

DETERMINANTS OF HEALTH OUTCOMES IN YOUNG CHILDREN:  
A MIDRANGE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Purpose: The purpose of this theoretical framework was to develop a better understanding of and guide research related to health outcomes in young children as affected by changes in the host immune defense system and susceptibility to disease.

Method: The framework was developed after a comprehensive review and synthesis of the medical, nursing, physiologic, sociologic, epidemiological, and behavioral literature.

Findings: The literature suggests that health outcomes in young children exist on a continuum of severity ranging from perfect health to devastating disease. These outcomes are a function of the host immune defense system that is comprised of both the innate and acquired immune responses. Innate immunity is the capability to rapidly respond to a wide array of infections challenges and acquired immunity involves the complex development of antigen specific immune responses. The competence of these two components of the immune system determines the degree of susceptibility and the extent of disease severity. Both extrinsic and intrinsic factors directly affect the status of the host immune defense system. Extrinsic factors, or those conditions in the child's environment, include daycare attendance, socioeconomic status, siblings, and parental smoking. Intrinsic factors, or those conditions or behaviors that constitute the basic and essential elements of an individual, can be nonmodifiable such as age, gender, race, and genetics or modifiable such as with concurrent disease, exercise, nutritional status, stress, and sleep. A feedback loop is included to represent the effect that health outcomes can exert on certain modifiable intrinsic factors.

Discussion: This midrange theoretical framework is in the initial stages of development; however, it provides a novel interdisciplinary context within which both basic and clinical science can be directly translated into clinical interventions designed to optimally assess and manage symptoms. It is clear, simple, generalizable, and supports the formulation of new research questions thus enhancing the development of nursing science. This framework also has the potential to help fill a significant gap in the research and clinical practice literature. Within the context of research, the framework can be used to guide the development of testable hypotheses based on specific theoretical relationships affecting health outcomes in young children. In clinical practice, it can be used to help identify those children at high risk for the development of poor health outcomes and target specific modifiable factors amenable to intervention.