S
ocial interactions—from the intimate and personal to the public and political—are central to the experience of being human. Our development as social beings begins within the family, when we are infants, then continues in ever-wider arenas as we grow through childhood and adolescence into adulthood.

Literature and memory testify to the fact that especially during the school-age years from early childhood through adolescence, our hearts and minds are occupied by our first encounters with fundamental questions about our relationships with other people: What is fair? What is not? How are you and I different? How are we the same? What can I expect from my peers, or from those who are less powerful or more powerful than I am? What rules can I count on to govern human interactions? How should I act when they seem to conflict? And what are the consequences when accepted norms of behavior are violated?

Even as children go to school to learn to read and write and to study the basics of mathematics, science, history, and geography, these social issues preoccupy them. Questions of how to manage matters of trust and loyalty, rivalry and conflict, belonging and exclusion, secrets and lies, concern most children deeply during this period of their lives. Whatever is mandated by the official curriculum of a given school or district, these perennial human questions—what we call, in the parlance of our field, “fundamental relationship issues”—cut across all attempts at teaching and learning and affect students of all kinds of backgrounds and academic abilities. This preoccupation with relationships is both normal and inevitable, since these are crucial years for social development. These are the years not only for learning specific social skills and strategies but also for the growth of our capacities for social understanding and empathy.

I belong to a group of practitioners and researchers concerned with the promotion of social competence and the prevention of the prob-
lems associated with impaired social development—primarily in children and youth but also in adults. We believe that these objectives are important not only in the lives of individuals but also in our society’s ability to provide—or failure to provide—for the good of all its members. In particular, we are interested in research and practice that help build social competence in children and youth who are growing up under difficult life circumstances—that is, those who face psychopathology in their families, poverty in their neighborhoods, or prejudice in the wider culture in which they must make their way.

This book summarizes the results of thirty years of theoretical work on the social development of children in the elementary and middle school years, focusing on what I now call the coordination of social perspectives—how children come to identify their own needs, wants, and feelings, understand those of others, and act to manage differences and conflicts, as well as closeness, within relationships. It is also a detailed case study of a long partnership between academia and the world outside the walls of the university. It is a story of how research and theory in the psychology of social development helped launch a series of practices—methods and programs for working to promote the social competence of children and adolescents—and then how the implementation of those practices provided a real-world “laboratory” for the ongoing evolution of the theory.

A Short Personal History

I began my professional training in the 1960s as a graduate student in the doctoral program in applied psychology at Boston University, which at the time placed a strong emphasis on the education and training of psychologists as professional practitioners and had a predominantly psychoanalytic orientation. The first group of individuals I was assigned to work with through the BU program were very disturbed adult male patients at a Veterans Administration psychiatric hospital in Brockton, Massachusetts. Most of the people I was trying to “listen to” were blatantly psychotic and heavily drenched in Thorazine. They could hardly say anything coherent that could be understood within a psychoanalytic theoretical framework. That was in 1965.

The next year I was sent by my professors to counsel male inmates incarcerated at the state’s maximum-security prison in Walpole, Massachusetts, now officially known as MCI (Massachusetts Correctional Institution)—Cedar Junction. These men looked very different from the inpatients I had seen in Brockton. For the most part, they were tough and physically fit, and some seemed smart and perceptive about both
the institution they resided in and the society from which they had been locked away. I remember several who read the newspaper editorials daily, and many had interesting things to say about the sociology of their lives in and out of prison, as well as complex theories about the psychology of their fellow inmates.

What most of these individuals seemed unable to perceive, or at least to talk about, was the effect of their own behavior on other people, even those with whom they had close relationships—family members, girlfriends, wives. It was not that they could not understand another person’s situation, but rather that they seemed to lack the capacity to take another person’s perspective, in particular on themselves, and especially when such a perspective might prevent them from getting what they thought they wanted. Puzzled and troubled, I went to my clinical professors with my observations and concerns about the futility of my efforts at counseling these individuals. I asked them how my clients at MCI–Cedar Junction got to be the way they were. If you want to know how these guys ended up this way, the professors said, why don’t you do some clinical work with children who seem to be heading in that direction?

