

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory: Development of Depression and Anxiety in  
Adolescents

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## **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory: Development of Depression and Anxiety in Adolescents**

In October of 2006, Jane Costello, Alaattin Erkanli and Adrian Angold wrote an article in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* about adolescent depression (Jane Costello, Erkanli, & Angold, 2006). Costello et al became concerned with the increase in antidepressant prescriptions and the rise in adolescent suicide rates and decided to look at twenty-six studies (generating 60,000 observed clients) that observed children born between 1965 and 1996 who had received a psychiatric interview. They found that under the age of thirteen, the rate of depression and anxiety was 2.8%, but in the thirteen to eighteen age ranges, the rate jumped to 5.6%. In a more recent survey done in 2011, it was found that in children under the age of thirteen, the rate of depression and anxiety was 4.8%, and in the thirteen to eighteen age ranges the rate of depression and anxiety was approximately 10.5% (Aldworth et al., 2010).

Urie Bronfenbrenner came up with an ecological systems theory that stated that human development is influenced by the different types of environmental systems that an individual is surrounded by; this theory helps people understand why we may behave differently when comparing behavior within different social settings or even different cultural settings (Korsmo, 2012). But how can Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory help explain the emotional development of adolescents and the development of depression and anxiety disorders?

### **What is Depression?**

Depression is an illness that affects the way you feel about yourself, others, and things in life (Woods, 2003). There are many factors that can increase the chance of depression in an individual including: abuse, some medications, personal conflict within family or friend groups,

death or loss, genetics, major events (such as moving, marriage or divorce, job loss, etc.), social isolation, serious illness, and substance abuse (Schatzberg, 2002). In individuals suffering from depression, the hippocampus (the small part of the brain that is important in storing memories) appears smaller. A small hippocampus has fewer serotonin receptors, which means less serotonin goes to the brain (serotonin is a calming chemical that allows communication between nerves and the body) (Schatzberg, 2002).

**Symptoms of depression.** There are many symptoms of depression, and they come in varying degrees for each individual suffering from depression; no two people experience depression in the exact same way. However, there are many common symptoms that can help identify depression including: feeling sad or anxious all the time; feeling guilty, worthless, hopeless, and/or helpless; losing interest in hobbies that you once cared about; feeling tired or drowsy all the time; not being able to think clearly or being easily distracted; decrease in memory; troubles sleeping and eating; feeling restless and getting unusually upset with people often; pains that do not respond to treatment; self-injury (Woods, 2003).

**Types of depression.** There are three main types of depression: major depressive disorder, chronic depression (also known as dysthymia) and manic depression (also known as bipolar disorder) (Woods, 2003). In his article on depression in *Nursing* magazine, Woods described these three different types of depression. Major depressive disorder includes a combination of symptoms that interfere with one's ability to work, eat, sleep, and enjoy their hobbies and can last a significant period of time while being disabling. This type of depression can occur only once in a person's lifetime, but usually recurs throughout a lifetime. Chronic depression (or dysthymia) is less severe than major depressive disorder, but typically lasts two years or more. Chronic depression can also reoccur throughout a lifetime. Manic depression (or

bipolar disorder) is a very complex mood disorder that alternates between clinical depression and times of extreme elation or mania (Woods, 2003).

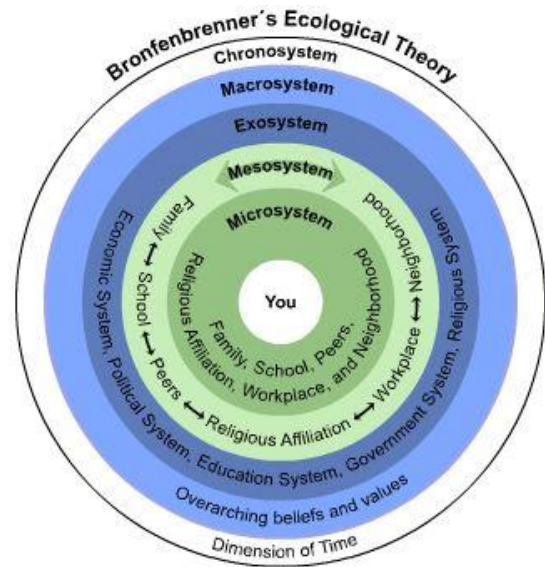
**Stigma around depression.** A stigma surrounds depression that may keep individuals with depression from seeking help (Barney, Griffiths, Jorm, & Christensen, 2006). In their study about the effects of stigma around depression, Barney, Griffiths, Jorm, and Christensen discovered that about 44% of individuals suffering from depression also suffer from the self-stigma and feel embarrassed for going to see a mental health professional. An even higher 46% believed that those professionals would think they were “unbalanced” or “neurotic” and thought others would think less of them for seeking help (Barney et al., 2006).

