Chapter 7, The First Two Years: Psychosocial Development

Chapter Summary

This chapter opens by tracing infants’ emotions as their brains mature and their experiences accumulate over the first two years. Then we review the five major theories that are described in Chapter 2, “Theories of Development,” focusing on how each describes psychosocial development during infancy. We then weigh the pros and cons of infant day care (a common experience for babies worldwide), paying special attention to its impact on psychosocial development. The chapter ends with practical suggestions for stimulating the healthy emotional growth of very young children.

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A. Section 7.1: Emotional Development

“On Your Own” Activity: Developmental Fact or Myth?

Before students read about psychosocial development during the first two years, have them respond to the true-false statements in Handout 1.

The correct answers are shown below. Class discussion can focus on the origins of any developmental misconceptions that are demonstrated in the students’ incorrect answers.

1. F  5. T  8. T
3. T  7. F  10. T
4. T

“On Your Own” Activity: Revising a Textbook

The three domains of development are perhaps more closely related in infancy than in any other part of the life span. To increase your students’ awareness of the interrelationship
among biosocial, cognitive, and psychosocial development in infancy and toddlerhood, you might ask them to imagine that they are the editors working on a revision of their textbook, as described in Handout 2. This exercise will help them to see that the topics treated in Part II of this text do not fall neatly into one or another domain.

Students should come to appreciate the difficulty of treating the areas of development “piecemeal,” because any important development can be covered under any of the three basic domains. Encourage students to discuss how they would revi
Adult Personality and Behavior Problems,” you might want to assign this critical thinking exercise as an outside assignment.

Answers to this chapter’s critical thinking exercise are as follows:

1. Because a single sample of children is followed and retested over a period of time, this study is an example of the longitudinal research design. Because the researchers did not directly manipulate an independent variable, nor employ separate groups of children in order to control extraneous variables, the design is correlational rather than experimental. Other features of the design include naturalistic observation of the children by parents and teachers through the use of behavior checklists. Given the purpose of the study—to uncover aspects of childhood temperament that predict later behavior problems—the research design seems appropriate.

2. The researchers suggest that certain behavior problems during late childhood and adolescence may merely be more extreme manifestations of specific temperamental styles during early childhood. Based on the evidence presented, this explanation does make sense.

3. Because the evidence is correlational, not based on experimental data, we can’t be sure that certain temperamental styles in young children always mature into certain behavior disorders later in life. Although the research seems valid, it makes no attempt to rule out factors other than temperament that might have influenced the results.

4. There are several other possible explanations for the results of this study. For example, early childhood behavioral styles and later behavior problems are, in fact, separate phenomena, so both may be triggered by some aspect of the child’s upbringing. Alternatively, temperamental differences may have an epigenetic effect on development, triggering a process of person–environment interaction that may cause different children to evoke different responses from others, as well as react differently to similar environmental experiences. The cumulative effect of this process may be the appearance of certain behavior disorders in some individuals.

Teaching Tip: Promoting Self-Regulation of Students’ Study Skills

As stated in the text, behaviorists believe that emotions and personality are shaped as parents reinforce or punish a child’s spontaneous behaviors. Albert Bandura and later behaviorists expanded this idea to include the importance of social learning throughout life. Social-cognitive theory is based on the ideas that thoughts and values determine a person’s perspective and that learning is the result of reciprocal interaction between a person, the environment, and already learned behaviors of the individual and group. To expand on the text discussion of cognitive theory in the classroom, you might introduce the concept of the self-regulated learning.

In the classroom, students bring to each learning situation their unique mental constructs, emotional state, and perhaps most important of all, their own personal sense of self-efficacy, or belief in their capability. These constructs and states interact with the student’s organization skills, tendency to procrastinate, and other habitual behavior patterns, as well as environmental factors such as the nature of the task, the group setting, and the modeling and reinforcement available at the moment.
As the term suggests, good study skills and evaluative processes are internalized in self-regulated learners. In addition, the skills are evident not only in school, but also in sports, musical and theatrical activities, and in the social dynamics of friendships and families. Self-regulated learning, which promotes developmental success in virtually every domain, is learned from teachers and other mentors who model and reinforce the cognitive skills and behaviors that characterize self-regulation. Good teachers scaffold their students’ self-regulation by providing metacognitive feedback after each lesson. Questions such as “What strategies did you use on this task?” and “Which ones were successful?” encourage students to self-reflect and evaluate what they did well and what areas might be improved.

Ask your students to reflect on their own skills as self-regulated learners. Do they, for instance, routinely review the strategies they used in tasks such as writing term papers, studying for exams, and preparing a class presentation?

C. Section 7.3: The Development of Social Bonds

Observational Activity: Attachment

About seven months after birth—when children are developing the ability to represent another person cognitively—infants develop an enduring attachment to their primary caregivers.

Infants express attachment by proximity-seeking behaviors, such as approaching, following, and clinging; and contact-seeking behaviors, such as crying, smiling, and calling. Parents express their attachment more by eye contact than by physical contact and by reacting to their child’s vocalizations, expressions, and gestures.

As discussed in the text, on the basis of many observations, Mary Ainsworth developed a laboratory procedure in which the infant’s reactions to a novel situation and the comings and goings of its mother indicate the security of the child’s attachment. In this test, which is conducted in a well-equipped playroom full of toys, most infants demonstrate secure attachment. The presence of their mother gives them the sense of security needed to express their natural curiosity and to explore the new room. If their mother attempts to leave the room, securely attached infants will usually stop playing, protest verbally, and demonstrate contact-seeking behaviors.

