

THE FOUNDATIONS OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT



EDITOR
JOHN OATES

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INTRODUCTION

John Oates

This book is about the foundations of development in two senses: first, it focuses on the early months and years of children's lives because so much of what goes on during this period is considered by psychologists to be of significance for development throughout childhood as well as worthy of study in its own right. Secondly, it is about the theoretical foundations of research into child development, and gives an introduction to the main influences on the ways and means that psychologists have used to investigate the development of children.

These two aspects are not quite as separate as they may seem at first sight. Theories about child development affect how children are viewed, and they affect the sorts of questions that researchers seek to find answers to. Everyone has ideas and theories about children's development and the influences on it, if only because we were all children ourselves once, and we will have given at least some thought to how our early experiences have influenced what we are. For this reason, the book starts, in Chapter 1, with an examination of a range of different images and theories associated with children and childhood. An important aim of this chapter is to begin a process of examining our most basic assumptions about child development.

Psychologists are generally coming to realize that there may be many different and equally appropriate ways of 'bringing up children', and that there may be no absolute yardstick of the 'normal course of development' against which to assess any particular set of practices and beliefs. Rather, the authors of these chapters share a view that child development should be treated as an expression of quite deep-seated cultural expectations. In this way of thinking about child development, what a child comes to be is in large part a matter of what is appropriate for the culture in which they develop. Through those who care for them, children are exposed to ways of thinking, of behaving and feeling that contain all sorts of implicit ideas about what it is to be a person within a particular culture.

Are children then purely passive recipients of the influences of their environments? Our answer to this is a definite no, and this book aims to show how the most appropriate model of child development needs to recognize that children are active agents in their own development, in other words, that a transactional relationship holds between children and their environments. Children affect what happens to them just as much as they themselves are affected.

In Chapter 2, it is argued that evolution has prepared children for a level of adaptability, primarily through their prodigious ability to learn, which far transcends the ability of any other species. This capacity has evolved in parallel with an increasingly complex reliance on the social transmission of knowledge. This moves beyond ideas of the simple determination of children's development by genetic factors to a view of

our biological inheritance as actually equipping us with the potential to be many different sorts of people.

Chapter 3 examines the links between what we know of the physical development of infants' senses, a fascinating story in itself, with the way in which their senses seem to be particularly well-matched to their social worlds. The chapter also stresses the cognitive work, of constructing mental representations of the world, which infants have to engage in. In Chapter 4 infant cognition is further examined by reviewing research into how infants come to see the world as made up of objects that have identity and permanence, a theme that is revisited in the final chapter of the book.

In Chapter 5, the transactional view of child development comes to the fore again, as the authors examine the complex issues surrounding the differences that are seen, even from birth, in the way individual babies behave. While the extent to which these are genetically determined remains an open question, this chapter argues that development rests not only on these individual differences, but also on how children's environments match them and indeed are affected by them. Chapter 6 deals with this issue directly and shows how modern knowledge about the different ways in which genes can be involved in development should lead us to be very sceptical about simple parallels between physical growth and psychological growth.

The book concludes with a chapter which brings together some of the ideas of developmental theory and research as they apply to the relationships between babies and those who care for them. These first relationships can be seen as the context within which each child comes to be a unique, human individual, with their own skills, thoughts, feeling and ways of being.

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OBJECTIVES

When you have studied this chapter, you should be able to:

- 1 be more critical of your own and other peoples' images of children so as to question where those images come from and what purposes they serve;
- 2 define development and types of development;
- 3 explain what is meant by the nature–nurture debate;
- 5 give a summary of the work of Skinner, Chomsky, Piaget and Vygotsky.

1 DIFFERENT CULTURES, DIFFERENT CHILDREN?

A baby is like the beginning of all things – wonder, hope, a dream of possibilities. In a world that is cutting down its trees to build highways, losing its earth to concrete, babies are almost the only remaining link with nature, with the natural world of living things from which we spring.

(Eda J. Leshan)

Never have ideas about children – and never have ideas *for* them.

(D. H. Lawrence)

The overall aim of this chapter is to encourage you to question your own and other people's images of children and ideas about children, and to introduce you to some of the major psychological theories of development.

