



# **Psychosocial impacts of child work: a framework for research, monitoring and intervention**

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## **Foreword**

This paper has been prepared as a contribution to the joint World Bank/ILO/UNICEF project “Understanding Children’s Work”. Recent initiatives to combat worst forms of child labour have made progress in identifying hazards to children’s physical health and well-being. Less attention has been given to psychosocial impacts of work. The paper outlines conceptual frameworks for assessing the multiple ways that work can impact (both positively and negatively) on children’s well-being; and for identifying psychosocial indicators of impact. The paper draws attention to ways that the context of children’s work mediates how far potential hazards constitute a risk to children and concludes by outlining theoretical models that link characteristics of work to evidence of impact on children’s psychosocial well-being.

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# 1 Introduction

Children working in hazardous situations have been a target of international action for nearly a century (since the first child labour convention of 1919), and a matter of concern for many more decades than that. Eighty years on from the first convention, international commitment was encapsulated within UNCRC Article 32:

"States Parties recognise the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development"

(UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Article 32)

The UNCRC is notable in its emphasis on protecting children from **hazardous** or **harmful** work, rather than on excluding them from work *per se* on the grounds of their age, relative vulnerability or immaturity. Article 32 became a catalyst for debate around definitions of hazardous and harmful work, leading to greater awareness of the limitations of simplistic distinctions between more benign 'child work' and more damaging 'child labour' (White, 1996). Child work - it became clear - covers a vast range of activities and situations affecting girls and boys in diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts, who range in age from earliest childhood through to eighteen (Unicef, 1997). ILO estimate about 250 million children aged between 5-14 are working, mainly in developing countries (IPEC, 2002, p.3). For many children, initiation into work begins in infancy, often as an extension of simple domestic tasks and it remains a core feature of childhood and beyond. Work is viewed as a necessary part of childhood, a part of everyday life, a way of learning skills and responsibility, as well as being essential to family survival. For other children, work may not begin until middle or later childhood, and it may be part-time, short term and incidental to the major activities shaping their prospects, notably school.

These debates around what constitutes child labour prompted increased research and analysis (e.g. Gunn and Ostos, 1992; Marcus and Harper 1996; Nieuwenhuys, 1994; 1996; Black, 1997; Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Woodhead, 1998; Schlemmer, 2000). Generalisations about harmful impacts of hazardous child work gave way to more qualified views, in which potential work hazards were considered in the wider context of children's lives, and taking account of a variety of perspectives, including from working children themselves (Boyden et al, 1998). Attention was drawn to the ways idealised social constructions of childhood as a time for play and learning had created a false expectation that childhood is (or should be) work free, whereas children continue to contribute to their families, communities and to their own well-being, even in societies where childhood is now dominated by schooling (Qvortrup, 2001). Evidence from working children illustrated the diversity of functions that work plays in their lives. It can be both an asset and a hazard to children's well-being, making unqualified generalisations about harm of limited value, (Woodhead, 2001).

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Recognition of the diverse realities of working children's lives has had important policy implications. While the hazards faced by working children are real enough, combating harmful child labour no longer seems so straightforward. Universal, single strategy solutions have increasingly been challenged in favour of more localised, child-centred strategies within which both risks and benefits are considered and 'the best interests of the child' translated into a range of appropriate interventions (Boyden et al, 1998; Lieten and White, 2001).

Against this background, a more focussed approach to international action was also emerging, of 'targetting the intolerable' (ILO, 1996), formalised through ILO Convention 182 (1999) on the elimination of the worst forms of child labour. Two rather different categories of worst forms are identified in ILO Convention 182, which have been described as the 'unconditional' and the 'unresolved' (Ennew et al 2003, page 14). The 'unconditional' are specific worst forms outlawed in Article 3 as violations of basic human rights, including all forms of bondage, trafficking and use of children in prostitution and illicit activities. The 'unresolved' are encompassed by a more general statement about worst forms, which in some ways echoes UNCRC Article 32:

'work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to **harm** the health, safety or morals of children' (ILO, 1999, Convention 182, Article 3d, my emphasis)

These 'unresolved' worst forms are more 'conditional'. They are defined not by the nature and circumstances of children's work *per se*, but according to the probability that harm will result.

These two different bases for identifying worst forms have important implications for the strategies adopted by international agencies, governments, local ngos and others concerned with intervention. Whereas 'unconditional worst forms' invite action targetted on particular forms of child labour, 'unresolved (or conditional) worst forms' require action targetted towards children at risk, irrespective of which sectors they work in. The extent to which work constitutes a risk to children's well-being is conditional on a whole range of circumstances, not just on the nature of the work itself. In other words, identifying worst forms of child labour becomes as much a scientific as a human rights issue. The challenge in this case can be posed as a question:

"Which children - in which kinds of work - and in which situations - are most at risk of being harmed by their work?"

Considerable progress has been made in identifying hazards that put children's physical health at risk (eg Forastieri, 1997; Graitcer and Leonard, 1998). Rather less progress has been made in the area of psychosocial hazards. This imbalance is in many ways understandable. Many physical hazards are much more tangible than psychosocial hazards, as is their impact on children's well-being. For example, children working in an unhealthy environment, with dangerous equipment or chemicals, and without protective clothing are clearly at risk. The consequences of exposure to that risk are evident in injuries or diseases they suffer. Many psychosocial hazards

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are much less readily identified, for reasons that will be discussed in Section 2. Yet Boyden et al argue that consequent neglect of psychosocial hazards is not justified in terms of their potential significance:

‘...often children are at greater psychological or social risk than physical. This because they lack authority and physical power, because their work is not always valued as a productive activity, and because they usually have the lowest status of all workers.’ (Boyden et al, 1998, page 81).

This paper analyzes issues surrounding the psychosocial impact of child work, in order to support progress in research, monitoring and intervention. It is not intended as a comprehensive research review. The main goal is to offer a conceptual framework for:

- assessing potential psychosocial factors associated with child work – including the environment and situation of child workers as well as the activity of work itself;
- identifying indicators of psychosocial well-being that may be affected by work; and
- evaluating the links between children’s work and their psychosocial well-being.

The paper mainly addresses the priority issue - to identify circumstances in which working may negatively impact on children’s psychosocial well-being. At the same time, I argue that exclusive attention to hazards can be misleading, for two reasons. Firstly, focussing on hazards perpetuates the dominant perception that work is inherently damaging to children’s well-being. Children’s multifold contributions to family, economy and social life are thereby overlooked, as are the positive functions that moderate levels of work can play in children’s lives. For example, it is estimated that over 70% of working children are engaged in family-based work, notably in rural economies (O’Donnell et al 2002, page 8). As noted in a recent Handbook for Labour Inspectors prepared by the International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour, IPEC:

“Not all work is harmful to children. From a young age, many children help around the home, run errands, or assist parents in the family farm or business. As they get older they take on light jobs or learn valuable traditional trades. In this way, children acquire the skills and attitudes they will need as future workers and useful members of the community. Light work, carefully monitored, can be an essential part of children’s socialization and development process, where they learn to take responsibility, and gain pride in their own accomplishments. Work of this kind is not without risk, but it is not what is generally meant by child labour”

(IPEC, 2002, page 3).

Secondly, even when faced with situations that would generally be regarded as child labour, ‘hazard assessments’ can be a misleading basis for predicting psychosocial risk unless such assessments also include psychosocial and economic rewards from working, which children (and families) may perceive as crucial to their welfare. Frequently, children are themselves aware of the hazards of their work, but they nonetheless report psychosocial benefits

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from working, frequently weighing-up risks against benefits (Woodhead 1998). From a child-centred perspective, it becomes important – in similar vein – to consider potential work hazards in the context of a wider assessment of children’s situation, the value placed on their work, the alternatives available to them and their families, as well as their realistic long term prospects. The significance of ‘context’ in assessing psychosocial impacts will be elaborated throughout this paper.

Following this introduction, section 2 introduces some major issues relating to psychosocial impacts of child work. Section 3 identifies a range of factors in children’s working lives that may be significant for their psychosocial well-being, in short or long term. Section 4 turns to multiple dimensions of psychosocial well-being and provides a framework for identifying major indicators of impact. Section 5 discusses a range of models that link risks, hazards, costs, benefits, value and function of work for children, and Section 6 provides a brief review of approaches to researching psychosocial impacts of work.

Psychosocial impact is only one of many criteria that can be used to judge the acceptability of working lives currently experienced by millions of children and young people. Child work issues can be addressed from the standpoint of economics, law, education, human rights as well as child development, (Myers, 2001). For example, extensive economic activity by children can be as prejudicial to the status of adult workers, as well as inconsistent with expectations that childhood will be a period of dependency, a time for play, learning and schooling. Child work may also be condemned as an unacceptable expression of extreme poverty or because it interferes with children’s rights to education (Boyden, 1994; Fyfe, 2001). The focus here is specifically on the ways that children’s work may impact on their psychosocial well-being, although evidence of psychosocial impacts will inevitably feed into these wider debates.



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## 2 Challenges for the study of psychosocial impacts of child work

In this section I summarise some challenges for the study of psychosocial impacts of child work. Starting with a list of challenges is not a counsel of despair. Recognising these complexities is the starting point for constructing an appropriate framework that can inform research, monitoring and intervention.

### 2.1 Defining psychosocial well-being

The first challenge is to define psychosocial well-being and then to identify appropriate indicators. The term ‘psychosocial’ is frequently used as a catch-all for aspects of children’s psychological development and social adjustment, but equally often disguises competing understandings about the boundaries of the concept. In the study of child work, a distinction is often made between ‘physical’, ‘educational’ and ‘psychosocial’ impacts. Physical impacts refer environmental hazards and associated ill-health, injuries or disease. Educational impacts are about access to schooling and effects on achievement in literacy, numeracy etc. Psychosocial impacts can appear to covers pretty much everything else! In terms of UNCRC Article 32, psychosocial might thus be taken to cover “...mental, spiritual, moral or social development”.

In this paper, I consider major factors that can influence children’s psychosocial well-being under eight headings:

- Secure relationships and consistent settings
- Activities and guidance
- Responsible adults
- Peer support and solidarity
- Physical environment and daily schedules
- ‘Contract’ with employers
- Work and family lives
- Other factors affecting the impact of work

(Elaborated in Section 3)

I propose five broad domains most relevant to assessing psychosocial impacts of child work under the following headings:

- Cognitive abilities and cultural competencies (e.g. intelligence, communication skills, technical skills)
- Personal security, social integration and social competence (e.g. secure attachments, positive adult/peer relations, social confidence, sense of belonging)

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- Personal identity and valuation (e.g. self-concept, self-esteem, feeling valued and respected)
  - Sense of personal agency (e.g. self-efficacy, internal locus of control, positive outlook)
  - Emotional and somatic expressions of well-being (e.g. stress levels; sleeping and eating patterns, general health).

(Elaborated Section 4)

These headings are based mainly around concepts from Western developmental and clinical psychology, psychiatry and psychometrics. They are not just concerned with children's inner psychological state. They are also about children's relationships and social integration, in relation to their peers as well as adults. Some concepts are based on specific theories and research, (e.g. locus of control). Others are more widely understood (e.g. self-esteem), although indicators relevant to these concepts are based on more precise technical definition.

Caution is needed in assuming these broad headings will necessarily translate meaningfully to child work situations in diverse cultural settings. Local concepts of psychological development and local expectations for personal and social adjustment can strongly mediate the impact of work. These complexities surrounding indicators of psychosocial impact will be elaborated in subsequent sections.

## **2.2 Identifying 'impacts' on psychosocial well-being**

Framing the issue as being about the 'impact' of child work, and about potential 'harm' to psychosocial well-being suggests work is an external force, something that happens to children, directly affecting their well-being, equivalent to being injured by a reckless car driver. Children themselves appear relatively passive in this process.

With the possible exception of extreme cases of forced or bonded labour, children are not passive victims, who are physically and psychologically 'damaged' by their work. They are social actors, trying to cope with their situation, negotiating with parents and peers, employers and customers, and making the best of oppressive, exploitative and difficult circumstances. Children shape their working life to some degree at least, at the same time as being shaped by it. Work does not damage young people's psychological health like a speeding car damages their physical health. Work is an activity that children do, which shapes their development and in many cases becomes part of their identity. Judgements made by an observer about possible risks or benefits of work may not coincide with how children receive those influences. To some extent at least, children define what affects them through processes of selective attention and interpretation (Woodhead, 1999).

