

Centre for Community Child Health

CORE CARE CONDITIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH DEVELOPMENTAL CONCERNs, DELAY OR DISABILITY AND THEIR FAMILIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Tim Moore

PRECI webinar
22nd August 2025

The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne

1

Centre for Community Child Health

OUTLINE

- Impact of environment on functioning and development
- Core care conditions needed by children, parents and families
- Implications for ECI services and practitioners
- Implications for the early years ecosystem
- Conclusions

www.ccch.org.au

2

Centre for Community Child Health

IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENT ON FUNCTIONING AND DEVELOPMENT

www.ccch.org.au

3

Centre for Community Child Health

IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENT ON FUNCTIONING AND DEVELOPMENT

- All human development is contextual:** children's development is shaped by ongoing, reciprocal interactions between children's biology, their past experiences and exposures, and their physical and social contexts, with relationships as key drivers
- Behaviour and functioning at any point in time are influenced by the immediate social and physical environment as much as by past experience – but it becomes progressively harder to shift trajectories over time*
- Early behaviour and functioning are predictive of later behaviour and functioning to the extent that children's social and physical environments remain unchanged

www.ccch.org.au

4

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development

The diagram illustrates the Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development. It consists of five concentric layers of influence:

- Macrosystem:** norms & values of the culture
- Exosystem:** indirect environments
- Meso-system:** systems that influence the individual indirectly through micro-system
- Microsystem:** direct interaction in which the individual interacts with others and objects
- Techno-system:** Media influences, Computers, Internet, Portable devices, Social media, TV, Phone

At the bottom is the **Chronosystem:** time and historic influences.

5

Centre for Community Child Health

THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH AND DISEASE

- Social determinants of health** – our health and broader life outcomes are strongly shaped by the social, economic and environmental conditions into which we are born, grow, live, and age
- Social gradient effects in health and well-being** – the lower one's social standing in life, the worse our health (and other) outcomes are likely to be
- Social gradients involve more than just disparities between the poor and the rich, but exist across the entire socioeconomic continuum: at any given point along the continuum, one is likely to experience inferior health outcomes to those above them
- These differences are independent of access to health care*

6



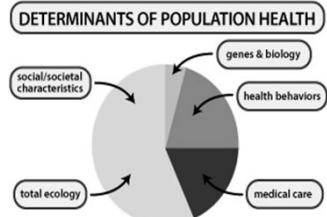
The conditions in which people lead their lives ... are the main influences on their health. Good conditions of daily life, the things that really count, are unequally distributed, much more so than is good for anything, whether for our children's future, for a just society, for the economy and, crucially, for health. The result of unequal distribution of life chances is that health is unequally distributed. Being at the wrong end of inequality is disempowering, it deprives people of control over their lives - their health is damaged as a result. And the effect is graded – the greater the disadvantage the worse the health.

Michael Marmot (2015). *The Health Gap: The Challenge of an Unequal World*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.

7

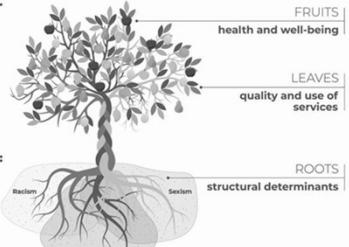
Role of social determinants

- Social conditions have greater impact on outcomes for children and families than do the services they receive



(Tarlov, 1999; CDC, 2014)

8



Michaels, Wesley and O'Neil (2023)

9

Centre for Community Child Health

'WEATHERING': THE IMPACT OF SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES

- Systemic injustice takes a physical, oftentimes deadly, toll on Black, brown, working class and poor communities
- *They are disproportionately more likely to suffer from chronic diseases and die at much younger ages than their middle- and upper-class white counterparts.*
- Health and ageing have more to do with how society treats us than how well we take care of ourselves.



