

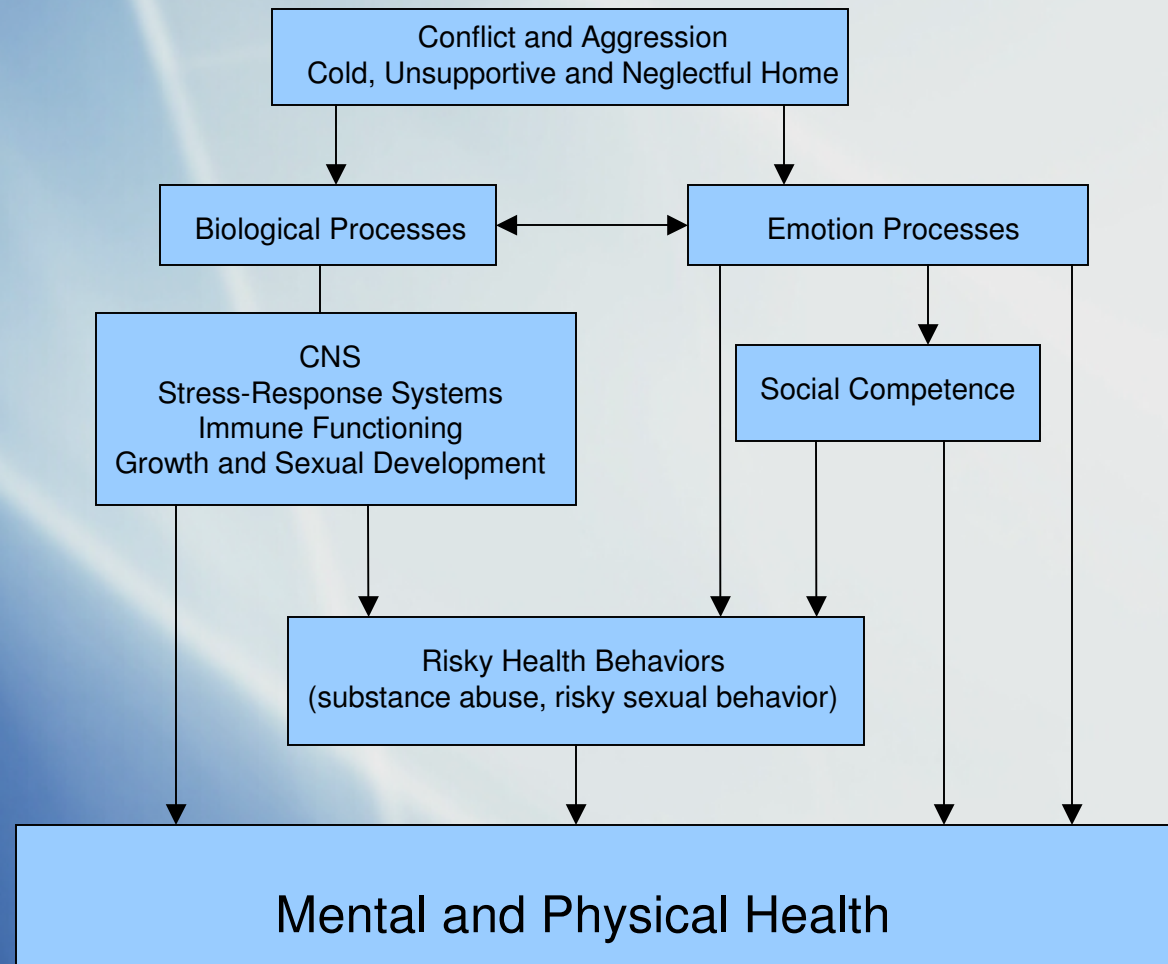
A Framework for Examining
How Conflict in Family
Environments Can Shape Health
and Development

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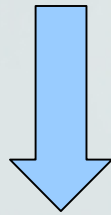
Goals

1. Risky Families Model (Repetti, Taylor, Seeman, 2002)
2. Four kinds of interesting complications arise when we ask about pathways to health through the family environment
3. Some suggestions about possible ways to capitalize on those complications; they are opportunities!