Recognising children as social actors is closely linked to another key concept, which is about respecting children's agency in relation to their work. A sense of personal agency is one of the five domains of psychosocial functioning outlined above. It is about how far an individual feels able to shape their

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destiny, versus being shaped by external forces outside their control. Some repressive situations deny children the ability to make even the most basic day-to-day personal (e.g. where their needs and rights are not respected and/or where their day-to-day lives are strongly regulated by an employer). By contrast, some situations demand that children exercise high levels of personal responsibility, for example working semi-autonomously on the streets. Recognition that children are social actors and social agents draws attention to the limitations of simple cause-effect models when assessing the impact of work.

### **2.3 Work in children's development**

Talking about 'impact' of work also suggests working involves a specific event at a particular point in time, whereas an individual child's work can involve:

- a range of different activities;
- a range of work relationships – e.g. with employers, clients and peers;
- several different settings;
- an extended time-frame.

For some young people, work is an occasional and relatively peripheral activity. For others, working is a core experience of childhood. Some children experience several different types of work, sometimes on the same day. Others sustain the same work activity from early childhood through into adulthood. Many children aren't so much affected by work as developing through their work. Taking account of the age children begin working and the intensity of their engagement with work become important. Equally important is the place of work in children's life course, (e.g. whether work is a short term necessity or a long term vocation).

Focussing on the individual child in isolation - on the ways their work impacts on their well-being – also has limitations. This individualistic focus is consistent with much child development research and children's rights discourse. For some types of work it may be appropriate, e.g. where children are isolated or working alone, e.g. as domestic workers. But most types of work do not impact on a lone child, but on children as part of a work group, a family group, a peer group etc. These wider groupings can be important in providing a shared source of identity and support, buffering the impact of difficult circumstances, (as studies of risk and protective factors reveal, see Section 5).

### **2.4 The nature of work and the circumstances of work**

Demonstrating how work impacts on children's well-being is not straightforward, even where relatively tangible indicators of physical health and well-being are the major focus. For example, an eighteen country study of health hazards failed to find consistent evidence of a link between work and ill-health. Data from five countries suggested working children appeared

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most at risk of health problems, but in another five countries working children appeared the most healthy. Data from three countries even showed children at school (and not working) as least healthy (O'Donnell et al 2002, page 4). Such inconclusive evidence does not mean health hazards associated with work have been exaggerated. Nor does it mean that schooling promotes ill-health. Rather, this study draws attention to the limitations of 'broad brush' approaches to monitoring and evaluation: that aggregate different types and intensities of economic activity irrespective of context; that rely on relatively global indicators of health; and that are insensitive to the various causal pathways between work and health in children's lives.

Broad based assessments of this kind are even less likely to bear fruit where psychosocial impacts are concerned, because 'child work' covers such diverse activities and situations - positive and negative. A range of factors may influence children in different ways even within the same situation - again, some positively and others negatively. Comparison with hazards to physical health are instructive. For example, well designed epidemiological studies can (in principle) link elevated levels of disease amongst child workers to exposure to specific toxins, infections or risks of accidents that arise directly from working in specific sectors, such as re-cycling workshops, scavenging and rag-picking or mining and fishing (Forastieri, 1997). For some sectors it is also possible to identify psychosocial risks specifically associated with the work itself, such as trauma following mining accidents, or low self-esteem amongst sex workers. But for many children, the activities of work may not be the most significant indicator of psychosocial hazard. This was signalled in ILO convention 182 by the phrase '...work which, by its nature or the **circumstances in which it is carried out** ...' (Article 3d, my emphasis). Children's working environment, their conditions of work, and especially their treatment by employers is a major influence on their well-being, but highly variable in potential to harm (or to benefit) children, even where children's work is broadly similar in nature. Consequently, the extent to which children are at psychosocial risk may vary significantly within sectors, as well as between sectors.

For example, the IPEC Handbook for Labour Inspectors notes that a sector- or trade-based classification is a weak indicator of children's situation because it 'says so little about the relationship between the children and the persons (clients, employers or members of the family) who in one form or another employ them'. The handbook notes that the 'agricultural sector' ranges from multi-national agri-businesses to small family units, within which 'the child workers may be permanent, seasonal, pieceworkers, slaves or family workers' (IPEC, 2002, p.5). The same diversity in employment situation applies within the informal and formal sector, as well as to children engaged in marginal or illegal areas of the economy.

Risks associated with children's activities, environment and employment status also interact with numerous other variables. Most children engaged in hazardous work are also amongst the most impoverished and marginalised groups within their society, making it difficult to isolate effects of work *per se*, even within quasi-experimental research designs. For many children living in extreme poverty, the opportunity to work - even in a hazardous sector - may be one of the few assets that contributes to their (and their families)

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psychosocial well-being, at least in the short term (Boyden et al 1998). These complexities draw attention to the limitations of a sector by sector approach to assessing the impact of work, and further endorse the case for a more child-centred and context-centred approach.

Key variables affecting children's work-related well-being are likely to include family circumstances, employment and school prospects, the extent of regulation and supervision of child work, as well as well as age, gender, social status and ethnicity. The consequent diversity of children's response to child work is well illustrated by local, qualitative studies (Woodhead 1998). Gender is especially important. It shapes children's experiences of and responses to work, with girls often working longer hours, very often in domestic activities that are barely recognised as work, often without social power and often without receiving direct payment (e.g. Nieuwenhuys 1994; Cohen, 2001). The implication is that focussed, localised assessments based around multiple negative and positive indicators are most likely to reveal which combinations of:

*Children + Activities + Situations + Contexts*

are at greatest risk (and which are more benign or even beneficial for children's well-being).

## **2.5 Cultural expectations and the impact of work**

Another layer of complexity has already been referred to in relation to definitions of psychosocial well-being. It is about how well-being is locally understood by those most responsible for shaping children's experiences – employers, parents and children themselves. The psychosocial impact of child work is embedded in social relationships and practices, and it is mediated by cultural beliefs and values of parents, employers and children themselves (e.g. Reynold, 1991; Nieuwenhuys 1994; Blanchet, 1996; Bey, 2003). These beliefs and values include:

- how children develop and should be socialized
- what is in their best interests
- what contributes to their integration within their families and community
- what puts them 'at risk' and constitutes 'hazard' or 'harm'

(e.g. Sigel, 1985; Goodnow and Collins, 1990; Greenfield and Cocking, 1994; Harkness and Super, 1996).

Beliefs and practice are often strongly differentiated according to children's gender as well as their age, with many activities almost exclusively the province of boys versus girls, and with a status hierarchy associated with specific occupations (e.g. Reynolds 1991; Nieuwenhuys 1994; Woodhead, 1998; Punch 2001).

Some aspects of child work are a clear violation of children's needs, well-being and development, for example where children's safety is at risk, where they are socially isolated, deprived of rest, or treated harshly and inconsistently. Others are less clearcut, especially where they are about

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children's social adjustment to norms and expectations for girls and boys within their communities. For example, the criteria for harm shift where children are apprenticed within a respected vocation from an early age but are thereby deprived of fulltime schooling. The question becomes more about whether early initiation into work is maladaptive for long term prospects, even though the work itself may be relatively benign.

Working children are frequently confronted by competing expectations about what is in their best interests. For example, self-esteem is an important indicator of psychosocial well-being (as elaborated in Section 4). Children acquire positive self-esteem through feeling competent in what they do and feeling their activities are valued. Positive self-esteem may be centred on their work, schooling, family and peer relations or some combination of all of these. Where children's work is valued and respected, their feelings of self-worth are likely to be enhanced. Conversely, their work may constitute a psychosocial hazard if it is devalued as mundane; or inappropriate to their age, social status or gender; or where they see no future prospects; or where they are stigmatized for what they do.

The mediating power of cultural norms can be illustrated by comparing research into the impacts of work on children versus on adults. The main emphasis of child research is on whether working has a negative impact on well-being. Research on adult workers is also concerned with the effects of work on their health and well-being, but few studies ask whether work *per se* has a negative impact. The very opposite is emphasised. Studies concentrate on the harmful consequences of not working, for example in research into adult unemployment, (e.g. Price et al 2002). The difference in emphasis is not just about differences in age and developmental stage between adults and children. It is about taken-for-granted beliefs about the 'proper' place of work in children's versus adult's lives.

Beliefs about the place of work in childhood have shifted dramatically over the past 150 years and still vary between societies – including conceptions of what is and what promotes healthy psychosocial development (Cunningham and Viazzo, 1996). One of the goals of socialisation is to initiate children into cultural expectations and practices regarding what is and is not age-appropriate:

'For age groups where economic activity is valued, being unable to work challenges core human needs for identity, role and value. For age groups where economic activity is de-valued, the impact of being required to work may in some respects be similar. If children feel ashamed of having to work, this may be one of the harmful effects of work'

(Woodhead, 1999, p.49).

These cultural dimensions of children's well-being draw attention to the need to balance developmental considerations against other aspects of children's situation. We need to ask how far the psychosocial hazards of working related to children's age, developmental stage and greater psychological vulnerability at this formative period in their lives. But we also need to ask how far hazard is about children's relative powerlessness, their limited awareness of the consequences of their work, their vulnerability to abuse, and

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their limited capacity to protect themselves. Finally, we need to ask how far hazard is about children's working lives being viewed as inappropriate for adjustment to modern societies. Each involves a rather different basis for judging the impact of work, and for prescribing appropriate interventions.

## **2.6 Visibility and 'psychosocial toxins'**

Visibility issues are especially important for psychosocial impacts, in several respects. The first is about the visibility of child workers. The well-being of children working in open workshops, in agriculture and in street-based work is more readily monitored, for the simple reason that they are working in public or semi-public places. Children in workshops, mining, fishing or home-based work are less accessible, and thus more vulnerable (IPEC, 2002, p.6). In recent years, attention has begun to focus on the most invisible and isolated groups of working children, notably girls working as domestic servants (Black, 1997) and girls or boys working at or around their homes. These children are not only least accessible to monitoring. The boundaries on their duties are least clearly defined, with the result that they may be working excessive hours, without any significant breaks and without opportunities for play or education.

The second level of visibility is about the identification of a hazard. It is relatively straightforward to identify some of the major physical hazards in children's work environment, (eg handling dangerous substances, lack of ventilation, lack of protective clothing, risk of accidents). It is also relatively straightforward to assess the effects of these hazards in terms of injuries and ill-health, as noted earlier. Many psychosocial impacts are much less visible. To begin with, they are about subjective experiences as much as about observable processes. For example, children are strongly affected by how far they feel valued and appreciated for their work, and proud of what they do. Conversely, feeling humiliated or ashamed by work can undermine children's self-confidence, self-esteem and self-worth. Feeling humiliation and shame (like feeling valued and proud) are not readily inferred from observing children's work environment. They are unlikely to result from a single intense event, but more probably from the slow accumulation of positive or negative feelings based around specific incidents, kind versus harsh words, gestures or other forms of encouragement or rejection.

Of course, children can be asked how they feel, and they may speak openly about their feelings. But they may be reluctant to speak out about feeling humiliated by their employers, as well as fearful of the consequences of sharing those feelings. Others may not even recognise how much they are being affected. In this respect, it is tempting to draw a parallel with the way undetected toxins in children's working environment can have devastating consequences for long term well-being. The challenge is to identify what might be described as the 'psychosocial toxins' embedded in everyday social and psychological processes. Of course, their detection may be even more elusive, because maltreatment of children can be much more readily disguised than is practical for dangerous chemicals or machinery.

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## 2.7 Research into children's psychosocial development

Finally, progress in this field is hampered by the imbalances in research into children's psychosocial development. While a good deal of policy work and field experience is available, drawing attention to potential hazards (as well as benefits) of child work, systematic research on these issues has until recently been surprisingly rare, especially in view of the millions of children whose lives are dominated by working (Fyfe, 1989; Boyden, 1990; Myers, 1991; Marcus and Harper, 1996; Boyden et al, 1998; Woodhead 1999b; Alaraudanjoki, 2000; Stegmann, 2003). By contrast, many hundreds of studies are carried out each year into children's psychosocial development in settings other than work (notably in homes, schools and playgrounds). They are reported in dozens of specialist journals as well as textbooks, (e.g. Durkin, 1995; Schaffer, 1996). Research evidence is also available into the impact of poverty (e.g. Brown and Pollit, 1996), and other adversities for children's well-being, but again work hazards are relatively neglected. This imbalance presents difficulties for this paper because of the uncertainties surrounding generalisations between very different situations. Theories of child development, like indicators of psychosocial well-being, have been constructed mainly within affluent Western societies, whereas most hazardous child work is in least affluent, non-Western societies. (Burman, 1996; Woodhead 1999b). Individualistic theories and concepts about children's psychosocial well-being and development do not necessarily translate readily to other societies, where expectations about the development of identity, personal agency and autonomy may be quite different. These dilemmas are discussed in relation to indicators of psychosocial well-being in Section 4.

