LINKS BETWEEN THE SOCIAL AND PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS

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This article concerns two questions: (1) How are the links between the social and the physical environments understood? and (2) How do these links affect children’s development? Many observations signal the importance of these questions: the increased risk for ill health among children who are homeless or marginally housed; the health effects of exposure to toxins; and the collapse of learning under stressful conditions, such as violence in the schools.13,19 Just as it is clear that some problems are environmental, so it seems that environmental solutions are in order: housing vouchers for low-income families, requiring homes to be lead free, and the growth in home schooling are just a few.16,18 This article attempts to lay out a key set of conceptualizations that may heighten awareness and improve practice with regard to environmental problems.

Before delving into the issues raised here, it is essential first to define how the terms development, social environment, and physical environment are used in this context. Children’s health—meaning their overall well-being—reflects the absence of disease and the presence of proper growth and development. Growth from birth to adulthood is not simply a matter of the gradual enlargement of an organism, but the much more complex process of unfolding capacities and attributes shaping and being shaped by the surrounding environment. On one hand, the evolving child interacts with, and attempts to gain mastery of, a specific sociophysical environment with unique resources and demands. On the other hand, a great deal of disease prevention is implemented through manipulation of the environment, whether it be through providing clean water or appropriate management of toxins. Health is then, in large measure, a reflection of the success of the person–environment encounter.

This article was supported in part by the Columbia Center for Children’s Environmental Health, NIEHS grant no. P50 ES0900, and the US Environmental Protection Agency grant no. R 827027.

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Environment, although often used narrowly to refer to toxicants, such as lead or air pollution, is used here in the broad sense of the ecosystem in its entirety.\textsuperscript{1,20} The distinction between social and physical aspects of the environment is an arbitrary one. There is a constant interaction between people and the natural resources that surround them. Through this active engagement, people create artifacts (e.g., buildings, machines, streets, and toys) and social groups (e.g., families and communities).

These are not independent productions. Rather, the social and the physical are created together and as a result of each other. Winston Churchill’s famous quip “We create our architecture and then our architecture creates us” expresses the kind of dynamic relationship that is of interest here. In addition, these interactions occur in specific locations: a group of people creates an architecture for a specific location with specific ideas and tools, thereby creating a “place.” This article will argue that it is in the creation of place that these links come together to shape the child’s health and development.

THE CREATION OF PLACE

The First House

Few besides architects know the myth of the first house. Dripps\textsuperscript{11} has used this myth to help modern students of architecture understand the ways in which the house arises from the social gathering and serves to place people in relationship to each other. It is equally instructive for understanding the issues pursued here.

Vitruvius, a Roman architect writing for the Emperor Augustus, related the myth in the following manner. Men of old lived like wild beasts in the forest. One day the woods caught fire, and the people ran away. As the conflagration subsided, the people gathered around and warmed themselves. They liked it so much that they gestured to others to join them. Language was born in that moment. People continued to gather and made other discoveries. Finding themselves more gifted than other animals, they began to construct shelters. Some built huts, others dug caves, while others created nests. “... And since they were of an imitative and teachable nature, they would daily point out to each other the results of their building, boasting of the novelties in it; and thus, with their natural talents sharpened by emulation, their standards improved daily.”\textsuperscript{11}

In Vitruvius’ tale, people watch the fire, understanding its power for good and its power to hurt. They enjoy the experience of each other as they draw together in the warmth of the fire. They begin to use language. They find a way to build community by building shelters around the fire, thus establishing a new way to live together. People are drawn together in the first city.

