Chapter 2 sets the stage for reading Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this chartbook. It explains the public health model of social ecology that NHPS used to select and analyze the data presented in subsequent chapters and provides context for how NHPS examines and discusses children's emotional and behavioral health in Delaware. It presents key issues, defines important concepts, describes data sources, and includes other helpful background information.

**Changing Perceptions About Children’s Emotional and Behavioral Health Needs**

Traditionally, society has not perceived children’s mental health as a public health issue, but as an individual health concern for which a child is provided clinical care. Terms such as “mental health” and “mental illness” are themselves barriers to changing this perception because they carry stigma that often limits how society and systems respond to such issues. Many experts agree that to effectively promote mental health and prevent mental disorders, professionals in the field must change the way society views children’s emotional and behavioral health needs.

The following definitions help clarify some of the central concepts of this field:

- Mental health, comprised of emotional and behavioral components, is the state of successful performance of mental functioning, resulting in productive activities, fulfilling relationships with other people, and the ability to adapt to change and cope with adversity specific to the individual’s culture. From early childhood until late life, mental health is the springboard of thinking and communication skills, learning, emotional growth, resilience, and self-esteem.

- Emotional and behavioral health refers to the thoughts, moods, feelings, actions, and reactions that support how individuals view themselves, their lives, and the other people in their lives; evaluate their challenges and problems; and explore choices for handling stress, relating to other people, and making decisions. Emotional and behavioral health is a part of overall child well-being. It draws on knowledge from psychology, sociology, psychiatry, child development, and other fields of study. Reducing the burden of mental health problems starts with promoting optimal emotional and behavioral health in children and youth.

- Conversely, emotional and behavioral health problems are the thoughts, moods, feelings, actions, and reactions that compromise the individual’s ability to engage in productive activities, have fulfilling relationships with other people, adapt to change, and cope with adversity.

**How Social Factors Influence Children’s Physical and Mental Health**

The ways in which emotional and behavioral difficulties develop in children are complex; there is no single cause or risk factor for any disorder. It is doubtful most childhood emotional and behavioral disorders can be cured by treating causes that supposedly exist within the child. Combinations of different risk factors can lead to similar symptoms, and no single cause may produce a specific outcome. Similar risk factors may affect different children in disparate ways, resulting in different symptoms for children exposed to the same risks.

A large body of scientific evidence supports the belief that factors within the social fabric play a significant role in determining the physical and mental health of individuals beyond their behavior and genetics. Clearly developed strategies that alter social influences, such as those within the family, school, and community settings, can have larger and longer-lasting effects on a broader array of behaviors.

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Nemours Health & Prevention Services

**Conceptual Framework**
It is important to understand how the social environment affects child well-being in order to improve health outcomes for children in Delaware. NHPS used current data to understand some important influences on children's emotional and behavioral health, particularly when children are exposed to multiple risks. The information presented here reflects NHPS' commitment to positively influence the social environment so that all children and youth in Delaware have the resources necessary—and the ability—to overcome obstacles and grow up healthy.

**Key Concepts**

The following concepts are key to recognizing how children's physical and mental health is influenced by social factors, how the people and conditions in children's environments support their development, and how children's vulnerabilities to poor mental health outcomes can be reduced by promoting positive emotional and behavioral health:

- The **social ecological model of human development** and the many factors influencing development
- **Resilience** and its importance to children's emotional and behavioral health
- How strengthening protective factors and reducing risk factors can influence children's emotional and behavioral health

The Social Ecological Model of Human Development

“The ecological model environment is conceived as a set of nested structures, each inside the other like a set of Russian dolls.”

— Urie Bronfenbrenner

Children grow and develop within a larger social environment—their health and well-being is greatly influenced by the people and conditions to which they are exposed. While the concept of social determinants of health (see Chapter 1) describes the collection of social factors that influence health, the social ecological model helps us understand how individuals and their social environments are interrelated.

The defining feature of the social ecological model of human development is the growth and change that occurs as a result of interactions between individuals and environmental influences, which include the family, school, peers, neighborhood, community, and nation.11

Because development is a dynamic process that will vary depending on characteristics of the person and the environmental influences, the social ecological model illustrates how individuals both influence and are influenced by the unique features of their environments. The social ecological model is a way to organize and think about the complex range of social influences—from parent practices that have a direct influence on the child, to community and economic factors that can only influence the child through the actions of others.