## 2.8 A framework for assessing psychosocial impacts

### *'Development', 'context' and 'mediation'*

The discussion so far points towards three major principles. These are about:

- **development** - recognising the place of work in children's lives within a long term perspective, from their initiation into work, through various phases of childhood and beyond;
- **context** – recognising that the circumstances and context of work may be as important as the work itself in determining how far the impacts are beneficial or harmful;
- **mediation** – recognising that cultural beliefs and expectations surrounding the value of children's work, goals for their development and indicators of well-being will strongly mediate children's perspectives on and experiences of work, and in turn its positive or negative impact in their lives.

These principles help guard against overly-simplistic conclusions about cause and effect in favour of a more complex and holistic understanding. It draws



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attention to the different points in children's life/work cycle when hazards and their impacts can be assessed, and indicators identified.

### ***Short and long term impacts***

Conclusions about the impacts of child work are based for the most part on relatively short term studies. The priority for future studies is to trace longer term impacts which have greater potential to inform policy. However, the findings from longitudinal studies are by definition a long time coming, and they are not necessarily conclusive. Studies of immediate impacts also play an important role. For example, evidence that a child is engaging in – or is forced to submit to – situations, activities and relationships which constitute neglect, maltreatment or abuse is an indicator of threat to that child's current psychosocial well-being – whether or not the experience has repercussions for their medium or long term psychological and social adjustment. So, psychosocial studies can profitably address children's ongoing experiences and current well-being as well as indicators that point to a long term impact.

### ***Hazards, risks and harm***

At each stage it is important to distinguish the presence of 'hazard' from evidence that children are adversely affected (Boyden, et al, 1998). Children encounter all kinds of hazards throughout their daily lives, even in the most protected environment. For example, exposure to a virus does not mean children are necessarily at risk; they may have already built up resistance. And even where they are at risk, this does not mean they will necessarily succumb to disease. So too with psychosocial impacts – it may be helpful to distinguish:

- the presence of a 'hazard',
- the level of 'risk' that children will be affected by the hazard;
- whether they are actually 'harmed'.

Any number of factors shape whether children respond positively or negatively to their work, for example related to their personal vulnerability or resilience, their age and prior experiences, as well as their gender.

### ***Transitions and child work careers***

These considerations open the way to the assessment of psychosocial impact at different points in working children's 'career', and beyond. For simplicity, three major points are suggested; bearing in mind these aren't fixed. The most significant points for assessment will depend on what are culturally defined as major life transitions, related to family, school, becoming an adult etc. For simplicity, three transitions are suggested:

1. Initiation into work. At this point children may experience a significant shift in their social world. For others it may be a much more gradual process of initiation. Indicators at this point may include the demands made on children, the ways they are treated by employers and their reactions to the experience, including evidence of heightened stress or distress.

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2. Working lives. At this point children may have been working for some months or even years, and they are likely to be familiar with expectations of employers, working practices and skills etc. Some will already have been exposed to several different types of work, perhaps simultaneously. Indicators at this point may be based on observations and reports on their working environment, as well as on employer's relationships with children. Children's feelings about various aspects of their work can be assessed, along with more standardised indicators of psychosocial well-being.
  3. End of childhood. At this point children may have stopped working, moved onto other work, or still be doing the same work, but no longer as children (depending how the beginnings of adult responsibilities are locally understood). The main focus at this point would be on indicators of the young person's psychosocial well-being, their reflection on their experiences as a working child and their understanding of their present situation and future prospects.

Note that identifying these (and many other possible) points for assessment of psychosocial impact of child work does not require that a specific cohort of children be followed up in the manner of a longitudinal study. It is also feasible to identify the psychosocial wellbeing of a group of working children at a particular point in time through a cross-sectional design. This has been the pattern for most studies to date, although it has the obvious limitation that causal links between work and psychosocial outcomes cannot be demonstrated conclusively.

### *Ecologies of work*

Taking account of 'context' and 'mediation' is important, especially in helping understand how children (peers, parents and others) feel about their work and the place it holds in their personal development. It warns against the expectation that a universal set of indicators of psychosocial hazard can be applied 'across the board', to the full range of children, sectors and situations. It draws attention to the linkages between work and other pressures/expectations in children's lives, as well as to wider social, economic and cultural influences, especially influences that amplify children's adversities. It also draws attention to the interdependencies between different areas of children's lives, notably between work, family and schooling. The combination of these influences shapes the opportunities available to them, and the developmental pathways they follow. This 'ecological' principle (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is well recognised in studies of psychosocial risk and adversity (e.g. Belsky, 1980; Cicchetti and Lynch, 1993). It can also be applied in studies of the ecology of work. Work can be seen as one micro-system in a child's life, alongside other micro-systems, centred around home and family, school, community activities etc. (see also Mortimer and Finch 1996). An ecological model is not without limitations, but it does have the advantage of drawing attention to the impact on children of relationships between microsystems (e.g. work and schooling or work and family) at the meso-system level, as well as to broader influences at exo- and macro- system levels. Taking account of the wider context of children's lives and recognising the multiple pressures that they face, can help explain why

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children may be eager to continue hazardous work as the most adaptive solution to difficult circumstances. Taking account of these pressures and the alternatives available to children – or lack of them - is a prerequisite of appropriate intervention, as field experience has shown (Tolfree, 1998).

The next sections of this paper look in more detail at psychosocial dimensions of work in relation to development, context and mediation. Section 3 concentrates on elements of children's working environment, relationships and activities that influence their well-being, and identifies those that may constitute a hazard. Section 4 looks in more detail at indicators of psychosocial wellbeing that can be affected by work.

### 3 Major influences on psychosocial well-being

Major influences on psycho-social well-being associated with work are set-out in Table 1. Column 1 identifies eight broad categories of influence. Column 2 briefly summarises major positive influences on psychosocial well-being. Column 3 identifies major sources of hazard. Some of these influences can be identified with specific points in children’s development, (e.g. starting work), while others are more enduring (e.g. deprivations and neglect). Identified hazards also vary in how far they are a risk to children’s psychosocial well-being in the short, medium and/or long term. Most of these hazards are about the nature of work and the circumstances of work, while others take account of factors in the wider context of children’s lives that modify the impact of work hazards.

The psychosocial hazards summarised in Table 1 constitute potential sources of risk – especially when they coincide as multiple risk factors. How far they actually impact adversely on children’s well-being depends on children’s vulnerability as well as the presence of protective factors, as discussed in Section 5, below.

**Table 1: Psychosocial dimensions of child work**

<i>Influences on well-being</i>	<i>Major positive influences</i>	<i>Major potential hazards</i>
Secure relationships and consistent settings	Stable environment, predictable routines. Changes occur in context of supportive relationships	Breakdown of social networks, emotional bonds. Disruptions to familiar surroundings without supportive relationships
Activities and guidance	Progressive participation in socially valued activities, skills and responsibilities under sensitive, consistent guidance	Unstimulating, monotonous activities. Induction into inappropriate behaviours, e.g. crime, drug abuse, peer exploitation
Responsible adults	Positive, consistent and considerate treatment,	Negligent, inconsistent, harsh treatment. Emotional abuse,

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	respectful of children's integrity	humiliation and discrimination. Physical and sexual abuse
Peer support and solidarity	Opportunities for positive peer relations and mutual support	Isolation from, or rejection by peers. Bullying, violence, stigmatisation
Physical environment and daily schedules	Safe, healthy environment with appropriate balance of work, learning, play and rest	Adverse working conditions. Accidents, ill-health. Exposure to toxins with psychosocial effects. Excessive workload
'Contract' with employers	Appropriately regulated situation with adequate protections	Financial and job insecurity, lack of legal or other protections. Powerlessness in face of exploitation
Work and family lives	Expected contributions respectful of children's interests and well-being	Unreasonable parental expectations, coercive treatment, collusion with employers
Other factors affecting the impact of work	Positive opportunities for participation in school and other community settings Basic economic and social security, political stability and social justice	Incompatibility of work versus school demands. Social exclusion, stigmatization, e.g. by teachers, police, or others in authority. Acute poverty, political/social upheaval, social injustice and exclusion

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### **3.1 Secure relationships and consistent settings**

For many children, working lives are an extension of domestic life, and children quickly adjust to new routines and relationships (e.g. Bey 2003). For others, initiation into work involves a dramatic upheaval in the psychosocial systems that support their development and well-being. Where children are suddenly separated from parents, siblings or other family members, emotional security may be threatened and social networks disrupted. This is especially the case for young children. Children's distress may be increased where they feel they have little control over what is happening to them, or feel they are being forcibly removed, or they are not able to maintain regular contact with sources of security. In addition to interfering with social networks and emotional bonds, children may be disoriented by the sudden loss of familiar settings, cultural routines, and social practices. At the same time, they may face a new situation, new sets of relationships, new daily patterns as well as the unfamiliar work demands that may be made on them. Large and growing numbers of children globally migrate in order to find work, especially female domestic workers (Camacho, 1999).

Most children adjust satisfactorily to moderate separations, disruptions and other transitions (Schaffer, 1996). Indeed these are considered a normal (even desirable) part of growing-up in many societies, and not just amongst the poor (e.g. the British upper class tradition of sending children away to boarding school from the age of six or seven). However, children are much less able to cope with extreme or unstable patterns of change or multiple disruptions that amplify feelings of insecurity and disorientation, especially where they are not psychologically supported by wider social networks. Children may be especially at risk where disruptions to relationships and routines associated with work are linked to other stressful adversities, (e.g. social upheaval due to family breakdown, natural disaster or violent conflicts and forced migration).

### **3.2 Activities and guidance**

Traditionally, children have been initiated into culturally valued activities, roles and cognitive skills through participation in supervised work, notably in rural societies (Rogoff 1990; 2003). Acquisition of skills has often been strongly linked to development of gender identities (e.g. Reynolds 1991; Nieuwenhuys 1994; Punch 2001). By contrast, within modern urban societies, much child work is judged to be mundane, monotonous and/or repetitive. In these circumstances working can undermine children's self-worth and inhibit opportunities for developing cognitive and social skills, and positive self-esteem. Children may be deprived of key experiences that are considered normal and desirable for children their age and gender within their community (notably school), with the consequence that they are ill-prepared for the demands of adult life, risking future unemployment and/or social exclusion. Judging whether children's learning is maladaptive requires that account is taken of the context and realistic opportunities available to working children. For example, children apprenticed in a specific vocation from an early age (e.g. as weavers) may be judged to miss out on wider skills and more academic education. But parents and children themselves may

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believe that acquiring these early vocational skills is most likely to assure them long term economic security (Woodhead 1999).

Children strongly identify with role models, on whom they depend for guidance and teaching. They may be at risk where they receive insufficient guidance and support in their work from adults and others responsible for their care, well-being and learning. At the same time they may be deprived of educational opportunities afforded by attending school, even on a part time basis. They may be exposed to undesirable influences, substance abuse, violence and illicit activities, including being encouraged to exploit, bully or corrupt those who are in turn weaker than themselves. These risks can be associated with their workplace, with peers, or customers, or with the social milieu within which they work. Children may be especially vulnerable where they are emotionally, socially and financially dependent on the source of negative influences.

### **3.3 Responsible adults**

Children's physical, personal and social well-being is strongly shaped by the people who have authority, power and influence over them, according to their capacity and willingness to respect children's rights and act in their best interests. Young children especially are at risk if they are working in an environment that lacks sensitivity to their immaturity, and need for rest and play, or where they are required to take on responsibilities beyond their capabilities.

Awareness of the extent of ill-treatment, physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children has steadily increased during the past forty years, although beliefs about what constitutes abuse vary significantly (Korbin 1981). Children can be at risk at home, in residential care, at school, via the internet and in any number of other settings, including where children are working. Indeed be subjected to ill-treatment or abuse can be one of the most serious risks to working children's psychosocial well-being. Box 1 offers a summary of internationally accepted definitions of child abuse and neglect.

#### **Box 1 World Health Organization definitions of child abuse and neglect**

“Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.”

“Emotional abuse includes the failure of a caregiver to provide an appropriate and supportive environment, and includes acts that have an adverse effect on the emotional health and development of a child. Such acts include restricting a child's movements, denigration, ridicule, threats and intimidation, discrimination, rejection and other non-physical forms of hostile treatment.”

“Physical abuse of a child is defined as those acts of commission by a caregiver that cause actual physical harm or have the potential for harm.”

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“Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violate the laws and social taboos of society. Child sexual abuse is evidenced by an activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person...”

“Neglect refers to the failure of a parent to provide for the development of the child – where the parent is in a position to do so – in one or more of the following areas: health, education, emotional development, nutrition, shelter and safe living conditions. Neglect is thus distinguished from circumstances of poverty in that neglect can occur only in cases where reasonable resources are available to the family or caregiver.”

