

Child Development and Adoption

by Holly Veldhuis

What is Development?

Development theory is just one way of looking at human behavior, psychology or change. The concept of development is essentially optimistic, suggesting that children (and adults) will grow and change, usually in healthy ways, if they are not actively prevented from doing so. Developmental theory influences parenting and teaching styles toward a more permissive, child-centered approach, because the motivation and energy for growth is seen as centered in the child and as naturally unfolding over time. We are just the gardeners tending our plants.

Observations

The science of child development and the practice of early childhood education are both based on the ability to observe an individual child clearly, setting aside as much as possible our own personal needs and preconceptions. Without observation, we can have no understanding of young children, because they often cannot explain their thoughts and feelings in words to us. I have found that the careful practice of observation can be extremely valuable in solving the day-to-day problems of parenting.

The Three Domains

In studying children's development, we often divide our study into three areas - physical, intellectual (or cognitive) and social-emotional (or psychological). Of course, this is just a handy way to think; everything tends to get all lumped together in reality. It is sometimes particularly useful, however, to distinguish between the way children think and the way they feel; children often feel the same feelings we do but they think very differently.

Nature vs. Nurture

What is the role of genetic inheritance, individual temperament and biological maturation in the shaping of personality? What role does the nurturing adult play in shaping the child, and what are some of the cultural and societal influences that interact with the child's developing individuality? (Undoubtedly a hot topic for us!)

Theories

The two main theorists influencing the study of child development are Erikson and Piaget. Both believe that development occurs in stages and that in each stage the individual must grapple with certain universal developmental tasks before proceeding with the tasks of the following stages. Behaviorism is a different type of theory, but it is also influential and, at times, useful.

Erikson's Eight Stages of Man (sic) covers the psychosocial domain (relating to emotions and interactions) and transmutes Freudianism into something that ordinary people can understand. Erikson was the first to extend the theory of development into adulthood and was also interested in the way cultural differences in rearing may influence adult personality pattern. Erikson theorizes that there are eight stages of development and that in each the individual faces a profound psychosocial conflict that must be resolved in either a healthy or an unhealthy way. For example, in infancy, the child's conflict relates to trust vs. mistrust, and on this resolution the rest of personality development depends. Erikson's ideas are extremely commonsensical and easy to grasp. I also find them helpful and relevant to daily life.

Piaget's Stages of Intellectual Development relate to how children think, particularly how they think about problems of logic, math, and spatial relations. He believed that throughout childhood (and beyond), the individual constructs, through innumerable interactions with the environment, his or her version of the human knowledge that we all share. Piaget did a lot of observation of his own children especially in infancy, and conducted interviews with older children to find out how they were thinking. While his ideas are rather difficult to grasp, they are fascinating when applied to that favorite parental pastime, child-watching.

Behaviorism is based on observations of animal behavior and tries to explain children's actions without reference to anything internal or introspective, seeing just sequences of behaviors and how they follow other. The concepts of reinforcement and punishment are valuable in understanding how to handle questions of discipline, something we all need help with at some time or another.

Research in this field continues to give us interesting insights into specific areas of children's needs and abilities. Currently, there are scholars exploring such important topics as children's understanding of friendships, the results of different parenting styles, the nature of gender differences and the process of attachment. Many of these researchers are limited by their Eurocentric bias. Even so, a careful use of the scientific evidence they offer can be a valuable resource as we practice the art of parenting.

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