Children are a particularly vulnerable part of the population and prolonged exposure to negative social factors can have serious consequences for their health and well-being. Because children experience rapid developmental changes, harsh social conditions and situations can lead to a host of poor emotional and behavioral health outcomes, including reduced school readiness, low educational attainment, problem behaviors, and emotional impairments as they age.

A healthy start during childhood is crucial, as inadequate health and development supports increase the lifetime risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes and in turn, decrease physical, cognitive, and emotional functioning in adulthood. The risks to the developing child are greater for those in situations where negative social factors are prevalent. Children exposed to significant stressors are more likely to develop diagnosable conditions and are less likely to experience positive
developmental outcomes. However, the risks to children's emotional and behavioral health can be minimized by ensuring adequate social and economic support systems, providing health and preventive care resources, providing access to high-quality education, offering good nutrition and health education, and supporting parents to ensure high-quality parent-child relations.

The social ecological model is often illustrated as a series of circles within circles, each influencing an individual's development to varying degrees. Figure 2.1 depicts the social ecological model as it is often presented in the scientific literature. At the center of the model are the personal attributes of the individual. These personal attributes play a significant role in shaping the health and well-being of the individual child.

**Figure 2.1: Social Ecological Model**

At the interpersonal level, formal and informal social network and support systems—including family, workgroup, and peer networks—play a critical role in healthy development. Social support is conducive to healthy development and receipt of support is crucial for managing day-to-day stressors and adversities. Relationships with immediate social systems such as family, friends, neighbors, social groups, churches, and school are in the circle(s) closest to the individual. Individual behavior has a direct influence on and is influenced by these immediate relationships.

**Institutional and organizational** factors are those influences and characteristics of the social institutions and organizations in which people participate. For example, childcare, schools, churches, healthcare, and recreational facilities are institutions that have a significant impact on children's healthy development.

**Community** factors are the relationships among organizations and institutions. How well the systems are linked together to provide seamless support to children and their families is important to maintaining a positive influence on health outcomes for children.

Finally, public policy influences are the local, state, and federal policies and laws that regulate and support healthy development. An individual's relationship with the policy level is less direct but no less important than an individual's immediate interpersonal relationships. For example, an individual may not be involved in developing policies or laws, but those policies and laws have an impact on the individual's behavior (seat belt laws, for example).
**Resilience**

Resilience is the individual’s ability to thrive despite being exposed to difficult life circumstances, situations, stressors, and risks. For children, particularly those continuously exposed to harmful social, relational, and behavioral risks, the ability to withstand adversity and “bounce back” is vitally important to their emotional and behavioral health.

**Strengthening Protective Factors and Reducing Risk Factors**

Research has identified a set of positive characteristics that distinguish resilient children from non-resilient children; characteristics that are associated with healthy physical, emotional, cognitive, and social outcomes. Because they often prevent or minimize the development of emotional or behavioral problems, these positive characteristics are called protective factors or buffering factors. For the most part, these protective factors fall into three groups: individual, family, and external supports. The right combination of protective or buffering factors can outweigh the negative impact of exposure to multiple risk factors. By examining risk factors and protective factors, NHPS hopes to begin to understand how these factors support or hinder children’s emotional and behavioral health outcomes.

Although NHPS believes that the basis for children’s emotional and behavioral health promotion efforts is strengthening protective factors to guard against psychological disorders, disease, and other negative health outcomes, it is not enough to ensure they will grow up healthy and free of significant problems. Children who experience multiple life adversities develop problems at a much higher rate than children who experience only one or two life stressors, so reducing their exposure to individual and situational risk is critically important. This balance—reducing risk factors while enhancing protective factors—is fundamental to influencing emotional and behavioral health outcomes.

Public health promotion strategies that seek to benefit all children’s healthy development can go far in buffering the effects of poor emotional and behavioral outcomes. By promoting positive characteristics and reducing risk in the individual, family, and community, a public health approach can enhance the child’s ability to withstand and rebound from adversity.

**Choosing and Developing Indicators for the 2006 Delaware Children’s Health Chartbook**

NHPS developed a framework for examining emotional and behavioral health in children using data from the National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH). This framework organized indicators selected according to the social ecological model (see Figure 2.1), grouping the indicators into several levels that can be used to assess the individual, relational, and social characteristics of children’s emotional and behavioral health and well-being.
Note: Information presented here is intended as a starting point for understanding some of the family and community level influences on children’s health. This initial view is not a complete representation of all levels of the social ecological model. For example, the survey did not ask questions about public policies. Therefore, this level of the model is not reflected among the indicators presented here. Details of the constructed indicators reported in the 2006 Chartbook are provided in Appendix A: Technical Notes.
References