(WHO, 1999)

Working children are vulnerable to maltreatment and emotional abuse perpetrated by employers, supervisors, clients or others with authority and power. They are especially at risk where they are working in domestic or workshop situations that are not open to public scrutiny, as well as in other unregulated sectors where children’s personal agency is weakened. They are relatively isolated and powerless – forced to endure the ill treatment from employers or from other more powerful individuals from whom they might normally expect to receive nurturance, support and encouragement. Children’s fear that they are going to be ill-treated can be just as stressful as actual incidents of abuse. They may be most at risk where they are constantly expected to display servility, and subjected to systematic discrimination and denigration. These risks are exacerbated where reliable support systems are not available, to which children could normally turn to for help. Children’s experiences of abuse are strongly affected by their gender, not just in terms of the likelihood of boys and girls becoming victims of sexual, physical and emotional abuse, but also in terms of the consequences of abuse, and the possibility of receiving help and support. For example, girls may be more prone to certain types of abuse, while boys may have more difficulty reporting abuse because of social taboos.

According to one influential definition (constructed by US experts) psychological maltreatment can take six forms: spurning (hostile rejecting/degrading); terrorizing (threatening); exploiting/corrupting; not responding to emotional needs; isolating (denying opportunities for interaction); and neglect (cited by Glaser, 2002). In the work context, emotional abuse may be manifested through a vicious cycle comprising:

- unreasonable expectations of work productivity and work standards;
- lack of encouragement and support to ensure children are able to complete a task;
- scolding and punishment for failures, including ridicule and humiliation, harassment, or shaming;



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- isolating child and denying child's needs or requests for help.

Employers who are inconsistent towards children, who constantly scold and rarely praise them undermine children's self-esteem, risking making them feel worthless.

The serious psychological consequences of emotional abuse are well-recognised from research carried out into abusive families (e.g. Glaser, 2002). Protecting working children from emotional abuse presents particular challenges. Reviewing psychological impacts of child domestic work, Stegmann (2003) notes that neglect and emotional abuse are much harder to pin down than physical abuse:

‘...many of the effects of child domestic work might not be as a result of abusive actions, but rather as a result of more passive forms of neglect... Many of the factors hypothesized to have a negative effect in child domestic work take the form of a more insidious undermining of the self-image, this may not be easily measured and may be subject to much cultural variation... We need to be able to identify the results of child domestic work that may be due more to the constant degradations wearing down the child's defences, than to any acute trauma or single event’

(Stegmann 2003, pp 25-26).

Emotionally abusive behaviour frequently goes hand-in-hand with harsh treatment, severe physical punishments and other abusive practices. Beatings from employers and clients are regularly reported by working children, as well as physical abuse by teachers (Woodhead, 1998). All forms of physical chastisement may be condemned in principle as a violation of children's children's rights, but this does not mean that children's psychosocial well-being is necessarily jeopardised by moderate physical punishment, especially where such punishments are endorsed within local social mores, and viewed by children themselves as justifiable, albeit unpleasant in the short term. Unjustified, severe or inconsistent punishments are more likely to pose a risk to children's well-being because victims are unable to take steps to avoid such punishments, which may lead to a sense of helplessness and apathy.

Sexual abuse is an additional hazard faced by working children, especially girls, again linked to their relative powerlessness in relation to their abusers. As a child domestic worker in Bangladesh explains: “If there is an adult male in the house they try to do ‘bad’ things” (Woodhead 1998, p.54). Sexual abuse from a familiar adult on whom children are dependent can lead to a sense of betrayal, adding to their trauma. Children are being hurt by the very people from whom they would normally expect help (Freyd, 1996). The impact of sexual abuse will be conditioned by cultural attitudes towards victims. Children are most vulnerable where sexual abuse is seen as bringing shame on family and community, and they are at risk of being ostracised or stigmatized (Feiring et al, 1996; Baker and Dwairy, 2003).

Child sex workers can face similar social exclusion where their occupation is seen as degrading (Woodhead, 1998). Again, much depends on cultural beliefs and practices surrounding child sex work, which are frequently ambiguous within communities where such activities can appear to be a more acceptable solution to poverty than other available options. For example,

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Montgomery (2001) highlights the dilemmas facing young prostitutes in Thailand, where the alternatives are even less appealing: “many of them have tried other jobs...the rubbish dump is close to where they live, but there is little money to be made there and it involves plenty of risks..Selling food is another option but there are start-up costs which would involve savings that most people do not have” (Montgomery, 2001, p. 98).

### **3.4 Peer support and solidarity**

Friendships are normally a fundamental source of social support and personal identity for children, especially during middle and later childhood (Rubin, 1980; Barnes 2003). Some types of work can foster friendships and solidarity amongst peers, for example where they work side-by-side, collaborating in tasks, watching out for each other, sharing in difficulties etc. These peer relationships can serve as an important source of social support, offering some psychosocial protection to children faced with harsh treatment, bullying or abuse. Much street based work is strongly built around solidarity amongst peers, especially where children feel unsupported by family networks. Indeed, children may be better nourished and adjusted than they would be in some impoverished, dysfunctional, abusive home environments. Studies of street children support the view that this way of life can represent an adaptive response to serious adversities (e.g. Tyler et al, 1991; Ennew, 1994a; Panter-Brick, 2002).

In other cases, work can be a socially isolating experience, especially where children are deprived of the opportunity to socialise with their peer group and participate in play and peer culture that is viewed as normal for young people within their communities. Children may feel rejected or stigmatised by their peer group because of their poverty and the degrading work they do. At worst, they may become victims of bullying, or physical, emotional or sexual abuse from other children who are older, stronger or more powerful. Children experience bullying as stressful even in relatively regulated and benign environments, such as school playgrounds (e.g. Smith et al, 1999). In less regulated work settings, bullying by other children is a greater risk, especially from employers' children, towards whom working children feel subservient. Their vulnerability is greatest where they are not able to complain, seek help or even escape the abuse. Children engaged in street work may also be vulnerable, especially where they rely on are unsupported by family networks and rely on their peers for emotional support.

### **3.5 Physical environment and work schedules**

So far, I have concentrated on dimensions of work that clearly come under the heading ‘psychosocial’. But features of children’s physical environment also have psychosocial consequences. Many of the world’s poorest children spend much of their day in conditions that are cramped, noisy, and lacking in sanitary or other basic amenities. Many urban homes are little more than temporary shelters (and some schools are little better). Where children’s work environment is equally poor - or worse - this can increase the risks to their well-being.

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Separating out psychosocial from physical hazards is in some respects artificial:

‘Chemical, physical, biological and psychological hazards are often found in combination in the workplace. Often, too, their adverse effects are not only cumulative but magnified through their synergistic interaction.’ (ILO, 1996, page 9).

Many well-recognised physical hazards have strong psychosocial consequences. These include:

- Toxic substances may impact on the developing nervous system and in turn on children’s psychosocial functioning, as for example in the evidence for lead (e.g. Tong et al., 1996; Banks et al, 1997; Lewendon et al, 2001);
- An unhealthy, noisy, poorly lit and ill-ventilated environment risks children’s general health and increases stress, fatigue and demoralisation. If children find it difficult to work in these circumstances, stress levels may increase;
- Dangerous tools, without adequate safety precautions may induce stress and fear of accidents. Children may be traumatised by suffering or witnessing serious incidents. Children working in extreme conditions, (e.g. mining, fishing) are especially vulnerable;
- If children do suffer an accident in which they are disfigured or disabled this may increase the risk of social rejection, isolation and stigmatization.

The psychosocial consequences of exposure to physical hazards can affect all children, but the severity of trauma will depend on children’s age, maturity and vulnerability. As a general rule, younger children are at greatest risk, during periods of rapid physical and psychological change (Schaffer, 1996).

Many children work in these difficult circumstances for excessively long hours, without adequate rest. If they are working beyond their strength, stamina and competence they risk exhaustion and accident. Besides reducing their general well-being, such work can induce loss of confidence, low self-esteem and fear of punishment for poor performance.

### **3.6 ‘Contract’ with employers**

One of the factors underpinning many potential hazards outlined above concerns the insecurity and/or exploitative and/or unregulated character of many child work situations. Children have to cope with a combination of insecurities:

- financial insecurity, uncertain income;
- job insecurity, lack of any ‘contract’;
- lack of sick leave or holiday pay;

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- no recourse to legal protection, trade union or other supportive agency;
  - powerless to complain or leave, especially in ‘bonded’ situations.

Unpredictable treatment of workers is often a key factor. Long term fear of loss of earnings may be as damaging as actual loss of earnings. In such circumstances, children’s sense of personal agency can be seriously undermined. They are dependent on and in the power of their employer, economically and also psychologically.

### **3.7 Work and family lives**

It may seem odd to include home and family circumstances as a potential risk factor in hazardous work. As stated at the outset, children’s working situation is one micro-system in children’s lives, which to greater or lesser degree is enmeshed with other micro-systems, notably their home/family networks. For many children, work and family systems are one-and-the-same, where parents or other kin are their ‘employers’. One major international study estimates that family-based work accounts for over 70% of working children (O’Donnell et al 2002, page 8).

Parents and other family members are normally a primary source of emotional security, socialization and learning. Contributing to family-based work (e.g. through farm work or small businesses) can strengthen personal identity and psychological well-being. But if family work is excessive, exploitative or abusive, family-based child-workers may be at even greater risk than children working outside their families. They are being maltreated by the people on whom they are most psychologically dependent, often isolated from others and without recourse to other sources of social support. In family work situations, there are few boundaries to the demands that can be made on children’s time and sense of loyalty.

“They say we are lazy...If we complain about our work, our parents say we are just making excuses. They say “what is hard in helping?”

(Woodhead, 1998, p.92)

Moreover, exploitation and abuse may be even less visible than in other work situations, especially for girls. Children’s experience of family-based work is strongly differentiated by gender, with girls’ lives typically more narrowly circumscribed and centred on domestic duties and care of siblings.

Where children’s work is not located within family settings, the linkages between working and family lives can serve to reduce or to amplify work hazards. For example, parents’ expectations for children’s work strongly mediate the impact of that work on their children –through the support and encouragement they are offered, or through the unreasonable expectations they are expected to fulfil, and the punishments they endure as a result (Woodhead, 1998). In situations of extreme hardship, families may have little choice but to collude with employers in the exploitation of their children, or at least feel they have no power to prevent it. At worst, children may be

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trapped between several sources of emotional and/or physical abuse – from employers, clients, parents and others.

### **3.8 Other factors affecting the impact of work**

Many other situational factors can serve to amplify or attenuate the psychosocial hazards of work. For example, children who live in communities where attending school is the norm for their age group are likely to feel more degraded by having to work instead of going to school than they would in communities where schooling is less widely available. Conversely, the availability of positive part-time school experiences may serve to buffer negative impacts of work. Children may also be at risk where they experience a conflict between economic pressures to support their impoverished family and pressures to achieve well in school (Woodhead, 2001).

Another example relates to public attitudes towards particular groups of working children, or specific occupations. Working children can be most at risk of humiliation or rejection by peers, teachers or others in school and community settings, where they are labelled for carrying out low status work. Children working in occupations perceived as socially degrading are at particular risk. Equally, children who have been sexually abused through their work may be stigmatised rather than treated with compassion, adding to their sense of social exclusion. A group of sex workers in Ethiopia report:

‘School and work will not go together, because ...students and teachers at school will insult us and abuse us and prevent us from attending’

(Woodhead 1998, p.127)

The social milieu surrounding work may also be a source of risk. Children may be exposed to anti-social and criminal activities, or contact with harmful drugs. This applies especially to children working on the streets, in markets, railway stations or in other public places.

In short, hazards associated with children’s working lives need to be assessed in context of the other many other sources of influence in their lives.

Working children can be exposed to hazards in many settings, not least because of the underlying poverty of their situation. They may be at risk of emotional, physical and sexual abuse from parents, teachers and police, as well as from employers.

Finally, it is important to recognise the economic and political context of poverty and injustice that so powerfully shapes children’s (and families’) experiences of hazardous child work (Stephens, 1995; Kenny, 1999; Schlemmer, 2000; Lieten and White 2001; Bey, 2003). For communities living with chronic adversity, faced with restricted opportunities and constrained choices, the opportunity of work – even exploitative and hazardous labour – has quite a different psychosocial significance than it would if basic material and social justice could be assured.

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## 4 Indicators of psycho-social well-being

In this section, attention shifts from indicators of hazard to indicators of impact on children's psycho-social well-being. This distinction between a 'hazard' and its 'impact' is in some ways an over-simplification, for the reasons explained in Section 2. It is helpful to distinguish:

- the presence of 'hazards', as revealed by environmental assessment;
- children's immediate experience of, and reactions to those hazards;
- evidence of medium or long-term impact on their well-being.

