

# SLK 310 - ABNORMAL CHILD PSYCHOLOGY

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORIES AND CAUSES

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We must acknowledge that nearly all child and family disturbances result from multiple, interacting risk factors and processes.

Contextual events in the family or school environment exert considerable influence over an individual's course of development. Therefore, a given child's problems must be considered in relation to multiple levels of influence:

- individual,
- family,
- community, and
- culture—

rather than be attributed to any one factor.

Some influences (such as biological factors and the effects of environmental factors) are contained within the child, whereas many others (such as family patterns and cultural norms) lie at various distances from the child's immediate surroundings.

Let's begin by considering Jorge's situation (next page) and his parents' complaints, which raise important issues.

- Could Jorge have mild intellectual disability that impairs his learning?
- Is Jorge's mother right about his having a learning disability?
- Does Jorge have a specific communication or learning problem unrelated to intellectual disability that affects his schoolwork?
- Perhaps his school and family environments have contributed to his learning difficulties and fear of school. Did his parents and teachers expect him to fail?
- Has he been given much assistance? Has he been abused or neglected at home?

## WHAT IS CAUSING JORGE'S PROBLEMS?

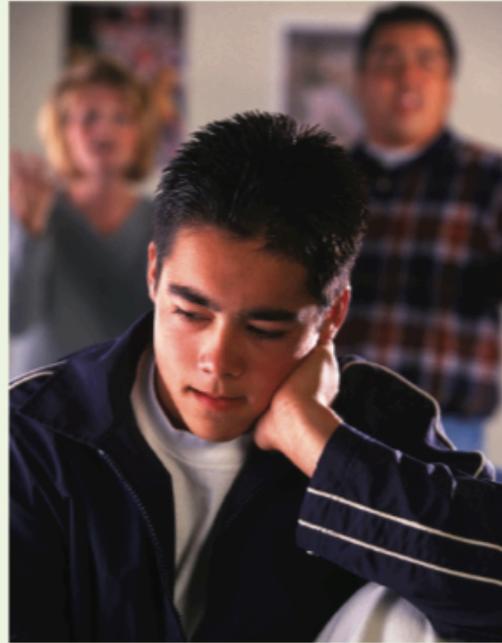
### JORGE

#### Not Keeping Up

Jorge was almost 14 years old when he was referred to me because of his academic problems. Since grade 4 he had been performing well below average in his classes, had difficulty concentrating, and was considered to be "too quiet and nervous." For the past four summers he had taken extra classes to improve his reading, but was currently reading at the third-grade level. As a result, his parents received a letter from the school saying he likely would not be promoted to the next grade if his work didn't improve. Everyone seemed angry at Jorge for not keeping up.

When I met with Jorge, his version of his school problems was short and to the point: "It's the teachers," he said, as he looked at the floor and squirmed in his seat. "How am I expected to learn anything when they yell at you? When I told my English teacher that I hadn't finished reading my book for class, he said I take too long 'cuz my mind wanders too much. How am I expected to learn when they think I'm dumb?" After further discussion, Jorge summed up his view of the problem in a quiet, sullen voice: "I know I'll never get anywhere with the brain I've got. I can't figure stuff out very fast, and the teachers aren't much help. Just thinking about school makes me jittery. I'm afraid I'll say something stupid in class and everyone will laugh at me."

Jorge's mother and father met with me separately and were quick to add their own opinions about why their son didn't do well in school. They had moved from their Spanish-speaking neighborhood when Jorge was in grade 2, and he struggled to learn English in school because his parents did not speak it at home. His mother admitted that she becomes aggravated and starts to yell when Jorge says he doesn't want to go to school or can't do his schoolwork, but she didn't think this was an issue. She quickly added, "I've read about learning disabilities and



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Everyone seemed to be angry with Jorge.

I think he's got one. He can't control his mind enough to center on anything. He's scared to go to school, and avoids homework as if his life depended on it." By the end of the interview it was evident that Jorge's parents were angry at him. They felt Jorge blamed his teachers for his own lack of effort, and that he should be in a special classroom and maybe given medications to calm him down so he wouldn't worry so much about school. (Based on authors' case material)

Suppose you were asked to interview Jorge, his teachers, and his parents to find out why schoolwork is difficult for him. How would you go about this task? What information do you feel would be essential to know, and what plan might you follow to organize and explore the many possible reasons for his problem?

- Most likely, you would form a working theory to help you in determining what to ask and why.
- At first, your theory might be very basic and unrefined. Jorge's problem in school might be connected to the negative comments and pressure he is getting from his parents and teacher.
- As you proceed, your theory about Jorge's problem would likely expand and become more detailed, allowing you to probe with more precise questions.