Dripps,\textsuperscript{11} reflecting on the many layers of information that can be extracted from this simple tale, comments:

This short narrative by Vitruvius, seemingly as simplistic as a cartoon, can provide a surprisingly rich account of a crucial role for architecture in a continuing process of foundation and renewal of culture. Vitruvius has shown how the condition of individual isolation and dislocation gives way to the pleasures of speech in a fixed place of the human being’s own design. These are the preconditions for the unfolding of civilization. The constructed manifestation of this unfolding is an architecture that directly and metaphorically connects self to the world. Beyond the necessity of survival, this architecture seeks to explain the complex nature of an evolving reciprocal relationship entered into with the hope of securing for the self an existence of lasting value.
Dripps\textsuperscript{11} helps readers to imagine the process of community building as a series of events (i.e., things that happen to people) and actions (i.e., things that people do) that leads to a new way of living. If history is read as recurrent cycles of events and actions, the process of change that slowly altered the world from the first gathering around the forest fire to the current situation can be imagined. The story offers useful segue to the next topic, solving problems in different domains. Here we will examine the manipulation of the environment to solve physical problems (e.g., getting warm and providing shelter) and social problems (e.g., organizing people around the fire).

**Problem Solving in Two Domains**

For groups of people to live together in a healthy manner, they must solve a series of physical problems. Among these, people have a need for shelter from the extremes of weather, clean air, nourishment, water, and disposal of waste products. People manipulate the environment to solve these problems. Perhaps the key insight from Vitruvius’ story is that the problems are solved in relationship to the realities of settlement: water is brought to the settlement, wastes are taken from the settlement. Because transporting water in one direction and wastes in another can be tiring and time consuming, people have tried to invent ways to ease these tasks. Pottery is one solution, aqueducts another, but both arise from the question: how will this get from here to there? The establishment of the settlement posits a “here” that conditions all other decisions.

Similarly, as people come together in a settlement, they need to solve a number of social problems. Whether building huts or palaces, people build first in relationship to the fire, as noted by Vitruvius, but second in relationship to each other. If the number of people exceeds the number that can be settled around the circle of the fire, this question must be answered: who gets to be close to the fire and who must move further away? This question inquires, at one and the same time, about social position and spatial array. People must work out the solutions in the settlement, ordering the “here” in ways that satisfy social needs.\textsuperscript{14}

The “here” of the settlement thus assumes enormous importance. It does not determine which of many possible actions will happen next, but it does delimit the possibilities for future action. The placement and organization of the settlement define a spatial array and an historical path: on the “game board” of the planet, a space is taken.

The occupying and ordering of space creates “place.” Geographers have taken the lead in deciphering the importance of place in human life.\textsuperscript{17} They have pointed out that place is far more than a point on the map. Rather, place is the phenomenologic center of being: “Before any choice there is the ‘place,’ where the foundations of earthly existence and human condition establish themselves. We can change locations, move, but this is still to look for a place; we need a base to set down our Being and to realize our possibilities, a here from which to discover the world and a there to which we can return.”\textsuperscript{10} “Place” is established in Vitruvius’ settlement around the fire. Now, as then, place is heaped with meaning because it is a center of the life of each person and of the whole group and the source of civilization and its renewal. What is posited here is that the creation of place is the essential link between the social and physical environments.
PLACE AND CHILDREN

Human life unfolds in places, and places can be organized to promote development. Given the multiplicity of cultures and the variations in historical development around the globe, it not possible to say that there is one "right" way to organize place to promote development. Under the icy conditions of the Arctic, the freedom of movement enjoyed by children in the tropics is not possible, nor can urban children run free in the way rural children can, yet all of these children can have healthy development. What, then, are the essentials of development? Assuming that children have the same basic needs for food, shelter, water, and sanitary living conditions as do adults, the author suggests four issues that are central to development and unique to childhood. First of all, it is important for children to form attachments to the people of their community. Second, it is important for children to be prepared to assume adult roles that are meaningful in their culture. Third, children need to learn a system of values that govern human relationships and guide thought and action in existential crises. Finally, children must be safeguarded through the years of their dependence. How might place be organized to meet these development needs?

In the village society common to farming cultures, these goals are accomplished through the close association of adults and children. The transmission of the culture and its values and the preparation for adulthood are embedded in daily life. Boys follow men as they carry out activities in the woods and fields. Girls follow women in carrying out child care and other duties. In addition to contact with parents throughout the day, village children also are socialized by many adults in the community; children can visit in many households; eat with many groups of people; and get disciplined by any of those in a line of authority, not simply the parents. Finally, through community ritual, all participate in the creation and celebration of a common belief system.

