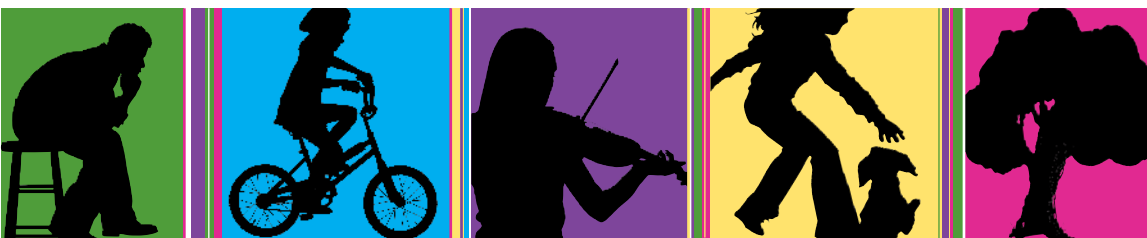


RICHARD L. MUNGER, Ph.D.



# CHANGING Children's BEHAVIOR

by changing the  
PEOPLE, PLACES, and ACTIVITIES  
in their lives



*How to find the everyday environments  
that will motivate your child*

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BOYS TOWN, NEBRASKA

# Changing Children's Behavior by Changing the People, Places, and Activities in Their Lives

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CHAPTER 1

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# Children's Environments and Their Pathways

IN 1947, ROGER BARKER HAD A WILD IDEA. BARKER was a professor of psychology at the University of Kansas. He convinced the small town of Oskaloosa, Kansas (population 762) to serve as a field station for the study of the psychological habitats of children. The novel idea was to record the minute-by-minute lives of many of the approximately 100 children living in Oskaloosa. With help from graduate students and the cooperation of the local residents, he documented the daily lives of the children, recording everything they did. He followed them from their homes into the schools and community and observed all of their activities. This might sound rather strange, having an adult hovering around writing about everything a child does. Weren't the children's natural behaviors inhibited by this constant presence? Of course they were initially, but the observers refused to interact with the children, and after a while, with instruction, the children learned to ignore the observers.<sup>1</sup>

Barker's observations were thorough and detailed. Activities often blurred together so Barker used two observers. He called this method of recording children's behavior *collecting a specimen record*. It is similar to a doctor collecting specimens from a person or animal. However, in this case, they were specimens of behavior, and they were collected

from the natural environment. Barker published the first book-length specimen record as *One Boy's Day* in 1951. Over the years, he collected about 20 specimen records, each one detailing the minute-to-minute activities of a child over a period of several days.

**After looking at the data, Barker came to a rather surprising conclusion: the children's settings were more important factors in determining their behavior than their personalities. So, Barker discontinued his observation of individual children because he found the "behavior setting" to be a more promising focus of observation.**

As he and his observers watched children live minute-to-minute in neighborhoods, on playing fields, in churches, at schools, and other places, Barker realized that individuals in particular settings exhibit fairly predictable behavior patterns. When a child enters one of Barker's "behavior settings" – a classroom, a gymnasium, a playground – everything in that environment presses behavior in the direction of conforming to behavior that is typical for that particular environment. As Barker put it, "When in church, people behave church." The fancy term for this is the *principle of progressive conformity*.<sup>2</sup>

For someone sitting in a church pew, spiritual reflection is easy. That same person sitting in the baseball stands finds reflection more difficult, but yelling loudly is made easy. Each place offers opportunities for specific behaviors, while placing limits on others. The physical location, including the people we are with, affects our immediate behavior, as well as longer-term development if we sit in that pew a lot.

In this book, we will be mapping out the behavior settings of childhood and adolescence. My goal is to describe the major developmental contexts that make up children's lives. "Context is the water in which we fish swim."<sup>3</sup> Take, for example, these two behavior contexts: a child slumped in front of the TV watching cartoons, and the same child building a volcano model at a Saturday science event at the local nature center. Both are developmental contexts. Is one developmentally better than the other? We will try to answer that question in this book.

## **Taking a Look Back**

How do children grow to become motivated, compassionate, competent adults? Let's think about that for a minute. In your mind's eye, take a trip back into your childhood. Think of a period of time about which you still carry vivid memories, perhaps when you were around 9 or 10, or when you were a teenager, around 14 or 15. Begin by identifying your life-spaces – the principal areas or contexts where you carried out your life. Typically, these include your home, the neighborhood, and your school. There also may be other areas, such as church life, or your parent's place of work, or even your own place of work. Revisit each of these life spaces to reacquaint yourself with your pre-adult life.

Now that you have revisited the general *geography* of your childhood, think about a specific place that made you feel competent and good about yourself. Try to focus on just one place. What was it about that special place that made it so positive for you? Did you learn something there? Were you challenged? Were you free from stress there? Try to recapture the feeling of that supportive place.

Now shift your mind's eye to a place from your childhood that was not so positive for you. Pick just one and think back. What was it about the place that made you feel uncomfortable or not good about yourself? Did you experience failure there? Did the place lack supportive people? Were you stressed? Having reacquainted yourself with your own childhood experiences, what conclusions can you draw about the environments in which children grow up?

