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The process in which we develop occurs in continuous stage-like patterns, starting from conception and continuing throughout the lifespan. There are critical developmental milestones that children are expected to reach as their development progresses through from neonatal, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood and older adulthood. The period of child development refers specifically to the changes that occur in biological, social, emotional and cognitive domains from birth to the end of adolescence. By studying which behaviours undergo changes, we can better understand critical time periods in development, possible causes of these changes in behaviours, as well as a better understanding of adulthood.

It is important to note that prior to the 20th century children and their development had been of little interest and had largely been ignored by researchers. Children were not considered complex enough or even capable of making decisions, leading researchers to see little benefit to studying them. However the early 20th century brought with it a new interest in child development and a wave of research has since been carried out with results that continue to show the true value of studying a child’s development. The first years of a child’s life are now seen as critical for physical, cognitive, social and emotional growth and the foundation for how a child develops into adulthood. These early years are the building blocks to adult behaviour and will often determine an adult’s success or failure in different aspects of his or her life.

**Child development in its earliest foundations**

During the European Middle Ages, children were not recognised as distinct from adults. When a child turned six or seven years of age and/or
was able to live without constant help of a caregiver, she or he belonged to adult society (Aries, 1962). In essence, children were considered miniature adults. However, during the 16th through to 18th century, a new way of looking at childhood emerged. Two philosophers, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, writing about 100 years apart, were amongst the first to argue that childhood is an important period that sets the stage for what one becomes later in life.

John Locke (1632–1704) proposed that a child is like a blank slate (tabula rasa) and through their interactions with the environment a child will develop his or her unique character and abilities. Locke emphasised the long-term impact of early experience and the responsibility parents bear for forming their children’s character. In Locke’s view, the environment was seen as the driving force in the child’s development. For example, when talking about children’s obedience Locke argued that by promoting both obedience and curiosity, parents encourage their children to develop into rational attentive people. His views supported the importance of nurture. In contrast, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), the French philosopher and leading proponent of ‘natural education’, was one of the first to propose that children emerged from the womb with inherent goodness and an innate set of skills to begin their own development. Rousseau was a strong opponent of institutions believing them to deplete the individuality and curiosity of a child, but he also wrote of the importance of giving a child the freedom to grow without the intrusion of adults. Rousseau’s (1762) philosophy of a liberal education environment rejected the commonly held theory of the time that children were naturally evil and prone to misbehave. He also argued against the need to install authoritarian teachers who ruled the classroom with an iron fist. Instead he believed that greater knowledge was to be gained from children having an active curiosity which would drive them to become independent learners. Rousseau’s 1762 novel Emile embodied his educational philosophy. Emile is a young boy who is raised completely separate from other children, educated in the outdoors, encouraged to explore his environment. He also recognised the importance of understanding child development, and was one of the first to suggest that children develop in stages (Ornstein, 2012). His views reflect the importance of our innate characteristics, often referred to as ‘nature’.

Locke’s and Rousseau’s opposing views reflect what is still known today as the nature–nurture debate. They both were influential in
assigning a special status to children and highlighting the importance of early experiences in shaping later development (Martin & Fabes, 2008).

Both Locke’s and Rousseau’s ideas were founded in philosophy, and it was another philosopher, Dietrich Tiedemann (1748–1803), who pioneered empirical psychology in relation to child development. He kept a journal of observations of his son’s sensory, motor, language and cognitive behaviour during the first 30 months of his life. Through empirical observation, he hypothesised that children possessed a ‘pre-linguistic knowledge’.

It was the biologist Charles Darwin who was one of the first to emphasise the developmental nature of infant behaviour. He disputed that children behaviours were created in a fixed and perfect form; instead he suggested that human behaviour evolves slowly. In his book *On the Origins of Species* (1859) he refers to natural selection, a gradual natural process by which more favourable characteristics evolve. He also is responsible for showing common patterns in development of human behaviour and other species (Berman, Rasmussen & Suorni, 1993).