Organizing support for development becomes much more complicated as the geography of the family and the village are reorganized away from subsistence to a market economy. The loosening of ties to a specific locale, the relocation of work out of the home and into the factory or office building, the entry into the workforce of a large proportion of all adults, and the replacement of cultural hegemony with cultural diversity all serve to add complexity to the creation of developmentally positive places. What values are to be honored? Who will teach the children? How will children be protected with fewer adults available? Who will be present to nurture attachment? How might buildings, roads, and open space be organized to support new demands and new social roles?

In essence, the reorganization imposed by the shift from subsistence to market economies is one of splintering the single place of the village into many places and segregating by age, gender, and occupation the inhabitants of the village into separate realms. The great developmentalist Bronfenbrenner has proposed that the solution to fragmented places is threefold: first, strengthening each subunit to maximize its functioning; second, deepening the connections among the subunits to strengthen relationships and promote communication; and third, creating physical structures that are congruent to the social activities they will house.

Following Bronfenbrenner's thinking, schools emerge as enormously important. Schools take over the task of socializing children for adult roles but do so with a minimal number of adults to whom the children might attach and from whom they might learn. The perils of schools, in an age of fragmented places, are great. Bronfenbrenner railed against the large high school at the edge
of town because its distance and its size worked together to increase isolation from adults and produce an alienated youth culture. He foresaw the problem of violence in suburban schools long before a child picked up a gun to murder his or her classmates.

Violence in schools is an extreme problem, but it marks one end of a continuum of negative feelings and behaviors that arise because young people have been isolated from the rest of society. To illustrate these issues, let us turn to stories of three schools: (1) a liberal arts college in the United States, (2) a high school in a relatively new city, and (3) a new school in Agen, France, built to prepare people who will work as prison guards. These stories provide insight into the following issues: (1) the socialization of young people takes place in specific locations that promote or inhibit social connection, (2) the socialization of young people requires that they have free access to the whole of society, and (3) the integration of young people into society requires that they have a reasonable approximation of what other people have. A common thread through the three stories is that of the adult role in planning appropriate environments, a topic to which we return after presenting the stories.

Where's the Center?*

Sebastian Quinn, who was interested in understanding how architecture supports human relationships (what he called social architecture), undertook a study of loneliness at his college. “During my first days as a student, I had a sense that something was missing. All that followed for me at [the college] was a result of that feeling. I found that I was far from alone in the experience of that sensation which came to be called: profound loneliness, lack of community, isolation…” (S. Quinn S, unpublished observations, 1999).

Quinn used participant observation to study this problem, particularly focusing on “. . . the life of the school and the ability of the architecture to support, contribute to, and inspire that life” (S. Quinn, unpublished observations, 1999). Quinn observed the use patterns of the school buildings, surveyed students about their movements around campus, and participated in the daily round of college activities.

He found that social life at the college was highly fragmented. For example, first-year students typically lived in dormitories that were sited in one corner of the campus, whereas students in other years lived in apartments some distance away. The housing dispersion was echoed by the separation for meals (first-year students ate in the cafeteria, but older students ate in their apartments) and course work (first-year students were likely to focus on classes, but older students engaged in a wide array of independent activities with no classroom component). The only place on campus visited by everyone connected with the institution—the mailroom—was located in a small, compact space that could not facilitate socialization.

In short, the college lacked a student center. A student center, in one form or another, is a standard part of American colleges and universities. It is a central gathering place that serves to support the development of the student community. Typically, the student community then is linked as a unit to the adult community, composed of faculty, staff, and administrators. As such, the

*The case study of the college is based on the senior thesis of Sebastian Quinn, interviews with Mr. Quinn, and the author’s own visits to the college on several occasions between 1997 and 2000.
student center serves the core developmental function of facilitating adult–child contact. Lacking such a meeting place, Quinn and others at the college struggled with a suboptimal form of student socialization.