Children learn to be healthy, fully functioning human beings by interacting meaningfully with diverse people in their everyday environments. There are many examples of developmentally healthy environments. Families where all the family members sit down to eat dinner and share the activities of the day. Neighborhoods where a child shovels snow from a neighbor's driveway for extra money and builds a tree fort with friends on a vacant lot. Schools where a child learns among diverse peers and is encouraged to "hustle" by a coach in after-school volleyball. Communities where a child works on a building project for the Boys Club and takes music lessons from a

retired musician. Church groups in which teenagers eat Sunday dinner with a friendly group of peers who discuss their frustration about teachers at school. Communities where a child can participate in a hospital volunteer program or get a job at a local ice cream parlor and learn that certain social graces come first, even when someone is discourteous to you. These are all developmentally healthy environments of childhood.

So how do youths become psychologically vigorous adults, who are honest, take responsibility for their actions, and learn from their mistakes? These are some of the characteristics of a successful adult and children will succeed only if we “give” them opportunities to develop these capacities. These types of traits are not transmitted to children only by instruction but rather are also learned during their participation in developmentally healthy activities in supportive environments. This is how children learn to function well. They take advantage of the competence-building opportunities in their everyday environments.

## **What Is a Supportive Environment?**

Wild animals in captivity live and flourish best when their environments approximate the natural surroundings from which they come. For instance, animals that live naturally on the plains are more healthy and contented when they are not confined to cages, but are placed in open areas where they can roam at will – in other words, where their environment supports, even encourages their natural, healthy behavior. Animals that live in caves or dens need a place of solitude where they can feel protected. The most successful zookeepers structure the optimal environments for meeting the innate needs of those in their care. In this respect, parents and professional counselors who use environmental strategies for children share similar goals and methods.

Let's clarify a little terminology here. When professional counselors talk about the *environment* of children and adolescents, they usually are referring to the effects of the child's immediate caregivers and close friends (e.g., “This child lives in an abusive environment”). However, in this book we are using the term quite differently. University of

North Carolina professor Mark Fraser notes that the environments of childhood can be thought of as consisting of interrelated and often nested parts.<sup>4</sup> Children usually live in a family. A family lives in a neighborhood. As they grow up, children become involved with school, and later perhaps with a job in the community. Each context involves a set of activities and resources, including people, within a specific social and physical space. Children develop their personhood in these environments through interactions with parents, brothers and sisters, friends, teachers, coaches, ministers, neighbors, and a variety of others who, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse, affect their lives. This “person-in-environment” perspective, as Fraser calls it, is at the heart of what we’re talking about here.

The approach to child psychology presented in this book is based on the belief that it is usually easier and more effective to change the environment of a child than it is to alter the child’s personality, because the environment is a known, visible quantity and producing concrete changes is fairly straightforward. The acclaimed psychologist Mary Pipher puts it this way:

**“A good rule of thumb is that life is more important than therapy. Friends, family, work, school, vacations, and ball games are more important than therapy, because the goal of good therapy is to get them into healthy, normal activity.”<sup>5</sup>**

So, along with exploring the various environments of childhood, we’ll also be identifying *environmental modifications* that can help optimize children’s healthy growth and development. Moving to a new neighborhood, or attending a different school can change dramatically a child’s experiences and the course of the child’s life. Implementing such major environmental changes in a child’s life can be a little frightening, however, especially since it is so hard to be sure in advance what effects your choices will have. But this is where Roger Barker’s findings can bring reassurance – the “right” environment will generally bring about desired effects.

A behavior setting (or environment) – that is, a place where activities occur – exerts an *environmental press*, which is the combined influence of various forces working in a particular setting to shape

the behavior of individuals in that setting. According to psychologist James Garbarino, environmental press arises from circumstances confronting and surrounding the individual – circumstances that generate psychosocial momentum tending to guide the individual in a particular direction.<sup>6</sup> Most people understand the concept of peer pressure. Well, here we're talking about environmental pressure. Helping a troubled youth, then, can involve linking the child with an environmental network of behavior settings that facilitate specific, desired behavior changes.

## **Pathways to Success or Failure**

In the early 1960s, Americans huddled around television sets to watch the first space flights return to earth. Reporter Walter Cronkite described the tense moments of re-entry, when the space capsule had to penetrate the earth's atmosphere at the precise trajectory or, if its path veered only slightly, face fiery destruction. The critical path, or trajectory, meant a course with the proper angle for the crucial dynamics of flight to unfold – a corridor of safety.

Just as a space capsule must maneuver through the invisible forces of space, children must navigate through their life spaces. They, too, are on trajectories, or pathways – some that offer safe passage to positive opportunities, and others that lead to failure and negative outcomes. Finding the proper trajectories for children to follow through their life spaces might be just as important as it is with a space capsule. The case study below, which contrasts the lives of two young adolescents, depicts how the elements of particular settings, as a result of their positions in the environment, influence behaviors.

Anthony is 13 years old and lives with two brothers and his single mother in a two-bedroom apartment. His mother has physically abused him in the past, and Anthony was once placed in a foster home for nine months. His mother has only one friend, a neighbor with whom she is very close, but the relationship limits her involvement with others. She works the 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. shift at a local hospital, which means that Anthony is usually unsupervised after school and has little opportunity for activities outside his neighborhood.

