



College Custom Series

Readings in Child Development



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McGraw-Hill, Inc.
College Custom Series

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READINGS IN CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 MALMAL 9 5 4 3 2 1 0

ISBN 07-055948-1

Editor: Jim Vastyan

Cover Design: Janet Spring

Printer/Binder: Malloy Lithographing

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Alvin H. Price

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CONCEPTS OF DEVELOPMENT

Behavioral scientists have studied many aspects of human behavior. This concentrated effort by thousands of researchers and writers has yielded much useful and significant information about human development. In spite of all that has been done, there is one condition or variable which has not been well researched. It is the factor of time and how it influences what we are.

In a general way, or course, we have some theories which suggest that events early in life influence what happens later. But for the most part, we still have difficulty trying to understand how time becomes part of and influences the human personality.

The matter of time is of increased importance when we focus on human development. Development takes place over time and scientists suggest that it is orderly instead of random and confused. Further, development appears to have a direction of some sort which means it has a goal or objective. Lastly, some believe that development is continuous and others suggest that it is sporadic. Regardless of which position you accept, however, none of these ideas are useful if one does not see and understand them related to time.

As a practical matter we are interested in what happens to a child of any age during certain segments of time. We want to know what happens, what causes it to happen, and what might influence it. Why? For one thing, we are interested in these questions from the point of view of any scientist. Development is significant and studying about it may improve the human condition. Development sometimes is not successful. It can be adversely affected by many things. For those who guide children, such as parents, teachers, physicians, and church leaders, knowledge about ineffective development is essential.

You can imagine observing a child and noticing something interesting or unusual about him. Let's suppose you notice a four year old playing and having fun in the living room of your house. Then, you put on his coat and put him in the car to run a few errands. To your surprise, instead of being pleasant, he begins to whine, say mean words, and tease his little sister. From your point of view, you are annoyed with what he is doing. Should

you spank him, yell at him, or ignore what is happening? What you do will depend on how you interpret this. Is it just the changeability one expects from a four year old? Is it that the child does not like cars? Is he a big tease and likes to torment? Or, is it a manifestation of something that is developmental? If you are not aware of it being developmental you might spank or scold. But if you know that before three, children do not have a concept of rules and then they begin to think rules are part of every solution. When they do not know the rules, they become frightened and often misbehave. Later, they discover that rules are changeable and can be adapted. Four year old children are very interested in rules, and when they do not know them, they will misbehave in order to find out. Knowing this developmental information, you will neither spank nor scold. You will take the time to teach your child the rules for riding in a car. You may also have a good time doing it and then all you will need to do is remind him.

THE HUMAN DESIGN

Probably the best way to begin to understand development over time is to understand something about the idea that humans have built-in or inherited mechanisms for both time and development. Inside the brain we can find a small mechanism that moves much like a clock. It actually rocks and keeps pace with time. New development takes place after certain amounts of time have passed and been measured by the brain's mechanism. In addition, microbiologists have found "master" genes on some chromosomes which control the expression of other genes. These lie dormant until certain time has passed and then they act to signal other genes which influence further development.

In addition to these two examples which appear to be built in features of brain and body, other conditions exist which stimulate and are a manifestation of development. All infants, for example, demonstrate an orienting response which allows them to move, or orient their body in order to take full advantage of the world around them. This has the net effect of adding stimulation promoting their development. Every infant also demonstrates an inherited "competency motivation" or drive to improve physical and mental skills. This motivation is evidenced by children's drive to turn over, crawl, walk, and run. Or, it is manifest by a child's drive to learn language and acquire new mental skills.

ENLARGEMENT AND INTEGRATION

Generally, as time passes and development takes place, an individual's capacity for thoughts, feelings, and skills are enlarged. One more mature, thinks more thoughts, feels more and more refined emotional characteristics, and can do more complex skills than the one who is less mature. Knowing this you can expect yourself and your children to think more effectively and develop emotionally as you and they grow older.

While this enlargement of study is gradually appearing, another form of development is also happening. It is called integration. This means that as the brain matures it increases its capacity to collect information and integrate it into increasingly complex understandings. A young person could tell one person apart from others and that individuals belong to families. It would take a more mature child to understand that families are part of towns which are part of cities, counties, states, countries, worlds and solar systems. It would take a fairly integrated mind to know the various ways all these parts may be related or connected to one another.

What does this mean to you? If you understand that humans develop over time then you will have an enlarged capacity for understanding children and yourself. Further, you will see your ideas about children become more integrated and your treatment of them will come closer to their situation in time. Collectively, if we all improve our understanding of development, we can improve our ability to rear children until they become humane, responsible, and mature adults.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Objective: To increase your understanding of development as it takes place over time.

