

# **Family Systems Early Intervention: Model, Paradigms, and Practices**

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## Purpose of the Seminar

- Describe a family systems approach to early childhood intervention for working with parents of young children with identified disabilities or developmental delays, and children at-risk for poor outcomes due to environmental or biological risk factors
- Share experiences and lessons learned using systems theories and associated models of human development for operationalizing family systems intervention practices
- Describe a number of ways in which the family systems model has been used in a wide range of child, parent, and family situations

## Brief History of the Family Systems Model

- 1981 Transforming a deficit-based early intervention program to a strengths-based program
- 1985 Rethinking early intervention. *Analysis and Intervention in Developmental Disabilities*
- 1986 Family needs, sources of support, and professional roles: Critical elements of family systems intervention. *Diagnostique*.
- 1988 *Enabling and empowering families: Principles and guidelines for practice*
- 1990 Supporting and strengthening family functioning: Toward a congruence between principles and practice. *Prevention in Human Services*.
- 1994 *Supporting and strengthening families: Methods, strategies, and practices*
- 1997 Conceptual and empirical foundations of family-centered practices
- 2009 Capacity-building family systems intervention practices. *Journal of Family Social Work*.

# Family Systems Intervention Model

- Broad-Based Definition of Intervention
- Social Systems Framework
- Conceptual Foundations
- Operational Elements and Practices

## **Definition of Early Intervention**

Early intervention is defined as the provision or mobilization of supports and resources to families of young children from informal and formal social network members that either directly or indirectly influence and improve parent, family, and child behaviour and functioning in ways having capacity-building (empowering) consequences

## Key Features of the Definition of Early Intervention

- A focus on both informal and formal supports and resources as different types of early childhood intervention
- Emphasis on the kinds of experiences and opportunities that are most likely to have capacity-building characteristics
- Explicit recognition that informal and formal interventions may be indirectly related to parent, family, and child functioning (mediated by other factors)
- Inclusion of capacity-building consequences as both a mediator and outcome of early childhood intervention