Importantly, Darwin also used the diary method to record observations of children’s development. He carefully documented the observations he had gathered during his son’s first two years. At the same time, American psychologist Stanley Hall (1844–1924), was also designing new ways in which to study children. Hall was a key figure in the study of children, introducing questionnaire techniques and the direct observation of children in psychology as we still consider it today. He was influential in promoting experimental over ‘philosophical’ methods in psychology.

However it was not until the 1920s that experimental methods in psychology helped psychology to be recognised as a scientific discipline in its own right. It was during this time an American behaviourist, John B. Watson, proposed a theory of behaviouristic principles whereby a child’s psychological traits were due in part to the profile of rewards and punishments administered by adults, especially parents. This assumption rested on the belief that children acted in order to maximise pleasure or minimise pain. Therefore actions that bought pleasure would be strengthened and repeated while actions that brought pain would be weakened and discontinued. This view remained popular during the early decades of the 20th century and persisted until the middle of the 20th century. The theory’s popularity rested on its ability to explain psychological concepts (such as personality, learning and emotion) in
terms of observable behaviours that respond to stimulus. It allowed psychology to be acknowledged for the first time as a natural science.

Summary

- Child development was not considered important until the turn of the 17th century
- John Locke proposed children are born as blank slates (beginning of the ‘nature’ position)
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed children had innate skills which would flourish (beginning of the ‘nurture’ position)
- Early theories were built around philosophy; Dietrich Tiedemann reported the first empirical observations mapping a child’s intelligence and cognitive ability
- Charles Darwin was the first to use diary methods and Stanley Hall was the first to use questionnaires to study child development
- Behaviourism theory moved psychology and the study of children to be seen as a science

Phases in developmental study

Trends in modern theories of child development can be seen to follow political and historical changes or events. We can identify five key historical eras in the study of child development over the last century. The first falls between 1900–1925 and is distinguished by the study of differences, particularly of intellectual ability and personality, among children, motivated largely by the number of immigrant children in the US who were failing school and committing crimes.

The second phase between about 1925–1950 was influenced by Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. Freud suggested that behaviour is determined by the unconscious mind, a repository of repressed impulses and desires, of which the waking mind is completely unaware, but that determine the way we think, feel and act. According to Freud, all behaviour is motivated by the desire to feel pleasure. That motivation is organised and directed by two instincts: sexuality (Eros) and aggression (Thanatos). In the course of this psychological development, people repress those thoughts or desires that are felt to be uncomfortable or unacceptable to the individual or to society. These contents of the
unconscious can cause personality disturbances and even physical symptoms. Although hidden from conscious awareness, these repressed impulses can be deduced from their appearance in dreams or unconscious reactions. A therapist will use techniques such as dream analysis, free association, hypnosis or regression in order to bring the repressed contents of the psyche to the patient’s conscious awareness during the long course of the therapy, and in so doing resolve the symptoms they are causing. For the first time physical interventions were challenged by psychological ones.

The third phase was characterised by the cognitive revolution, initiated by American linguist Noam Chomsky. His radical view was that children were born with innate ability to use grammar, which they are able to use and then to adapt based on new information they learn through others. Jean Piaget followed on from these ideas, suggesting that children are not passive learners (simply receiving information) but that they are cognitively active in acquiring knowledge through manipulations of objects and ideas.

The fourth phase was defined by British psychiatrist John Bowlby, credited with introducing the concept of infant attachment. ‘Attachment’ was defined as the emotional connection to a person who cares for the infant, created by the infant’s pleasure in the presence of the carer and reduction in distress when he or she returns. Attachment is characterised by specific behaviours in children, such as seeking proximity with the attachment figure when upset or threatened (Bowlby, 1969). His early work suggested that the infant and young child should experience ‘a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment and that not to do so may have significant and irreversible mental health consequences’ (Bowlby, 1951). Both controversial and influential, these views were also used for post-war political purposes to claim any separation from the mother was damaging in order to discourage women from working and leaving their children in day care.