DR ARLINE T. GERONIMUS

www.ccch.org.au

10

Centre for Community Child Health

ROLE OF POVERTY

- Exposure to sustained poverty in the first 1000 days is associated with adverse health and social outcomes in later life, including physical health; social and emotional well-being; cognitive functioning; educational attainment and employment; and mortality
- *While persistent poverty in the first 1000 days has a cumulative negative impact on development, prolonged poverty during later stages of life is less likely to have a significant impact on future life outcomes*
- Relieving poverty (particularly in the first 1000 days) has been shown to increase birth weight and other outcomes, which can reduce the likelihood of negative outcomes in later life

11

THE ROLE OF POVERTY (cont)



Marmot, M. et al. (2020). *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On*. London: Institute of Health Equity

There is evidence to reject the twin notions that people are poor because they make poor choices, and that the poor health of the poor results from poor choices.

Rather, it is poverty that leads to unhealthy choices and the poor health of those lower down the social hierarchy results from the restricted range of options available to those on low incomes, as well as the direct health impacts associated with the stresses and poor conditions which result from poverty.

12

THE SOCIAL DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH



According to the WHO's *Commission on Social Determinants of Health* (2008), action to promote health must go well beyond health care - it must focus on the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, and in the structural drivers of those conditions, namely inequities in power, money, and resources.

Action on the social determinants of health must involve the whole of government, civil society and local communities, business, global fora, and international agencies.

It will also take a dual focus on the health of the planet and the health of human societies

Commission on Social Determinants of Health (2008). *Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health*. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organisation.

13

Centre for Community Child Health



CORE CARE CONDITIONS NEEDED BY CHILDREN, PARENTS AND FAMILIES

www.ccch.org.au

14

Centre for Community Child Health



CORE CARE CONDITIONS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Core care conditions are the key features of the social and physical environments in which young children and their families live that are known to be important for optimal development and functioning.

The paper seeks to identify these developmental circumstances or conditions so we can use them as a template for reconfiguring the early years environment to ensure that all young children and their families are provided with these conditions.

Moore, T.G. (2024). *Core Care Conditions for Children and Families: Implications for policy and practice*. CCCC Working Paper No. 6. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.26065597>

<https://ccch.org.au/resource-hub/reports/core-care-conditions-for-children-and-families-implications-for-policy-and-practice/3878> www.ccch.org.au

15

Centre for Community Child Health



RATIONALE

- All human development is contextual - the physical and social contexts in which children live constitute the social determinants that play a major role in shaping developmental and wellbeing outcomes
- *The health and wellbeing of children, parents and families are strongly shaped by the social, economic and environmental conditions into which they are born and grow*
- These conditions have a greater impact on their health and development than the health and other services they receive
- *The conditions under which families are raising their children shape the parents' capacity to provide children with the conditions that they (the children) need to flourish*
- The ability of families to provide the nurturing care their children needs depends upon the nurturing care they themselves receive

16

Centre for Community Child Health



Core care conditions for children and families

Children's needs	Parental / caregiver needs	Shared child and family needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure relationships with primary caregivers able to provide the responsive caregiving needed to build secure attachments Support for developing emotional and self-regulation skills Positive early learning environments, in the home as well as in ECEC and community settings Opportunities to mix with other children of different ages, and to build social skills Adequate and appropriate nutrition from conception onwards Support to establish regular sleep patterns Physical opportunities to play and explore Protection from relationship stresses – abuse and neglect by caregivers, exposure to family or community violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive social support networks (including support from family, friends, fellow parents and neighbours) Secure time to build relationship with the broader community (e.g. employment) Safe and easily accessible places to meet other families Access to relationally-based family-centred services Access to universal services during antenatal / perinatal / postnatal periods Access to relational support services to address additional personal needs (e.g. mental health issues, resilience, violence) Information about how to support development, and support for managing the challenges of parenting Availability of learning opportunities to build personal capabilities Inclusiveness of the immediate social environment – absence of racism or discrimination Employment opportunities and family-friendly employment conditions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure and affordable housing Financial / employment security Healthy physical environment (clean air and water, freedom from environmental toxins, green spaces) Safe and easily navigable built environments Ready access to family-friendly services (e.g. child care centres, libraries, swimming pools, sporting facilities, parks) Healthy food environments that provide access to fresh food outlets Access to support services to address barriers to care (e.g. mental health, financial counselling, housing services) Inclusiveness of the wider society – absence of racism or discrimination