In the first section, we will examine images of children in British and other cultures. The second section introduces you to the idea of development and the questions that developmental psychology addresses, and the third presents you with brief overviews of major theories of child development.

ACTIVITY 1

Allow about 60 minutes

WHAT IS A CHILD?

This activity is meant to start you on a process of examining your own ideas about children and childhood, which should continue throughout this chapter and book. Allow an hour for it now, but keep your notes handy to reflect on and add to later.

- 1 When you think of children, what images come to mind? Write down (without thinking for more than a minute) three things that occur to you:

Someone who did this thought of the children she saw in the street that morning on their way to school, who caused problems to her as a road-user; her own children, whom she finds remarkable for their curiosity, energy and depth of feeling; and a rather muzzy picture of the typical child used by advertisers, who is cute but above all a consumer of sweets, toys, chips and washing powder.

- 2 Now do the same thing with 'childhood'. What three things occur to you?

This may have been a little more difficult, but you might have thought of it in terms of its age-span, or as a time of immaturity or dependence, or as a time of innocence and vulnerability. If you didn't think of age-span, try noting down when childhood starts and finishes.

- 3 What sorts of words have you used to describe children and childhood? Are they mostly positive, negative or neutral?
- 4 If you can, ask someone else to do (1) and (2), and compare responses.
- 5 Now explore whether views of children and childhood have changed in your lifetime or that of your parents. Would you bring up children in the way you were brought up? Think about things such as who took care of you, discipline, clothing, games and pastimes, deference to authority, differences between boys and girls, sexual freedom, and so on. You could make this part of the activity an ongoing one, keeping notes of conversations or newspaper articles which discuss attitudes to children.

While doing Activity 1, you may have found that you have very definite views on children and childhood. You may also have become aware of some sources of these views – for example, memories of your own childhood, experiences with your own children or with the children of relatives and friends, your parents' or grandparents' views, the views of your community, information and opinion in books and other media, religious belief, psychology, and so on. In other words, your views of children are influenced both by your own experience and by your culture. I am using 'culture' to mean the whole pattern of a way of life, as when we speak of English, Irish, French, Indian or West Indian culture.

If you were able to talk to several other people for Activity 1, you may have found a wide range of views. The people you talked to may have differed in their ideas of what a child is, and may behave in different ways towards children as a result. Within any one culture, any one person's ideas of what childhood and a child are may vary according to their class, their gender, their ethnicity, and, of course, their own experience and inclinations.

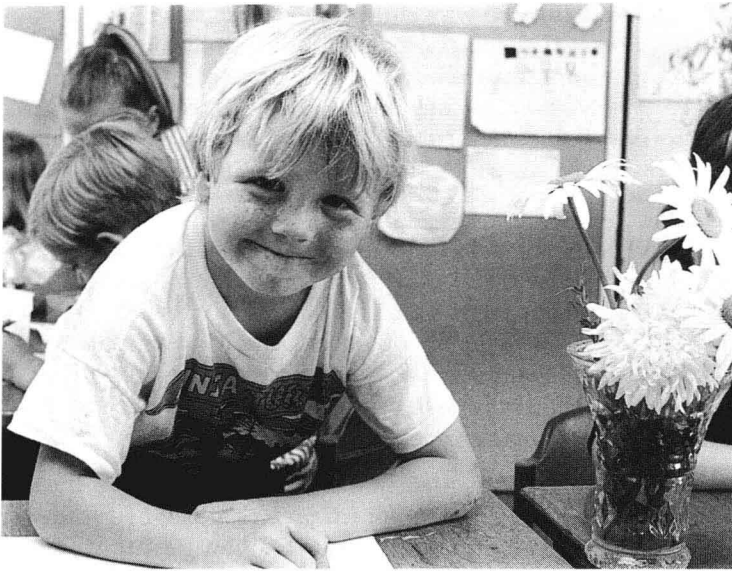


In a world dominated by commercial imagery, a child can be shown standing outside commerce; in a world of rapid change, a child can be shown as unchanging; in a world of social and political conflict, a child is untainted. Children are for all time, forever new but always the same.

