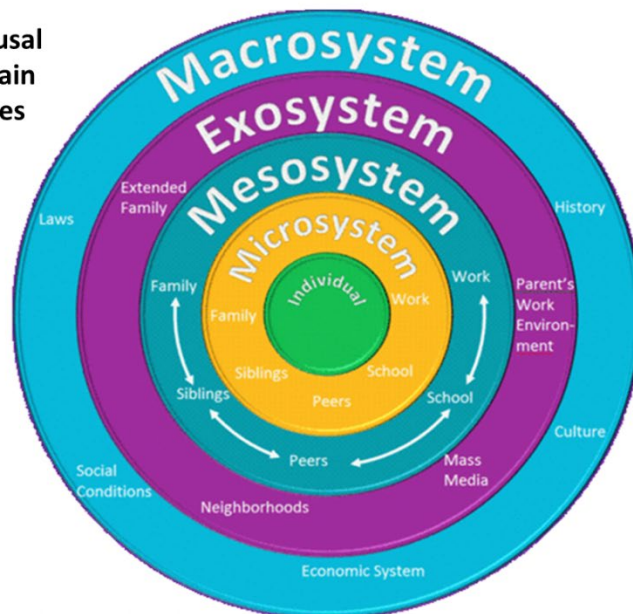


An ecological approach to assessing and intervening to improve attendance and promote inclusion

It is important when working to improve attendance to hold a curious stance in order to understand all of the possible factors underpinning poor attendance or the risk of exclusion. An ecological approach recognises that people (especially children) are best seen as situated within and subject to multiple influences from their environment.

Helping to think about multiple influences or causal factors that sustain current difficulties



Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory (1979)

The practice framework currently used in Family Early Help 'whole family' intervention is based on such an approach. Identifying and targeting those factors most strongly associated with non-attendance or risk of exclusion in collaboration with the family themselves can more be more effective in deciding together which of the range of actions and interventions available are most likely to be helpful in promoting inclusion. By acting transparently and seeking buy-in from families in identifying these factors, the greater the chance there is of achieving our aims, since by doing this collaboratively we are teaching problem-solving, thinking systemically, and sustainable change.

In the Family Early Help framework, this analysis is completed through a process called *mapping*. Mapping refers to the process of identifying factors that lead to, or allow, persistent non-attendance to occur. Professionals and parents are invited to think of all of the possible contributing factors, grouping these factors under the headings 'individual, family, school/work, community'.

Mapping Step 1 – Choose what's going in the middle of your map

Start by writing the behaviour that is of concern in the middle of your map, making it as specific as possible. As a starting point, this is usually going to refer to poor attendance, for example:

Susie refused to come to school for the last two weeks
Keylon is often late to school and gets marked as absent
On Tuesday, Marsha threatened to hit another pupil
Kent often talks and distracts other students in class

By taking this approach you will be more likely to generate ideas about specific contributing factors as well as more global factors. Make sure you write it as a specific observable behaviour rather than a thought process or a feeling – this is because anything *other than an observable behaviour will already include a hypothesis within its description*. For example writing 'Susie is doesn't like coming to school' is already assuming that not liking school is the most powerful reason for non-attendance, when in fact it could be that she loves learning but is reluctant to come for another reason.

Mapping Step 2 – Work out the possible contributing factors

Collect information and ideas about contributing factors to the problem - from your experience of this family, from your experience of other families, ideas from the family themselves, from the your colleagues, from the academic literature, from observation and from collecting sequences with the family. Aim to think systemically across multiple levels. Organise and check the ideas visually – create a map showing with arrows that show the possible contributing factors leading to the thing that needs changing and in so doing check with yourself and the family if they really do **lead** to the thing in the middle or if they are just background information. The purpose is not to get the right answer straight away, but to generate as many possible causes as possible that fit the data and the evidence base for this young person or family.

Mapping Step 3 – Picking a factor to target

What is most powerful? Try covering up each factor, and think/discuss with the professional network/family whether the example would still have happened without that factor. What will be easiest to change? It does not make sense to go for something hard to change if there is an easier way of getting there. What's most immediately connected? The further back in the chain of causality, the less likely we are to get an immediate effect from intervening. What gets buy-in from the family? If they don't agree that it's worth trying to work on factor then they are less likely to commit to it in a genuine way.

Mapping Step 4 – Choosing interventions

If a particular contributing factor (for example *Mum is depressed*) is the sort of thing that evidence has shown is often helped by a particular intervention, e.g. *having talking therapy*, and then our starting point should be thinking about getting that in place. Where there isn't an obvious 'intervention', we use our understanding of child development, family relations, parenting styles, impact of deprivation, adult mental health to help us create an intervention plan that makes sense. We owe it to families and the wider community to be able to clearly explain why we are trying the intervention we are trying – not just personal preference or 'what I've always done'.



This is your chance to innovate. Think outside the box – if it occurs to you an approach might be good. Don't assume that someone else in the network should do the intervention because that's 'their role' – think about who would most easily be able to get it done, in terms of acceptability to family, available time.