1. Interview two people asking and recording their answers to the following questions: (these questions are designed to learn how much people might or might not know about development)
 - a. Describe something you have gotten better at over the years. _____

 - b. What would you do if a four year old child began to tease, whine, and cry while you were driving a car? _____

 - c. What is the best thing to do if your first grad child cannot read well? _____

 - d. If neither children has any previous experience, with some subject describe how a ten year old might learn differently than a five year old. _____

2. In the following types of development, describe how you have enlarged your ability.
 - a. physical _____

 - b. language _____

 - c. emotional _____

 - d. social _____

 - e. cognitive _____

3. Write a behavioral description of the typical actions for a child, a teenager, a young adult, and a mature adult. _____

THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Years ago doctors were attempting to learn how diseases spread. Not knowing about bacteria they had to develop a theory based on what they thought they knew and what they observed. Imagine what preventative strategies they arrived at when they first thought that infections were spread by the wind. Their advice was to keep children from drafts and ill people away from fresh air. After discovering the idea of contagion by air they thought perhaps the cause of illness was the smell of illness. They supported this idea by the fact that when ill people in hospitals were separated from one another, meaning they could not smell sickness, there was less transmission of disease. Bacteria in the role of infection was discovered in a hospital where doctors realized they were spreading it by using unsterilized surgical instruments. The first people operated on did not get the same illnesses as those who had later operations. Someone noticed this, realized it must be due to something going on in the operating room and suspected the cause of infectious disease was something they could not see. Then later, with the development of the microscope, the existence of bacteria was confirmed.

Researchers studying child development and human behavior started out with ideas as strange as the thought that smell causes disease. These early ideas were useful though because they could be disproved. This led to progressively better ideas until our present time. We now know that we do not know everything, there may be very new and exciting discoveries made about children, and that we should be open to learning about them. However, for you who are new to the study of child development, it is important to learn about what has been and is thought about children so that you can use these ideas to generate or understand new discoveries.

THEORIES ARE THE BEGINNING

Everybody uses theories. You may have some idea about how to get a date, the best way to buy a car, how to make friends, or how to get money from your parents. They are part of your everyday life and they are so common you probably give them little thought.

Your theories will be good or bad depending on whether they work the way you hope. When they work, (i.e. you get a date) you conclude your theory is a good one. When desired results are not obtained (i.e. you cannot make friends) you will revise your theory by first questioning what went wrong, getting some new information, and then trying again.

This same process is an on going effort in the study of human behavior. Researchers try things out, if they seem to work, the theory seems to be a good one, if they fail the theory is revised.

In our case, we are especially interested in those theories which are used to explain child development. So as you begin your study, you should understand what a theory is.

(1) A theory is an organized and focussed set of ideas. Since humans are so complex, a theory narrows what we are able to observe. One theory, for example, might focus on observable external behavior while another might focus our attention on inward thoughts or feelings. (2) A theory contains two elements. One is a set of terms or vocabulary which explain what one sees when child behavior is observed. The word "maturation" refers to growth determined by biological factors while "learning" refers to growth determined by children's experience with their environment. Besides a vocabulary that explains, a theory also contains predictions which are used to predict what causes growth and what can be expected in the future. For instance we can predict that all human beings will mature and go through puberty, a time of rapid biological growth. (3) theories are not a set of wild ideas. They are partially proven systems of thought which are supported by much research but still contain some unproven ideas called hypotheses. These hypotheses are the exciting parts of theories because they are at the forefront of knowledge where scientists are working to confirm or disconfirm how children develop. (4) Theories have original or "a priori" assumptions which are the beginning or originating ideas for the theory.

FOUR THEORIES

When you study a theory it is important for you to learn about its assumptions and then you can tell where it started and how researchers and writers have developed the theory over the years. In addition, you can find out what part of human behavior the theory is going to focus on and what part it is not. Consider the following.

BEHAVIOR THEORIES

This theory begins with the assumption that humans inherit some survival drives such as hunger, thirst, sex, and perhaps curiosity. When individuals seek to satisfy these drives (to survive) they learn. This learning is based on two laws: the law of association and the law of effect. When we attempt to satisfy our hunger we learn all we can about what is associated with food and our bodily response to food. This is the law of association. We also learn what will get us food (i.e. money). Thus we will learn what we must do to get money in order to get food. This is the law of effect.

Behavior theories focus on external behavior. They use words which direct us to understand a stimulus and response, to count the frequency of some act or how some action may be reinforced or extinguished. In addition, they try to explain what external actions are related or associated with certain emotions.

PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORIES

Psychoanalytic theories begin with the assumption that humans inherit certain mental and emotional characteristics. These inherited tendencies develop in a sequence of age stages. This means that at certain ages children will manifest certain mental and emotional characteristics. A second assumption is that the rate of development can be affected by the nature of one's exposure to the environment. That is, any new thoughts or feelings are largely affected or determined by the type of experience in our past. For example, if our parents were mean to us we might be afraid and later assume that all people will hurt us. As time passes, and we collect our life experiences, all development is due to the "interaction" of inherited characteristics and these experiences.

Psychoanalytic theories focus on emotions and thoughts. The words of these theories describe the inward part of human behavior and consider systems of thought and feeling to be the most important parts of development.

COGNITIVE THEORIES

These theories begin with the assumptions that humans inherit a brain structure which determines certain styles of thought or cognition. It is proposed, for example, that

cognitive development takes place in some age stages and is affected by how rich or limited one's interaction is with the environment. The richer our exposure the better and more elaborate will be our ability to think and reason.

Cognitive theories describe several different mental activities or "cognitive operations" and are used to explain or predict what will happen at certain ages of growth and what will help or hurt development. (e.g. neglect will hinder development while much positive exposure to people and objects will help children grow).

ETHOLOGICAL THEORIES

Ethological theories have assumptions which are different than any of the other three. These theories start with the assumption that human development stems from inherited characteristics. Further, ethological theories focus on the behavior which one exhibits toward other members of its species. These include eating, mating, survival, parenting, and play behavior. According to these theories, all individuals inherit the behavior which allow them to participate in these tasks. Therefore, they show how to observe the behavior of one individual and compare it to the actions of other species members.

These theories contain words which direct attention toward external behavior but as it is related to the species tasks. Mating in humans would be an example of the focus demonstrated by ethological theories. Advocates of this theory are also interested in how individuals grow into demonstration of the types of behaviors related to the species tasks.

THEORIES AND YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Each of the four theories described above enable us to refine our abilities to understand children. You may like one more than you do any others. But, it is important to remember that each has its value by focusing our attention of different aspects of child development and by giving us different ways to think about children. We are probably better informed if we are familiar with all four theories than if we know none or only one. Therefore, you will be asked to be knowledgeable about all four theories of child development.

As you study these theories, notice they will help you decide what you think. These theories can, in fact, help you develop your own theory about children and how they develop. You might never become a researcher or a scientist in a formal sense. But, you might become a parent or a teacher. Do you think it is important to have a theory about children and how they develop? What if your theory is too limited and you have some notions which are not true? What will the consequences be for the children? What if you have a variety of ways to think about a child? Will you likely do a better job of understanding and predicting what the child will do?

The answers to these questions are pretty obvious aren't they? This implies, however, that as you acquire knowledge about these theories and about children that you should examine your assumptions and that you should decide what parts of human behavior you want to consider. Are you more interested in observable external behavior than you are in mental development? Or are you equally concerned about thoughts, emotions, and acts?

The theories provide a way to understand and also provide specific knowledge about children. You can use them to formulate your own theory and in so doing improve your ability to promote healthy human development.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Objective: To refine your understanding of theories and the role theories play in understanding children and in the formulation of your own theory of child development.

1. What are the four characteristics of a theory?
 - a. _____

 - b. _____

 - c. _____

 - d. _____

2. Answer the following questions about the four theories.
 - a. Which theories are stage theories? _____

 - b. Which theories assume development is due to what is inherited? _____

 - c. Which theory(s) focus on learning exclusively? _____

 - d. Which theories focus on interaction between the individual and the environment? _____

3. What aspect of human behavior does each theory focus on?
 - a. Behavioral theories _____

 - b. Psychoanalytic theories _____

 - c. Cognitive theories _____

 - d. Ethological theories _____

4. Begin to develop your own theory.
 - a. Read the following statements and select one as your "a priori" assumption.
 1. Children are born and are like blank pages ready to be filled by what they experience and learn. Who they eventually become is up to their parents, other caring people, and experiences children choose themselves. A child's growth is due to learning and experiencing.

2. Children are born full of genetic potential that affects all they do. Who they eventually become is determined in large part by their inherited characteristics. A child's growth is due to inherited possibilities.
- b. After selecting ONE assumption, write a 3 page paper and provide support for your theory. Also give reasons why the other position is not correct.
 - c. Also in your paper, describe what you think healthy development is, and what you think it is not.
- *NOTE:** This is an activity to promote your logical thought. Do not combine or try to integrate the two assumptions.