What is Child Development?


Child Development is the scientific study of ways in which people change and grow from conception through adolescence. In this course we will focus on early childhood development. The field of child developmental examines **change** across a broad range of topics, including physical development, cognition, language and social/emotional development, and examines the impact of family and peers. Development occurs over time and enhances our adaptation to the environment. It follows an orderly pattern that moves toward greater complexity.

Developmental psychologists investigate key questions, such as:

- Are children *qualitatively different* from adults, or do they simply lack the experience that adults draw upon?
- Does development occur through the gradual accumulation of knowledge or through shifts from one stage of thinking to another?
- Are children born with innate knowledge or do they figure things out through experience?
- Is development driven by social context or by something inside each child?

Development is multidirectional. Children do not change at the same time and at the same rate in every aspect of development. They may show gains in some areas of development, such as language or cognition, while remaining unchanged or showing losses in other areas of development, such as social/emotional.

Development is multidimensional. Children change across multiple domains of development: **physical domain** (e.g., height, weight, sensory); **cognitive domain (**e. g., intelligence, perception, problem-solving, memory; language); and **psychosocial domain** (e.g., self-regulation, self-perception, interpersonal relationships). We need to take a **wholistic** perspective when looking at how children develop. Each domain influences the others and changes in one domain may prompt changes in the other domains. For instance, an infant who has started to crawl or walk will

encounter more objects and people, thus fostering developmental change in the child's understanding of the physical and social world.

Development is plastic. **Plasticity** means that children have the ability to change, and that many of our characteristics are malleable. For instance, plasticity is illustrated in the brain's ability to learn from experience and to recover from injury.

Development is multi-contextual. Children develop within multiple environmental contexts: historical (time period in which they are born), social (family, extended family, school, peers), geographic (neighborhood), economic (socioeconomic status). Each of these contexts influences development.

Important contexts to consider are:

- *Normative age-graded influences:* An **age-grade** is a specific age group, such as infant/toddler, preschool, or school-age. Children in a specific age-grade share particular experiences and developmental changes.

- *Normative history-graded influences:* The time period in which you are born (e.g., generation x, millennial) shapes your experiences. A **cohort** is a group of people who are born at roughly the same period in a particular society. These people travel through life often experiencing similar circumstances.

- *Non-normative life influences:* Despite sharing an age and history with our peers, each of us also has unique experiences that may shape our development. A child who loses his/her parent at a young age has experienced a life event that is not typical of the age group.

- *Social standing, socioeconomic status, or social class:* **Socioeconomic status (SES)** is a way to identify families and households based on their shared levels of education, income, and occupation. While there is certainly individual variation, members of a social class tend to share similar lifestyles, patterns of consumption, parenting styles, stressors, religious preferences, and other aspects of daily life.

An Ecological Perspective of Development

Today we are more aware of **variations** in development and the impact that culture and the environment have on shaping our lives. **Culture** *is the totality of our shared language, knowledge, material objects, and behavior.* It includes ideas about what is right and wrong, what to strive for, what to eat, how to speak, what is valued, as well as what kinds of emotions are called for in certain situations. Culture teaches us how to live in a society, as each new generation learns from the solutions passed down from previous generations.

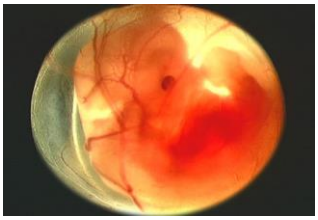
Culture is learned from parents, schools, churches, media, friends and others throughout a lifetime. The kinds of traditions and values that evolve in a particular culture serve to help members function in their own society and to value their own society. We tend to believe that our own culture's practices and expectations are the right ones. *This belief that our own culture is superior is called* **ethnocentrism** and is a normal by-product of growing up in a culture. It becomes a roadblock,

however, when it inhibits understanding of cultural practices from other societies. **Cultural competence** *is an appreciation for cultural differences and the understanding that cultural practices are best understood from the standpoint of that particular culture.*

Culture is an extremely important context for child development. Understanding development requires being able to identify which features of development are innate (biological) and which are culturally based. This understanding is still being explored. Much of what developmental theorists have described in the past has been culturally bound and difficult to apply to various cultural contexts. The reader should keep this in mind and realize that there is still much that is unknown when comparing development across cultures.