Risky Families Model

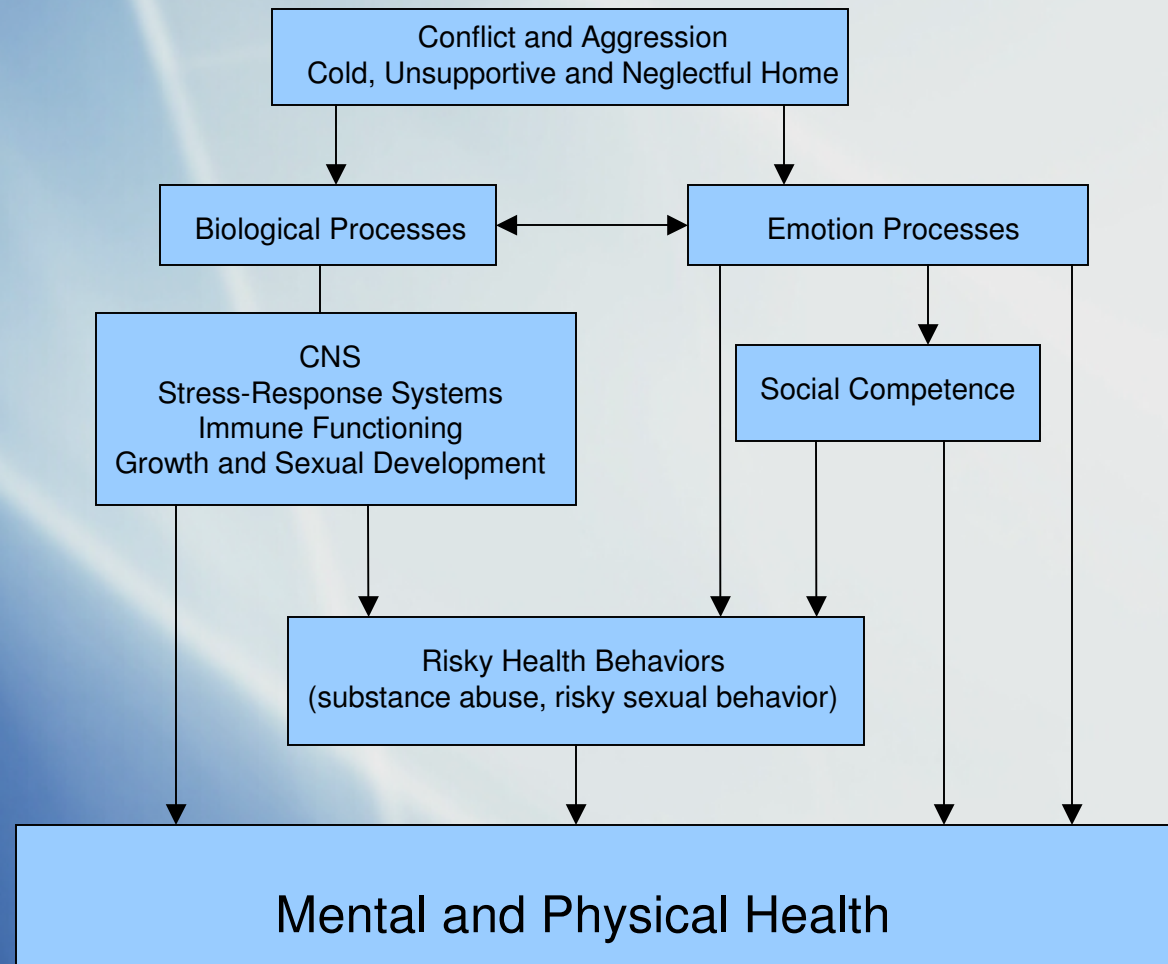


Crowing up in Families with
Conflict and Aggression
Cold, Unsupportive and Neglectful
Home