The students were active in improving college life. Over the years, a number of campaigns have been initiated to convince the college to build a student center. Students also have made efforts to strengthen group life using other means to promote social integration. Quinn thought that students had achieved some success and noted, "... I discovered the potential for individuals acting collectively to fill the vacuum of loneliness and isolation. This process is a continuous struggle, but I have come to believe that the struggle need not be terrible or undertaken alone" (S. Quinn, unpublished observations, 1999). Unhappily, as of this writing, college officials had not taken steps to fill the missing piece in the college's physical plant.

Safety First*

Noreen Evans, a local councilwoman from Santa Rosa, a new development in California, shared a story of efforts to ensure safe passage to school. The high school had been built on the edge of town, where land was inexpensive, in anticipation that future development would soon spring up around it. The new development would provide not only neighbors for the school but also basic amenities, such as roads and sidewalks. Because the anticipated development did not occur, students had to walk to school across this unstructured terrain. Evans and others protested for years about the unsafe conditions students faced, but nothing was done until 18-year-old Patrick Scott was hit by a car and killed while walking home from school on a dark, rainy night. After an intense and emotional community meeting, the councilwoman met with the public works department of the town—"tears still in our eyes"—to begin to solve the problem. They surveyed the pedestrian safety needs of all the schools and came up with an $8 million plan for sidewalks, bike paths, and lights. Within three years, most of that money had been raised and the pedestrian safety improvements implemented—an enormous feat for a small town.

The environmental assessment, although triggered by the need to protect schoolchildren, had an impact on the town's thinking about the environment more generally. Councilwoman Evans noted:

We are also working on other programs as well—in one program we have adopted safeguards for several roads that we have identified as particularly scenic and which (not coincidentally) have a high pedestrian use. Often new development was not respecting the scenic quality of the roads. We are now protecting the scenic quality of these roads and requiring meandering asphalt paths which can be used by both pedestrians and bikes and fit better into the scenery than the standard concrete sidewalk, curb and gutter.

Another positive benefit was the creation of a real commitment to pedestrian safety. This commitment was tested when another school district proposed to build a school without pedestrian improvements. Councilwoman Evans wrote, "... because of the City's firm commitment to pedestrian safety, it looks like the improvements will be made—it is requiring the cooperation of the school dis-

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*The case study of Santa Rosa is taken from correspondence from Councilwoman Noreen Evans, dated 1/22/2001, 2/26/2001, and 2/27/2001; used with permission.
trict, the city, the county, and possibly the state and the Army Corps of Engineers, but we are forcing the issue of pedestrian safety.”

Free Space*

The School for Prison Guards in Agen, France, opened its doors in September 2000. The issues reviewed here are issues related to the design of a physical environment that would support the education of prison guards. When the school was “on the drawing boards,” the developers debated the organization of school buildings and the placement of the school in its lot. Where should they place a restaurant to be shared with a nearby university? How should they demarcate the boundary of the school? Perhaps influenced by stereotypes of guards or prisons, the development team proposed a plan that would have imposed extreme isolation on the guards-in-training. They suggested that the school be surrounded by a wall and that the shared restaurant be placed just inside the wall so that “outside” students need not cross the grounds to eat.

At that point, Michel Cantal-Dupart, a leading French urbanist and chair of the Department of Urbanism and the Environment at the National Conservatory of Arts and Trades in Paris, became the urbanist for the project. He realized that the intense isolation inherent in the design would convey to the students that they, like their prisoners, were outside of society. As outsiders, the students would be at a disadvantage in achieving a major goal of national prison policy: reintegrating prisoners back into French society. Cantal-Dupart thought that the implications for human rights were obvious and undesirable. The wall, he told the development team, had to go. Furthermore, the placement of the restaurant at the front of the campus was out of keeping with cultural tradition: the school building should be the building that welcomed people to the site. The restaurant ought to be a place where students from different schools interacted. Sited at the far end of the campus from the entrance, it would serve that function, par excellence.