Children who are poor ... children who are sick, harmed or disabled pose problems for the imagery, yet are necessary to it. Their experience means that they cannot be the bearers of joy and guileless innocence, yet their weakness is an essential part of childhood. They are extreme exemplars of children's dependent status ...

Another set of public narratives speaks of little monsters, threatening their parents, refusing to listen and calling for extremes of restraint and control ...

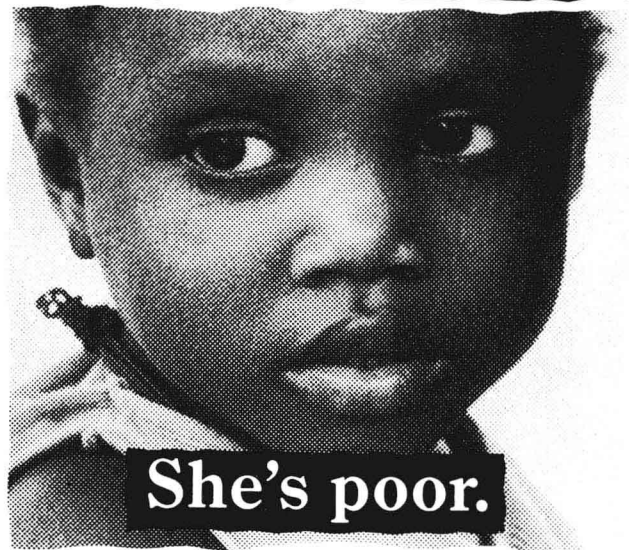




When children move beyond constraint and surveillance and run together in the urban street, the fear is genuine. This is where we find the terrifying image of youth, of children alone together beyond the reach of family or school ...

The last twenty years began with utopian visions of children's liberation and ended with major domestic scandals over child sexual abuse ... Nonetheless, in Britain, the most fertile source of public imagery of children is produced as a necessary part of a consumer-based economy. In this blissful world of plenty, pictures of children are commodities, and they promote other commodities, enhancing their desirability. But while the consumer image becomes ever more euphoric, in stark contrast, the image of a child suffering from harsh conditions or damaged at the hands of adults has pushed more and more into public consciousness. We have become used to pictures of children sleeping rough in British cities, publicity which highlights drug abuse amongst children, and the victims of sexual abuse, who can be shown only in shadow, or with their backs turned to the camera. In major disasters across the world, caused by war, famine and the human exploitation of resources, children are the first to suffer, and pictures of emaciated children close to death have become the symbols through which the magnitude of those disasters have penetrated Western media. (Holland, 1992, pp. 8-21)

**Her fourth
birthday may well
be her last,
but she isn't ill.**



She's poor.

You probably also found that the way children grow up has changed dramatically over the last fifty years or so, with differences in length and type of schooling and in leisure pursuits, for example. Child-rearing itself has changed. Many older people, for instance, can remember being urged to feed their new babies according to a strict timetable and not to pick them up when they cried, which might well seem cruel to new parents nowadays.

If we are behaving differently with children, and children themselves are behaving differently (less deferential to authority, for instance), have our ideas changed about what a child is? Certainly, legal definitions have – the ages at which people are thought of as mature enough to vote, stand trial, work, and so on. These changes in the way British culture thinks of children have happened relatively recently. What happens when we go further back?

In what follows I am going to indicate some of the ways in which the concept of childhood and the lives of children have changed over the centuries in Britain. If you see influences of the past on attitudes nowadays, please add to the notes you made for Activity 1.

1.1 The child in Western history

The miniature adult

Some historians (notably Philippe Ariès) have argued that in the Western Europe of the Middle Ages, children were regarded at miniature adults, with all the capacities of intellect and personality that that implies. He scrutinized medieval pictures and diaries, and found no distinction between children and adults – they shared similar leisure activities and often the same type of work. Ariès, however, pointed out that:

this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised. The idea of childhood is not to be confused with affection for children; it corresponds to an awareness of the particular nature of childhood, that particular nature which distinguishes the child from the adult, even the young adult. In medieval society this awareness was lacking. That is why, as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle rocker, he belonged to adult society.