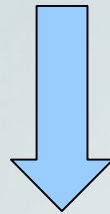


Mental and Physical Health
Problems in Adulthood

Risky Families Model



Conflict and Aggression
Cold, Unsupportive and Neglectful Home



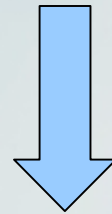
Biological
Processes
CNS

Stress-Response Systems

Immune Functioning

Growth and Sexual Development

Conflict and Aggression
Cold, Unsupportive and Neglectful Home



Biological Processes

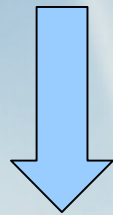
CNS

Stress-Response Systems

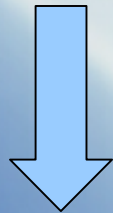
Immune Functioning

Growth and Sexual Development

Conflict and Aggression
Cold, Unsupportive and Neglectful Home



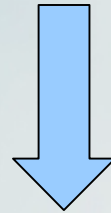
Biological Processes



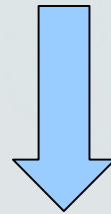
Deficits in the control and expression of emotion



Conflict and Aggression
Cold, Unsupportive and Neglectful Home



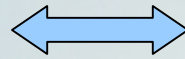
Deficits in the control and expression of
emotion