Unsuccessful in sports in a large, competitive junior high school, Anthony has befriended several neighborhood boys who spend their after-school hours “hanging out.” As a result, Anthony has begun to skip school and experiment with drugs. Excessive TV viewing prevents Anthony from extending his friendship network. Anthony has recently been reported to local juvenile justice authorities for breaking into a neighbor’s house.

Another youth, Tony, appears to live in an environment similar to Anthony’s: he also is 13 years old and lives with two brothers and his single mother in a two-bedroom apartment. His mother also has physically abused him in the past and he also was placed in a foster home for a few months. Tony’s environmental circumstances, however, place him on a different trajectory. Tony has a pet to care for after school. A neighbor, who breeds dogs, acts as a mentor and friend to him. His school is small and needs every student to participate in activities in order to have sufficient manpower for sports teams and other groups. Therefore, Tony is involved in school plays, the band, and the soccer team. The school also encourages involvement in community activities and – with the help of funding from a local church that Tony’s family attends on Sundays – got Tony enrolled in a Tae Kwon Do class. The class has helped Tony with unresolved angry feelings he harbored because of his mother’s physical abuse. Tony and his mother and brothers participate in a family softball club sponsored by the hospital – which offers flexible work hours for his mother, enabling her to be at home most evenings and to broaden her friendship network.

There are two very different outcomes for Anthony and Tony. While their life circumstances are similar, Anthony’s environmental circumstances have put him on a negative pathway, while Tony’s environmental factors put him on a more positive trajectory. As you can see, then, relatively small events and alterations may push children down one path rather than another, shape their inclinations, and ultimately, determine the quality of their life experiences. Anthony’s and Tony’s lives are examples of environmental distinctions that alter the developmental paths of children. One of the goals of this book is to show parents how to help children engage in positive environmental trajectories.

Childhood and adolescence are times when many developmental trajectories become established. It is important that the environments that children spend their time in are structured in ways that optimize the youths' chances to learn the skills that will help them become healthy, successful adults.<sup>7</sup> Effective environments for children promote the development of competence and provide opportunities for beneficial relationships.<sup>8</sup> According to Claremont Graduate University psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "the first step in improving the quality of life consists in engineering daily activities so that one gets the most rewarding experiences from them."<sup>9</sup>

The processes leading to particular outcomes for children and adolescents are not completely predictable, and specific outcomes are rarely linked to a single cause. Instead, the pathways leading to an end point of failure – or to successful transition into adulthood – involve many factors in the environment interacting with the psychological and physiological characteristics of the individual.<sup>10</sup>

Further, just looking at the environmental effects alone on child and adolescent behavior is not a simple task. Some effects are directly attributable to the environment, while others influence youths indirectly. Let's take the faith environment as an example. Research indicates that youth who participate in religious activities get intoxicated less often. The influence of religion is direct and fairly straightforward. With indirect effects, the influence is more difficult to demonstrate. For instance, here is an illustrative fictional study from the National Study of Youth and Religion: Religious service attendance is found to lack any *direct* effect on reckless driving in late adolescence. However, other research suggests that parental religiosity affects a number of variables, suggesting that the influence of religion on reckless driving is not absent, but rather indirect. For example, religion influences the extent of parental monitoring, as well as a teenager's choice of friends, and then these in turn affect the likelihood of reckless driving. Therefore, religion has an *indirect* effect on reckless driving via its influence on friendships and parenting practices.<sup>11</sup> The multi-layered contexts of children's lives makes the understanding of environmental influence a great challenge!

## *Children's Environments and Their Pathways*

In this chapter, I have emphasized that the life courses of children may be explained in large measure by circumstances within their environments. The next chapter presents a fundamental principle behind the ideas in this book: how we use time in our lives deeply affects how our lives turn out, or – as is often said – we are what we do. How children spend their waking hours in various environments defines their circumstances and the kind of developmental experiences they will have. I will pay special attention to how children can spend time in environments and activities that promote healthy development.

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## *Changing Children's Behavior*

<sup>11</sup> Regnerus, M., Smith, C., & Fritsch, M. (2003). *Religion in the lives of American adolescents: A review of the literature*. Chapel Hill, NC: National Study of Youth and Religion.



*Is your child **doing poorly** in school? Hanging out with the **wrong crowd** or having **trouble** making friends? Defiant and **argumentative** at home?*

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THESE SETTINGS and the presence of interesting, challenging activities and adult mentors in them can make a big difference in helping children develop into motivated, compassionate, and competent adults. For example, the same child who flounders in a big school with academic, athletic, and activity opportunities limited to an elite group of students may flourish if enrolled in a small school dependent on involving many of its students in order to field sports teams, form a band or drama club, etc.

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RICHARD L. MUNGER has spent 25 years as an administrator in public community mental health. He is a practicing child psychologist in North Carolina and formerly Associate Professor of Psychiatry, John A. Burns School of Medicine, University of Hawaii. He received his Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from the University of Michigan.

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