In practice, children's day-to-day experiences of exhausting work, neglect and abuse are as significant an indicator of harm as are indicators of long term impacts on their psychosocial functioning.

This section draws extensively on concepts in developmental and clinical psychology, psychiatry and psychometrics. A vast, potentially relevant research literature is available on these topics, including well-researched concepts, indicators and instruments. Even so, generalising to the study of child work is not straightforward. Most research is linked to psychosocial development amongst children in affluent Western societies and the adversities that commonly affect their well-being. While key concepts and general principles may apply, caution is needed in translating specific findings into the very different circumstances of most child workers. The export of observational, attitudinal and other diagnostic instruments is especially problematic unless their content is thoroughly revised to ensure relevance to child work situations.

This section of the paper draws on two existing reviews, both specifically on psychological indicators of child work: Judith Ennew's Rapid Assessment Procedure (Ennew 1994); and Stephanie Brewer's review and proposed assessment tool for Anti-Slavery International, specifically focussed on child domestic workers, but also relevant to child workers in general (Brewer 2003).

Table 2 proposes five broad domains of psychosocial functioning most relevant to studying the impact of work. These domains cover areas of social cognition, social/cultural competence and personal agency as well as emotional and physiological expressions of well-being – or otherwise. The second column lists positive indicators for each domain, while the third column summarises negative indicators. Some of the indicators are precise, measurable, and well-researched; others less so, as will become apparent from the following discussion.

**Table 2: A framework for assessing psychosocial well-being amongst working children**

<i>Broad domains</i>	<i>Major positive indicators</i>	<i>Major negative indicators</i>
Cognitive abilities and cultural competencies	Intelligence, cognitive, communication and practical skills, culturally - valued competencies	Delayed development, narrow range of cognitive, technical and communication skills, maladaptive for future prospects
Personal security, social integration and social competence	Secure attachments, positive adult/peer relations, social integration/adjustment, moral reasoning and behaviour	Insecurity, inhibition, low social confidence, conflictual relationships, social exclusion or rejection, deviant or antisocial behaviour
Personal identity and valuation	Positive self-concept, high self-esteem, self-worth, personal pride	Feelings of worthlessness, fear of failure, self-denigration, negative social comparisons, shame and stigma
Personal agency	Self-efficacy, internal locus of control, autonomy, responsibility, positive outlook, motivation	Learned helplessness, external locus of control, hopelessness, apathy, fatalism, feelings of confusion, betrayal, abandonment
Emotional and somatic expressions of well-being	Subjective well-being, stability, general health, growth and development	Stress, trauma, fear, anxiety, depression, anger, distress, despair, disturbed sleep and eating, substance abuse, self-harm

#### **4.1 Cognitive abilities and cultural competencies**

Children's cognitive abilities are traditionally encompassed by the concept of intelligence. Well-tested psychometric instruments are available in abundance. Measures of general intelligence, or sub-tests of specific areas of

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spatial, motor and verbal intelligence are likely to be most relevant in assessing children whose working situation is marked by extreme deprivation, lack of stimulation or mundane and repetitive activities, or children whose general development has been seriously impaired by an unhealthy and restricted environment.

For most work situations, children's competence in more specific, culturally-valued cognitive skills, (including basic levels of numeracy and literacy, practical knowledge and communication skills) are likely to prove more sensitive indicators of the positive or negative impact of their work. Besides, some recent strands of research have been critical of universalistic constructs of intelligence and favour a more socio-cultural approach. Children's 'multiple potential intelligences' are shaped by the situations in which they grow up, the opportunities that are available to them and the skills valued by their community, and considered appropriate according to their age, gender, ethnicity, social status etc. Mature capacities for thinking, reasoning and communication valued by modern societies are not the culmination of general processes of growth, development and learning alone. They are also the product of particular forms of cognitive socialisation, strongly linked to school learning and instruction (Mercer, 1995; Faulkner et al, 1998).

According to this view, the curriculum and pedagogic practices so distinctive of modern schooling are designed to initiate young minds into very particular culturally-valued forms of schooled-cognition, (Rogoff and Chavajay, 1995). The emphasis of school learning, on language as a medium of instruction, de-contextualised learning, literacy and symbolic numeracy, need to be understood as a modern adaptation to a particular set of socio-economic and cultural priorities in high technology, information-based economies (Woodhead, 1999a).

'The developmental endpoint that has traditionally anchored cognitive developmental theories - skill in academic activities such as formal operational reasoning and scientific, mathematical, and literate practices - is one valuable goal of development, but one that is tied to its contexts and culture, as is any other goal or endpoint of development valued by a community...Each community's valued skills constitute the local goals of development. ...In the final analysis, it is not possible to determine whether the practices of one society are more adaptive than those of another, as judgements of adaptation cannot be separated from values' (Rogoff, 1990, p12).

So, the search for indicators that work impacts on children's cognitive development requires prior answers to a more basic set of questions applied to each context studied:

- Which cognitive, communicative and practical competencies are essential for social adjustment and well-being?
- How far are these encouraged, or undermined within the learning experiences provided by work?
- How far can acquisition of these skills be assured within schooling systems realistically available to working children?



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Answering these questions requires judgements about which cognitive skills it is most valuable for children to acquire, and about who is best able to decide what is in children's best interests – now and in the future. They also require more technical assessments about different routes through which children can acquire cognitive skills, most clearly researched in relation to street versus school mathematics (Nunes et al 1993).

More pragmatically, overall indicators that cognitive development has been affected by work are certainly important. But equally important are indicators that children's work is adaptive or maladaptive, in terms of the range of skills acquired, in so far as this affects their future prospects and future well-being. Judgements about which kinds of learning are adaptive - and which are not adaptive - shift over time, as Oloko's study of Nigerian street workers elegantly demonstrated (Oloko, 1993).

## **4.2 Personal security, social integration and social competence**

Many of the psychosocial dimensions of work identified in Table 1 are about the quality of children's relationships – and the ways these may be enhanced by positive experiences, or challenged by hazardous situations. Disruptions and discontinuities, lack of guidance, inappropriate role models, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, negative peer relations and adverse family relations all draw attention to the centrality of relationships. Secure patterns of relationship with others are at the core of children's psychological development and well-being, in numerous respects (Schaffer, 1996). For example:

- Personal security is founded on stable, caring relationships within which children feel protected, encouraged and nurtured, especially during the earliest of physical and psychological dependency;
- Earliest social interactions are the foundation for development of a sense of self, understanding and respect for others and they are the basis for learning communicative and social skills;
- Relationships with parents, teachers, employers, older siblings, etc. are the context within which children learn cognitive, moral, practical and cultural skills through processes of observation, modelling, instruction and guided participation;
- Peer relationships encourage playful exploration of self and identity, and sustain children through the phases of childhood, including at school, work and in community settings.

As noted in Section 3, breakdown of secure attachments not only causes children distress. It can lead to long term social adjustment difficulties for children deprived of love and consistent care. Attachment theory offers a well-researched model for considering the implications of work-linked

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disruptions and discontinuities (O'Connor, 2002). At the same time, the universal prescriptions for healthy emotional development that were originally proposed by Bowlby (1953) in his influential report to the World Health Organisation are now recognised as failing to separate out normative patterns of child care from children's psychological needs. The numbers and patterns of attachment, the frequency of separations, the way caregivers respond to distress, and the way these close relationships are regulated within family settings, are highly variable within and between societies (Super and Harkness, 1982). The history of studies into the impact of divorce on children's psychosocial well-being offer a particularly clear illustration of the linkages between changing beliefs about children's needs, changing social practices and shifting messages from research (Woodhead, 1990; Smart, 2003).

The role of cultural beliefs and practices in mediating the psychosocial significance of disruptions and discontinuities applies equally in relation to circumstances of children's work. In situations where children are forced to separate from attachment figures at an early age in order to work away from home they will very likely suffer emotional distress, just as has often been described for the children of affluent Minority World societies being sent away to boarding school. In such circumstances the extent of trauma will depend not only on individual differences in children's vulnerability, but also crucially on children's prior relationship experiences, combined with the availability of support networks amongst peers and adults (Schaffer, 1996). However, work is not necessarily associated with disrupted social relationships. On the contrary, in most societies, induction into work has traditionally been an important opportunity for ensuring children experience personal security, social integration and social competence. Working has been a core social activity, and failure to find work, or loss of livelihood has been most threatening to personal security and social cohesion.

Continuities in relationships are significant for children's well-being, in whatever context. Quality of relationships is also central, with distorted and conflictual relationships and inconsistent patterns of care putting children at greater risk than disruptions and separations. For example, a longitudinal study in New Zealand reports that parental discord (conflict, arguments and physical assaults) was more strongly associated with negative psychosocial development than family disruptions and separations (such as divorce) (Fergusson et al, 1992). Problem behaviour (including a history of offending) was more marked for boys than girls, confirming the well-established gender differences in children's reactions to difficulties, with boys more likely to develop challenging and anti-social behaviour, while girls are more likely to become withdrawn, anxious and depressed. Studies of emotional abuse in families draw similar conclusions (e.g. Emery and Laumann-Billings, 2002).

These lines of research all point to the quality of children's relationships with others as important indicators of social adjustment. These indicators include their success in 'managing' interactions with others (especially those in authority), feelings of security and social confidence, anti-social behaviour as well as symptoms of depression.

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During middle childhood and adolescence, peer relationships become important sources of identity and social support for young people (Tietjen, 1989). In contexts where childhood is dominated by education, the school is a major context for establishing and maintaining these relationships. 'Peer-culture' mediates social relationships, and shapes appropriate tastes and behaviour (Corsaro, 1997; Kehily and Swann, 2003). For working children, the peer group at work may be at least as important as a source of security, solidarity, and cultural initiation as the peer group at school. It can also be a context where children experience rejection and social exclusion. For children 'of the streets' the peer group can play a primary role in maintaining psychological health and well-being (Ennew, 1994a). In short, the quality of children's social integration is a further indicator of their psychosocial well-being.

An additional dimension of children's social integration is about whether children's social interactions, social understanding and behaviour are moral (or pro-social). Children may be psychologically secure even though they are growing-up within deviant relationships and being guided by undesirable role models, through which they are initiated into anti-social, abusive or exploitative behaviours. It is a matter for debate how far substance misuse, criminal or anti-social behaviour and other indicators of psychosocial harm are attributable to work itself and how far to the poverty, deprivations and abuses suffered by children at home and on the streets. For many vulnerable children, productive work may be seen as helping protect children from these risks (Campos et al, 1994).

One way to summarize the themes of this section is under the heading 'social competence'. On the basis of research into the development of behaviours consistent with social adjustment, Susan Harter devised a Social Competence Scale based on items such as the following: "have a lot of friends"; "popular with kids"; "easy to like"; "do things with kids" (cited in Schaffer, 1996). The culture-specificity of these characteristics is fairly obvious, drawing attention to the importance of embedding indicators within culturally relevant expectations for children's behaviour and social adjustment (Schneider, 1993). 'Social competence' has been translated in meaningful ways within studies of street children (e.g. Tyler et al, 1991).

### **4.3 Personal Identity and Valuation**

Identity is fundamental to psychosocial adjustment. Children face different developmental challenges at different stages, according to Erikson's classic developmental theory (Erikson 1980). For example, the years 6-12 are seen as a stage when children are acquiring socially valued skills – winning approval in the process or developing a sense of inferiority if they are unable to meet expectations. The period 13-18 years has special significance, according to Erikson. This is a time of role confusion for young people and of identity re-negotiation as they make the transition into adulthood, at least according to dominant cultural norms within twentieth century industrial societies.

More recent theorists are generally wary of Erikson's universal account of identity development, recognising that pathways through the challenges of childhood are culturally as much as developmentally defined, as are points of

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transitions into adulthood. Children's experiences of developing identity are always located in particular social contexts, settings and practices, and shaped by those with authority, influence and power in their lives. Identity is linked to places, activities and relationships (e.g. learning with friends at school, caring for my little brother at home, helping my family with the harvest, or working for customers in the market). It is often strongly differentiated according to gender, ethnicity and circumstances (Morrow, 2003). Young people's identity is also shaped by the 'cultural narratives' available to them within their community. Some narratives of identity are associated with roles and relationships (e.g. as a 'child', a 'son', a 'daughter', a 'pupil', a 'carer' or a 'worker'). Others are associated with socio-economic circumstances, religion or ethnicity (e.g. as 'poor', 'Hindu' or 'Xhosa').