## Foundations of the Family Systems Model

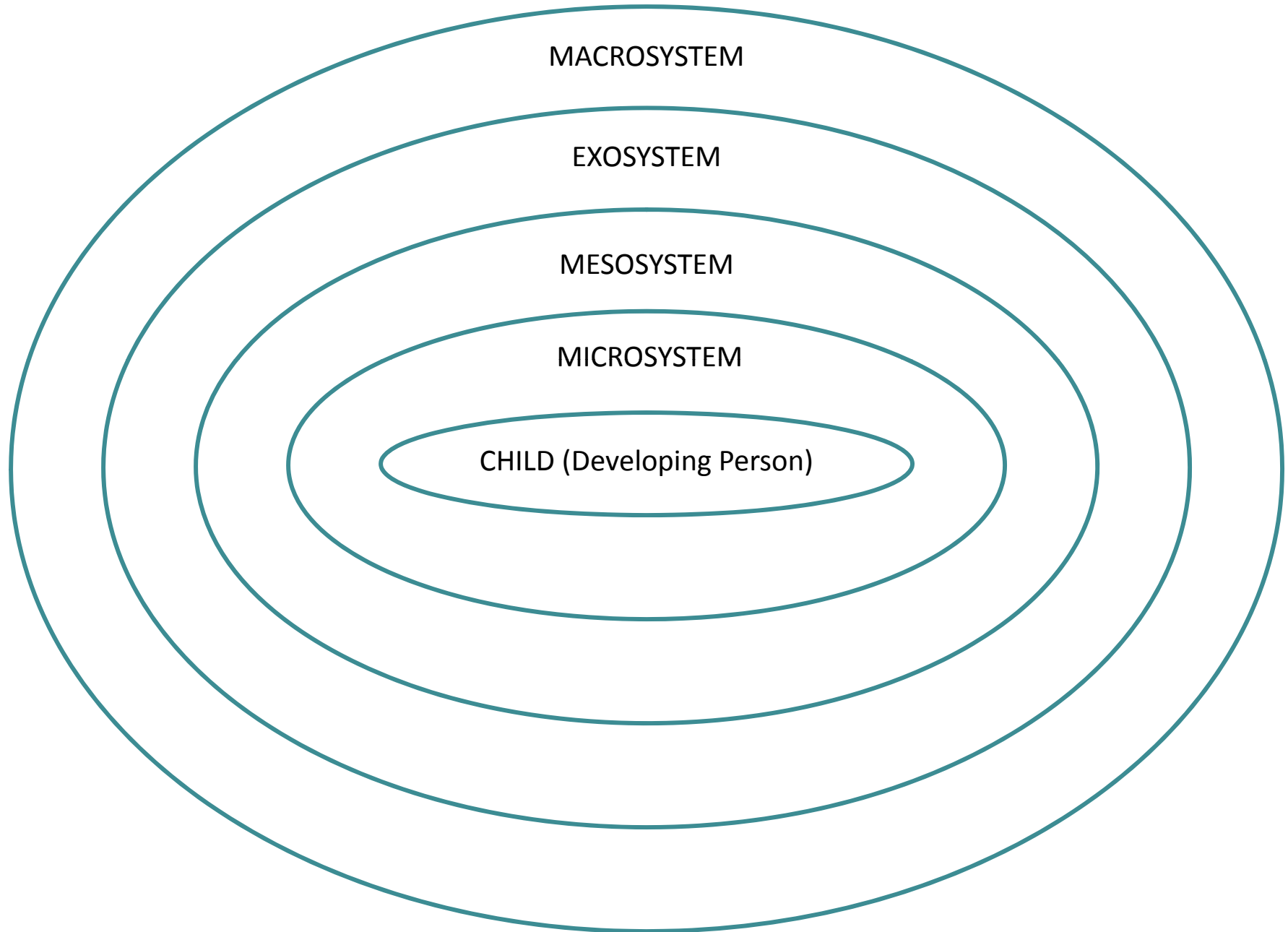
- Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development and the sources of influence at the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-systems level were used as the starting points for specifying factors influencing parent, family, and child behaviour and functioning
- The framework has been modified and updated over the past 30 years based on research and practice informing changes in the family systems intervention model