Social Competence

Conflict and Aggression
Cold, Unsupportive and Neglectful

Biological Processes



Emotion Processes

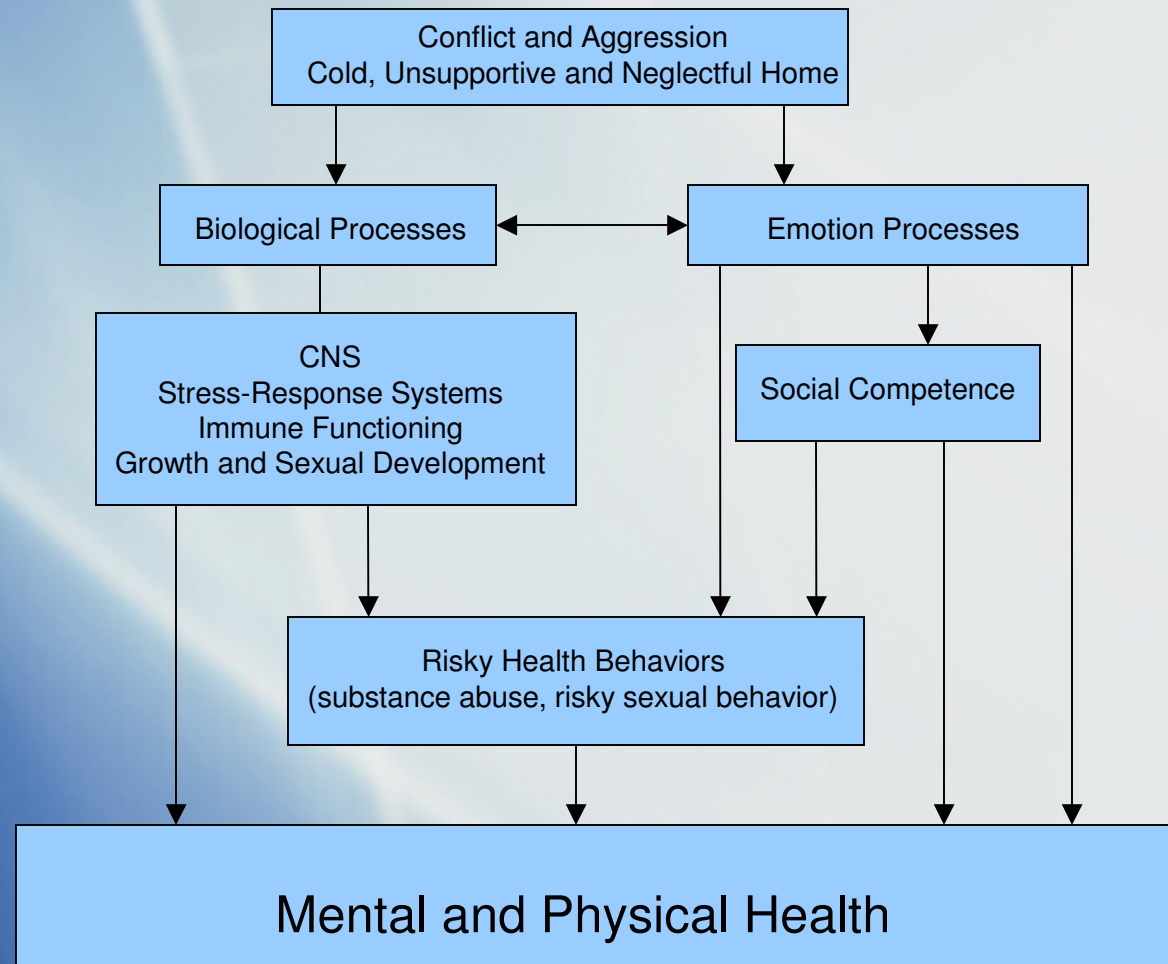


Social Competence

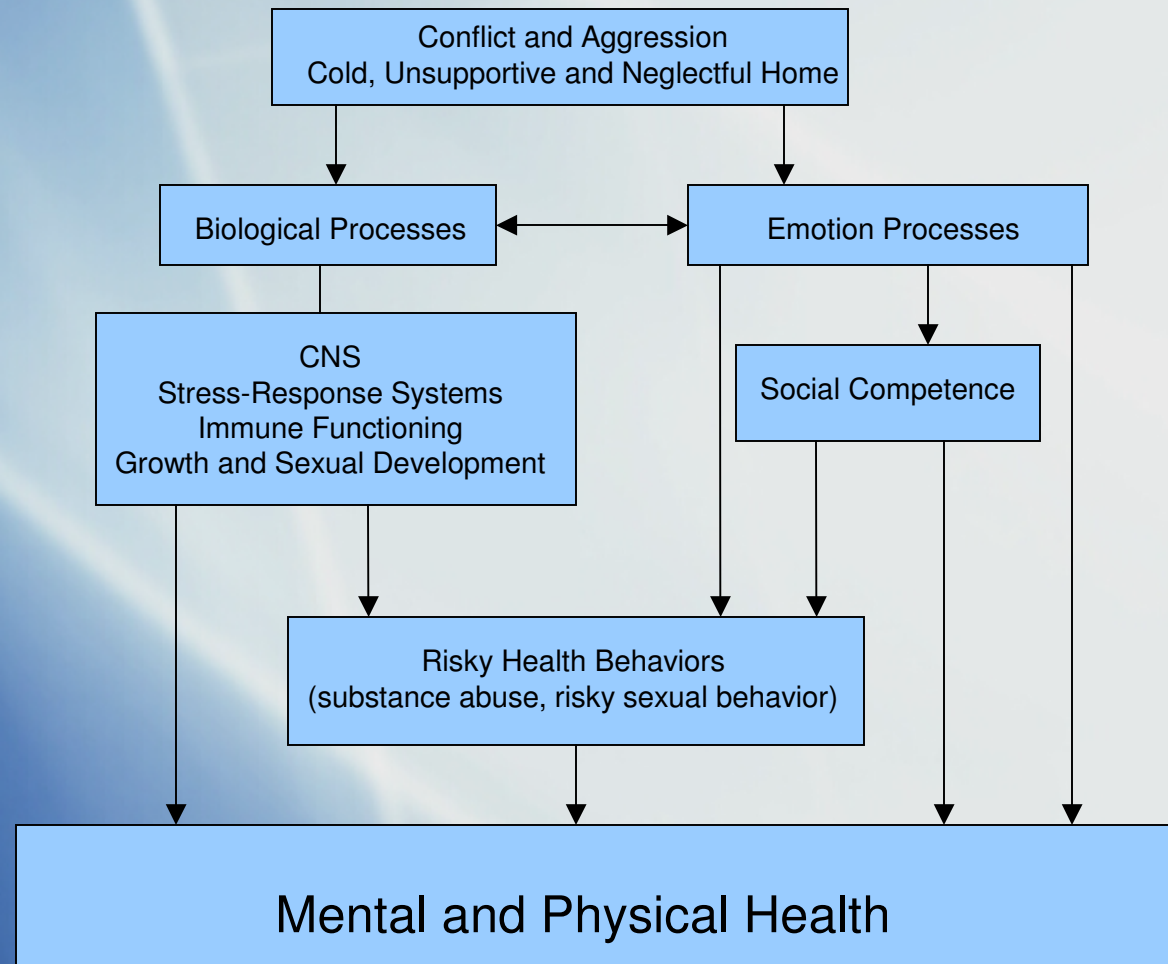


Risky Health Behaviors
(substance abuse, risky sexual behavior)

