As noted in Chapter 2 of the textbook, any large society encompasses various “layers” of environment that affect children’s development in one way or another. One developmental psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, has described the nature of these layers in his ecological systems perspectives (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989, 1995, 2005). Over the course of several decades, Bronfenbrenner’s views evolved through a series of theoretical models of children’s development. In this reading, we describe the basic ideas of his ecological systems theory, process-person-context-time model, and bioecological model of human development. Key to each of these models is children’s participation in defined social systems, such as the family, a peer network, and the school. Bronfenbrenner’s models portray children’s development as firmly rooted in separate but interacting systems—the ecology of children’s lives.

Bronfenbrenner articulated his first model, ecological systems theory, in the late 1970s. Ecological systems theory defines the several layers in children’s environments that affect children either directly or indirectly (see Figure 2.1):

1. Central in most children’s lives is, of course, the family. Families are complex social units (systems) with people who interact regularly and take on defined roles. Some family roles are fairly predictable based on culture, generation, and gender. For instance, in most North American and European families that have school-aged children, parents rather than children make decisions about many important family matters, such as where the family will live and which schools children will attend. Other roles emerge depending on family circumstances. For example, one child with athletic prowess might emerge as the family “star,” and another might become a scapegoat blamed for the family’s problems.

Two or more family members may form subsystems, perhaps in the form of longstanding alliances or animosities. For example, two brothers may occasionally rebel against their “unfair” parents, solidifying their connections to each another (“We don’t like Mom, right?”), or a mother and daughter might unite against a physically punitive father. Alternatively, two parents might both be so consumed with the health of a chronically ill daughter that they neglect their relationship with each other (Bowen, 1978).

The family exists within the context of larger environmental and community systems. The microsystem consists of children’s experiences in their immediate surroundings. In child care centers, schools, homes of extended family members, and the neighborhood, children develop relationships with a variety of adults and peers. These relationships with people outside the family may be particularly important when parents work outside the home or
Figure 2.1. In Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems perspectives, children are affected by multiple systems that are nested within one another and that all change over time.
have limited energy and resources (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). For example, extended family members take on varied roles, perhaps acting as primary caregivers, affectionate playmates, or “cheerleaders” when children reach significant developmental milestones.

2. The various microsystems in children’s lives (their families, neighborhoods, schools, and so on) form a connected network known as a mesosystem. Children are more likely to thrive when families and schools maintain regular and productive communication. Children perform better academically when links between important socialization agents are strong and positive (Garbarino, 1981). Unfortunately, microsystems don’t always work well together; for example, parents and teachers may be at odds about how best to help children grow and learn most effectively.

3. Another layer within Bronfenbrenner’s hierarchy of systems is the exosystem, which includes individuals and institutions that influence children’s microsystems even though their actual contact with children is minimal. Examples of entities within the exosystem include parents’ work settings, public support systems (e.g., social service agencies), health and fitness clubs, and parents’ extended families and friends. Exosystems can offer tremendous indirect support to children through the direct support they offer parents. When working parents can regularly relax in the company of friends, they are emotionally bolstered and can, as a result, interact with their children in a less stressed manner than they might otherwise.

4. At a still broader level, exosystems exist within contexts of cultural belief systems and behavior patterns, or macrosystems. Macrosystems include far-reaching events, such as war and social strife, general migration from inner-city settings into suburban and rural areas, and cultural values and practices (e.g., an emphasis on self-reliance, or advocacy of racist beliefs). Children’s moral development seems to depend somewhat on the form of government in their country: Children who grow up in democratic societies—where diverse viewpoints are acceptable and individual rights are legally protected—are more likely to listen to other people’s diverse viewpoints and less likely to conform to adult authority than children who grow up in totalitarian regimes (Garbarino & Bronfenbrenner, 1976).

These various social systems often interact with one another as they affect children. For example, out-of-home caregivers assist many parents with their children during the day. However, if child care is not responsive, safe, and stable, parents may become anxious about the welfare of their children and experience stress. Parents’ stress may, in turn, lead them to be less patient and effective with their children.

The various systems just described are hardly static; they are changing systems.¹ For instance, as children develop, a parent’s role shifts. As infants and toddlers, children must be watched constantly. As children grow older, they begin to internalize rules and guidelines for behavior and acquire a better understanding of what actions may threaten their well-being. By adolescence, they simply keep their parents informed about their activities and whereabouts.

¹ Bronfenbrenner sometimes referred to changes in the various systems over time—for instance, the changing sociocultural environment—as the chronosystem.
Parents, too, undergo developmental transformations and other changes across the lifespan. Changes in parents’ occupational status, economic security, emotional well-being, and physical health all can affect children’s day-to-day experiences.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Bronfenbrenner expressed dissatisfaction with his own ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Notably, he became concerned that his attention to environmental contexts overshadowed the child’s own role. Accordingly, he redirected his theoretical energy to defining the child’s developmental tasks (e.g., forming trusting relationships with caregivers) and the child’s own personal characteristics (e.g., temperament, personality, intelligence, motivations, interests, and self-perceptions). He also showed how these characteristics of the child affect interactions with other people. To remedy the omission of the child and other limitations of his original theory, Bronfenbrenner formulated the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model of human development. He and his colleagues argued that child development draws on four interrelated components:

- **Process** refers to the types of interactions the child has with caregivers and others in the microsystem. The child’s regular interactions with caregivers and others are the primary sources of learning and development.
- **Person** refers to the child and his or her unique characteristics. This is the factor that was previously neglected by ecological research but has a tremendous effect on the kinds of interactions the child has with other people.
- **Context** refers to the nested systems that were originally identified in the ecological systems theory.
- **Time** refers to several aspects of temporality, including the child’s developmental age, the extended time spent together by child and caregivers, and the historical era and generations in which the child and caregivers live.

In the last few years before his death in 2005, Bronfenbrenner began using the term *bioecological model of human development* to describe his ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The prefix *bio* communicates the need to consider the child’s biological dispositions as contributors to developmental change. Other examples of emphases in the new model include the progressively responsible actions of the child that result from regularly occurring interactions with caregivers, the significance of the child’s emotional bonds to caregivers, the essential support given to the child’s primary caregiver by another adult (e.g., a spouse or family friend), and the dramatic changes in child and parent roles over the lifespan.