Book Review

Children's Social Networks and Social Supports
Edited by Deborah Belle (1989)
Chichester, England: John Wiley

Reviewed by Martin D. Ruck[1]

According to the editor, Deborah Belle, of this volume, the study of children's social networks and social supports is a relatively new field. This current work serves to bring together the most pertinent past (ca. 1970s!) and present theoretical and empirical work in the area. As stated in the introduction, the goal of this volume is "to synthesize what is known and to stimulate and guide future research" (1989, p. 5), in the area of children's social network and social supports. To accomplish this the editor has assembled a multidisciplinary group of contributors and has organized the book into five major parts. Each of these parts deals with a specific theme in children's social networks and social supports.

The first part of this book discusses children's social networks and social supports from both an historical and a cultural perspective. The chapter by Hareven presents a comprehensive historical review of the cultural and social changes which have affected children's social networks in the United States over the past two centuries. Tietjen examines some of the ecological issues involved in understanding children's support networks. The chapter by Weisner addresses the subject of cross-cultural similarities and differences in terms of what constitutes social support. Wenger examines how the sociocultural context of a nonindustrialized community influences the the development of children's social relationships.

Part two of the book examines some of the developmental aspects of children's social networks in terms of age-related and gender differences. Feiring and Lewis's chapter provides a rare look at a longitudinal study of the changes in children's networks from early to middle childhood. They report a study of 75 children, along with their mothers, interviewed at 3, 6, and 9 years of age. Next, Furman examines the development of children's social networks on several different levels ranging from face to face encounters to the global network level. Finally, Belle contributes a chapter that examines the role gender plays in the development of children's social networks and how children relate to network members.

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The two chapters that make up the third part of the book present a variety of measurement issues that arise when studying children's social networks and social supports. Wolchik, Beals and Sandler focus primarily on conceptual and methodological issues underlying the construct of social support. They also provide an excellent review of the various social support inventories used by researchers in the field. The chapter by Zelkowitz addresses the methodological question of whether one should use maternal reports or children's own reports as sources of information regarding children's social networks.

The fourth and shortest part of the book investigates the question of how children's social and supportive networks come into being. Parke and Bhavnagri discuss the ways in which parents act as managers of their children's peer relationships. The following chapter by Hirsch and Dubois examines the formation of social networks during the early adolescent years.

The three chapters that make up the final part of the book deal with the implications of social networks and social supports in terms of children's well being. In the first of these chapters Sandler, Miller, Short, and Wolchik examine how children's social support functions to protect children from stressful life experiences. Berndt addresses the types of social support that are likely to be received from peers during childhood and adolescence. The chapter by Bryant deals with the issue of the child's need for support in relation to their ever increasing need for independence.

The collection of chapters in this volume provide an excellent overview of the past and present research on children's social support and networks. It offers new insights into areas of children's social development that have undoubtedly been taken for granted in the past. In addition, it does an excellent job of incorporating the pertinent research on adults' social relationships. It is an extremely well written and coherently organized book. The various theories, models, and empirical findings that are presented in this volume are accompanied by clearly illustrated tables and figures. As well, the book contains substantial author and subject indices.

This reviewer commends the editor for having achieved the intended goal of bringing together relevant work in the area, and hopefully, encouraging future research. In short, I would strongly recommend this book to clinicians and researchers alike. However, I would caution the nonspecialist that they might find such theoretical and research-based treatment slow going at best. Nevertheless, this volume should be considered a valuable addition, both at a conceptual and empirical level, to the study of children's social networks and social supports.