Approximately one-third of the infants show insecure attachment in this test situation: They cling nervously to their mother and are unwilling to explore even if she remains in the room. Others seem aloof and engage in little or no interaction with their mother.

Have students arrange to observe a 1- or 2-year-old child and his or her caregiver in a play setting outside the child’s home. During the observation period, they should measure the infant’s reactions to a novel situation and the comings and goings of his or her caregiver. After the approximately 30-minute observation period, students are to complete the questions in Handout 4 and return their answers to you.

In addition to giving students firsthand experience in the developmental research method of observation, this observational activity has several purposes: (1) It assesses students’
understanding and recognition of attachment behaviors in both children and parents. (2) It encourages students to think critically about the Strange Situation as a valid measure of attachment. (3) It demonstrates how research findings can be applied to everyday problems of human development (advising expectant parents and the parents of insecurely attached children).

Classroom Exercise: Critical Thinking About Parenting

Because raising children is a responsibility that most people take very seriously, there is no shortage of advice—and disagreement—on how to be an effective parent. Before you begin your unit on early childhood, ask your students to reflect on what they consider to be “optimal parenting.” Have them write a one-minute paper with specific examples of parental behaviors they believe to be associated with the best outcomes. Once the unit has been completed, have the class review their earlier work, explain whether their thinking has changed, and share with the class the one or two most important things they learned during this part of the course.

A good follow-up to this classroom exercise is to divide the class into small groups of 2–3 students, each of which is asked to discuss one of the following questions. After 10–15 minutes of discussion, have each group report to the class.

- How can parents, teachers, and caregivers help children develop a positive self-concept? What types of interactions with children potentially undermine their developing self-concepts?
- What influences a child’s resilience to adversity? Genes? Parenting? How can resilience be fostered in children?
- What childhood experiences promote social justice and respect for cultural diversity? How might culturally responsive teachers, parents, and other caregivers push against people’s natural fear and/or aversion to the unknown?

Classroom Activity: Classroom Debate: “Resolved: Attending Day-Care Centers During the First Three Years of Life Is Psychologically Damaging to Children”

In recent years, no issue has been more heatedly debated than the impact of infant day care on cognitive and psychosocial development. The volatility of the issue is understandable in the United States, a country in which fully half the families with young children have both parents working.

Concern about day care became almost feverish in 1986 when prominent developmentalist Jay Belsky concluded that extended day care (more than 20 hours per week) beginning in the first year of life is a “risk factor” for the development of insecure infant attachments with parents. Although Belsky’s arguments reinforced what many feared to be true about infant day care, his conclusions did not go uncriticized. Much of the criticism centered on the
relatively small statistical difference in the proportion of day-care and home-reared infants who were found to be insecurely attached based on Belsky’s use of the Strange Situation for measuring attachment.

One positive outcome of the day-care debate has been the increased awareness among legislators and the general public of the need for affordable, high-quality day care for infants. To broaden your students’ perspectives on the day-care debate and increase their understanding of the issue’s complexity, follow the guidelines in the General Resources section of this resource for scheduling a classroom debate on this resolution.

Section 7.4: Theories of Infant Psychosocial Development

Teaching Tip: Understanding Freudian Theory

To help students understand Freud’s theory of personality, you might ask them to provide everyday examples and anecdotes. (Students find Freud’s ideas fascinating, but in the abstract they sometimes also find them outlandish.) You might begin, for example, by pointing out that the mouth seems to be the most important part of the infant’s body: In addition to eating and sucking, biting, crying, babbling, and sticking out the tongue are among the favorite activities of children under 1 year. (You might note also that Freud is not the only theorist to emphasize the importance of oral activities in development. Piaget’s theory, for example, recognizes that one of the earliest ways in which the infant explores and learns about the world is through the mouth.) By the same token, defecation is an important activity for toddlers and an obvious source of pride: When a toddler asks you to come see what he or she has done in the potty, the response the toddler expects is “How wonderful,” not “Let’s flush it down the toilet right away.”

Go on to explain that parents who are overly concerned with cleanliness and regularity in toilet training may also be overly concerned with control and regularity in all things; it is quite possible that there is a correlation between the attitudes of the parents toward toilet training and the child’s eventual personality. Then point out that, in fact, there seem to be people who fit Freud’s description of an anal personality, which can be one of two opposing types: the anal retentive, who as a child was overly eager to please during toilet training and as an adult is punctual, compliant, orderly, and devoted to cleanliness; and the anal expulsive, who as a child was recalcitrant in affairs of the potty and as an adult is defiant, stubborn, and messy. You might want to rent a DVD of the Odd Couple (either the movie or the TV series) to show to your students. They should recognize in Felix Unger and Oscar Madison a classic confrontation between the two types. However, to prevent students from getting carried away with these examples, you should probably remind them that although Freudian theory on this matter is not pure fantasy, the precise link between toilet training and personality has not proved to be quite as Freud described it.

Teaching Tip: Developmental Theory and Controversial Topics in Psychosocial Development
As with politics, religion, and other controversial topics, the topic of how to be a good parent has always been the subject of much debate. Here are a few questions to pose to the class that are sure to promote spirited discussion. For each question, have students also consider how each of the major theories of psychosocial development might inform their answer.

Should children:

- be home schooled?
- watch violent television programs?
- play aggressive video games?
- be raised with an eye towards promoting androgyny?
- use social media?