(Ariès, 1962, p. 125)

After the fifteenth century, however, children began to be depicted as different from adults in paintings and documents, and Ariès argued that this was due to the emergence of a new image of children which stressed their special nature and needs. The rise of formal education, initially available only for the children of the wealthy, but gradually becoming compulsory for all children, also separated children from the adult world.



A miniature adult?
The portrayal of a child on
the cover of an *Illustrated
London News* in 1872.

Other historians (notably Shahar, 1990) have rejected both Ariès's views and the methods he used to gather evidence for them. They criticized him for depending too heavily on very limited sources, the diaries, letters and pictures to be found only in literate, aristocratic homes, and for drawing conclusions about medieval childhood *in general* on the basis of these limited sources. The vast majority of children were not written about. As the psychologist Nicholas Tucker has pointed out, 'Evidence that exists on the day-to-day life in the home quickly grows more meagre the further back one goes in history. How many mothers or nurses, for example, have left accounts of their experiences with the very young?' (Tucker, 1977, p. 16).

The sinner

Since the fourth century AD, the Christian doctrine of original sin (Adam's act of revolt in eating the forbidden fruit) has resulted in children being seen as inherently sinful. Children were believed to be born with original sin and therefore had to be disciplined in order to be saved.



A Puritan father instructs his family in religion.

Christianity was and is often ambivalent about the nature of the child – the newborn can be seen as sweet, pure and innocent, and at the same time both sinful and susceptible to corruption. This ambivalence was exemplified by the Puritans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who were greatly devoted to their children but also sometimes punished them harshly in order to make them ‘good’ and obedient. They believed that children had to learn obedience to God through obedience to their parents.

This view was also current in the early nineteenth century and is typified by Hannah More, a popular writer on child-rearing (Hendrick, 1990, p. 39). More argued that it was ‘a fundamental error to consider children as innocent beings, whose little weaknesses may, perhaps, want some correction, rather than as beings who bring into the world a corrupt nature and evil dispositions, which it should be the great end of education to rectify’ (quoted in Hendrick, 1990, p. 39).

More recently Alice Miller, a child therapist, has argued that the legacy of this view is still with us. Drawing on analyses of books of advice on child-rearing as well as case studies, Miller claimed that almost everywhere

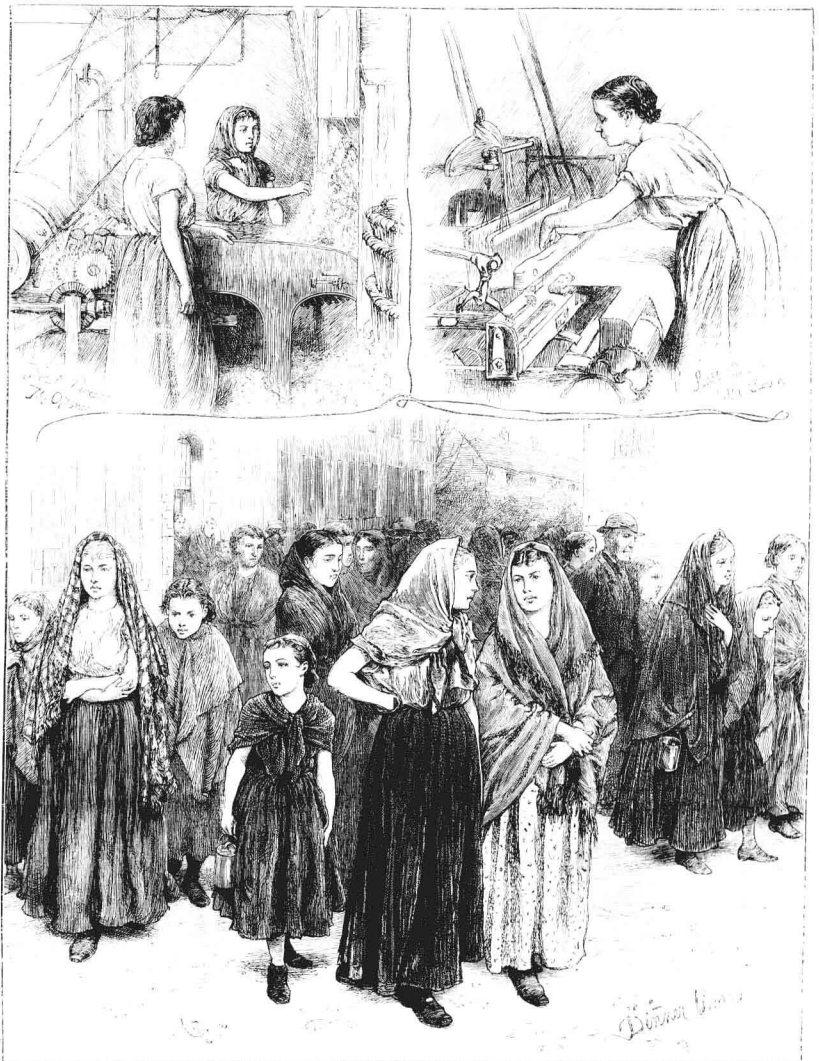
we find the effort, marked by varying degrees of intensity and by the use of various coercive measures, to rid ourselves as quickly as possible of the child within us – i.e. the weak, helpless, dependent creature – in order to become an independent adult deserving of respect. When we re-encounter this creature in our own children, we persecute it with the same measure once used on ourselves. And this is what we are accustomed to call ‘child rearing’.