In keeping with the grand French landscape tradition, established in the 1600s by André Le Nôtre, landscape architect for Versailles, Cantal-Dupart organized the school around a beautiful park, using a church just outside of the grounds to give perspective. A beautiful old chateau on the grounds was remodeled for a student center. Three housing units, each designed by a different architect, were clustered together on one side of the park. The park was bisected by a canal that was planted with reeds and inhabited by frogs and other wildlife. The canal embodied a free space within the free space of the school. The school building, the canal, and the bridge to the restaurant are shown in Figure 1.

The issue of connection was extended from the new school to the surrounding area. Cantal-Dupart consulted with the city of Agen to create a more harmonious traffic pattern around the school. The small church gained new significance because it was important to the perspective from campus, which led to new investment for renovation and maintenance. Drawing on the grand traditions of French urbanism, Cantal-Dupart organized the physical space to

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*The case study of the School for Prison Guards is based on the author’s own fieldwork, including interviews with Michel Cantal-Dupart and a site visit to the school in July 2000.
Figure 1. School for prison guards at Agen, France. The main school building, with the canal and walkway to the restaurant in front of it.

maximize the likelihood that humans would have interactions within and around the school that might promote health and development.

The directors of the school recognized the thesis that was presented in the design. They understood the meaning of the open design, with its clear call for mingling of insiders and outsiders. They grasped the potential for settlement in the grouping of the housing units. In response, even before the school had opened, they reorganized the curriculum to incorporate the new information contained in the setting of the school. The school, as the central training place for people working in prisons, is a location to which they will return at points throughout their careers. The new curriculum was designed with a view toward lifelong learning in a well-endowed place.

CONSCIOUS DECISIONS ABOUT COMPLEX PROBLEMS

Planning

The most fundamental implication of Bronfenbrenner's analysis of the number of social units and the need to link them is that this requires careful planning and a deeper understanding of how and why linkages work. Planning was important in each of the stories presented here. The college without a student center was built in that manner, just as the Santa Rosa high school was placed consciously in a location with no sidewalks. These planning decisions created stressful environments, but, because much of the stress is borne by the young people, authorizing agencies could be removed from the problems, at least until a crisis—such as the death of Patrick Scott—forced the issue. The
School for Prison Guards, by contrast, benefited from a thorough and enlightened planning process that attempted to account for issues such as movement to and from the campus, the creation and siting of appropriate gathering places, and the creation of a "sense of place" that knitted it into French society rather than walling it away.

How does good planning happen? One factor is social commitment. As is illustrated in the story from Santa Rosa, the death of Patrick Scott catalyzed a profound commitment to pedestrian safety. Many obstacles that had seemed insurmountable were not so formidable to the community when viewed from the perspective of what must be done to keep children safe. That this commitment could transfer from one school to another and from planning for schoolchildren to planning for all pedestrians means that the lesson was learned in a profound manner.

Another factor in good planning is a sound philosophic basis for planning decisions. Planning designed to improve health outcomes must be based on a respect for human rights. In terms of consideration of the kinds of place issues being examined here, the fundamental human right to be considered is the right to a place on Earth.

Over and above social commitment and an understanding of human rights, good planning must be based on a mastery of the strategies for creating sound places and connecting them to one another. Cantal-Dupart, who is a master of this art, argues that what is needed is a science of urbanism, which he defines as "the ecology of cities." By cities, it is important to underscore, he does not mean population clusters of a certain size, but rather, in the Vitruvian sense, complex human settlements.11 He often cites the definition offered by the French historian Henri Braudel—that when there are two bakeries you have a city—to emphasize issues in the process of human settlement that define the work of planning. Because he understands that the physical and the social environment must work together, Cantal-Dupart also argues that a wide array of professionals, including architects, engineers, social workers, doctors, teachers, community organizers, and others, must be trained as "urbanists" if they are to solve the complex problems human beings face.8

What Carries What?