17

Centre for Community Child Health



CHILDREN'S CORE CARE NEEDS

- **Secure relationships with primary caregivers able to provide the responsive caregiving needed to build secure attachments**
- **Support for developing emotional and self-regulation skills**
- Positive early learning environments, in the home as well as in ECEC and community settings
- **Opportunities to mix with other children of different ages, and to build social skills**
- Adequate and appropriate nutrition from conception onwards
- **Support to establish regular sleep patterns**
- Physical opportunities to play and explore
- **Protection from relationship stresses – abuse and neglect by caregivers, exposure to family or community violence**

18

Centre for Community Child Health

PARENTAL / CAREGIVER CORE CARE NEEDS

- Positive social support networks (including support from family, friends, fellow parents and neighbours)
- Secure time to build relationship with the newborn (paid maternity/paternity leave)
- Safe and easily accessible places to meet other families
- Access to relationally-based family-centred services
- Access to universal services during antenatal / perinatal / postnatal periods
- Access to specialist support services to address additional personal needs (e.g. mental health issues, relational violence)
- Information about child care and development , and support for managing the challenges of parenting
- Availability of learning opportunities to build personal capabilities
- Inclusiveness of the immediate social environment – absence of racism or discrimination
- Employment opportunities and family-friendly employment conditions

19

Centre for Community Child Health

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

- Positive personal relationships and social networks are a critical aspect of the social conditions in which we live
- We are biologically wired to connect with others, and our health and wellbeing are shaped by the quality and extent of our close personal relationships
- Loneliness, social isolation and threats to social safety are major contributors to mental health, physical health, and social problems
- Positive social support also has many beneficial effects on parenting
- Positive social support involves both emotional support and practical support – in many cultures, practical support takes the form of shared parenting

www.ccch.org.au

20

CIRCLES OF FRIENDSHIP (Dunbar, 2021)

21

Centre for Community Child Health

PARENTAL / CAREGIVER CORE CARE NEEDS

- Positive social support networks (including support from family, friends, fellow parents and neighbours)
- Secure time to build relationship with the newborn (paid maternity/paternity leave)
- Safe and easily accessible places to meet other families
- Access to relationally-based family-centred services
- Access to universal services during antenatal / perinatal / postnatal periods
- Access to specialist support services to address additional personal needs (e.g. mental health issues, relational violence)
- Information about child care and development , and support for managing the challenges of parenting
- Availability of learning opportunities to build personal capabilities
- Inclusiveness of the immediate social environment – absence of racism or discrimination
- Employment opportunities and family-friendly employment conditions

22

Centre for Community Child Health

SHARED CHILD AND FAMILY NEEDS

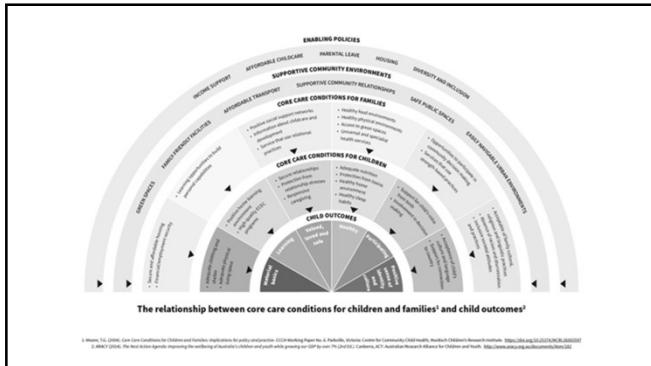
- Secure and affordable housing
- Financial / employment security
- Healthy physical environment (clean air and water, freedom from environmental toxins, green spaces)
- Safe and easily navigable built environments
- Ready access to family-friendly recreational and other facilities (libraries, swimming pools, sporting facilities, playgrounds)
- Healthy food environments that provide access to fresh food outlets
- Access to support services to address exceptional family needs (e.g. financial counselling, housing services)
- Inclusiveness of the wider society – absence of racism or discrimination