(Miller, 1987, p. 57).

Miller suggests that such attitudes are common to many cultures and continue to exist today. A belief in the inherent sinfulness of children, and a rejection of weakness as something sinful and negative, led to a negative view of children's impulses, and to the creation of educational structures that were designed to punish and correct them. Do you recognize this view as familiar? When you did Activity 1, did you talk to anyone or read anything which stressed the need to teach children the difference between good and evil, for instance?

The child as property

The children of the poor have often contributed to family income by working either inside or outside the home. In the Middle Ages, children as young as 5 or 6 did important chores for their parents and, from the sixteenth century, were often encouraged (or forced) to leave the family by the age of 9 or 10 to work as servants for wealthier families.



Children at work in a Manchester cotton factory, from *The Graphic*, 1872.

With industrialization (in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), many children were forced to work in appalling conditions and for long hours at a stretch. Parents were often dependent on children's wages, and some had more children because of that. The demand for child labour made children an asset, and made it desirable to keep children within the family rather than send them out to apprenticeship.

Gradually, concern grew over the appalling working conditions of children. In Britain, the Factory Act of 1833 was the beginning of legal protection of children from exploitation (and was linked to the rise of schools for factory children). In 1893 the minimum working age for all children was raised to eleven, in 1918 to fourteen and, finally, to 16 as late as 1973.

The school child

The 1833 Factory Act established half-time schools which allowed children to work for half the day and attend school as well. But although middle-class children increasingly attended schools, even in the 1840s a large proportion of children never went to school, and if they did, left by the age of ten or eleven.

By the end of the nineteenth century in Britain, however, the school became central in constructing a new image of childhood. It did this mainly by segregating children from the adult world of work: 'Since the Second World War, school has become an increasingly important part of a child's life, dominating evenings with homework and effectively ending the old habits of juvenile contributions to domestic management' (Hardyment, 1992, p. 92).

1.2 Children in other cultures

Looking back at British history has thrown up some problems with assuming that there are unchanging elements in ideas of childhood and about children. Ariès and others claimed that 'childhood' itself is a relatively recent invention, specific to a particular group of people at a particular time in history. As well as looking back in time (and meeting problems of evidence in doing so), students of childhood can look around the world. Are there common patterns or does every culture have its own?

One of the most comprehensive studies of children in different cultures was conducted by a team of American anthropologists headed by Beatrice and John Whiting (anthropologists examine how people live in different cultures). The team studied childhood in six cultures (the Gusii of Nyasongo, Kenya; the Mixtecans of Juxtlahuaca, Mexico; the Baco of Tarong, Philippines; the Hoka of Taira, Okinawa; the Rajput of Khalapur, India; and North Americans of 'Orchard Town', USA). These studies, known as the 'Six Cultures Project', provided the first systematic and detailed recordings of children's behaviour in different cultures and provided a wealth of information on children's work, play and social interaction, as well as on how adults regarded children (Whiting and Whiting, 1975).