

Neighbourhood of residence

According to the Montreal health and social services agency,¹ children are influenced by their peers and tend to imitate and conform to characteristics they see around them. In other words, children living in the same community are inclined to adopt the behavioural models—whether positive or negative—of their immediate surroundings. Obviously, this determinant is closely aligned to sociocultural and socioeconomic contexts. Disadvantaged neighbourhoods, distant rural regions, and areas with high concentrations of immigrants all present their own challenges, of which, dropout is frequent. When assessing sociocultural and socioeconomic backgrounds, parental levels of unemployment, inactivity, and education (especially among mothers) should be taken into consideration.

What the research says

Children and youth living in less advantaged neighbourhoods are more at risk of having trouble with the requirements of school. While dropouts come from all types of neighbourhood,² numerous studies have shown that they are twice as likely to come from poor areas. Intervention in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is thus a priority.

The socioeconomic status of youth has a significant influence on their development, especially before they start school and during their first years of schooling. Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas generally start school with less knowledge. According to one study,³ depending on where they live, some students can enter school with up to two times less communication experience than others (i.e., vocabulary exposure is 2.5 million words in disadvantaged areas, compared with 4.5 million words in more prosperous areas). It is important to point out that children from more disadvantaged areas do not necessarily have lower abilities; they just do not start school with the same experience as others.

However, beyond socioeconomic status, researchers have also observed that children's readiness for school is also strongly linked to the social cohesion of the neighbourhood they live in.⁴

Social cohesion, as defined by the Council of Europe, is the capacity of a society to ensure the well-being of all its members. This includes equal access to resources and services, respect for dignity, personal and collective autonomy, and responsible participation.

It is characterized by:

- Shared values and civic culture
- Shared identity
- Sense of belonging to a single community
- A sense of trust among individuals and in local institutions and organizations

As children grow and assimilate into their environment, risk factors related to peers, the school, the neighbourhood, and the community start to play an increasing role. But in early childhood, the risk factors with the greatest influence on educational achievement come from within the family.

However, parental behaviours toward their children are influenced by the social context in which they live. Neighbourhoods characterized by high poverty, low social cohesion, family break-ups, and high mobility tend to weaken social networks and exacerbate ineffective parental behaviour.

The connections between social cohesion and child development can be explained in particular by differing access, depending on the environment, to positive role models, to the support of friends and acquaintances, or to high-quality services (e.g., health care, daycare, libraries, parks, playgrounds, schools, and community centres).

[1] Direction de santé publique, Agence de santé et de services sociaux de Montréal (2008), *Enquête sur la maturité scolaire des enfants montréalais, rapport régional*. Downloaded at: http://publications.santemontreal.qc.ca/uploads/tx_assmpublications/978-2-89494-630-5.pdf

[2] M. Janosz (2000), L'abandon scolaire chez les adolescents : perspective nord-américaine, *VEI Enjeux*, 122, Sept.

[3] J. Hattie (2009), *Visible Learning. A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-analyses Relating to Achievement*, New York, NY: Routledge.

[4] D. E. Cohen, C. Hertzman, and J. Brooks-Gunn (1998), *Neighbourhood Influences on Children's School Readiness*, Human Resources Development Canada, Applied Research Branch, Catalogue no. MP32-28/98-15E.

Taking effective action

When community members can access and take part in community initiatives and actions, it can help to develop a sense of belonging and pride that can counterbalance the effects of material disadvantage. From the standpoint of prevention, there are clear advantages to strengthening support and cooperation within at-risk environments.

Among the available courses of action, it is important to support parents in developing their sense of competence so that they can learn more positive parenting skills, especially in at-risk areas. This is true from birth right through their children's schooling.

Communities with greater social cohesion are more likely to be heard in matters and decisions that affect them.

For more information

Approche territoriale intégrée versus lutte à la pauvreté

<http://www.eve.coop/?a=48>

Persévérance scolaire : aux réalités territoriales

http://www.visaj.ca/documents/1_Decembre_PersvScolAdapterStrategie.pdf

Avenues for effective action related to neighbourhood of residence

Put in place activities that help to integrate families into neighbourhood life:

- by organizing neighbourhood festivities or community and social activities,
- by developing social and mutual-aid networks in communities,
- by organizing activities to promote solidarity (community kitchen, book or clothing exchanges, daycare, respite care, community gardens, etc.).

Organize initiatives at schools or daycares in which families and community organizations take part:

- by allowing the school to run or host family support and guidance activities,
- by using the school or daycare to promote neighbourhood activities (invitations to activities and events, social groups, facilities, etc.),
- by holding networking activities (reading clubs, movie nights, group cooking, etc.).

Organize activities to facilitate the various personal and educational transitions of youth in the neighbourhood:

- by furnishing information to parents and community organizations on the various steps involved and difficulties,
- by assisting parents in supporting students going through these stages.

Put in place an outreach system to get in touch with families who are hard to reach or to identify new families (neighbour or mutual-aid networks, etc.).

Put in place child stimulation activities for parents (emergent literacy, fine motor skills, crafts, etc.).