

Psychological Development and Early Childhood



John Oates, Clare Wood and Andrew Grayson





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Foreword

Creating a textbook like this cannot be done without the collaborative efforts of many people as well as the contributing authors. As editors of the book as a whole, we have valued immensely the knowledge and understanding that has been so ably provided by the consultant authors of the chapters, Emma Flynn, Kieron Sheehy, Alan Slater, Jim Stevenson, Martin Woodhead, Mark Norrish and Nigel Wilson, as well as those in the Child Development course team. Our critical readers, Brenda Clayton, Sandy George, Rebecca Johnson, Wendy Lawrenson, Janet Thelander, Malou Spier, Sandy Banks, Donald Bennett, Linda Castle, Joanne Dawson, Sally Gallagher and Krysia Potten, provided much useful encouragement and constructive critique, and Iris Rowbotham helped throughout to manage the project efficiently. Bridgette Jones and Julia Brennan gave us outstanding support in editing the text, greatly improving the clarity of presentation. Stephanie Withers' speed and precision in turning our drafts into electronic copy was admirable throughout, and we would also like to thank Jonathan Davies and Sian Lewis, the designers; Roy Lawrance, Victoria Eves and Janis Gilbert, our illustrators; and Nikki Tolcher our compositor. Last, but not least, our External Assessor, Alyson Davies of the University of Surrey for her comments on the chapter drafts.

John Oates

Clare Wood

Andrew Grayson

Introduction

John Oates, Clare Wood and Andrew Grayson

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 in which psychologists have investigated 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 to which researchers seek to find answers. 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 of children and childhood. An important aim of this chapter is to begin the process of examining our most basic assumptions about child development. This leads to a consideration in Chapter 2 of four influential theories of child development which, in different ways, reflect the questions asked more generally about what the potential influences on development might be.

Psychologists 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 cultural expectations. In this way of thinking about child development, what a child comes to be is largely 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, 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 merely 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 influence what happens to them just as they are influenced by their experiences.

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 with which infants have to engage. 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 influenced by them.

In Chapter 6, biological influences on child development are considered. The idea is discussed that evolution has prepared children for a level of adaptability, primarily through their prodigious ability to learn, which far transcends the abilities of any other species. The contribution that genetics makes to our understanding of child development has moved beyond notions of simple determination to the view that our biological inheritance equips us with the potential to be many different sorts of people.

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, feelings and ways of being.

Chapter 1

Children and development

Martin Woodhead

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	‘Work, play and learning in the lives of young children’	

Learning outcomes

After you have studied this chapter you should be able to:

- 1 consider the significance of diverse ways of thinking about children, including the idea that children are developing;
- 2 describe the origins of developmental research in terms of the social and economic context of Western societies and the emergence of scientific approaches;
- 3 analyse some key concepts involved in developmental research, drawing on examples from different aspects of development;
- 4 discuss historical ideas about how development occurs, especially the significance of 'nature' and 'nurture';
- 5 evaluate the relevance of theories about children's development in global cultural contexts, especially the relative importance attached to work, play and learning.

1 Introduction: a right to development

Social attitudes towards children have changed dramatically in recent decades, notably through the influence of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), with its strong emphasis on children's rights to be respected and to be consulted about matters that affect them. One hundred and ninety one countries have ratified the UNCRC, making this the most significant international human rights instrument designed to promote children's well-being. The UNCRC draws heavily on the principle that children have a right to development, for example, 'States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and *development* of the child'. (UNCRC, 1989, Article 6, my emphasis).

The UNCRC was built on many decades of international activity with the goal of improving the treatment and well-being of the world's children. For example, the earliest attempt to codify children's rights declared 'The child must be given the means requisite for its *normal development*, materially, morally and spiritually' (Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, 1924, Article 1, my emphasis). Indeed, recognizing that children are growing and developing was one of the main justifications for a separate UN Convention on the *Rights of the Child*, over and above the 1948 UN Declaration of *Human Rights*. Children are understood as being different in important ways from adults and requiring special provisions. They are seen as more vulnerable and inexperienced, and in many ways dependent on adults who will protect them from harm and promote their development (Burr and Montgomery, 2003).

The UNCRC (1989) includes over 40 articles covering a wide range of children's rights. Concepts of development run throughout the Convention. For example,

Article 27 affirms children's right to provision of a standard of living '... adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development'. Article 32 is about protecting children from '... any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development'.

This book is concerned with scientific questions about children's development which have been investigated using a variety of methods: carrying out observations and experiments, constructing theories and testing hypotheses about how children develop, and evaluating major influences on the process of development. Starting with the UNCRC is a reminder that children's development is not just a subject for scientific study. The importance of understanding children's development is widely recognized – for parents, teachers, health visitors, paediatricians, psychologists, social workers, lawyers, policy makers and others who work with, or are responsible for children and young people. Promoting children's development has also become fundamental to the framing and interpretation of international law – and not just in the Western societies where so much of the research has been conducted.

This chapter will introduce you to the study of child development. Early sections will outline the historical context within which developmental theory and research has become so significant. It will examine the concept of 'development', and summarize some of the ways children can be described as 'developing'. The scientific study of children's development originated within Western societies, but the influence of developmental ideas is now widespread. The chapter concludes by outlining some of the challenges of applying child development research and theory in global contexts.

Summary of Section 1

- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) is designed to promote children's well-being throughout the world.
- The idea that children are developing and that their development must be protected and promoted is central to articles of the Convention.

2 Images of childhood

Within any one culture, people's ideas of what childhood is and what a child is may vary according to their occupation, gender, ethnicity, and, of course, their own experiences and inclinations. This section begins by asking you to think about your own and other people's ideas about children and childhood.

Activity 1 What is a child?

Allow about
45 minutes

This activity will stimulate your thoughts about different ways of understanding children, as a starting point for introducing the concept of child development.

- 1 When you think of children, what ideas come to mind? Initially, concentrate on visual images of children – how they look, what they are doing and the feelings they evoke in you. Make a note of three contrasting images of children that occur to you, either from personal experiences or images in the media.
- 2 Now explore some ways in which childhood has changed. For example, think about what it was like for your parents or carers when they were young. Were their experiences of childhood different from the experiences of children today? Next, think about your own memories and then think about children growing up today. Some areas of change might relate to home, school or starting work, clothing, games and pastimes, deference to authority, or differences between boys and girls.
- 3 Finally, think about your personal beliefs about children, and about how they should be treated at different ages. For example, in relation to care, the importance of play and learning, how much freedom they should be allowed or the role of discipline. You may find these proverbs a useful starting point:
 - ‘Children are the wealth of the nation’ (proverb – Tanzania)
 - ‘Children are innocent like angels; they can’t do any harm’ (proverb – Pakistan)
 - ‘A tree should be bent while it is still young’ (proverb – South Africa)
 - ‘The egg should not be smarter than the duck’ (proverb – Vietnam)
 - ‘It is the young trees that make the forest thick’ (proverb – Uganda)

(Cited in Kirby and Woodhead, 2003, p. 234)

If you can, ask someone else about (1), (2) and (3) and compare your ideas.

Comment

While carrying out this activity, you may have found that you have very definite ideas about children and childhood. You may also have become aware of the sources of these views; for example, memories of your own childhood, experiences with your own children or with the children of others, your parents’ or grandparents’ views, the views of your community, information in books and other media or religious belief. If you were able to talk to someone else for this activity you may have found a wide range of views and you may also be aware of the way these ideas have changed over time. For example, during the early decades of the twentieth century, parents were urged to feed their new babies according to a strict timetable and not to pick them up when they cried, which may seem unthinkable to new parents nowadays.