, especially when they are young, on relational partners mandates a broader intervention focus. Parents as support generalists must be assisted to enhance children's well-being through two-generation interventions, and, when parental incapacity or unwillingness is serious, three-generation interventions involving grandparents are often necessary. And because family support is also affected by the resources of people in the neighborhood and community, especially if the community has become drained of human as well as economic capital, interventions to improve community functioning sometimes also become necessary. Whether focused on prevention or therapeutic assistance, therefore, the child should never be considered as the sole intervention target. The significance of children's environment of relationships mandates enlisting assistance through multiple social networks.

This view has deep roots in public policy in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere throughout the world. In the United States, for example, the design of Head Start and Early Head Start programs to address the needs of children in poverty has long been two generational and community based. Young children in these programs receive preschool education as well as medical and dental checkups and nutritional assistance. Their parents are provided developmental guidance related to parenting and assistance with completing adult education, housing assistance, and job training with the expectation that enabling parents in these ways will have direct consequences for children's well-being. Britain's Sure Start program is a comparable intervention also directed to children and families in poverty that is focused on children's centers that are designed as sources of family services, including high-quality child care and preschool, child and family health services, parenting guidance, and adult job training and employment services. Programs in both the United States and Britain also have community outreach components based on local needs.

Two-generation interventions are also important in a therapeutic context, especially when conditions leading to the need for therapeutic assistance affect children and parents in overlapping ways. Multigenerational, family-based therapeutic approaches are essential because children's problems sometimes arise from dysfunctional family relationships or create conditions in the family that maintain or exacerbate the child's symptomatology. One example is the

RAINBOW treatment protocol designed for children with bipolar disorder that addresses the intense personal demands of raising a child with this psychopathology (Pavuluri et al. 2004). Elements of this program include encouraging family members to distinguish helpful from unhelpful actions in their efforts to cope with a child who can be difficult to live with, helping parents model appropriate strategies for emotion regulation, fostering shared effective problem-solving strategies in which parents and children jointly participate, assisting children in their efforts to develop successful peer relationships, and identifying other sources of social support. Such strategies are important because of how children with emotionally demanding psychopathology can arouse anger and hostility in family members that exacerbate the child's condition. In an evaluation study of 34 families participating in this program, symptom severity for children decreased significantly following therapy, and parents reported strong satisfaction with the treatment (Pavuluri et al., 2004).

Addressing children's representations of relationships can be an important part of improving their well-being. Because children bring with them a representational legacy of past relational experience, these representations can color their interactions with new people and, in some cases, undermine their capacities to elicit or receive support in these new relationships. Providing effective preventive or therapeutic assistance requires tackling this representational legacy and helping children to develop new ways of understanding past experiences and approaching new relationships.

One example of this approach is called Child-Parent Psychotherapy, an attachment-based approach designed for young children who have experienced a traumatic event, such as maltreatment or exposure to domestic violence, that can be manifested in post-traumatic symptomatology and attachment disorganization (Lieberman et al. 2006; Lieberman and Van Horn 2008; Lieberman et al. 2005). This two-generation intervention involves trauma-focused therapy for the parent (which often involves recollections of childhood trauma), including explicit attention to the impact of traumatic experiences on the mother's representations of herself and her child, as well as age-appropriate therapeutic assistance to the child (in which older children can participate more actively than younger). In addition, therapy focuses on parent–child interaction, developmental guidance for the mother, and fostering healthier patterns of maternal behavior to alter the young child's expectations for the mother's behavior and the development of a more secure attachment to her. Evaluation studies found a reduction in behavior problems and post-traumatic stress symptomatology in preschoolers in the therapeutic group compared to a control group (Lieberman et al. 2006). A separate study testing a modified version of this approach called Toddler-Parent Psychotherapy for mothers with major depressive disorder found an increase in the proportion of secure child-mother attachment relationships in the therapeutic group (Toth et al. 2006).

Enlisting multiple features of children's social networks can improve the conditions fostering children's well-being. As the research findings and applications of this section illustrate, preventive and therapeutic efforts are strengthened to the extent that diverse aspects of children's environment of relationships can be enlisted to support their well-being. In an ideal intervention strategy, multiple forms of support to children, parents, and other family members would be combined with

school-based (including peer-related) assistance to children; economic, housing, and health-care assistance for parents; and connections to community agencies to provide continuing sources of support to the family. In a broader focus, neighborhoods and communities would also be strengthened to enable them to provide this continuing support to the families within them.

Taken together, recognizing the significance of children's environment of relationships provides researchers with more acute conceptualizations of the relational determinants of well-being. It also enables policy and program planners to consider multiple ways of enhancing well-being in children at risk.

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