In these three cases, the creation of place results from a series of social and physical actions. Important to understand is that the social and the physical contribute to the creation of a great place. Looking deeper, it is discovered that some tasks are best performed by the physical environment, whereas others are best performed by the social environment. The key to a great place is the appropriate partition of duties. Fitch, author of the influential book, American Building: The Forces that Shape It,12 outlined this basic thesis and presented a useful diagram (Fig. 2).12 As the caption to the figure notes, "Modern building acts as a selective filter which takes the load of the natural environments off man's body and thus frees his energies for social productivity." If buildings can free energies for social productivity—Quinn's social architecture and Dripps' reciprocal relationship—then humans have an enormous tool for the advancement of civilization. An extraordinary number of problems that seem to be intra- and interpersonal problems can be solved by the careful physical organization of the places within which people live their lives.

In the absence of a physical solution, social solutions may be used, as was the case at the college without a student center, and as was surely the case in
Santa Rosa before the death of Patrick Scott. Three issues must be considered in evaluating the success of such a transfer strategy: (1) social organization may be an incomplete solution to a physical problem, (2) a transfer involves the commitment of student time and resources that might be better spent on educational matters, and (3) a transfer does not solve that eternal problem of how it feels to "have not" when others "have."

If physical forms free people for social productivity, however, it is also true that people must act within the space in a manner that promotes social welfare. If, by chance, the students from the two universities in Agen eat in the same restaurant but refuse to talk to each other, the tools for organizing the social environment must be deployed. France and Germany used social strategies, such as citizen exchange, to rebuild understanding and trust at the end of World War II. By doing this, they reorganized the social environment to build peace and prevent war.

The carefully planned interaction of the social and the physical environments serves as a resource and a protection for growing children. What happens when failure occurs? One consequence is that children are left without the help offered by place. The extraordinary photo by Stummer of "Hermineo taking clothes home to his mother in their cardboard shack, October 1987" captures the bleak environment of an inner-city neighborhood and illustrates the struggle for survival that goes on when place has collapsed (Fig. 3). This photo is different in tone from the cheery faith in progress observed in Figure 2. Rather, Stummer’s photograph reminds viewers of the sobering postmodern reality that "progress" has not meant progress for all.

Sharing Resources

The reorganization of society from subsistence to market economies has not occurred in a resource-neutral manner. Rather, the penetration of the market
economy has led to uneven development within and between countries and the increasing concentration of resources in a smaller and smaller number of places. To the extent that the capacity to support children's development depends on resources, the unequal distribution of resources becomes a central factor in determining what might happen and what does happen.

Studies on the transformation of local places have documented two parallel processes that seem to be highly negatively correlated. The first process is stripping resources from some communities to concentrate them in others. As some communities become resource-poor, they also seem to become vulnerable to a second process, which is to place noxious wastes away from resource-rich communities. Thus, "stripping and dumping" leads to communities that have a deficit of banks and supermarkets but a surplus of diesel bus stations, waste transfer sites, and toxic waste dumps.\textsuperscript{4,5}

The formation of resource-rich and resource-poor communities has profound implications for child development. Obviously, children in resource-rich environments have better health outcomes on most measures. Less obviously, the health of children in resource-rich areas is less than optimal because deprived places nurture diseases and problems, which then spread to more affluent places. Finally, the health of all children is undermined by the presence of visible gradients. Again, this may not be obvious: gradients undermine the health of all through the creation of social divisions, alienation, and intergroup conflict.\textsuperscript{22}
SUMMARY

This article proposed two questions: (1) How are the links between the social and physical environments understood? and (2) How do these links affect children's development? This article has presented the argument that the link between the social and physical environments arises in places that have profound emotional importance to people. In creating place, people establish the "here" of their lives. Like a bird building a nest for its eggs or a bear digging a lair for its newborns, humans have to create settings that guard their young while they are at their most vulnerable. They want to bring them to adulthood to become full members of the society of which adults are a part. That means raising them and teaching them, but most of all it means inspiring within them a wish to make community with adults. It is hard to attract youth to the adult world if the adult world is hostile to youth. It is all too easy, under the multicentered structure of life created by the market economy, to give the appearance that adults do not care about the young, even if that is not the whole truth.