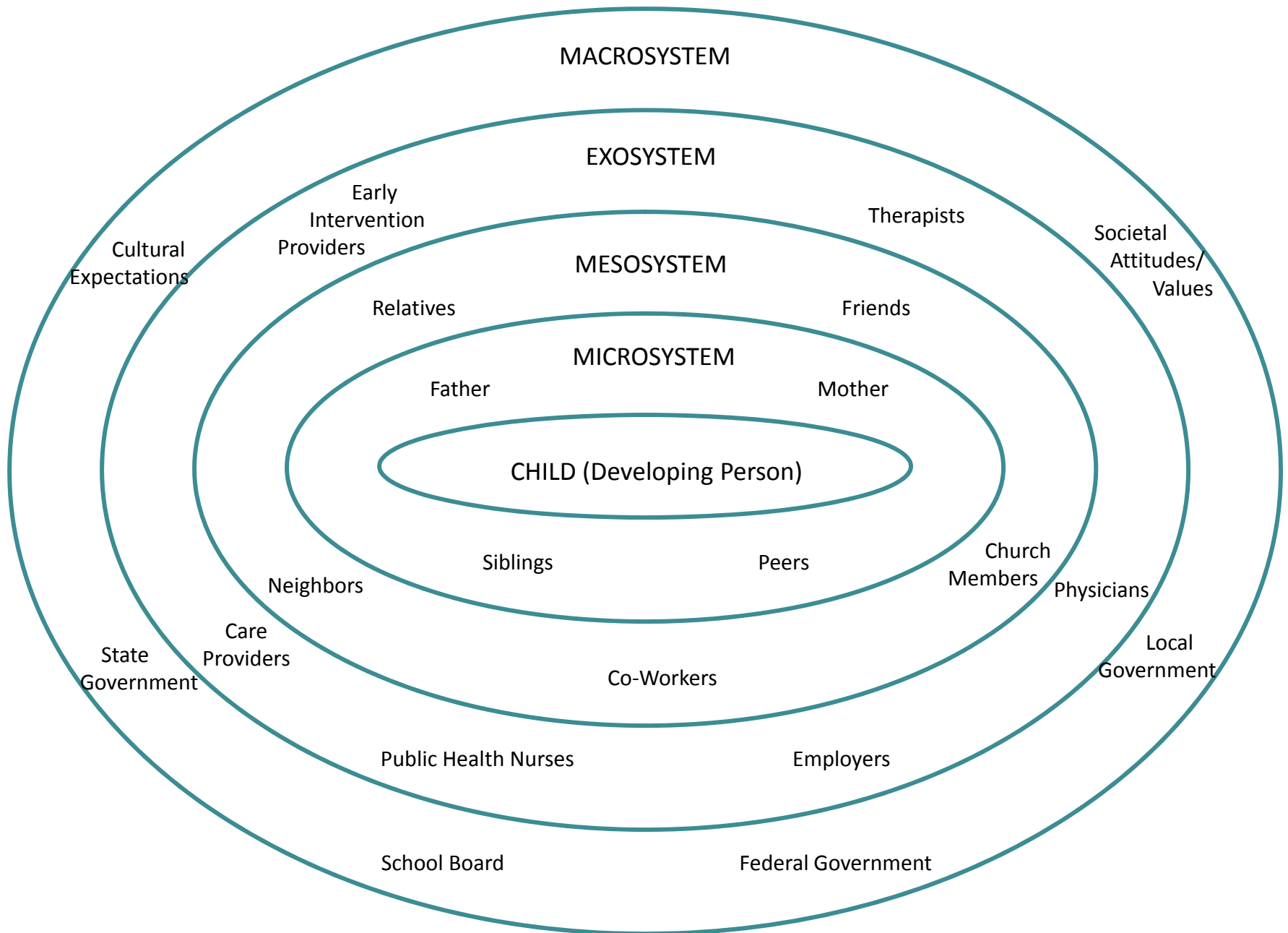
## Family Systems Framework

A family is viewed as a social unit embedded within other informal and formal social support networks [where] the behaviour of a developing child, his or her parents, other family members, and the family unit as a whole, are influenced by events in settings beyond the family that both directly and indirectly influence parent, family, and child behaviour and functioning



# Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Framework





## Bronfenbrenner's View of Parenting

“Whether parents can perform effectively in their child-rearing roles within the family depends on the role demands, stresses, and supports emanating from other settings.... Parents’ evaluation of their own capacity to function, as well as their view of their children, are related to such external factors as flexibility of job schedules, adequacy of child care arrangements, the presence of friends and neighbours who can help out in large and small emergencies, the quality of health and social services, and neighbourhood safety. The availability of supportive settings is, in turn, a function of their existence and frequency in a given culture or subculture.”

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Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

## Bronfenbrenner's View of Early Childhood Intervention

“Intervention programs that place major emphasis on involving parents directly in activities fostering their children’s development are likely to have constructive impact at any age, but the earlier such activities are begun, and the longer they are continued, the greater the benefit to the children. One major problem that still remains.... [Many] families live under such oppressive circumstances that they are neither willing nor able to participate in the activities required by a parent intervention program. Inadequate health care, poor housing, lack of education, low income, and the necessity for full-time work...rob parents of the energy to spend time with their children.”