The following year I worked at the Cambridge Child Guidance Center with troubled children, many of whom were poor and lived in public housing in the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts. There I met kids like Ralph O’Malley, a seven-year-old fire-setter living with his overweight and depressed single mother in a public housing project. Ralph liked to torture (I think “torture” would be the right word) bugs and small animals. I started to ask kids like Ralph not only how they themselves were feeling about things, but also how they thought other people in their lives—people they seemed to need or care about—felt about their behavior in relation to a given event or situation. Like the Cedar Junction inmates, these “troubled” children seemed to have difficulty considering the point of view of other people. Did that difficulty stem from a “natural” immaturity in their social understanding at ages six and seven, or was it a sign that something was lacking in their emotional development? How did their social awareness compare with that of other children their age?

In 1968 Lawrence Kohlberg, a developmental psychologist and researcher at the University of Chicago, visited Harvard for a year. Kohlberg’s emerging ideas about what he called stages of moral judgment were attracting a lot of attention. My thesis adviser at Boston University, Freda Rebelsky, suggested that I enroll in an interuniversity seminar that Kohlberg was hosting for a small group of professors and graduate students from Tufts, Clark, BU, and Harvard; in monthly meetings we would consider the latest concepts and research
in the field. This seminar gave all of us who participated a new
model for social relationships and a new framework for understand-
ing social, moral, and ethical issues from a developmental point of
view. It gave me the opportunity to have Kohlberg serve as a reader
on my dissertation and also to sponsor my application for a postdoc-
toral research-training fellowship from the National Institute of Men-
tal Health (NIMH) after I received my Ph.D. NIMH approved my
application, and thus I began both my formal training as a researcher
of developmental psychology and, although I did not know it at the
time, my career as a theorist.

Linking Theory and Practice

My colleagues and I have found that the attempt to link theory and
research directly involves putting what we have learned about social
development into practice, examining the results, refining the theory,
then adjusting the practice. It is this circular research-based practice/
practice-based research enterprise that I describe and advocate in the
chapters to follow.

The history of our original theoretical framework, and the research
undertaken to test it, begins at the end of the 1960s and covers more
than three decades. In each decade our basic theory—I call its present
incarnation the Risk and Relationship Framework—was transformed
by its interaction with the world of practice in various public schools
in the greater Boston area and in a school for children with severe
social and emotional problems that I directed from 1975 to 1990 at the
Judge Baker Children’s Center. In recounting this history, I focus es-
pecially on the work of the decade of the 1990s, when our practice-
based research group returned to the public schools to explore and
address new questions that had emerged from the theory-practice
partnership. These questions have special relevance for urban educa-
tion: How do children develop an ethic of social relationship? How
do they put into action their evolving awareness of proper, decent,
respectful ways to get along with other people? How do they do this
when they are growing up amid social and economic adversity, or
when they are treated badly, whether directly by parents or peers or
indirectly or incidentally by society at large? How can we help?

In this book, I speak of an “ethic of social relationship” as a general
term signifying the nature of the issues we are studying. We want to
increase our understanding not only of how children develop this
ethic but of what an ethic of social relationship really is. This brings
us inevitably into the tricky territory of the promotion of “values.”
Certain terms are often clustered together—values, character, ethical
awareness, moral development, social competence, risky behavior—yet their meanings are somewhat different.

It has always been acknowledged that education involves what has long been called, even to this day, the development of character—that is, the instilling of moral and cultural values in an individual. (Some of us are old enough to remember grammar school report cards with “Deportment” as one of the categories for evaluating our performance in school.) In terms of our theory-practice work, the world of school is not only an important place to promote social awareness and social competence but also a convenient place in which to observe children’s growing social awareness and its relationship to their actual social actions.

I report here what we have found in our research and offer suggestions about the implications of these findings for how to help children—and by logical extension, all of us—get along with peers and neighbors. Because children and adolescents spend so much time in the environment of school—which may be primarily designed to promote academic success but is saturated with social interactions—our recommendations about methods and programs will come under close scrutiny by parents, educators, and concerned citizens. This is as it should be. I believe our research is sound, and in this book I address questions of values directly and openly—as I believe researchers or designers of social or educational programs should do.