Accordingly, identity is for most young people multi-faceted, dynamic and shifting with time according to cultural as well as developmental agendas. This is important when it comes to considering positive and negative influences of work. Children may be at risk in circumstances: (i) where they lack opportunity and encouragement to develop a coherent sense of their identity(ies) within which they have self-respect; (ii) where they are forcibly separated from their family and community (as in trafficking); (iii) where they are surrounded by conflict, violence and social instability or where they (and their community) are subject to persecution; and (iv) where they are faced with confusing or competing expectations (e.g. incompatible and unreasonable demands for economic activity as well as school achievement). At worst their identity may be challenged where they feel degraded and stigmatised by their situation and by the ways they are treated (e.g. as in bonded labour or in sex work).

Indicators related to children's identity, self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy etc, are reviewed in the following pages, based mainly on psychological research from Western societies. It is important to bear in mind that 'sense of self' is a cultural construct. Developing a positive sense of self may not be invested with the same meaning or significance in the diverse societies where children work. For example:

"The unexamined assumption in social science research is that the individual is a self-contained entity who (a) comprises a unique configuration of internal attributes (e.g. preference, traits, abilities, values rights etc., and (b) who behaves primarily as a consequence of these internal attributes. The problem is that this model of the self is quite simply not the one that is held by the majority of people in the world' (Kitayama and Markus, 1995, p 366).

Modern views of normal child development are steeped in individualism, with its emphasis on the psychological value of the child to parents, socialization goals associated with separation and independence, and development of an autonomous sense of self. This contrasts sharply with many traditional societies where interdependencies are emphasized, (Kagitcibasi, 1996).

### ***Self-concept and self-esteem***

Self-concept refers to children's sense of who they are, which is closely linked to identity and becomes increasingly more reflective, differentiated

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and explicit during later childhood (Harter, 1983). Self-esteem is about children's sense of their worth and value. It can involve their own judgements about themselves, as well as their beliefs about how others view them.

Self-esteem may be differentiated into different 'domains'. For example, a child may have low self-esteem in relation to school learning but high self-esteem in relation to skills at work, or vice-versa. Or a child may have high self-esteem playing with their peers in the playground, but low self-esteem playing with their siblings at home. Self-esteem is often linked to feelings of purposefulness and achievement, and it is strongly affected by the respect, approval and encouragement children receive from others. Self-esteem is diminished by feelings of failure, and by experiences of rejection, scolding and ridicule. Low self-esteem is associated with diminished confidence, motivation, competence, shame and depression.

Self-esteem is a widely used indicator of psychosocial adjustment. Measures of self-esteem include Harter's self-perception profile (Harter, 1988) and Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Typically these are presented to children as statements for rating on 5 point Likert-type scale. Like most measures of psychosocial adjustment these scales were not designed with working children in mind. Items proposed by Brewer (2003) as a relevant measure of global self-worth include:

"I can do things as well as most other people"

"Not many things about me make me proud or happy"

"At times I feel that I am no good, or worthless"

(Brewer 2003 p.23)

Developing more domain specific indicators of self-esteem would also be feasible, and more likely to be sensitive to specific effects of work.

In qualitative studies with working children, self-esteem often emerges as a major theme, with evidence of both positive and negative impact of work (Stegmann 2003). For example:

"I feel bad ...because sometimes I am very dirty"

"When we are able to do ... work which brings home money it feels great"

(Woodhead, 1998, pp. 94-96)

#### **4.4 Personal agency**

The importance of recognising children as active contributors to their development, including their working lives has already been mentioned in Section 2. Put simply, agency is about how far an individual is able to shape their destiny versus being shaped by external forces outside their control. Developmental psychologists have emphasized that children are active meaning makers, endeavouring to make sense of their social environment (Bruner and Haste, 1987). They are partners in social interaction and communication (Schaffer 1996), actively shaping the ways they are treated by adults in transactional patterns of influence (Sameroff, 1987). At the same time, the concept of 'socialisation' is being set aside in favour of a much

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more dynamic theoretical framework within which children are seen as contributing to the creation of social life, as well as being shaped by it (James and Prout, 1990). Questions about children's sense of personal agency (and the closely related concept of self-efficacy, Bandura, 1977) are thus central to any assessment of their well-being. I emphasize 'sense of personal agency'. Children may feel comfortable with circumstances that appear highly constrained from an outsider's point of view.

Assessment of working children's sense of agency or self-efficacy can be informed by a number of well-researched psychosocial constructs (bearing in mind that they originate in Western contexts and may not have equivalence of meaning and significance in other languages/cultures). These include 'locus of control', 'learned helplessness', and 'attribution'.

### *Locus of control*

Locus of control has roots in Social Learning Theory. It refers to an individual's feelings that events/influences in their lives are the consequence of their own actions (internal locus of control) versus outside their control (external locus of control), e.g. due to chance or the actions of powerful others (Rotter, 1966). Within Western contexts it is generally assumed that greater internal locus of control is consistent with psychosocial wellbeing, (Kliewer and Sandler 1992). Some theorists link the two concepts 'internal locus of control' and 'high self-esteem', arguing that 'true self-esteem' comes about when an individual has a secure, autonomous sense of self-worth that is not dependent on external structures of motivation and approval (Deci and Ryan, 1995).

The following examples from the review carried out by Anti-Slavery International illustrate how locus of control themes can be operationalised. As with the self-esteem examples quoted above, these items are fairly general but could be translated into children's working situation:

"When something bad happens to me, generally it's because I have bad luck"

"If I try hard enough, I can accomplish things I want to accomplish"

"Often I know that nothing I do will make a difference, so it would be a waste of time to try"

(Brewer, 2003 p. 43-4)

Applying locus of control measures to children is not straightforward because some measure of external control is considered normal and desirable, through the socialising influence of parents, teachers, employers, etc. Internal control normally increases with age, although this is highly variable according to gender, family structures and patterns of authority (Smith et al, 1995). In more hierarchical societies, external locus of control may be normal even for adults. This suggests distinctions are needed between the source of control and the type of control. Control that is perceived as reasonable, consistent and predictable may be less damaging to children than control that is perceived as unreasonable, abusive and unpredictable. The next indicator of personal agency goes some way in that direction.

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## *Learned helplessness*

'Learned helplessness' was first used by Seligman and colleagues in the 1960s to describe results from laboratory research into the effects on dogs faced with uncontrollable shocks, compared with other animals able to control these negative experiences. Later studies applied an equivalent procedure to humans, with equally debilitating effects (Garber and Seligman 1980). While experimental research of this kind would now raise serious ethical questions, these studies did draw attention to the psychologically disturbing effects of unpredictable negative experiences over which the individual has little control or means of escape. Such experiences induce stress, anxiety and depression. They are likely to increase passivity as well as a sense of hopelessness and fatalism combined with a sense of abandonment, with reduced motivation for learning or for accomplishing goals in the absence of consistent structures of personal recognition and reward. Most serious, these ways of adapting to a difficult situation may be generalised to situations where children do have greater potential control over the lives. They may become inappropriately passive, lacking initiative and motivation. Reactions to difficult situations will be mediated by a host of personal and cultural factors. For example, anthropologists draw attention the ways beliefs about personal karma or destiny can moderate a sense of helplessness (Montgomery, 2001).

Many child work situations put children at risk in this respect, notably where there lives are highly regulated, under the control of powerful adults who subject them to neglect, maltreatment and emotional abuse, which may be combined with physical and sexual abuse. An obvious case is domestic work:

"...once the child arrives at the employer's house, she loses the ability to choose how she spends her time, where she can go, with whom she can associate, when she eats and sleeps, and how she is addressed. Daily activities may be tightly scheduled so that child domestic workers do not even choose the order in which they do their tasks ... (they) fear that they may be fired, but do not feel that they have the choice to quit..." (Brewer 2003, p.42)

One child domestic worker acknowledged her situation thus: "My employer controls my life" (Woodhead, 1998, p. 38)

Other studies offer a rather different view of domestic workers sense of personal agency (Camacho, 1999). One of the few pieces of research that has measured locus of control suggests the undermining effects of external locus of control may apply mainly to children who also experience high anxiety, which is consistent with the idea of 'learned helplessness.' Alaraudanjoki (2000) compared 10-14 year old children working in carpet factories of Kathmandu with school children from comparable communities in Nepal (total sample=254). Applying a short version of the Nowicki-Strickland locus of control scale for children (Nowicki & Strickland, 1973) working children showed higher internal locus of control than school children. Presumably this was because the 'school' children felt strongly controlled by their parents and teachers, whereas the 'working children' felt some degree of autonomy at least in certain aspects of their lives. But there were important differences within the groups. Those working children who showed higher external locus

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of control also showed higher anxiety, suggesting they were a more vulnerable group.

### ***Attribution style***

Feelings of agency, efficacy, locus of control and helplessness may also be expressed through the explanations (attributions) children offer for events in their lives (Weiner, 1990). For example, in the context of work, children may attribute an event to an internal cause (e.g. “I was injured because I didn’t follow instructions properly”) or an external cause (e.g. “I was injured because I wasn’t given any protective clothing”). Their attributions may be global (“I had the accident because I never concentrate at anything I do”) or a specific one (“I had the accident because I was tired when I got to work that day”). They may be stable (“I am always careless and clumsy”) or unstable (“I made a mistake that time, but know how to take care of myself now”) (adapted from Brewer 2003).

Children who offer internal, global, stable attributions (i.e. undifferentiated self-blaming accounts of their hopelessness) are most likely to feel low self-esteem, efficacy and self-worth. At worst, children who feel they are responsible for an event, may at the same time show external locus of control. In other words they feel unable to influence what is happening to them, but feel responsibility nonetheless. Self-blame in situations where children have no control over traumatic circumstances is well-recognised in relation to parental disharmony and conflict as well as for victims of child abuse, with negative consequences for children’s psychological well-being, especially noted for girls (Bugental and Shennum, 2002; Cohen and Mannarino, 2002). In similar way, working children may view their situation with resignation. For example, “Girls have been born to work” was the way one child domestic worker understood her situation (Woodhead 1998, p.119).

## **4.5 Emotional and somatic expressions of well-being**

Low self esteem, self-efficacy and feelings of helplessness are often accompanied by strong – sometimes overwhelming - negative feelings. Under this heading are grouped a spectrum of factors conventionally associated with mental health and psychological adjustment. As before, some constructs partially overlap. And, as before these constructs mainly derive from Western clinical approaches.

### ***Stress, anxiety and depression***

Stress involves arousal in response to perceived environmental pressures, measurable at a physiological level, for example in changes in hormone levels, notably the secretion of cortisol. Coping with stress is part of everyday life – for children as well as adults. Indeed, children often seek out moderate levels of stress, especially in adventurous play, although there are marked individual differences in vulnerability and reaction to stress, notably linked to gender (Schaffer, 1996). Moderate levels of stress are generally recognised as beneficial to children’s motivation and learning – or at least are tolerated as inevitable. For example, attending school is a potentially stressful experience for children, as is coping with teachers’ demands for high achievement and



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good behaviour. However, school is not generally seen as harmful to children's psychosocial well-being even though some aspects of modern schooling can be seen as highly stressful (Field, 1995). Many working children may be at risk of excessive stress, trying to cope with the insecurity and pressures of their situation, unreasonable demands, risk of beatings or other abuse etc. The majority of working children combine working with schooling. They may experience the added stress of trying to satisfy competing demands from parents, employers as well as teachers,

Excessive stress is often accompanied by reduced efficiency, disrupted concentration (and in extreme cases) chronic anxiety, feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope. The anxious child worries about their situation, lacks confidence about their skills, capacities and achievements, and is often wary about what will happen next. In this way, stress and anxiety are frequently linked to low self-esteem, low self-efficacy and feelings of helplessness (as discussed above). Stress and anxiety may also be evoked by fearfulness, for example about the risk of an accident, about failing to meet an employers's expectations, about the consequences of making a mistake. Stress may be excessive in situations where employers are harsh and unpredictable, where children are punished or deprived of their earnings for no reason, or where they live with the threat they may be sexually abused. Where children suffer extreme abnormal stress, this can result in long term trauma (see below).

Children will very often communicate about their feelings of stress, fear and anxiety. But as noted above, stress is also manifested in physiological changes, notably increased levels of cortisol and this has been used a stress indicator in field research amongst children in Nepal (Panter-Brick, 1998; Panter-Brick and Pollard, 1999). The evidence from these studies does not point to any simple association between work and stress levels. For example, urban homeless boys showed higher cortisol levels compared with urban slum or village children, but urban school boys showed similar elevated levels. The longer term consequences of excessive stress for children's overall health is well recognised, for example in terms of reduced immunity to infections and digestive difficulties. Stress and anxiety may also lead to symptoms of depression.

