Neighborhoods of Southern California Children and Families

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Abstract

Middle childhood is a time when children move beyond the boundaries of family to explore the neighborhood, forge their own relationships with friends and neighbors, and have experiences independent of their parents. Depending on the character of the surrounding community, parents are more or less comfortable allowing unfettered exploration by their children. This article reports a study of families with 9- and 10-year-olds in an array of southern California neighborhoods, showing close links between parent perceptions of their neighborhoods, the rules they impose on their children, and the children’s experiences and social skills.

The neighborhood environment has increasingly come to be viewed as an important context for children’s development. Recent studies have found that the economic resources available in children’s neighborhoods influence developmental outcomes over and above families’ individual social and economic circumstances. One researcher sees the neighborhood as directly affecting children because it is “the child’s first turf . . . to explore, become a part of and to use.” Neighborhoods may also have an indirect influence on children’s social development when neighborhood characteristics prompt parents to regulate their children’s activities in the neighborhood.

This article describes recent findings from a study of children in two southern California communities that illustrate how school-age children’s activities and social development are supported or constrained by resources and problems in their neighborhoods. The study addresses four primary questions: (1) How similar are parents’, children’s, and objective raters’ assessments of physical and social dimensions of family neighborhoods? (2) Are perceptions of neighborhood quality associated with limitations imposed on children’s activities by parents? (3) Are children’s experiences...
in the neighborhood related to their social adjustment? and (4) How important are the practices that parents use to regulate children's experiences in their neighborhoods?

**Studies of Children's Neighborhoods**

Two approaches have been used to characterize neighborhoods. In some instances, researchers use U.S. census data to differentiate neighborhoods. One study, for instance, found that high-poverty areas differed from low-poverty areas on such health and developmental outcomes as third-grade reading scores, low birth weight, infant deaths, and juvenile delinquency. Other investigators use a descriptive approach to link physical and social features of neighborhoods to children's neighborhood activities and sense of autonomy. For instance, one study of how 11- and 12-year-olds in four northern California neighborhoods spent their time indicated that neighborhoods with hilly terrain, major thoroughfares, and low densities of children offered less desirable optimal play environments and constrained children's access to community resources and social interaction. In another study, the researcher took a "neighborhood walk" with 7- and 10-year-olds in metropolitan and suburban California neighborhoods; the children reported on sources of formal and informal neighborhood support, and on their activities, both structured and unstructured. That study found that children living in neighborhoods with more social and physical resources, where they were allowed more autonomy and more opportunities for unstructured interactions with others, were more skilled at understanding the perspectives of other individuals. They more often had a sense of personal control or mastery.

The study that is the focus of this article employs a descriptive approach to examine the neighborhood experiences of third graders from heterogeneous neighborhoods in southern California. The goal of the study was to understand how the perceptions that parents and children hold of neighborhood problems and resources, social activities, and parental management strategies are linked to the children's social functioning. The study combines descriptive information about neighborhoods, interviews with parents and children about the neighborhoods and rules governing children's activities, and teacher and classmate ratings of the children's social adjustment.

The study emphasized parents' perceptions of neighborhood quality because those perceptions may be just as important as, or even more important than, objective dimensions of the neighborhood context in determining how the family uses community resources or regulates children's activities. As anticipated, when parents—especially mothers—saw their neighborhoods as problematic places for children, they restricted their children's activities more and the children were lonelier than children in more positive, child-friendly neighborhoods. Surprisingly, teachers and classmates viewed the more closely supervised children from difficult neighborhoods as comparatively well behaved and socially competent.

**The Social Development Project**

The University of California, Riverside, Social Development Project is a longitudinal study that was initiated in 1990 with the goal of understanding the links between children's experiences in their families and surrounding social environments, and their
developing social competence with peers. Sixty-three third graders participated in the study along with their parents. The participants resided in neighborhoods in two mid-sized, southern California communities and came from a range of ethnic backgrounds (59% Euro-American, 32% Latino, 7% Asian, Middle Eastern, or other ethnicities, and 2% African American). The families ranged from middle class to working class, with a median family income of approximately $45,000.

Some of the neighborhoods selected for the study were rural (with no sidewalks, considerable open space, and small agriculturally based businesses), some were suburban (with recently constructed, large residential developments designed to include playgrounds and parks), and others were semi-urban (with older residences and apartment complexes in close proximity to downtown). The majority of families owned their own homes.

Parents and children assessed the extent to which various physical features were problems in their neighborhood, as did trained observers who made "drive-through" visits to the neighborhood of each family in the study. The assessments included child-related neighborhood problems (cars going too fast, toys being stolen, strangers in the neighborhood), crime and danger, impoverished qualities of the neighborhood (high unemployment, homelessness, run-down buildings), and low social control (unsupervised children, lack of respect for laws, teens loitering). Participants also evaluated the presence or absence of neighborhood resources for children, such as child care, recreational programs (scouting, YMCA, team sports), and informal amenities (parks, sidewalks, places to ride bikes, swimming pools, libraries). In addition, parents and children described the extent to which they interacted socially with members of their neighborhood (had someone over to talk or play, went out for an evening, asked someone for help).

Although the neighborhoods varied, most were not disadvantaged and had a range of child-oriented resources. The majority of children reported frequent involvement in informal activities such as bike riding, skating, playing tag, and sports. Approximately 33% of the third graders in the study were involved in organized sports; 25% reported being enrolled in scouting or other organized clubs. In contrast, very few children indicated that they used a recreation center in their neighborhood (10%) or visited a library (17%). As might be expected, families with higher incomes lived in neighborhoods that the observers rated as less problematic, but there were no significant differences between the neighborhoods of Euro-American and Latino families.