Many social scientists believe that terms like “affective education,” “building self-esteem,” and similar popular phrases describe aspects of learning that are too fuzzy to measure or evaluate clearly. To a degree I agree. Yet just as there is an art to getting along with others, I believe there is a science to its analysis. Getting along with others involves concrete and measurable social skills and actions; not only can these be measured and taught, but adults with a wide range of philosophical orientations, political dispositions, and cultural backgrounds and experiences can agree on their importance to social relationships. I believe that there can be a developmental science for the assessment as well as the study of the ethics of children’s social relationships. This science can thrive and give rise to initiatives that will make a real contribution to our society, especially in institutional settings designed for the education of our children.

My further goal is to document the value and promote the development of partnerships between research and practice organizations. Often practitioner groups—mental health workers, educators, the makers of social policy—look to researchers for help in two areas: on the front end they look to the implications of research findings for the design of their interventions, and on the back end they look to re-
searchers to help them evaluate programs as they are implemented. Researchers themselves are often eager to try out their ideas in practice, but they do not always seek to revise or expand their ideas through careful observation and evaluation of the results. As practice-based researchers, we do.

By practice-based research I mean that we base our investigations into the nature of the development of children’s social understanding in practices designed to promote the very social competence we are studying. Specifically, we are interested in how children growing up come to comprehend, manage, and make personal meaning of certain fundamental social issues and problems we all face in life in one form or another: problems with peers and friends as well as problems with those who may not be our friends, sometimes for reasons that have little or nothing to do with us.

The “we” to whom I refer stands for a group of researchers who share a common, although not identical, way of understanding social development. As I mentioned in the preface, we have given ourselves a name, the Group for the Study of Interpersonal Development, and consider ourselves a collaborative. Besides our understanding of children’s social development we also share a set of ideas called the Risk and Relationship Framework. Our intellectual aim is to continue to develop and evaluate this framework and to explore its practical applications. We have functioned for almost thirty years through grants to our members and through our affiliation with a major university. When we receive funds, the university administers the projects. Like many such entities that exist in university settings, our group recruits new members from the ranks of graduate students who come to the university.

What I think has been somewhat unique about our collaborative is that over the past three decades we have entered into partnerships with individuals and institutions interested in the design and implementation of innovative practices, not only to promote social development in the world outside academia but to refine our theoretical framework. Especially in our field, the road connecting theory and practice can be full of potholes. In this book, we acknowledge the difficulties that such partnerships encounter, but by sharing the history of one such endeavor in particular we hope to help widen and smooth that road. As practitioners, that is, as applied developmental psychologists, we want to help young people develop their capacity to relate well with others; as researchers, we want to understand the barriers that hinder that development as well as the experiences that promote it.
Perspective Coordination and Social Competence

I realize that across the globe—or within any city or town in the United States for that matter—people hold many different beliefs about what constitutes proper behavior toward others and how to teach it to kids. The rules and regulations of social relationship are enormously complex, varied, and subtle. They vary from family to family, as well as between cultures. Some believe, for instance, that children should be raised from an early age to anticipate the needs of others; others think it vital to encourage kids to express themselves freely at all times and to assert their own point of view openly if not vociferously. These beliefs are not necessarily contradictory in theory, but they often are in practice. And the rules of appropriate social behavior and demeanor can differ within cultures as well as between them, varying along lines of age, gender, and class.

Yet despite all these diverse expectations of what constitutes appropriate or adaptive behavior, there are, I believe, some basic capacities that are central to the social functioning of individuals in any culture. I call these capacities “core social competencies” and see them as so deeply embedded in the structure of each individual’s psyche that to some extent they are hidden from view. We have designed our research, and its methods of inquiry and study, to make these core social competencies more visible.

From the beginning, the common thread that has run through the work of the Group for the Study of Interpersonal Development has been the reciprocity between two core competencies that we believe each individual must develop in tandem—and in harmony with his or her culture—if he or she is to maintain healthy relationships with other people. The first is the capacity to be aware of one’s own point of view, to know where it comes from, and to be able to express it or keep it private. The second is the capacity to take, and to keep in mind, the point of view of another person, group, or even society as a whole. Developing each of these competencies is easier said than done. Putting them to work together is even more challenging.