Most adults divide their lives among many places located at some distance from their children. That state of isolation undermines the development of adult–child relatedness. If healthy children are to be raised under these conditions, adults must find ways to overcome the geographic divide and to connect the many places in which adults and children are living their lives. This goal requires conscious planning that draws on a concern for human rights and a science of ecology, including human ecology, as taught by Bronfenbrenner, and urbanism, as taught by Cantal-Dupart.

In the complex market economy that dominates the world today, children's health is in some danger. With attention and the commitment of resources, the problems that are posed by the new state of affairs can be solved. Cost cutting and inattention, although seeming to be ways of saving money, will, instead, be costly for children and for adults.

Perhaps the greatest loss in the transition from the village to the postmodern universe is that child-rearing is no longer a communal act. Many adults are detached from children. It is worth remembering the old saw, "Out of sight, out of mind." For all who are engaged in health care for children, there is probably no more urgent problem than helping adults get back in touch with their responsibilities to the future generations.

Pediatricians and others engaged in health care have developed an array of tools for making environmental interventions at many levels of scale. Few people consider the health care setting when they are considering environmental interventions, but providers control the space within which they practice. With planning, that space can be used to create child-positive environments that make the health care visit a model for what should happen in other settings and among settings. Within the usual health care setting, parents are seen as partners in care. Their empowerment in the care for their children can be a model for linkages between parents and other centers that affect children's lives. Because learning is so important, in and of itself and as a marker of the child's growth and development, health care providers should monitor school progress carefully. They might consider their offices as sites for the promotion of reading to young children and literacy for their parents. As children get older, health care workers can support the relationship with the school. A provider might create a form, titled Good Health/Good Learning, that would inquire about the school's perception of a child's well-being. Urging parents to get information from their children's school is one useful step in encouraging the parent–school relation-
ship. Reluctance by the parent to go to the school could signal the need for additional intervention in this crucial area.

In some cases, the traditional forms of practice must be reinvented to create places that support optimal care. The creation of special settings for the investigation of child sexual abuse has been a major breakthrough in the management of this problem. In New York City, Victim Services established one of the first of these settings. Instead of going to the hospital or the police station, children who might have been abused were brought to a setting shared by health care workers and the police. The sharing of the space by police and health care workers meant important efficiencies in the collection of data about child abuse. The separation of uses—children’s spaces in one area and adults’ spaces in another—meant that already traumatized children were not exposed to the harsh settings of a police station.

Pediatricians have a long history of actions in the larger realms outside of the office, educating parents and society about the care of the children and working to institute health-promoting policies. Although there are many examples of this kind of work, one that is particularly relevant to this discussion is the report generated by the organization Docs4Kids to delineate the relationship between housing and health. Called There’s No Place Like Home: How America’s Housing Crisis Threatens Our Children, the 1999 report was edited by two pediatric residents, Sandel and Sharfeinstein, and a housing advocate, Shaw. It presents a description of the nation’s crisis in affordable housing. The facts are made real by the inclusion of vivid clinical vignettes collected from pediatricians all across the country between January 1997 and December 1998. The report helps everyone to understand the myriad ways in which good housing is a precondition for good health.

Finally, health care providers concerned about the sociophysical environment have taken leadership in public health efforts to institute better programs and policies. One outstanding effort was that undertaken by the Syracuse Department of Health, under the leadership of Lloyd Novick, to improve birth outcomes in the city. After a careful analysis of the sources of excess infant mortality, Novick and his team instituted a plan designed to identify and support high-risk mothers throughout the city. The plan was designed to ensure their access to decent health care; to help them manage other concerns, such as stable, affordable housing; and to connect with them in a manner that was culturally appropriate and socially respectful. In the first 3 years after the initiation of the program, infant mortality rates for white and black infants decreased by 25%.

There is a wide array of actions that pediatricians and others providing health care to children can take to improve the places that nurture children. There are no limitations to the creative and effective actions, large and small, that people can take. Essential is that people expand their capacity to recognize and accept the contribution that healthy places make to children’s well-being.

References


*Available for $15.00 from Housing America, 126 Hyde Street, San Francisco, CA 94102. Docs4Kids can be accessed at www.docs4kids@bu.edu.


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