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The Development of the Person: The Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation from Birth to Adulthood,
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Preface

For the last three decades we have been conducting a comprehensive study of children in their families, from birth to adulthood. It is a dream of developmental psychologists to know what children experience and to know their circumstances at each age, and to watch them unfold. This book is the story of what we learned about children as they progressed from one age to the next and what we came to understand about the development of individuals—how they became the persons they are.

We studied 180 children born into poverty in order to track the courses of their lives. Direct assessments of the children and the care they received were made at multiple times, and information was gathered from interviews and other procedures with parents, teachers, and, ultimately, the young people themselves, usually at the same ages. All aspects of development and the developmental context were examined, many times in the first 4 years, then yearly into elementary school, and every 2 or 3 years thereafter. Settings for the study included the home, the laboratory, the school, and the peer group. We examined parenting, peer relationships, temperament, and cognitive functioning, and we examined the interplay of all of these factors age by age in detail, beginning at the beginning. Moreover, the study included ongoing assessments of the entire range of contextual factors, from child and parent IQ and personality, to family-life stress, disruptions, and social support, to socioeconomic conditions. Finally, the study relied on multiple measures and multiple sources of information, including ample direct observation of

children and parents. Rather than relying on what someone said had occurred in the past, or what the child was like as an infant, we directly assessed such things at the time.

Our goals were to outline the general trends in development, as well as to describe the course of individual lives. At each age, we were able to coordinate our measures of the nature and characteristics of individual children as these emerged and changed over time, as well as the quality of care the child was receiving and critical features of the context surrounding each family. Because the information on many features of development was comprehensive, we were able to evaluate the potential critical influences on individual development. For example, we looked at the influence of temperament, attachment, and other aspects of care; intelligence of children and parents; the peer group; and the stress families were experiencing. We evaluated not only the relative predictive power of these factors but also how they worked together to shape development. Because the children we followed were born into poverty, their lives were often challenging, and some experienced harsh circumstances. Not surprisingly, a number of them had difficulties. Others, however, had social assets that offset this adversity and did very well indeed. This was a study of competence, as well as a study of developmental problems.

The comprehensiveness and longitudinal nature of the study allowed us to ask three kinds of questions. The first questions concerned the conditions that promoted competent functioning across development or, alternatively, that led to developmental difficulties. How well could outcomes such as dropping out of school, aggression, or attention problems, to name just a few, be predicted? What were the predictors of such problems? We found that dropping out, for example, could be predicted even prior to school entry, and that other problems also followed an understandable course. Second, we were able to answer questions about “exceptions”; that is, some children developed well despite experiencing early risks for problems (were “resilient”), and other children showed problems even though early predictors were not present. We were able to account for and explain such changes in adaptation and show that they, too, were lawful. Finally, we were able to answer complex developmental questions: What was the fate of early experience following developmental change? In the face of different later circumstances, is early experience erased?

Thus, the study was much more than an investigation of the predictability of who did well and who struggled. Rather, our central focus was the very nature and process of development. We wanted to understand both continuity and change in adaptation, the ongoing transaction between the developing child and the environment, and the child’s changing

role with development. We illustrate a particular viewpoint in which the child is seen as emerging through a process of development. At each point the child is shaped by the history of experience and current circumstances, but at each point the child also contributes to the circumstances and creates the experience that will be part of the new history.

In the introductory part of the book, we first lay out these questions (Chapter 1) and present the conceptual background for our viewpoint on development (Chapter 2). These chapters make clear why the study was conducted as it was. The nature of the questions required a prospective, longitudinal study of the kind we did. Then, in Chapters 3 and 4, we describe in some detail the study itself, including the inception of the study and the measures and methods we employed. We wrote the book so that readers with particular interests could skip ahead and find their way, and be referred back to discussion of particular methods as required. But we urge most readers to read the methods chapters first. What distinguishes our work from others who make claims about forces that shape development is that our comprehensive measurement allows us to control for other factors when we claim the importance of one factor or another. When we make claims about the impact of temperament or IQ, or a particular pattern of care or maltreatment at a particular time, or the consequences of family disruption or of witnessing abuse, or the stress the family experienced during any particular period, we take into account each of these other factors (and more).

In the second section of the book (Chapters 5–10), we describe the emergence of the person, attained patterns of adaptation, and their origins and course, age by age. We not only predict individual outcomes but also account for changes in trajectories. There are chapters on infancy, toddlerhood, the preschool period, middle childhood, early adolescence, and late adolescence/early adulthood. In each case, the age is first described in terms of its salient developmental issues, and variations in patterns of adaptation with regard to those issues are described and explained.

The third section is devoted to development and psychopathology. Chapter 11 describes the developmental process, what we have learned about the interplay of experience, representation of experience, and surrounding circumstances over time. We account for the fate of early experience following change and the development of individual constructs such as resilience. This is a backdrop for understanding disturbance. In Chapter 12, we present a developmental model of disturbance and provide data on the development and course of disturbed patterns of behavior, including attention/hyperactivity problems, dissociation, depression and anxiety, and conduct disturbance. Implications for assessment, classification, and treatment of problems follow in Chapter 13.

In the final chapter, we discuss current directions of our work and present very recent data on adult disturbance, adult relationships and relationship representation, and continuity of parenting across generations, based on the beginning study of the children of our grown-up participants. We point to the new level of process-oriented questions that can now be addressed.

This was a large, comprehensive study that we could not have carried out without a great deal of help. We would like to thank first of all the parents, children, and now their children who participated in the Minnesota Parent–Child Study. You gave of your time, you shared your lives with us, and we were inspired by you. We greatly appreciate your commitment to this project, and this book is dedicated to you.

We also are indebted to the many people who contributed their time and talent to this project. First, we thank the more than 200 graduate and undergraduate students who contributed both effort and creativity to this study. This remarkable group of students were the backbone of this project, and readers will see their work throughout this book. We also mention in particular staff who, over the years, maintained contact with our families—Michele Dodds, Julie Johnson, Hunter Rowe, and Anne List—for their work in the early years of the project, and Judy Cook, who is our core staff person now. Peter Clark and Jane Love were our primary preschool teachers. Robert Weigand directed our summer camps. They created humane and nurturing environments for our participants. We could not have done this without you, literally. In addition, we acknowledge the school administrators and more than 1,000 teachers who gave of their time, because of their commitment to the improved well-being of children.

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