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Bronfenbrenner, U. (1975). Is early intervention effective? In B.Z. Freidlander, G.M. Sterritt, & G. E. Kirk (Eds.), *Exceptional infant: Vol. 3. Assessment and intervention* (pp. 449-475). New York: Brunner/Mazel.

# Examples of Systems Influences

## *Microsystem*

Influences of parent-child interactions on child learning and development (e.g., attachment)

## *Mesosystem*

Influences of spousal/partner support on the availability of time to carry out parenting responsibilities

## *Exosystem*

Influences of social support from friends and relatives on parent well-being

## *Macrosystem*

Influences of cultural values and norms on parenting expectations

## **Need for a Capacity-Building Paradigm to Complement the Social Systems Framework**

- Need for a shift in the purpose and functions of early childhood intervention based on new models of human development
- Need for a particular set of models and associated practices consistent with the social systems definition of early childhood intervention
- Need for a conceptual framework to help early childhood practitioners better understand the benefits of family capacity-building as a primary focus of early childhood intervention

# Contrasting Models of Early Childhood Intervention

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Capacity-Building Models

Traditional-Paradigm Models

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Promotion

Treatment

Empowerment

Expertise

Strengths-Based

Deficit-Based

Resource-Based

Service-Based

Family-Centred

Professionally Centred

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## Capacity-Building Paradigm

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Promotion Models	Focus on enhancement and optimization of competence
Empowerment Models	Create opportunities to use existing abilities and learn new competencies
Strengths-Based Models	Emphasis on the use of strengths to obtain resources for improving functioning
Resource-Based Models	Use of a broad range of resources and supports as “interventions”
Family-Centered Models	Family choice and family involvement in obtaining resources and supports

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## Promotion Models

- Promotion practices place primary emphasis on the kinds of opportunities and experiences that support and strengthen competence and a sense of mastery (empowerment)
- Promotion models are based on the premise that the absence of problems cannot be equated with the presence of optimal growth and well-being

## Empowerment Models

“Empowerment implies that many competencies are already present or at least possible....Empowerment implies that what you see as poor functioning is a result of social structure and lack of resources which make it impossible for existing competencies to operate. It implies that in those cases where new competencies need to be learned, they are best learned in a context of living life rather than in artificial programs where everyone, including the person learning, knows that it is really the expert who is in charge.”

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Rappaport, J. (1981). In praise of paradox: A social policy of empowerment over prevention. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 9, 1-25.

## Strengths-Based Models

- Strengths-based practices are based on the assumption that all people have existing capabilities as well as the capacity to become more competent
- Strengths-based practices are also based on the contention that “Every family has strengths and, if the emphasis of [intervention] is on supporting strengths rather than rectifying weaknesses, the chances of making a difference in the lives of children are increased” (Stoneman, 1985)

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Stoneman, Z. (1985). Family involvement in early childhood special education programs. In N. Fallen & W. Umansky (Eds.). *Young children with special needs* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 442-469). Columbus, OH, Charles Merrill.

## Resource-Based Models

- Resource-based practices define the targets of intervention as the full range of community supports — potentially helpful information, advice, guidance, assistance, etc. — that are used in response to an indicated need or concern
- Seymour Sarason and his colleagues, in their book *Human Services and Resource Networks*, argue persuasively about the pitfalls of defining the supports and resources needed by community members solely in terms of professional services

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Sarason, S. B., Carroll, C. F., Maton, K., Cohen, S., & Lorentz, E. (1988). *Human services and resources networks: Rationale, possibilities, and public policy* (Rev. ed.). Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books.

