

be recognized and embraced (Crosson-Tower, 2013). For example, a family may be made up of a father, a mother, and three siblings; a grandmother and her five grandchildren; a lesbian or gay couple raising a child; an unmarried couple raising a child from a previous marriage; or two adults and no children. All these systems are families. The members of each system are interrelated. In the case of children, families typically include the children's primary caregivers. It is important to understand and accept this extended view of the term *family*. Social workers often intervene on behalf of children through involvement with their families. A more rigid definition of *family* could cause social workers to miss valuable resources when working with a child.

Additional definitions suggest that family systems exist to serve certain functions. For example, when a child is part of a family, one of the family's functions is to care for, support, and nurture that child. Social workers who specialize with children and families often intervene when the family does not or cannot provide care, support, and nurturance.

Ecological Approach



EP 6a

As discussed earlier in this text, the ecological approach provides a framework for social workers to assess a client within the context of his or her environment. As it relates to children, this approach requires social workers to develop a broad understanding of a child and his or her situation. First, the social worker must identify the systems that affect the child's life. Systems that are commonly part of a child's environment include families, schools, peer groups, and neighborhoods. The larger systems affecting a child may include public policies, the surrounding community, and even changes in the federal system that result in resources or barriers for children. Second, the social worker must consider the interaction between the child and these systems; hence the application of person-in-environment, or the ecological framework. By considering such factors, a social worker is able to identify all areas for intervention, not just those at the individual level.

Consider an 8-year-old boy who has been arrested for theft. Simply assessing this client at an individual level may lead a professional to intervene by counseling the boy in order to improve his problem-solving and self-control skills. However, further investigation under the ecological approach shows that the boy is the oldest of five children in a single-parent home. His mother has recently been laid off from her job, and her oldest son feels responsible to help provide for his younger siblings. In fact, his arrest occurred as a result of stealing some basic food items from a grocery store for his younger siblings. In this case, the initial assessment on the individual level would have led the social worker to build skills that were likely not really at issue. The ecological approach helped the social worker identify the cause of the boy's behavior as the financial stressors in the family, not impulsiveness or lack of self-control. Intervention that stems out of this ecological assessment may involve referring this family to local financial support services rather than simply focusing on the behavior of the child as an isolated phenomenon (see Box 7.2).

Box 7.2 More About... Systems and Children

Often, when we think about systems and children, we think of social services, schools, and families. Many other groups and activities are central in children's lives. Examples include Boys and Girls Clubs of America,

4-H clubs, sports teams, religious youth groups, tribal youth groups, and even gangs. Social workers need to consider the effect of these systems on the children with whom they work.

Human Development

In addition to assessing a client and his or her interaction with the environment, it is also important to understand theories about how human beings develop throughout their lives. Although there is variance in the way that children develop, it has been shown that growth is continuous and orderly, and that development follows fairly predictable patterns. These patterns have been studied and organized into categories that can help social workers assess the current level of functioning of a client. Human development theories describe stages and the tasks that are expected to be accomplished at each stage. Using these theories and development milestones as guidelines for determining whether a child is maturing appropriately, a social worker can assess whether a client is in need of intervention.

Although the stages are helpful guides, each person is unique and may not exactly match the descriptions. Also, many of the development characteristics that have been identified are linked to dominant cultures and fail to take into account cultural diversity and the norms of nondominant populations. For example, in many cultures children sleep with their parents for a significant part of their childhood. Although sharing a room or a bed can be an economic necessity, there is also a strong cultural belief in the value of such closeness. The dominant American culture emphasizes individuality, and babies are expected to sleep in separate beds and often in their own rooms from birth. To some cultures, this seems cold and distant and would not be considered nurturing. Taking into account cultural differences is an important part of utilizing developmental theories appropriately.



EP 2a

Prenatal The prenatal stage of development is the time during which a fetus develops within the mother's womb prior to birth. Development during this stage is assessed medically; prenatal care allows a physician to monitor growth, heartbeat, and organ development. Prenatal medical care typically emphasizes healthy living for the mother, which allows for healthy development of the fetus. It is a way for medical professionals to detect early problems, such as genetic disorders, symptoms related to drug or alcohol use, or transmission of a virus from mother to child. Good preventive health care can improve pregnancy outcomes and the physical well-being of newborns.

Infancy Infancy is the first three years of a child's life. In this stage, children's development of attachment relationships is seen in their recognition of and interaction with their primary caregivers and other significant people (Zastrow