The fifth and latest phase is contemporary developmental psychology. Biology has returned to the study of children during the last two decades as a result of recent elegant discoveries in genetics, biology and neuroscience. For example, whilst behavioural studies continually show that language learning develops at a rapid pace during a child’s first year of life, neuroimaging techniques have allowed us to see what is happening much earlier by examining both the structural and functional organisation.
of the brain. Neuroimaging techniques have shown evidence of innate regions in the brain dedicated to speech processing during the first year of life (Dehaene-Lambertz et al., 2006).

Summary

Five key historical eras of child development:

1. Study of individual differences amongst children
2. Psychoanalytic theory
3. Cognitive revolution
4. Attachment theory
5. Biological influence

Themes and stages

Regardless of which theories of child development one supports, or the focus of the domain being looked at, there are key themes that emerge throughout the child development literature. They are:

- Active versus passive child
- Continuity versus discontinuity
- Stability versus change
- Nature versus nurture

Active child versus passive child

It has been heavily debated whether individuals influence their own development through behaviour (active) or whether individuals are at the mercy of their environment (passive). Are infants born as blank slates then altered by experience? Do people who share the same events share the same developmental outcomes? What makes some individuals more active participants in their development than others?

Continuity and discontinuity

Continuity versus discontinuity in development refers to the question of whether development is solely and evenly continuous, or whether it is masked by age-specific periods. Is change sudden or does it happen more gradually? For example, when children start to learn how to speak there
is often a sudden language explosion at 18–24 months. However, other skills develop more gradually such as walking.

Continuous development describes development as a relatively smooth process, without sharp or distinct stages through which an individual must pass. In this model, each change in development builds upon previous abilities. In contrast, discontinuous development refers to development as a series of discrete stages, each of which is characterised by at least one task that an individual must accomplish before progressing to the next stage. The notion of a ‘stage of development’ is central to the discontinuous view of development. A stage of development can be thought of as a particular organisation of a child’s knowledge and behaviour that characterises that development at a particular point in time. Factors that promote continuity and discontinuity are stable across the lifespan. Continuous development is thought to be reliant on genetics, physical appearance and environments. In contrast, factors that induce discontinuity can include social roles and life events.

The debate of continuity versus discontinuity is important in addressing whether aspects of one’s development relate to later outcomes, with change occurring smoothly through time or progressing through a series of steps that we learn differently at different ages. Implicit in the ‘stage theories’ of development are ideas of critical periods where particular aspects of development are favoured, for example the difference in language acquisition shown by adults attempting to master a second language compared to young children learning two languages in a bilingual home.

**Stability versus change**

Is development best characterised by stability? For example, does behaviour such as a child’s level of shyness stay relatively stable over time or does it fluctuate? It is often claimed that early experiences influence current and later development. This view then suggests that certain aspects of children’s development display stability, in the sense that they are consistent and predictable across time. However research has largely drawn the conclusion that development is characterised by both stability and change – for example, personality characteristics such as shyness and the tendency to be aggressive tend to be stable, whilst others such as approach (the tendency to extreme friendliness and lack of caution with strangers) and sluggishness (reacting passively to changing circumstances) are unstable.
Nature versus nurture

The most published theme throughout the child development literature and the one that has generated most controversy is the nature versus nurture debate. This is the question of whether genetic inheritance is the primary influence on a given development track versus the idea that environmental factors (children’s experiences, parenting, education, cultural influences and so on) are primarily responsible for development. Today both are recognised as shaping development and the main challenge now is to examine the interplay between the two. This interaction is sometimes referred to as ‘epigenesis’. We will continually return to this point throughout the following chapters.

Overview of this book

Numerous theories have been proposed to describe and explain the course of human development, yet over the last hundred or so years, only a few of these theories have stood the test of time. Chapter 2 will consider the most influential developmental theories to date including Freud’s psychosexual stage theory, Erikson’s psychosocial stage theory, Bandura’s social learning theory and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory.