Risky Families Model



Risky Families Model



Investigations of pathways to health through family environments are complicated by...

- § **“Family” as the source of influence**
- § Lifespan approach
- § Genes play a role
- § Search for “good” versus “bad” outcomes

When the family is the source of influence it can be difficult to precisely identify causal processes

- 1. The family carries its larger social ecology with it**
2. Individuals and subsystems within the family influence each other at all levels

The family carries its larger social ecology with it

- § Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory
- § Neighborhoods, schools, daycare setting, peers
- § Social class, cultural values & customs shape parenting and other aspects of social interaction in the home

The family carries its larger social ecology with it

The social ecology magnifies the family's
impact and acts directly on the mediators of
its influence (or “sustaining” factors in the
Risky Families Model)

e.g. social and emotional development; risky
behaviors

Challenge

How to disentangle processes that take place within the family (stress and conflict) from other aspects of the family's social ecology?

Sampling Strategy

- § Focus on more homogenous groups
(e.g., single parent households, families with an unemployed parent, families living in the same neighborhood, etc.)
- § Effects of family conflict and stress are easier to identify when not confounded with other characteristics of the family's social context.

Close ups on Families

- § Close-ups on families as they cope with similar stressors outside of the home
- § Particulars and nuances of families' lives tend to get buried in the general trends
- § A new approach to measurement: qualitative data, intensive repeated assessments

When the family is the source of influence it can be difficult to precisely identify causal processes

1. The family carries its larger social ecology with it
- 2. Individuals and subsystems within the family influence each other at all levels**

Individuals and subsystems influence each other

- § All family members contribute to the family social climate
- § Family members shape each other's behavior

Individuals and subsystems influence
each other

Family members also influence each
other's mood and physiology

§ Emotion transmission

§ “Coregulation” of physiological states

(Shoebi, 2008; Saxbe & Repetti, *in press*)

Subsystems influence each other

Marital Interaction



Parent-Child Interaction

(Margolin, Gordis, & Oliver, 2004)

When individuals and subsystems within the family influence each other...

§ Determining “cause” and “effect” is not straightforward

§ Problems when key players, like fathers and siblings, are left out of the picture

Investigations of pathways to health through family environments are complicated by...

- § “Family” as the source of influence
- § **Lifespan approach**
- § Genes play a role
- § Search for “good” versus “bad” outcomes

Lifespan approach makes it difficult to identify “outcomes”

- § The same aspect of development is manifested in different ways at different points
- § Need to identify appropriate “outcome” at each stage of development

Lifespan approach makes it difficult to identify “outcomes”

Timing of effects are hard to pin down because of consistencies in the family environment over time

To what extent do the continuities in the family explain associations between early experience and later outcomes?

Consistencies over time make it hard to figure out when effects occurred

Intervention studies

§ create discontinuities in family practices (e.g., parenting)

§ allow researchers to discriminate effects of prior conditions from effects of current conditions

Another Complication of the Lifespan Approach

By the adult years, there are potentially three streams of family influence:

1. Developmental pressures from past experiences
2. Relationships with current family (spouse, children)
3. Current relationships with family of origin

Continuing developmental pressures from past experiences in family of origin

That's what models like the Risky Families Model
are all about...