These abilities are no more highly developed in us at birth than the ability to walk. Rather, they are intertwined elements of social awareness that develop over time, and that is why a developmental framework is essential for understanding social competence and the conditions and experiences that foster or hinder its growth in children and adolescents.
The Anatomy of This Book

The first part of this book, "How Children Develop Their Awareness of Risks and Social Relationships: Lessons from Theory," reviews the evolution of the theoretical framework we constructed to help us study social perspective coordination and its role in the social development in children. Here I explain that framework and the research methods we used to test and refine it.

The second part, "Connecting Children’s Literature and Social Awareness: Lessons from Practice," tells the story of our partnership with Voices of Love and Freedom (VLF), a program designed to help educators integrate the teaching of literacy and values—or, to put it in our terms, to promote a sound ethic of social relationships among children. In these chapters, we go into the classroom to take a close look at how students responded to VLF’s innovative practice. I also discuss the key role of competence and commitment on the part of the teachers we observed, and I begin to address the question of the professional development of teachers.

This topic is further explored in the third part of the book, "Promoting and Analyzing Teachers’ Understanding of Students’ Social Awareness: Lessons from Iceland." My colleague Sigrun Adalbjarnardottir and I share the saga of how she imported our theoretical framework to her native Iceland as part of her design of a social competence program for use in that country’s elementary schools. Very much in the tradition of our group, she soon found herself involved in the circular relation of research and practice—in this instance, in the institutionalization of a strong professional training program for elementary grade teachers, and then in research on teachers’ reflections on their own pedagogical vision and professional challenges. The professional challenge of which we speak is in fact a shared challenge: How can practice and research work together to integrate social competence into the curriculum, be it through social studies and history, as in Iceland, or through literacy, as in Boston?

This research in turn connects to the case study on which we report in part IV, "Researching the Social and Ethical Awareness of Students: Lessons from a Fifth-Grade Classroom." Here we integrate our research on students and on teachers by focusing on a single teacher and her implementation of VLF in her fifth-grade classroom. Almost five years ago our research team spent much of the first twelve weeks of school in this classroom, observing a teacher we found to be a masterful instructor in the ethics of social relationships. Over a period of six weeks Angela Burgos used the text of an emotionally powerful and well-crafted chapter book for young readers, Felita by Nicholasa
Mohr (1979), and the pedagogy of VLF to promote social perspective coordination skills in her students along with their language and literacy skills. We videotaped the lessons, and in these chapters we share what she, and especially her students, have taught us about the development of social competence through both educational practice and developmental theory.

The last part of the book, “Deepening Social Awareness and Literacy Skills: Lessons from the Integration of Developmental Theory, Research, and Classroom Practice,” begins with several questions that are new to us. What is the connection between literacy and social development? What do perspective coordination skills have to do with language skills—comprehending what we hear or read and communicating with others through writing or speaking? What are the standards by which we can judge the progress of students in these areas? Not surprisingly, Amy Dray and I argue in this part of the book that any such standards will have greater validity if they rest on an understanding of the interconnection between the academic and social competencies of children. We also argue that the more opportunities students have to develop basic perspective coordination skills, the more likely they will be to enjoy academic as well as social success.

I use the last chapter to sum up some observations on practice, share some reflections about the possible uses of our ongoing theoretical and research work, and pose some possible directions for establishing scientific foundations of assessment of individuals’ growth in social awareness and the evaluation of social competence and moral education programs.

Finally, I want to make it clear here, at the outset, that this is not a book that locates this reprise of our work within the full corpus of the scholarly research and theoretical advances in the field of social development that have occurred over the three decades. Nor is it a book that advocates or is designed to market a particular educational method or approach—although we hope that the research we discuss will be helpful to others in designing educational programs that fit the needs of their schools and districts, and the needs of the students and communities they serve. It is primarily a book about how educational practice transforms developmental theory—in this case, a theory of how to listen to and watch children’s growing understanding of their social world, or more precisely, to listen to ourselves listening to children. This is a book about what we have found out about the social awareness of children by attempting to promote it, and about how psychological researchers and educational practitioners can form rewarding partnerships for exploring theoretical issues with real-world implications for children’s lives.