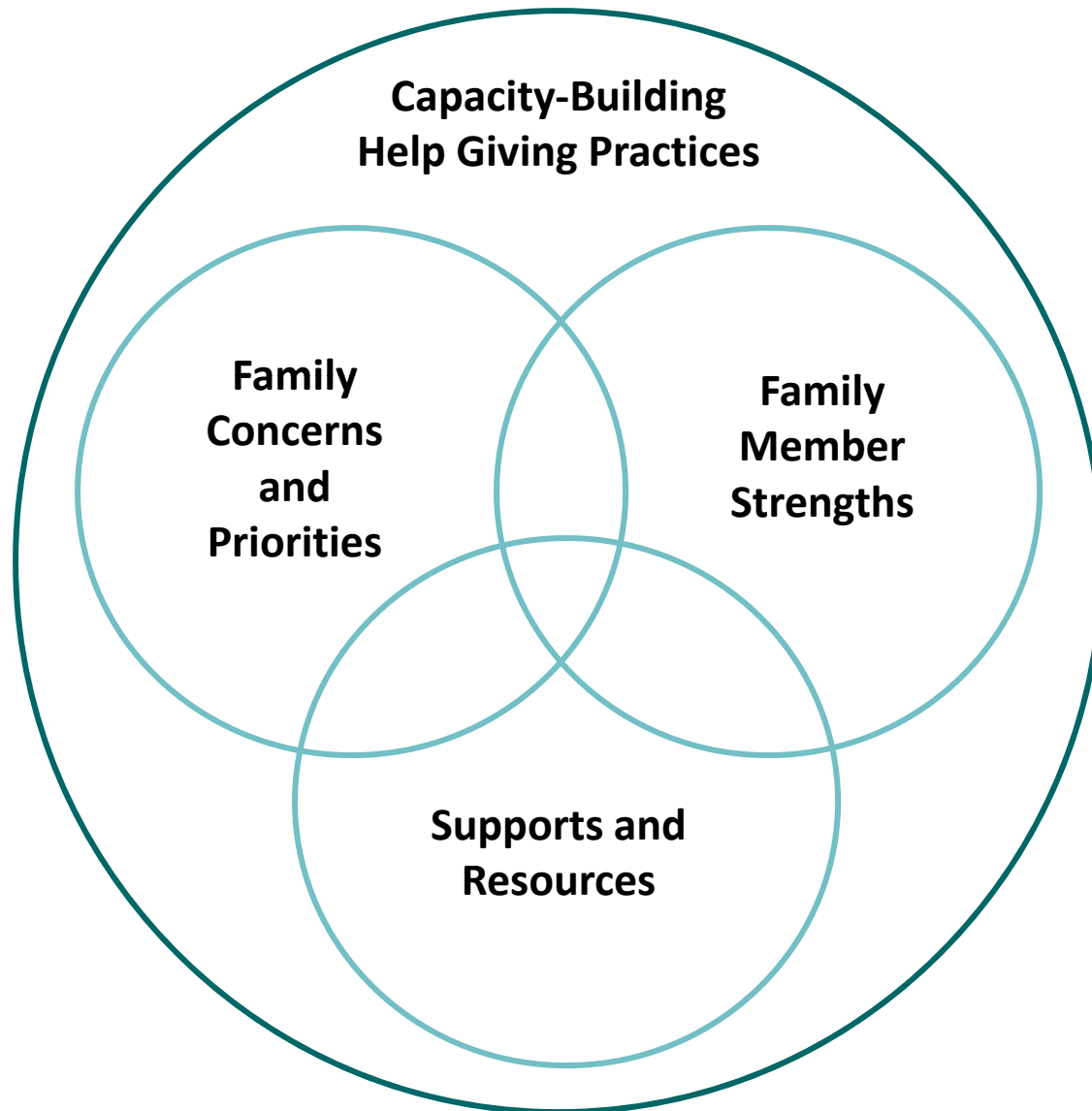
## Family-Centred Models

- Family-centred practices which build cooperative relationships between parents, other family members, and practitioners that explicitly focus on family capacity-building as the way in which supports, resources, and services are provided or procured
- Family-centred practices treat families with dignity and respect; provide family members with information needed to make decisions and choices; and actively involve families in obtaining resources and supports