The creation of these theories have stemmed from testable hypotheses about the developing child. Chapter 3 will address the key methods used to study a child’s development, from observing the child in a naturalistic setting to manipulating variables in experimental designs. The strengths and limitations to these approaches and the types of research question adopted by these different approaches will be covered. There are also different frameworks in monitoring and assessing these development changes and this chapter will cover the four most common designs: longitudinal, cross-sectional, microgenetic and the time-lag design. Finally, the practicalities and ethical issues associated with researching and safeguarding children will be addressed.

In the subsequent chapters we begin to uncover the key areas of study in developmental psychology, starting with biological development in Chapter 4. Infancy comes with plenty of biological developments, but these changes also continue to occur during early childhood. During these years, a child grows in height and weight while also developing fine motor skills and growing strong muscles. In addition to covering the key
biological milestones, we also look at the nature–nurture debate. How much of child’s development can be attributed to their genetic inheritance. Here we cover the specific use of twins and adoption in studies designed to uncover the effects of nature and nurture. Identical twins share the exact same genetic code, so some researchers hypothesise that differences between them will show which attributes are influenced by the environment.

Chapter 5 looks at the child’s cognitive development covering the three core cognitive theories. Cognitive theory is concerned with the development of a person’s thought processes. It also looks at how these thought processes influence how we understand and interact with the world. The foremost cognitive theorist was Jean Piaget, who proposed an idea that seems obvious now, but helped revolutionise how we think about child development: children think differently to adults. Piaget also proposed a theory of cognitive development to account for the steps and sequence of children’s intellectual development. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s theory of socioconstructivism focused on the role of social interaction in cognitive development, and argued that development first takes place socially. He posited that information from the external world is transformed and internalised through language. Since language is both a symbolic system of communication and a cultural tool used to transmit culture and history, it plays an essential part of both language development and a child’s understanding of the external world. The premise behind the third cognitive theory discussed in Chapter 5, the information processing account, is that brain function is synonymous with a computer and seeks to explain human learning as the development of networked memory structures.

Chapter 6 focuses on how children develop language, a process starting as soon as a child is born. Whether language is a skill unique to humans has been a question heavily debated. This chapter will cover the research suggesting that features of language might make it unique to humans. The different aspects of language will be introduced alongside evidence suggesting that children develop language in universal stages. The main theories of language development will be discussed, including the empiricist view that language is learnt through observation and reinforcement; the nativist view that language is largely innate and children are born with an ability to learn grammar; and the view that language develops through nature and nurture, the interactionist view.

The importance of language in our ability to communicate and socially interact will be apparent from Chapter 6. In Chapter 7 we consider
another important skill in our ability to socialise, the way we learn and develop our emotional understanding. The development of our emotions from birth through adolescence will be mapped, providing evidence on how children move from basic primary emotions to those that include more complex skills, such as self-awareness, known as the secondary emotions.

Chapter 8 builds on this topic and addresses how children begin to use their understanding of others’ feelings to learn what is right from wrong. The theories of moral development are plentiful, in this chapter we present both those built on reasoning and thought, such as Piaget and Kohlberg’s theories of cognitive development, and those built on internal conflicts such as Freud’s psychoanalytic theory. Similarities and differences between the theories will be highlighted as well as some of the main criticisms.

Early relationships to caregivers are pivotal to children’s later social relationships. In Chapter 9 we explore how children’s early attachments with their caregivers impact their development. As children start school and gain independence, it is their relationships with peers that become more important to development. How children make friends and consequences of being a popular versus a neglected child will be discussed. Gender differences in play and social skills is also addressed.

In the final chapter we attempt to bridge the gap between typical development and atypical development. Focusing on the pathways and developmental stages covered in the previous chapters we build on these concepts discussing the development of psychopathology. In addition to covering factors that will enhance the risk of children developing different psychopathologies and how and when the pathway from normal development is thought to diverge, the complex interplay of different causes will be considered. Finally, we describe some of the most common clinical disorders in childhood, illustrating risk factors and also how some of the models of child development introduced in the following chapter account for the development of these conditions.
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