### **What is Anxiety?**

Gale and Oakley-Browne defined anxiety as excessive worry or tension on most days for at least six months (Gale & Oakley-Browne, 2000). Often the things that are causing this anxiety are small or not important, but they disrupt one’s life most days. Aside from worry and tension, anxiety disorders come with physical symptoms as well, including: increased motor tension (drowsiness, trembling, restlessness, and muscle tension), autonomic hyperactivity (shortness of breath, increased heart rate, dry mouth, cold hands, and dizziness), decreased concentration, headaches, hard time swallowing, hot flashes, feeling lightheaded, having to go to the bathroom frequently, and trouble sleeping (Gale & Oakley-Browne, 2000).

## Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory consists of four main systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. This theory states that individuals encounter different environments and systems throughout their lifetime that can influence their behavior (Korsmo, 2012).



**The microsystem.** The microsystem refers to the groups that most directly influence and impact the individual's development. Friends, family, classmates and teachers, neighbors, and others that have direct contact with an individual are included in their microsystem.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory states that individuals are not only recipients of the experiences that happen in the microsystem, but are also helping to construct the environment (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2013).

**The mesosystem.** A mesosystem involves the relationships between the microsystems in an individual's life. In other words, the experiences in an individual's microsystem can affect and be related to one another. An example of this is the relationship between one's family life and their school life; for example, if a child is abused and/or neglected at home, s/he may have a lower chance of developing positive relationships with teachers and/or peers (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2013).

**The exosystem.** An individual's exosystem is a social setting in which the individual does not play an active role. A simple example of this is the impact that a parent's career has on

their child. If a child is attached to a parent who is away for work for long periods of time, it could impact the relationship the child has with the other parent and/or teachers, and could affect their schoolwork (Santrock, 2012).

**The macrosystem.** The cultural context in which an individual is living is part of their macrosystem. This includes the individual's socioeconomic status, ethnicity and/or race, living conditions, heritage, and values. Because an individual can change the context in which they are living, the macrosystem is something which evolves over time (Santrock, 2012).

### **Applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to Emotional Development**

An individual's emotional development is the emergence of their experience, expression, understanding, and regulation of their emotions from birth all the way through adolescence. It does not occur in isolation; emotional development is impacted by neural, cognitive and behavioral development as well as cultural and contextual influences (Moissinac, 2003). According to Moissinac, as children enter school, they gain a sense of self and a deeper understanding of their emotional self, and it is critical to interact with them as they grow in themselves so they can gain a better understanding of their emotions and how to handle them.

#### **Microsystem influence.**

***Family roles in emotional development.*** When thinking about how to raise a child, emotional development is easy to forget about. However, this is a very important area of child development, and there are some key roles the family plays in helping a child develop emotionally (Howe, Brandon, Hinings, & Schofield, 1999). A family must be purposeful in guiding a child's emotional life and must focus on their emotional needs. Stronger familial bonds will result in higher acknowledgement of emotional needs, which will make the child or

adolescent feel supported in exploring their emotions. Along with this, it is important for family members to model healthy emotional relating. Children mimic those in their immediate surroundings; this includes the way emotions are handled and the way family member relate to one another. When parents can manage their emotions in a healthy way, it will show their children how to manage their emotions in a healthy way as well. An important part of modeling healthy emotions is also teaching children how to handle negative emotions so they can handle negative experiences in a healthy way (Howe et al., 1999).

***Education roles in emotional development.*** In 2002, Raver established a strong link between social and emotional development and behavior and school success, describing the relationship between emotional development, social development, and academic performance as complex (Raver, 2002). Emotional understanding can positively affect social behavior, which in turn can affect school performance. Individuals who cannot regulate their emotions and/or feel as if their emotions are not understood or supported can begin to display disruptive behavior in school, spend less time focusing on tasks and receive less individual instruction and less feedback (Raver, 2002).