## **Operational Elements of the Family Systems Intervention Model**

- Family Concerns and Priorities
- Supports and Resources
- Family Member Strengths
- Capacity-Building Help Giving Practices

# Family Systems Intervention Model



## Main Focus of Each of the Model Components

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Concerns and priorities are viewed as determinants of how people spend time and energy obtaining supports and resources

Family strengths include the abilities and interests of family members used to engage in desired activities and to obtain needed supports and resources

Supports and resources include the different types of information, assistance, experiences, opportunities, etc. for addressing concerns and priorities

Capacity-building help giving includes practices that strengthen the ability of family members to obtain supports and resources or engage in desired activity

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## Some Applications of the Family Systems Intervention Model

- Parents of children with identified disabilities participating in home-based early childhood intervention programs
- Parents of children with identified disabilities or developmental delays attending family resource centers
- Teenage mothers participating in parenting and life-skills programs
- Families of children at-risk for developmental delays due to poverty and other risk factors
- Immigrant families from more than a dozen countries without typically available support systems
- Parents of elementary-aged school children with and without disabilities
- Parents and children participating in community-based family support programs

## Concerns and Priorities

- Concerns include the perception or indication of a discrepancy or difference between “what is” and “what is desired”
- Priorities include the conditions or life situations that are considered highly important and worthy of attention
- Concerns and priorities are highly individualized and vary considerably family to family

## Supports and Resources

- Supports and resources include the information, instrumental assistance, advice, guidance, financial resources, emotional support, and so forth, provided or procured to address family concerns and priorities
- Supports and resources also include the experiences, opportunities, and other activities that are sources of supportive exchanges and competency-enhancing learning opportunities

## Family Member Strengths

- Strengths include the knowledge, skills, interests, abilities, preferences, etc. of individual family members and the family as a whole that are used to obtain supports and resources or engage in desired activity
- Strengths are incorporated into interventions as a way of strengthening existing capabilities and for promoting the development of new competencies

## Capacity-Building Help Giving Practices

- Help giving practices include early childhood practitioner knowledge and skills in their area(s) of professional preparation, their abilities to establish interpersonal and collaborative relationships with families, and their abilities to support and strengthen family capacity
- Capacity-building help giving practices focus on actively involving parents and other family members in informed decision-making and procurement of supports and resources, or engagement in desired activity, based on their choices

## Two Components of Capacity-Building Help Giving Practices

Research on the characteristics of effective help giving that is associated with capacity-building characteristics and consequences indicates that help giving includes two components:

- ***Relational*** Help Giving Practices
- ***Participatory*** Help Giving Practices

## Relational Practices

Relational practices include behaviours typically associated with effective help giving (active listening, compassion, empathy, etc.) and positive practitioner attributions about family member capabilities

- These kinds of practices are typically described in terms of behaviours that strengthen family member and practitioner interpersonal relationships (mutual trust, collaboration, etc.)
- Relational practices also include help giver beliefs about existing family member strengths and their capacity to become more competent as well as practitioner respect for personal and cultural beliefs and values

## Participatory Practices

Participatory practices include behaviours that involve family member choice and decision making, and which meaningfully involve family members in actively procuring or obtaining desired resources or supports for achieving desired goals

- These kinds of practices strengthen existing competencies and provide opportunities for learning new capabilities by engaging family members in informed choices and acting on those choices
- Participatory practices also include help giver responsiveness to a family's situation and changing life circumstances, and help giver flexibility in response to these situations and circumstances



## Conclusions

- My colleagues and I have been *surprised* that so many of the originally formulated ideas have “stood the test of time.”
- Advances in theory, and both research and practices, have however been used to inform changes and improvements in the family systems model
- The family systems model has proven useful for working with families from diverse backgrounds in many different kinds of situations.
- The model practices capture many of the important life situations that can be addressed by informal and formal interventions.
- Research findings to date show that there are predictable relationships between the model practices and parent, family, and child behavior and functioning.