Early experiences in the family and their lingering
effects on mental and physical health

Current relationships with spouse and offspring

For example, conflict and hostility in marital relationships have direct and indirect effects on health

Effects of marital conflict and hostility on health

§ Mediated by depression, health behaviors (e.g., alcohol use), and physiological mechanisms (cardiovascular, endocrine, and immune systems) (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001)

Current relationships with the family of origin

- § Caregiving for elderly parents
- § Relationship between caregiving daughters and siblings
- § Conflict and stress in the family is also manifested in the form of elder abuse

A true lifespan approach to the health outcomes of stress and conflict in the family

All three forms of family influence should be considered

1. Early experiences in family of origin
2. Relationships with spouse and children
3. Current relationships family of origin

Investigations of pathways to health through family environments are complicated by...

- § “Family” as the source of influence
- § Lifespan approach
- § **Genes play a role**
- § Search for “good” versus “bad” outcomes

G x E

§ Families shape the phenotypic expression of genes

§ Effects of the family social environment are modified by genes

Genes act at every point in the process

- § Direct effects on physiology, emotion processes, social competence
- § Phenotypic expression may be influenced by the family environment

Studies that assess genetic risk and rearing

§ human adoption studies (Cadoret et al., 1995)

§ non-human primates cross-fostered to females who provide different rearing conditions (Suomi, 1991)

Both paradigms suggest that a combination of genetic risk, parenting predispose offspring to developmental outcomes

mRNA used to study gene expression

- § Amount of mRNA in a tissue sample indicates rate at which gene for that protein was transcribed
- § Eg, rats exposed to maternal separation and handling (rearing condition) showed elevated expression of genes (for RC3 in hippocampus) required for development of brain circuitry
- § A mechanism by which early experiences shape development of the CNS

(McNamara, Huot, Lenox, & Plotsky, 2002)

Genes may modify effects of the family environment

Insensitive parenting during infancy predicted less controlled and more aggressive behavior at age three, but only among children with a particular allele of a gene involved with dopamine (D4) receptors in the limbic area of the brain

(Bakermans-Kranenburg & van Ijzendoorn, 2006)

Gene-environment correlations complicate matters further...

§ Family environments are shaped by parents' heritable characteristics

§ Those genes are passed to offspring and influence their development

Genes account for some of the observed associations between family environments and outcomes in biological offspring

For all of these reasons...

- § The role of genes cannot be ignored in our models
- § Genetic inheritance must be a part of our study of family influence processes

Investigations of pathways to health through family environments are complicated by...

- § “Family” as the source of influence
- § Lifespan approach
- § Genes play a role
- § **Search for “good” versus “bad” outcomes**

Why would genes have us act this way?

- § Phylogenetic questions about the evolutionary processes that result in developmental trajectories
- § Some responses to early negative experiences may represent adaptations

Possible short-term benefits of what appear to be adverse outcomes in the long run

- § “adaptive tradeoffs” that organisms make in harsh rearing environments (Simpson & Gangestad, 2001)
- § Quickened pace of maturation may be one example

Immediate biological reactions to maternal separation

- § Evidence of quickened pace of maturation, in non-human primates
- § increased release of growth hormone & enhanced immune response
- § Set the stage for acceleration of aging process in the longer term

(Repetti, Taylor, & Saxbe, 2007)

Another example of quickened maturation may be early pubertal development

Research with girls

- § Conflict and stress in the home
- § Harsh and controlling parenting

(Belsky et al., 2007; Saxbe & Repetti, in press; Ellis & Garber, 2000)

Early Pubertal Development

- § Possible advantages to bearing more children across the lifespan in high-risk environments (shortage of potential supportive mates)
- § Contribute to risky sexual behavior in young teens associated with family conflict?

Children Growing up in Violent Families

- § Responses of greater vigilance, attributions of hostile motives to others, and a coping style in which escape is prioritized may be adaptive in the home
- § Costs include heightened emotional and physiological reactivity

Adaptations may maximize short-term survival benefits, even at the expense of long-term outcomes

Therefore, assigning a “positive” or “negative” label to outcomes is not always possible and may, at times, be misleading.

Bottom Line

- § Consider possible *adaptive* functions of observed responses to conflict and stress in families
- § May provide a different perspective on the concept of resilience

Questions about pathways to health through the family contain some hidden complexities

Complications are clues telling us

§ where to dig deeper

§ where different methods are needed

They point the way to a better understanding.