23

CORE CARE CONDITIONS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

All children and families are thriving / flourishing

24



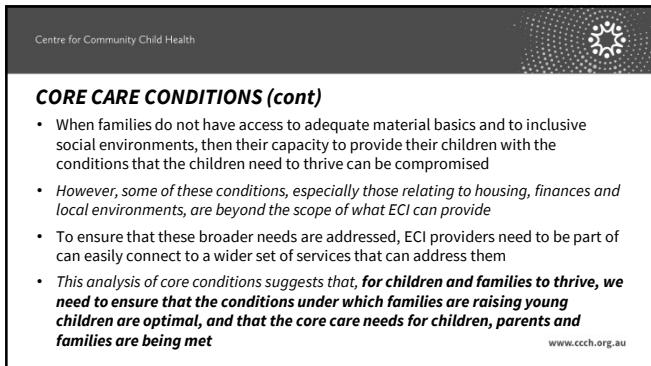
25

Centre for Community Child Health

CORE CARE CONDITIONS (cont)

- Child / family outcomes are *emergent properties* of having the core conditions we need to flourish
- Services are part of the core care conditions, but the overall conditions under which families are raising young children have a greater impact than do the services they receive
- These core care conditions should not be read as *preconditions* for thriving, that is, as necessary for children and families to thrive: few children and families will experience all these conditions, yet many thrive despite living in less than ideal circumstances
- Instead, the core conditions should be used as a guide for ECI and other practitioners as to what are the most important aspects of the child, parent/carer and family environments that should be addressed.

26



27

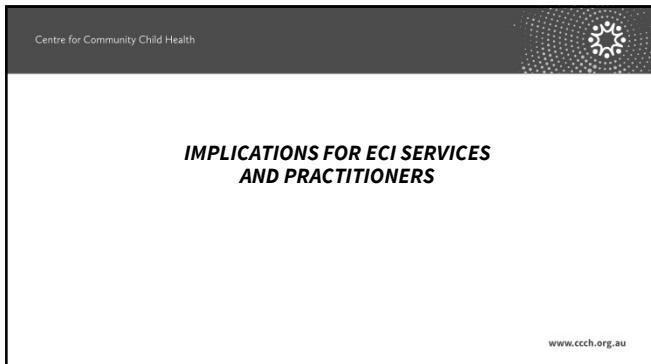
Centre for Community Child Health

What conditions do children with developmental disabilities and their families need to thrive?

- The aims and outcomes for children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families should be the same as for all other children
- The core care conditions for children, parents and families should also be the same as for children with developmental disabilities as all others
- Children with developmental disabilities and their families are at risk of not receiving the same core conditions as other children and not achieving the same outcomes
- The task of ECI and other support services is to help ensure that these children and their families do receive the conditions they need to thrive

www.ccch.org.au

28



29

Centre for Community Child Health

IMPLICATIONS

- Child's needs for secure attachments and responsive caregiving need to be a central focus of ECI support
- Other key children's needs that can be overlooked include adequate nutrition, establishing healthy sleep patterns, and providing opportunities to play
- All parents and caregivers need strong social support networks, and there should be a much greater emphasis on helping parents build connections with other parents and families
- Evidence also indicates that a major factor in determining parental health and wellbeing is time – time to spend with partner and friends, time to get enough rest, time to take care of oneself

www.ccch.org.au

30

Centre for Community Child Health

IMPLICATIONS (cont)

- 'Support to families should nowadays be viewed as a two-arm endeavour, with a first component devoted to ensuring sufficient material means and a second aimed at strengthening personal capacities of responsive caregiving' (Tamburlini, 2025)
- *ECI services need to be able to recognise what ecological care conditions may be compromising parental and family functioning*
- Tools for identifying environmental stressors include eco maps, Family Resources Scale (Dunst & Leet), and the Parent Engagement Resource
- *ECI services need to be part of a wider system capable of addressing the wider social determinants*

www.ccch.org.au

31

Centre for Community Child Health

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EARLY YEARS ECOSYSTEM

www.ccch.org.au

32

Centre for Community Child Health

POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION

Improve services

- The default approaches to addressing the challenges that some children and families experience have been treatment-oriented and service-driven rather than prevention-oriented and context-driven
- *This approach will continue to play an important role in ensuring the health and wellbeing of children and families*
- However, relying solely on targeted health and other services has not been sufficient to make a significant difference to the complex health problems that are prevalent today
- *This is partly because the conditions under which people are living have a greater impact on their health and well being than the services they receive*

