

Module: **Family-Centered Practices
for Infants and Toddlers With Visual Impairments**

Session 1: Building Reliable Alliances

**Study Questions and Answers for Recommended Reading A:
Bernheimer, Gallimore, & Weisner**

Bernheimer, L.P., Gallimore, R., & Weisner, T.S. (1990). Ecocultural theory as a context for the individual family service plan. *Journal of Early Intervention, 14*(3), 219-233.

1. Until recently, theory and training in Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) have focused almost exclusively on the individual child. Why is this?

The prevailing paradigm in ECSE has been developmental psychology, which typically focuses on child dimensions rather than on the entire family unit.

2. Ecocultural theory is a combination of ecological and cultural theories and is consistent with research on families in ECSE. Describe the three components of ecocultural theory.
 - **Ecocultural theory explicitly includes family-constructed meaning of family circumstances as well as their proactive responses to those circumstances and meanings.**
 - **In ecocultural theory a critical unit of analysis is daily routines that are created and sustained by ecocultural forces. Daily routines and activities are critical because they mediate ecocultural effects on the more familiar units of analysis—individuals, interaction dyads, or families.**
 - **Ecocultural theory is distinguished by its applicability to families in all cultures, because the theory is based on cross-cultural literature. The ‘hierarchy of ecocultural niche’ feature that the theory proposes is explicitly intended to apply to all families.**
3. How does ecocultural theory define a niche?

A person’s and family’s cultural, as well as material, place. This captures both the material and socially constructed qualities of family niches.
4. What is meant by the term “accommodation” in ecocultural theory?

Accommodation describes the proactive steps that a family takes to deal with the competing and contradictory forces in their lives. These actions include adapting, exploiting, counterbalancing, and reacting to those forces.

5. What is the benefit to early childhood special education professionals in knowing about ecocultural theory?

It provides a conceptual framework that enables us to understand why some parents think, feel, and act in certain ways while others think, feel, and act in entirely different ways.

6. Discuss the value of knowing families' meanings, beliefs, values, and goals when writing the individualized family service plan (IFSP).

Such knowledge enhances our understanding of a family's interpretation and response to an intervention plan. Traditionally, family needs assessment has focused on demographics and other descriptive information (marital status, family constellation, employment). In so doing, it has failed to identify the family's perspective or the full range of niche features.

7. What is the valence of environmental factors?

The positive or negative value that a family assigns to a factor or outcome based on its own family meaning. Ecocultural niche features such as social support, child-care workload, siblings, and intervention services cannot be assumed to be positive or negative without knowing how these features are interpreted by families. The valence attached to features is an important component of the family's social construction of its niche.

8. What does ecocultural theory suggest regarding the individualized family service plan (IFSP)?

Ecocultural theory suggests that a family service plan can maximize family functioning only if it does not ignore the loading that the family gives the niche features. Recognition of this principal of the theory is already present in concerns that intervention for young children (and families) may be "iatrogenic" that is, that the interventions themselves may place additional stress on families.

9. Niche features are hierarchical and interconnected. What does the hierarchical order of niche features mean or imply? Give an example.

Niche features function to set priorities. If a family is struggling with the basic features of their niche (such as mortality or subsistence issues), other levels of niche (such as training for parent to be a surrogate teacher or therapist) become less immediate. NOTE: Examples will vary.

10. What three additional outcomes does ecocultural theory consider be added to achieve improved individualized child-focused measures?

- **Meaningful—whether family accommodations to the child with delays are meaningful in terms of their beliefs and values.**
- **Congruent—whether family values are congruent with the child's characteristics.**
- **Sustainable—whether accommodations are sustainable for a long period of time given the constraints and opportunities of the family.**