**Agreement on Neighborhood Characteristics**

Consistencies and disparities emerged when the perceptions of mothers, fathers, children, and observers were compared. Mothers and fathers cited the lack of social control as the most problematic feature of neighborhoods. They perceived the physical attributes of their neighborhoods similarly—agreeing on the degree to which their neighborhood posed child-related dangers, was impoverished, or lacked social control. There was less similarity in their perceptions of the dangerous and crime-ridden aspects of their neighborhood, perhaps because they differed in their vigilance or their exposure to the neighborhood's features. Parents had similar perceptions of the extent to which child-related problems such as cars going too fast and strangers in the neighborhood had limited their child's activities, and they agreed about the extent to which their child was involved in social activities in the neighborhood and could rely on others in the neighborhood for help.

There was only moderate agreement between parents and their children regarding problematic neighborhood features, and less agreement on the availability of community resources (different questions were used with parents vs. children, so item-by-item comparisons are not possible). The neighborhood ratings by objective observers...
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corresponded closely to the perceptions of the fathers, but were less similar to the views of the mothers.

**Neighborhood Quality and Parental Supervision**

To keep their children safe, parents may adopt a variety of regulatory strategies. The parents in this study adopted rules related to safety, rules that set standards for children’s social behavior, and rules that restricted the places and times of children’s play with peers, the children they were allowed to play with, or the activities they were allowed to engage in. The study examined the families’ use of these regulatory strategies in light of the characteristics of the neighborhoods where they resided.

Both mothers and fathers reported that lack of social control in their neighborhoods as well as child-related problems such as cars going too fast, toys being stolen, and exposure to strangers led them to limit the activities of their third grader. When parents perceived that children’s activities were compromised by the physical quality of their neighborhoods, they tended to shift the children to activities outside of the neighborhood. The children reported greater supervision of their activities when parents viewed the neighborhood in a more negative light. They reported less supervision when the parents felt the neighborhood afforded more resources such as parks, libraries, after-school child care, and sports teams. When children were more socially involved in their neighborhood, parents were less likely to limit their activities. It is interesting, however, that children’s reports of supervision were only marginally related to the observers’ ratings of the quality of the neighborhood.

**Neighborhood Characteristics and Social Adjustment**

Children’s experiences in their neighborhoods could be expected to influence their social behavior and emotional well-being. Therefore, the study gathered information on children’s social adjustment and feelings of loneliness, and it collected ratings by teachers and peers of the child’s social competence and acceptance by classmates.

The study findings suggest that mothers’ perceptions of the neighborhood serve as the filter through which supervisory and other parenting strategies are determined—not the fathers’ perceptions or neighborhood characteristics rated by observers. The children’s perceptions of their neighborhoods were also closely aligned with their mothers’ perceptions, perhaps because mothers actively manage their children’s activities in the neighborhood and discuss with them why opportunities for play and other activities may be limited.
In turn, social aspects of children's involvement in the neighborhood were modestly linked to their social development. Children who perceived more help and assistance from neighbors described themselves as less lonely, and those who participated in more social activities with neighborhood members were described as more socially accepted by teachers and peers. Social activities with neighborhood members may provide a source of experiences in which children can practice social skills.

Surprisingly, however, when mothers described their neighborhoods as more impoverished and lacking in social control, children were rated by peers and teachers as more socially competent. Similarly, when fathers considered their neighborhoods impoverished, their children were more socially competent and better accepted. And when observers described the neighborhoods in negative terms, the children living there were rated positively by teachers and peers (they were less disruptive and more prosocial), although they viewed themselves as lonely. The positive aspects of neighborhoods, such as the parents' perceptions that the neighborhood provided child-oriented resources, were not linked with the children's social functioning.

Influence of Parent Rules and Limits

One reason that children in troubled neighborhoods were socially competent might be that their parents were more vigilant in regulating their experiences. Mothers who perceived more child-related problems in their neighborhood increased their supervision and imposed more limits on their children's neighborhood activities. In turn, heightened supervision and more limitations led to better social behavior among children. Mothers also managed their children's activities more carefully when they perceived less social control and more poverty, danger, and crime in their neighborhoods. The same link did not exist between the father's perceptions of the neighborhood, family rules, and children's social adjustment. It appears therefore that mothers primarily impose the rules on children that shape the influence of neighborhoods on children's social development in the middle-childhood period.

Conclusion

The findings discussed in this article underscore a common belief that neighborhood safety is a major concern of parents. When parents are comfortable with the safety of their neighborhood, children are given greater opportunities to function spontaneously and independently of parental supervision, with the result that children feel less lonely and dissatisfied. Chances to explore are important for young children, and opportunities for children to direct their own activities may have a continuing influence on their developing sense of self-efficacy. At the same time, when mothers see the neighborhood as threatening, they are likely to respond by supervising the child's behavior more closely, which appears to promote the development of social skills that the child's teachers and peers appreciate. The impact of neighborhood quality on children's adjustment may intensify in more disadvantaged communities where families are less able to seek out resources and activities for their children beyond the neighborhood.

This study makes clear that parents' perceptions of their neighborhood are as important as, if not more important than, the area's objective characteristics, so these perceptions deserve continued attention. Similarly, researchers and program planners should carefully consider the ways parents regulate their children's experiences when they reside in a neighborhood that they perceive as lacking in resources or troubled in other ways.

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6. See note no. 2, Garbarino, quote on p. 150.