Periods of Development

In this course we will focus on development from the prenatal period to the beginning of middle childhood.



Prenatal Development: Development begins with conception. All of the major structures of the body are forming during prenatal development, and the health of the mother is of primary concern. Understanding nutrition, teratogens (or environmental factors that can lead to birth defects), and labor and delivery are primary concerns.

Infancy and Toddlerhood: The first two years of life are ones of dramatic growth and change. A dependent newborn becomes an independent toddler within a relatively short period of time. Caregivers are also transformed as they learn to meet the needs of a growing child. What happens during these first years is the foundation for all the stages that follow.

Early Childhood: As two to six-year-olds, children are learning language, gaining a sense of self and developing greater independence, while also beginning to learn the workings of the physical world.

Middle Childhood: From ages 6-11 years, children continue to learn and grow, and much of their experience is now connected to their involvement in the wider world—school, friends, after-school activities. Now the world becomes one of learning and testing new skills, and children assess their abilities and accomplishments by making comparisons between self and others.

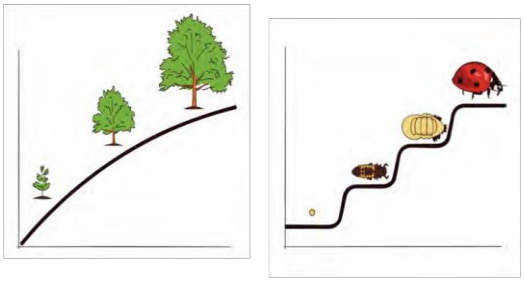
Theories of Child Development

What is a developmental theory?
A **theory** is defined as a coherent set of ideas that are used to explain and predict behavior and development. All developmental theories address several key questions:

- **What is innate (biological) and what is learned (environmental)?**
- **Are there critical periods in development?**
- **Is development a continuous process or a series of discrete stages?**
- **What is the child's role (active vs. passive) in the developmental process?**

Nature and Nurture: Why are you the way you are? As you consider some of your features (personality, physical features) ask yourself whether these features are a result of heredity or environmental factors—or both. Chances are, you can see the ways in which both heredity and environmental factors have contributed to these features. **Nature** *refers to those aspects in which heredity plays an important role in shaping the way we are.* **Nurture** *refers to the significance of environment in shaping the way we are.* Most scholars agree that there is a **constant interplay between the two forces**. It is difficult to isolate the root of any single feature or behavior as a result solely of nature or nurture.

The tree represents continuous development, while the ladybug represents discontinuous/stage development.



Continuity or Discontinuity: Is human development best characterized as gradual change, or as more abrupt change? The theories of Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg are called stage theories. **Stage theories** assume that developmental change often occurs in distinct stages that occur in a universal sequence and are **qualitatively different** from each other. Thus, stage theorists assume development is somewhat discontinuous. Other theorists assume development occurs more gradually and continuously. They believe that the advanced skills of the adult were already present in some form in the child.

Active or Passive: How much do you play a role in your own developmental path? Are you at the whim of your genetic inheritance or the environment that surrounds you? Interactionist theorists (Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky) see humans as playing a much more active role in their own development. Piaget, for instance believed that children actively explore their world and construct new ways of thinking to explain the things they experience. In contrast, behaviorists (Skinner, Watson) view humans as being more passive in the developmental process.

Stability or Change: How similar are you to how you were as a child? Were you always as outgoing or reserved as you are now? Some theorists argue that the personality traits of adults are rooted in the behavioral and emotional tendencies of the infant and young child. Others believe that these initial tendencies are modified by social and cultural forces over time.

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