33

Centre for Community Child Health

POSSIBLE COURSE OF ACTION (cont)

Change the environment

- We need to address the upstream 'causes of the causes': if we address only the superficial 'causes' of non-communicable diseases (such as bad nutrition, smoking and inactivity) without addressing the wider 'causes of the causes' (the social, cultural and economic determinants of health), we will fail to achieve any sustained change in outcomes
- *A true prevention approach addresses the underlying causes of problems and seeks to improve the conditions under which families are raising young children*
- One way of ensuring that all families are well-supported socially and have access to the services they need is by establishing **integrated child and family centres or hubs**

34

Centre for Community Child Health

INTEGRATED CHILD AND FAMILY CENTRES RESOURCES



Moore, T.G. (2021). Developing holistic integrated early learning services for young children and families experiencing socio-economic vulnerability. Prepared for Social Ventures Australia. Parkville, Victoria: Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute. <https://doi.org/10.35374/MCRI.14593890>

National Child and Family Hubs Network



<https://www.childandfamilyhubs.org.au/>

www.ccch.org.au

35

Centre for Community Child Health

KEY FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE INTEGRATED CHILD AND FAMILY CENTRES / HUBS

- Hubs are places within a local community that are natural places for families with young children to go where they can meet and connect with other parents and children and get access to a range of services.
- *The core decisions regarding the location of the facility, the design of the building and the services to be provided are made in partnership with the families and community who will be using it.*
- The hub provides high quality child care and early childhood education programs for children, and a tiered system of support to address unique and/or additional child and family needs
- *Staff use relational and family-centred practices and have appropriate training and ongoing support in their use.*

36

Integrated child and family centres (ICFCs) can address a range of family needs but need to form part of a whole-of-society approach

Integrated child and family centres are a community-based service and social hub for children and families

Role as a social hub
Acts as a natural and safe place within a local community for families with young children to go where they can meet and connect with other parents and children
Is inclusive and uses culturally-responsive policies and practices
Helps build community capacity to care for children through networks and civil society

Role as a service hub
Delivers a wide range of child and family services on site based on local needs, including high quality child care and early childhood education programs, preschool parenting programs, community-supported playgroups, and core health services
Provides access to other services including mental health, financial counselling and housing services
Is staffed by multi-disciplinary teams working together with other agencies to provide integrated holistic support for families
Has stored systems of support to match the level of need of the children/family

To truly support children and families to thrive, they require broader place-based supports and an enabling policy environment

The diagram consists of three overlapping circles. The top circle is labeled 'Enabling policy environment' and contains the text 'Shapes the social determinants that affect child development and family functioning, e.g. poverty, housing, employment'. The middle circle is labeled 'Broader place-based supports' and contains the text 'Shapes the community factors that affect child development and family functioning, e.g. the built environment, transport, family-friendly facilities'. The bottom circle is labeled 'Integrated child and family centres' and contains the text 'Provides a holistic service and social hub to meet the needs of children and families'.

37

Centre for Community Child Health



COURSES OF ACTION (cont)

Introduce enabling policies

- There is only so much that can be done at a local level to improve the conditions under which families are raising young children
- Direct action needs to be complement by enabling policies at state and federal government levels*
- Examples include cost of child care, affordable housing policies, paid parental leave etc.

www.cccch.org.au

38

Centre for Community Child Health



CONCLUSIONS

- We are shaped by the environments in which we live**
- This is the rationale for ECI: by changing the environment in which children spend time, they will thrive – develop functional skills that will enable them to participate meaningfully, experience better mental health and quality of life – **when we change the context, we change the outcomes**
- The same is true for parents and families: changing their conditions and circumstances enables them to thrive and to provide their children with the conditions the children need to thrive
- All parents and caregivers should have access to a range of universal and tiered child and family services, including ECI services**
- All young children and families should have their core care conditions met – universal early years guarantee**

39



THANK YOU!

Dr. Tim Moore
Senior Research Fellow
tim.moore@mcri.edu.au

The Centre For Community Child Health
The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne
50 Flemington Road
Parkville 3052 VIC
www.cccch.org.au

The Centre for Community Child Health is a department of The Royal Children's Hospital and a research group of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute.



40