### ***Trauma***

Research from the field of child psychopathology offers some basic distinctions between different kinds of stressors in children's development. So, many child workers are growing-up in the context of long term chronic adversities (e.g extreme poverty, unhealthy living and working conditions). Many also face acute life stresses such as those we have discussed above, (e.g. having to cope with demanding work schedules, fear of harsh treatment, the insecurity of their work situation etc). The word 'trauma' is generally applied to events that have actual or potential catastrophic consequences for children's physical and psychosocial well-being. Trauma can be applied to situations that are life-threatening (e.g. in war zones and following floods, famines, earthquakes) or other disasters. Child workers may well have to cope with such life-threatening events during their childhood, but these are not specifically related to their work. However, child workers in some physically hazardous situations may be powerfully affected by the risk of fatal

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or serious accident, and by witnessing or suffering such accidents. For others, the risk of trauma comes from disruptions to the social networks of family and community, that undermine attachment relationships on which emotional security and personal identity are constructed.

A third broad category of potentially traumatic experiences concerns working children who are subjected to extreme physical abuse, emotional and/or sexual abuse. Such experiences may be experienced as 'life-threatening' in the sense of threatening children's psychological survival, especially where children feel in some way dependent on their abuser, in ways that parallel family abuse:

'...the child is often faced with an emotionally wrenching dilemma: the child wants to be protected from physical and emotional harm but, at the same time, the child also has strong emotional ties to the parent'

(Emery and Laumann-Billings, 2002, p. 332)

Such emotionally destructive dilemmas may be faced by children working for an abusive parent, or where they are bonded to their employer, or where they are isolated from other sources of protection (as for a child domestic living with and dependent long term on their employer). Emotional, psychological and behavioural consequences of abuse have now been well-documented, especially for children in Western family and institutional settings. New lines of neurobiological research offer an even stronger understanding of the physiological process underpinning the impact of abuse, for example demonstrating damage to the growing nervous system following states of hyper-arousal associated with traumatic stress during early childhood (Glaser, 2000). Reporting evidence that abused children are not just physically and psychologically scared but also neurologically scared, one researcher has concluded:

'Because childhood abuse occurs during the critical formative time when the brain is being physically sculpted by experience, the impact of severe stress can leave an indelible imprint on its structure and function. Such abuse, it seems, induces a cascade of molecular and neurobiological effects that irreversibly alter neural development'

(Teicher, 2002, p. 54)

This evidence relates to children maltreated during early childhood, but it is nonetheless indicative of the possible far reaching developmental consequences of extreme stress-inducing hazards that can be faced by some child workers. It is also important to take account of the powerful mediating role of cultural context in defining what counts as a stress-inducing, abusive environment (Korbin, 2002).

### ***Post Traumatic Stress Disorder***

Assessments of trauma faced by children have also included evidence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This is an enduring reaction to a traumatic event, characterised by intrusive thoughts, emotional numbing and avoidance of reminders of the event, and anxieties associated with physiological hyper-arousal (Yule 2002). Note that PTSD is mainly about long term psychosocial disturbance following an event in the past which is

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no longer threatening, whereas many of stress-inducing anxieties and fears faced by working children are about current and future hazards. PTSD grew out of concern with the well-being of adult soldiers following the experience of combat in Vietnam. Initially, less attention was given to the well-being of millions of children in this and every other war zone - as well as to young survivors of community violence, natural disasters and maltreatment – all of whom may be at risk of PTSD. Drawing on wide ranging research and clinical experience mainly in Western contexts Yule (2002) suggests that the main manifestations of trauma in children and adolescents include some combination of: fear, anxiety and panic attacks, repetitive and intrusive thoughts, sleep disturbances and nightmares, resistance to separation from parents or other sources of security but reluctance to talk about their experiences, irritability, impaired concentration and learning wariness about the dangers.

The wider validity and usefulness of PTSD has been subject to debate, especially regarding its appropriateness in relation to intervention for children affected by the trauma of war and other conflict situations. PTSD is built around individualistic assumptions about the autonomous bounded self which may not apply in more collectivist societies. Symptomatology may not generalise within diverse social, cultural and political situations. Even where similar symptoms are found, for example amongst survivors of a natural disaster in Europe and refugees from civil war in Africa, they may not be invested with the same significance and meaning. Finally, conventional Western psychotherapeutic interventions may be inappropriate, where they are insensitive to indigenous cultural approaches to mental health and social healing (see for example Yule 2000; Bracken, 1998).

‘...the focus on individual pathology disregards the social and political dimensions of misfortune...If policy is to effectively support healing in the context of political violence, it must allow that different cultures express, embody and give meaning to distress in different ways’.

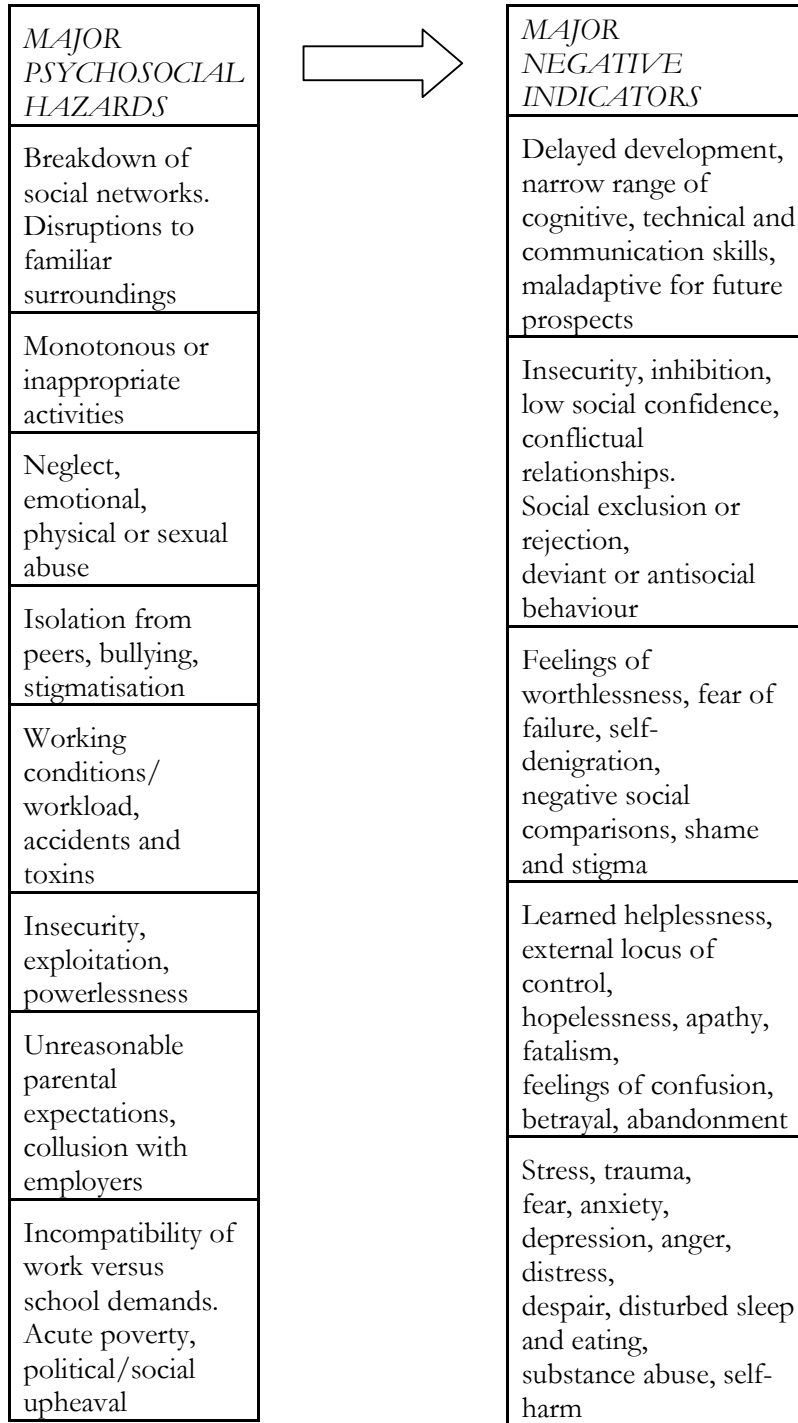
Boyden and Gibbs, 1997)

These debates are instructive, suggesting caution is needed when applying the concept of ‘trauma’ to children’s reaction to serious hazards of child work. A contextually-sensitive approach is needed, which combines understanding children’s reactions to extreme events in relation to social and cultural circumstances, without in any way detracting from the evidence that subjective experience of stress can be extremely damaging to their well-being.

## **5 Linking child work to psychosocial well-being**

This section illustrates four theoretical models that can help conceptualize the linkages between work and well-being. Figure 1 draws on earlier sections in order to summarize major potential hazards, along with major indicators of negative outcome for children’s psychosocial well-being.

**Figure 1: Linking major psychosocial hazards to negative indicators of well-being**



## 5.1 Cumulative Risks

Many children face risks of one sort or another in their working lives, linked to any one or more of the hazards summarised in Figure 1. For example: their work may be monotonous and exhausting; they may be badly treated by their employers; they may be socially isolated; they may suffer incidents of physical or sexual abuse; they may miss out on schooling; they may be scolded by parents for not bring home enough money; they may be stigmatized within their community for the work they do, or because of their social class or ethnicity; and so on.

Any one of these risks may impact on children's well-being in short, medium or long term. The extent of the impact will depend (among other things) on children's age, gender and vulnerability at the time, as well as on the frequency of these negative experiences, and on their severity. Extensive research into the impact of adversities confirm that 'cumulative risks' are potentially more harmful than single hazards:

'...most children have the resources to cope with one risk without serious developmental consequences. However, the accumulation of many risk factors renders children vulnerable to psychopathology and other negative outcomes' (Friedman and Chase-Lansdale, 2002, p 264)

Some argue that these risk factors combine in a multiplicative, not just an additive way. In other words, when two or more adversities co-occur, the risk is not doubled but quadrupled. The implication, not surprisingly, is that the priority for targetted interventions should be on child work situations that combine multiple psychosocial (as well as physical) risks to children. In assessing cumulative risks, the hazards associated with work need to be seen in the context of hazards within the wider ecology of children's lives.

Cumulative risks combine across all areas of children's lives. So work should be assessed alongside family, school and community, as well as poverty, political discrimination, violence and other adversities (Woodhead et al 2003).

## 5.2 Risk, resilience and protective factors

In the study of childhood adversities, most attention has understandably been paid to children whose well-being is put at risk. (This is no different for child work, where the attention has understandably been on children whose health and well-being is impaired by the hazards of work). Increasingly, researchers have argued that this offers an incomplete picture of the impact of adversities in children's lives, by overlooking significant numbers of children who appear to thrive – despite adversity (Werner and Smith, 1982, Rutter, 1987, Masten, 1994; Masten, 2001; Luthar, 2003). The concept of resilience (or invulnerability) has been widely applied to circumstances where children appear better able to cope with stress than their more vulnerable peers.

In some ways the term 'resilience' only tells half the story. It draws attention mainly to dispositional characteristics of children that help them to cope - their temperament, resourcefulness, flexibility, their age and maturity, social

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competence and so on. And it suggests where vulnerabilities may lie – children who are younger, more sensitive or whose general health and stamina is weaker, and so on. Children’s personal qualities and general health are an important factor that can buffer the effects of adversity – and this can be expected to apply equally in relation to psychosocial impacts of hazardous work. But it is equally important to consider ‘protective factors’ in children’s environment; the assets or resources that can help children cope with difficult situations – such as supportive parents, teachers or other significant adults, peer group solidarity, and so on. For children living in poverty, working may itself be considered an asset, providing them with economic and personal rewards that help protect against wider adversities. Absence of protective factors may amplify the risks to children’s well-being, for example where children are deprived of opportunities for education or where adults neglect their needs, or discriminate in favour of one group at the expense of another, (e.g. favouring boys over girls).

Because of the potential confusions surrounding the concept of resilience, Luthar and Zelazo (2003) refer instead to children who show ‘positive adaptation’ in the face of adversity, which may be due to a combination of personal and environmental protective factors. Conversely, ‘negative adaptation’ may be due to a combination of personal vulnerabilities and environmental hazards.

A classic longitudinal study of children growing up during the Great Depression in the USA during the 1930s remains highly instructive about the difficulties in predicting how adversities will impact on children’s psychosocial well-being. The study was based on two cohorts of children born in 1920-1 and 1928-9 respectively. The Great Depression triggered multiple adversities for many of these children, notably economic hardship, family stress, parental conflicts and pressures on mothers and children to contribute to family income by taking on work. But the two cohorts were affected by these adversities in quite different ways related to their age and their gender. The cohort born in 1920-1 were already ten years old before the start of their families’ difficulties and so had experienced a relatively secure early childhood. For boys in this cohort, taking part-time work to support their families encouraged a greater sense of responsibility and independence. Girls also took on greater responsibility but mainly within the home, which in many ways meant they had fewer opportunities to develop their independence. The impact of adversity was very different for the cohort born in 1928-9 who were still very young at the time of the Great Depression. For this group, it was the boys who appeared more vulnerable, most likely due to their father’s demoralization and irritability. They more often showed behavioural difficulties than girls, which in some cases had long term repercussions in terms of poorer school achievement and reduced self-esteem (Elder, 1974).

