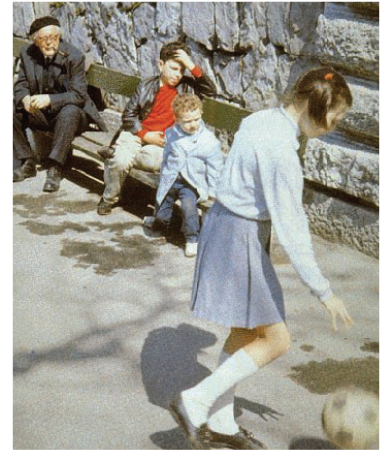


Coffee Date with Piaget

Amy C. Johnson

If you're an educator, you have probably heard of Jean Piaget. Born in 1896, in Switzerland, he is arguably the most influential child development theorist and researcher of all time. When I was a student, learning about theorists was one of my least favorite topics. My mind would wander, and a dull cloud filled the room. I simply did not understand their importance, and I certainly never thought I'd want to chat with one over coffee. Eventually though, through life experience and education, I began to enjoy learning about theorists and what they have contributed to the welfare of children and the world of education. In fact, I'd like to get together with Piaget and thank him for his work.

The next time you hear his name in an education course or a teacher training, let people know that Jean Piaget would actually be a fascinating coffee date. He made significant contributions to the study of children, and he was passionate about the same things we are.



1 Piaget showed the importance of naturalistic observation. Beginning with his own children, he took detailed notes and filled journals, painstakingly marking their accomplishments at different ages. This is actually one criticism of Piaget; researchers are not supposed to study their own children because it's too hard to be objective and the findings are unlikely to be representative of all children. However, Piaget did expand out from his own children, continuing with the naturalistic approach to thousands of other children throughout his career.

2 Piaget laid a lasting foundation for developmentally appropriate practice. He discovered that children have a limited view of events at certain ages. One of his most well-known experiments is the conservation task. A young child is asked to look at two short, wide cups of liquid. They are identical, and the child correctly states that they both hold the same amount of liquid. Then, with the child watching, the adult pours one of the containers of liquid into a tall, skinny glass. It's the same liquid as before, so obviously it's the same amount, but the young

child thinks that the tall, skinny glass now contains more liquid than the short, wide one. Repeating this experiment many times, he found that toddlers and preschoolers were consistently fooled, but older children were not. His experiments provided groundwork for understanding what we can expect from children at different ages. Wouldn't you love to peek into children's minds and discover new ways of thinking? When we have our sit-down with Piaget, we'll talk about all the things we've observed about children in our care.

3 Piaget was among the first to help us understand the benefits of more authentic testing among children. When Piaget first started out, he had a job recording the right and wrong answers children gave to standardized questions. He soon found that he was more interested in why the children were choosing those answers than the answers themselves. He believed that to understand a child, we should not look at an end product, but how the child arrives at that conclusion. This resonated with me because of an experience in which a colleague and I were asked to take an IQ test. It was just for fun, but it was an actual test. My colleague and I picked different

answers for one of the questions, but after discussion, we both explained exactly how we came to our conclusions. I looked at the problem in a completely different way than my colleague did, and both ways made perfect sense. Now, if that had been a real testing situation one of us would have been right and one of us would have been wrong. Piaget stated that every child approaches problems and new experiences through the lens of prior experiences. Each child is made up of unique experiences. He encouraged testing as a means of focusing on where a child is in the thinking process—not on whether the child's answers are right or wrong.

4 Piaget was a model of lifelong learning devoted to understanding children. He dedicated his life to better understanding children as individuals. He believed they are unique and different from adults. He valued them and worked to educate others on the importance of childhood. If you are a teacher, I believe I just described you. Teachers spend their days with little individuals who are unique and valuable. Teachers understand the importance of these little beings and work not only to educate children but also to educate parents about the importance of childhood. Our life work fits right alongside Piaget's.

About the Author

Amy C. Johnson, PhD, is an adjunct instructor for Texas Woman's University and University of North Texas, both located in Denton. Amy teaches child development courses that include information on theorists prominent in the field.

Viewpoint, a periodic feature of the journal, provides a forum for sharing opinions and perspectives on topics relevant to the field of early childhood education. The commentary published in Viewpoint is the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the view or position of NAEYC. NAEYC's position statements on a range of topics can be found at www.NAEYC.org/positionstatements. If you would like to write a Viewpoint, please see www.NAEYC.org/writeYC.

Photographs: p. 86 (top), © Jean Mohr, Musée de l'Élysée, Lausanne, Switzerland; (other photos) © Fondation Jean Piaget pour recherches psychologiques et épistémologiques and © Archives Jean Piaget, Geneva, Switzerland

Copyright © 2017 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.naeyc.org/yc/permissions.

Copyright of YC: Young Children is the property of National Association for the Education of Young Children and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.