**Mesosystem influence.** As demonstrated earlier, an individual learns from those around them, and different settings can have an effect on one another. If an individual is not getting the emotional support they need from their family at home, it can negatively affect their performance at school, which in turn can negatively affect how their teachers and peers interact with them. Unless broken, this becomes a vicious cycle of a lack of emotional support for the individual.

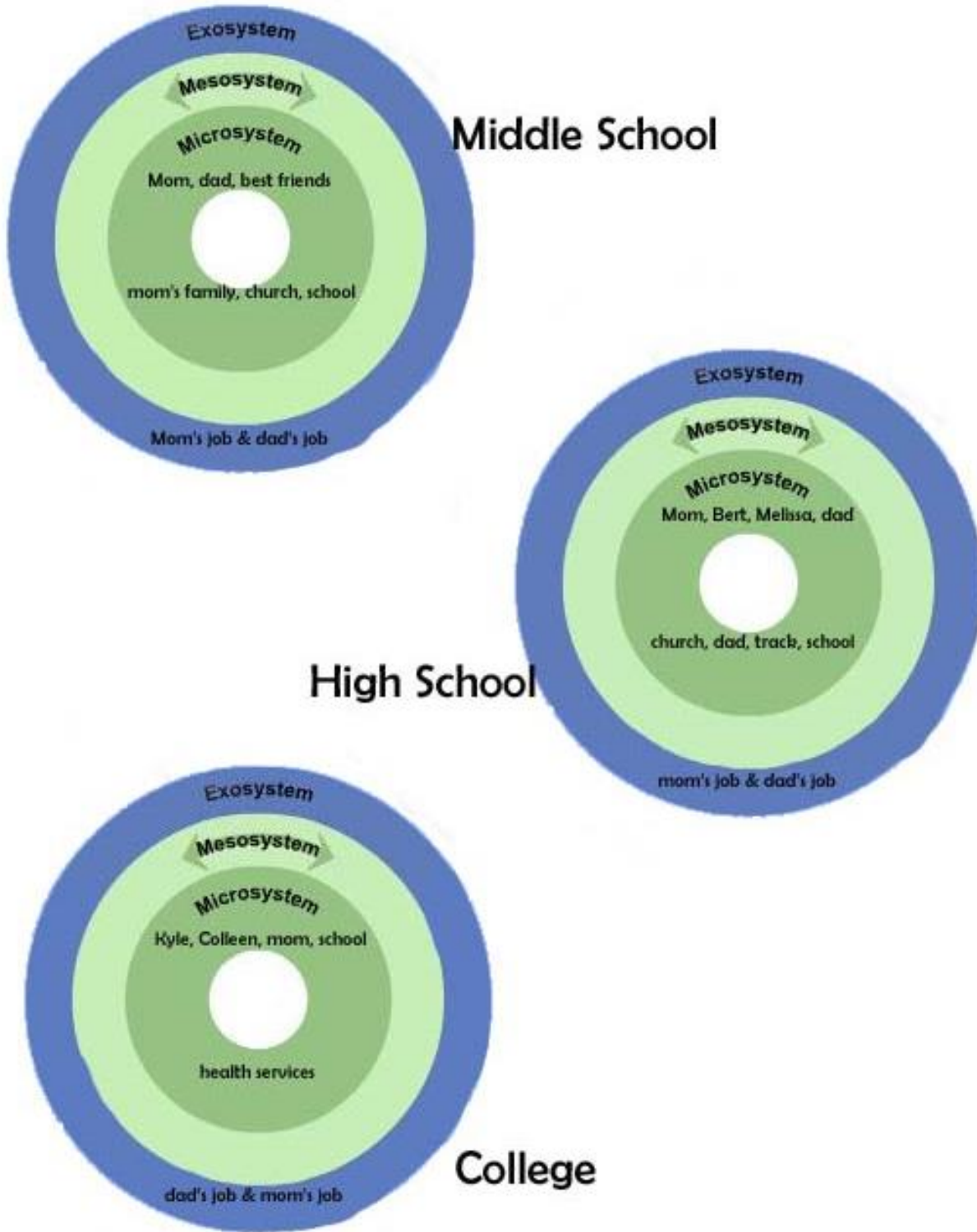
**Exosystem influence.** Emotional support is one of the biggest factors in an adolescent's emotional development, and in order to get emotional support, and adolescent needs interaction with others. A family member's job may not directly influence an individual, but it can indirectly influence them. If a parent has a job that keeps them away for long periods of time, that adolescent may not be able to get the emotional support they need from home. On the other hand, if a parent has a job that allows them to be home for decent periods of time with their child, that child has a higher chance of getting their needed emotional support.