The implication is that indicators may be agreed that point towards specific child experiences as potentially hazardous (or beneficial) for psychosocial development, but children’s negative reaction to these risks cannot be assumed, and will depend on a whole host of personal and situational factors. On present knowledge (and taking account of the discussion in Section 3) it should be possible to construct a set of indicators covering what are judged

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to be both the major risk factors and the major protective factors affecting child workers in a particular situation. In due course, research may provide a more precise picture of the ways risk and protective factors combine in shaping working children's lives and well-being.

### **5.3 Costs and benefits**

Another way to approach the appraisal of positive and negative factors is through the idea of 'costs' and 'benefits'. Although superficially similar to psychological concepts of 'risks' and 'protective factors', a cost-benefit approach comes from a very different research tradition. Both approaches entail assessment of children's work situation in a wider context, including in relation to their age, abilities, gender and circumstances. Hazards in the child's situation are seen as costs, while positive features of work for children's well-being are seen as benefits, or assets. One of the arguments for a cost-benefit approach has been that it is more child-centred than an approach based mainly on environmental assessment and is therefore better able to judge the 'best interests of the child' (Myers, 2001). To take an example from another field of child welfare, social workers are frequently faced with difficult decisions about how to ensure the well-being of children coping with a difficult family situation. On the basis of an environmental assessment they might judge that features of children's home life, quality of care etc was threatening aspects of their psychosocial wellbeing and prospects. But they would also need to take into account how far children's family situation was nonetheless providing basic emotional security which could be disrupted by their removal and would be difficult to provide through substitute care. If children were at risk of serious abuse within their family environment then actions might be initiated to remove them from 'hazard', but for the most part a social worker would be weighing up the 'costs' against the 'benefits' to children of their family situation. Applying a so-called 'balance' model between costs and benefits to child work has been advocated by Hobbs and McKechnie (1997), based on their own research, mainly in Scotland, and strongly informed by research in USA (notably Greenberger and Steinberg, 1986, and Mortimer and Finch, 1996). Hobbs and McKechnie locate their case for a balance model within the conceptual debates of the 1990s, noting the limitations of child work – child labour dichotomies and the increased attention paid to the possibility of defining any child's situation on a continuum between 'beneficial' and 'intolerable' (White 1996; McKechnie and Hobbs, 1998). A balance model is not just valuable for researchers. Its practical significance has also been demonstrated in studies that ask children themselves to weigh-up the 'costs' and 'benefits' of their work (Woodhead, 1998; 1999c; 2001). Recognition of the centrality of children's own accounts of 'hazard' and 'impact' in policy development leads to the final model.

### **5.4 Meaning and value**

The final model is offered as a reminder of the significance for psychosocial impacts of the subjective meaning and cultural value children attach to their work. It resonates with the principles outlined at the outset: that children are social actors trying to make sense of their experiences; and that these

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experiences are strongly mediated by cultural understanding and values relating to children's status, needs and development. Even young children construct narratives to make sense of and help them cope with their experiences (Dunn, 1988). From an early age they begin to develop an understanding of their and their family's circumstances, and they develop a strong sense of justice, including whether adults' behaviour towards them is 'fair'. These narratives about what is normal, fair and reasonable are co-constructed through conversations with other children, as part of everyday living, and especially through what they are told by parents, teachers, employers and others, as well as through the often competing messages from religious teachings, popular culture, children's rights etc.

Children's perspectives extend to the work they are expected to do and the ways they are treated by others, including whether the work they do is excessive or reasonable and whether punishments they receive are justified or abusive. In making judgements about their social world, children (like adults) also differentiate according to children's gender, age, circumstances etc. A range of children's comments illustrate their reasoning:

"...we work for our stomach. If we don't work there is no food, no clothes"

"If you learn (brickchipping) from a young age then no one can speak ill of you. And when you do the work they praise you. Even so...if you only learn...after growing older, then others will make you feel ashamed"

"The worst work is weaving as there is a lot of physical and verbal abuse...but the best work is also weaving because we are...learning a skill which will give us more money than other occupations"

"A porter often gets beaten by customers...we too get beaten...but then it is only from one person (the child's employer) not from the public"

"In the garment factory there are times when you are scolded. But that is to help you learn the skill. Whereas in domestic helping they beat us...not for our own good"

(Woodhead, 1998)

Taking children's perspectives into account is consistent with their participatory rights. But it is also important for any assessment of psychosocial impact. The personal and cultural meanings and values children ascribe to their work experiences are one of the factors that will moderate its impact. When children feel their work is a normal thing to do, that they are doing something valued by their families, and they are treated fairly, these feelings can serve as a coping mechanism that helps their resilience. When they feel stigmatised or ashamed, or unjustly treated this can add to their vulnerability, and distress. For example:

"I feel ashamed ...I sometimes hide from my classmates while I clean shoes"

"I feel terrible when visitors (come to employer's house)...because we are poor (employer) is always saying 'stand away from (her). Don't touch (her) clothes' As if my body is smeared with filth"

(Woodhead, 1998).



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Another illustration comes from studies of children caught up as combatants in civil war – who are working as child soldiers. Following the Ethiopia – Eritrea conflict, agencies involved in re-integrating child soldiers noticed a difference in their ability to cope with the traumas they had experienced and inflicted, according to whether they had been formally initiated into manhood before the conflict began, irrespective of their age. Boys who had been initiated and considered themselves men, coped better than those who considered themselves still children. In other words, the significance attached to an initiation ritual was a key factor improving resilience because it sanctioned their behaviour as manly (De Berry and Boyden, 2002).

In the same way, the significance children attach to being ‘child workers’ may alter their reactions to the difficulties they face. In order to understand psychosocial impact, questions need to be asked about the functions it plays in their life – in the present, as well as in the past and especially in the future. Functions of child work include:

- Subjugation: long term labour where children feel little power to improve their situation (e.g. bonded labour)
- Survival: children recognise long term necessity of their work to ensure the well-being of their family and see no realistic alternative (e.g. much family based farm work, domestic work, unskilled manual work in subsistence economies)
- Vocation: children value their early initiation into a skill that has long prospects (e.g. apprenticeship to a trade)
- Distraction: Children treat hardships of work as short term necessity, to support family and perhaps pay for schooling (e.g. street vending and other ‘child occupations’)
- Socialisation: short term opportunity to acquire valued adult skills, such as responsibility, communication skills and team work (e.g. work experience schemes)
- Instrumental: mundane, casual work as means to greater autonomy and consumer power, but with no long terms significance (e.g. fast food work amongst affluent students)

There is also evidence that children distinguish their personal valuation of their work from their parents’ expectations of their work, for example where they gain self-esteem from their schooling, but feel their parents are more interested in their economic contribution (Woodhead, 2001).

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## 6 Approaches to research, monitoring and intervention

At least 120 million children are working full-time every day, all year round, according to ILO estimates. Many more are involved in part-time and seasonal work (IPEC, 2002, p.3). A significant proportion of these children engage in work that is unhealthy, dangerous, repetitive, mundane and exploitative. They experience harsh treatment, humiliation and abuse. They may be socially isolated from peers and denied opportunities for education that would enhance their prospects. Intervention to improve their well-being is justified in terms of respecting their human rights alone, irrespective of whether these hazards have demonstrable long term effects.

Practical and effective approaches to monitoring the impacts of child work are still relatively few and far between. Some notable studies have been conducted and much relevant documentation is available from local, mainly small scale enquiries. But, until recently, the modest amount of research activity is quite out of proportion with the massive scale of the phenomenon. One of the reasons for slow progress is that most research on children's psychosocial development has been concentrated in societies where paid-work activities have been relatively marginal in children's lives for nearly a century, and the attention has been mainly on play, learning and socialization, especially in the context of home, school and playground. Another reason is that the urgency to tackle hazardous child work has become entangled with a wider - sometimes unhelpfully polarised - debate about the desirability of child work in general (Lieten and White, 2001).

ILO Convention 182 (1999) has helped clear the way for a more focussed effort to eliminate worst forms of child labour. Differentiating harmful work from the economic activities of most of the world's children is in many ways no different from differentiating dysfunctional from healthy families or ineffective from successful schools. Recognising the continuing significance of children's economic activity (as producers and consumers) may help draw attention to hitherto neglected and largely unregulated areas of children's lives. It sets hazardous work in a much broader context (Nieuwenhuys, 1996). Massive effort has been invested into understanding the features of family and schools that contribute to children's psychosocial well-being, and introducing family welfare, child protection policies and school reforms for situations where they are at risk. The same approach is advocated in this paper to understanding the nature and circumstances of children's work. Major sources of potential influence on children's well-being have been analysed in Section 3, as well as key aspects of psychosocial functioning in Section 4. Section 5 provided an overview of some influential frameworks for linking features of work to their impact on well-being.

Throughout the paper I have been cautious in drawing firm conclusions, for two reasons. The first reason is theoretical. Universal features of children's psychosocial development, needs and well-being can be identified at a general level. But in practice 'development', 'needs' and 'well-being' can be fulfilled through a wide range of settings, activities and expectations for

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childhood. More specific claims about which settings and practices best 'meet children's needs' or are most 'developmentally appropriate' should be treated with caution. They often express particular cultural values for childhood, rather than respecting the diversity of developmental pathways through childhood (Woodhead, 1996). In Section 2, I outlined the case for addressing psychosocial dimensions of work in relation to children's development, their context and the role of cultural mediation. The implications have been elaborated in later sections.

The second reason is more practical and hinges on the limitations of current knowledge from research. One solution would be to initiate large scale cross-sectional and (ideally) longitudinal studies, equivalent to major investigations into effects of adversities amongst children in affluent Western societies. Such studies would draw on multiple data collection methods to identify key potential influences amongst children in a variety of situations, including working and non-working children. These would be multi-site studies, and ideally cross national boundaries, as for example has been the case for major school effectiveness studies (e.g. as carried out by International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement).

Such studies are costly and time consuming, and are best seen as part of a multi-pronged approach, which also includes smaller scale, more localised research. Much can be achieved by coordinating local studies, using common indicators and methodologies, and applying meta-analyses to the data. Systematic, quasi-experimental quantitative studies would be a high priority. Crucially, such studies depend on the construction of instruments to measure key indicators of psychosocial functioning. While there is no shortage of well-validated psychometric tools, most require major adaptation to be appropriate for the populations in question (Brewer, 2003).

Developing appropriate tools for measuring long term psychosocial outcomes need to be matched by more immediate assessments, covering children's situation, activities, risk of abuse etc. A 'Psychosocial Assessment' procedure would build on approaches to environmental assessment already well-developed in relation to other dimensions of hazardous work (Forastieri, 1997). Assessment of hazards and risks (as well as assets and benefits) can be based on a combination of observations, consultations with children, interviews with employers, parents and other stakeholders (Black, 1997).

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches have a role to play. For example, systematic tools for observing the quality of children's environment have been constructed in relation to children's home and school environment, and could be the starting point for developing observation inventories for assessing child work settings. Procedures used in adult occupational research would also be relevant. Qualitative methodologies have played a key role in clarifying some of the confusions surrounding children's work. They have also been an important tool for realising children's participatory rights. For example, interviews, focus groups and consultations capture local perspectives, including children's perspectives (Johnson, et al, 1995; Boyden and Ennew, 1997; Save the Children, 1998; Woodhead, 1999c). Ethnographic methods provide insight into culture and context especially through detailed local studies of specific sectors or

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communities where children work (e.g. Schildkrout, 1981; Nieuwenhuys, 1994; Punch, 2001; Montgomery, 2001).

The urgency for action demands construction of relatively simple tools that can be adapted to a wide range of child work settings. Section 5 discussed one such approach based around principles of cumulative risk and protective factors. Developing basic tools that can guide monitoring and intervention is an immediate priority. A longer term programme of research and evaluation is also needed. This can most profitably adopt a multi-pronged strategy, combining small and large scale studies and quantitative methodologies, preferably in a coordinated way. Local capacity-building is also essential to ensure research is sensitively carried out and relevant. Hopefully, priorities for research into major influences on children's well-being will eventually shift to accommodate 'working' alongside 'playing' and 'learning' (Woodhead, 2002). Only then will the significance of children's economic activity begin to receive attention commensurate with its impact on young lives.

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## 7 References

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