### **What Does This Look Like Applied to a Real-Life Example?**

My parents met when they were stationed overseas in Germany. They dated for a short time before getting married, and soon after, my mother was expecting. My mother got out of the Air Force, but my father stayed in and throughout my life my mother and I followed my father around the United States. When I was eleven years old, my parents got divorced and my mother and I moved to Washington to be closer to her family. When I was twelve, my mother started dating again, and my father remarried when I was thirteen. My father had a son when I was fourteen and a daughter when I was eighteen. When I was thirteen, I started struggling with depression, but kept it to myself. I experienced a series of suicidal thoughts at ages thirteen, fourteen, seventeen, eighteen, and twenty. I never acted upon them, but some days the thoughts were so disruptive, I could not get myself to continue my day. I was sent to therapy at ages seventeen, nineteen, and twenty for depression, commitment issues, and an anxiety disorder, although I did not go regularly because I was afraid of digging deeper into my emotions. In October of 2013, I was officially diagnosed with depression and anxiety and was put on escitalopram.



**Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory applied to my life over time.**



*Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and my story explained.* Growing up, my parents never talked to me about my emotions. I was, and still am, a very emotional person, but my parents made it clear that emotions were not to be shared with others. And so, I learned to internalize all my feelings. When my parents got a divorce, people thought I had taken it really well. I will admit that for the first few years, I thought I was taking it well too; my father was still an important part of my life when my parents first split. As time went on, my father became less and less prevalent in my life, and eventually he stopped calling altogether. This was when my emotional development started to take a negative turn. I started losing an extremely important part of my microsystem, and after having lost so much already, I was not prepared for that. With my father gone, my mother was the only parental figure left in my life; my mother is the least emotional person I know, the only emotion I see her show is anger. My mother did not encourage me to share my feelings about my father or the divorce, so again I internalized them.

My mother and father's jobs have always been an important part of my emotional development. My mother has worked as a computer programmer, a veterinarian, and business personnel at a doctor's office. Overall, she has had decent hours that allow her to spend time with me at home, so although she did not encourage my emotional expression, she was there to support me physically, and that helped. My father on the other hand has been in the Air Force for my entire life. There is a saying that says the military is not a job, but a lifestyle, and I find that very true. My father often worked extremely long hours and weird schedules. Even when we lived in the same house, I did not see him often. When my parents got divorced, it got worse because we were often on opposite sides of the country. My father was not able to be around for me, and that made it more difficult for him to be part of my emotional development process.

As time went on, my depression and anxiety got worse and harder for me to control. I also started losing a lot of pieces of my microsystem. I lost my religion, huge chunks of family, lots of friends, and a supportive sports team. With a smaller microsystem, I also had a small mesosystem. This meant less supports for me, physically and emotionally. It was not until I made health services part of my microsystem that my depression and anxiety started becoming more manageable. It took a lot of convincing from my boyfriend, Kyle, and my mother in order for me to pursue health services. Had my microsystem been bigger and more extensive, it might not have taken so long for me to seek help.

### **Conclusion**

When it comes to emotional development in adolescents, there are many factors that can impact development both negatively and positively. These factors interact with one another in a very complex manner, and it is important to pay attention to each factor. An individual's microsystem is their closest group of influence and can greatly influence the development of the individual. Without strong emotional support and understanding from those in the individual's microsystem, the individual has an increased chance of suffering from depression and/or an anxiety disorder. It is important to remember that emotional development takes place in an individual from birth until late adolescence (Howe et al., 1999), so a steady and reliable microsystem and mesosystem are an important part of an individual's life. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory gives us a visual way to look at an individual's life, and it makes it easier to spot where problems in emotional development could have arisen. It is a very simple theory to apply to any individual's life, and allows someone to compare different systems over a period of time to better see what changed and how it affected the individual.

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