
Child Development

A CHILD'S WORLD TODAY

A child's world has changed dramatically in the past three or four decades. The typical child of 40 years ago stayed at home with his or her mother from birth to enrollment in nursery school or kindergarten. More recently, economic needs and changing attitudes toward women have altered this situation. Many homemakers and mothers have joined the workforce. In addition, the traditional family unit of mother, father, offspring, and the extended family (aunts, uncles, and grandparents) isn't as dominant as it once was. A child may live with a single parent, with a parent and his or her friend, with grandparents, or in a communal setting.

In addition, within a few weeks of birth, many infants have a babysitter or day care provider. By ages two, three, and four, the child may attend a nursery school, preschool, or day care center. At five years of age, the child usually attends kindergarten, with yet another arrangement for after-school care. In some instances, because of parents' work schedules, arrangements must also be made for child care before school begins each day.

The Critical Period

These varying experiences occur during a critical period—the first five years of a child's life. The experiences that young children have during this period directly affect the total development of their thinking ability, their emotional stability, their personality, and their physical growth. It's a period when young children learn to develop trust (or distrust) in adults and confidence (or lack of confidence) in themselves. Trust and self-confidence generally develop in an environment where the *nurturance* (affectionate care) is consistent

and steady, where there are appropriate *role models*, and where there's ongoing continued sensory stimulation. Role models are individuals whose behavior in a particular situation is imitated by others.

Sensory stimulation (stimulation of the senses) is provided by activities that require infants to use their senses of sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch. Sensory stimulation is particularly vital during the first 18 to 24 months of life. This period of growth and development—dubbed the *sensorimotor stage* by the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget—is defined by the young child's dependence on his or her senses to explore the world.

Newborn infants are born with tremendous potential for physical, intellectual, social, and emotional growth as well as a multitude of existing abilities in each of these areas. The infant's sensorimotor activities are his or her primary tools for developing, enhancing, and integrating these skills. Activities that require infants to use their senses and their emerging motor skills supply the vehicle through which learning can occur.

Effects of Time Spent in Child Care Settings

Because of the fewer hours spent with parents and due to the variety of caregiver settings, young children are less likely to receive consistent nurturance, appropriate role models, and ongoing sensory stimulation during their first five years of life. In addition to their parents, young children today must become familiar with several adults outside their families. The differences in adults' personalities, in the ways they communicate and interact with children, and in their expectations of children make it more difficult for children to develop trust.

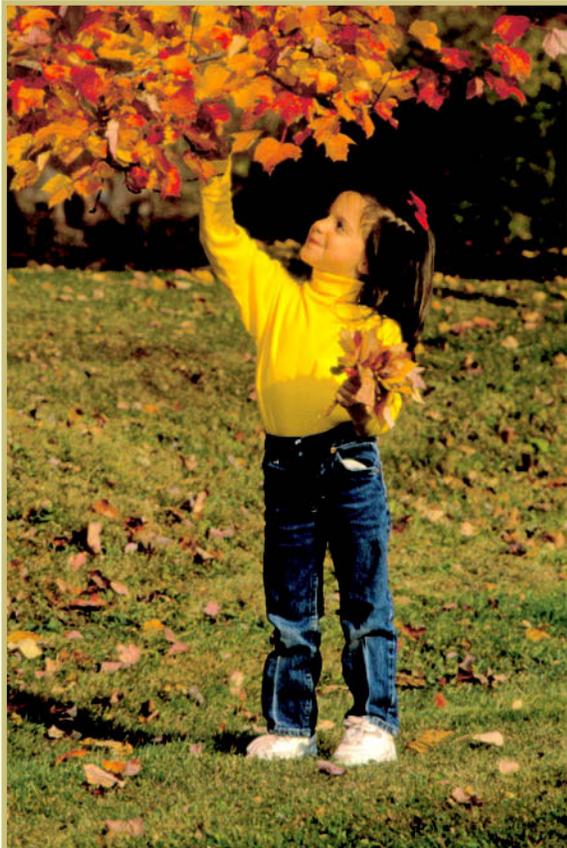
Not only do they have to relate to caregivers other than their parents, but young children today also find themselves in group situations with other children. A group may consist of about 20 children of approximately the same age in a child care center or six children of varied ages between infancy and school age in a family day care home. As you learn

about the nature of growth and development in this study unit, you'll become aware of the demands on a young child who spends considerable time in child care.

Effects of Family Structure on Growth and Development

The wide variety of family structures in which children live today directly affects their growth and development with respect to nutrition, social skills, emotional stability, character, personality, and thinking ability.

Children living with a divorced parent, for example, may believe they were the cause of their parents' separation and consequently feel a tremendous burden of guilt. They also may have to assume responsibilities that ordinarily wouldn't be given to them and indeed may be inappropriate for their ages. Such children may misbehave simply because they



have a need for love and affection or because they aren't ready for some of the responsibilities placed upon them.

A great amount of development takes place during the early years of a child's life. Those caring for children in this age group have a strong potential for influencing a child's entire life (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1—As this child grows and develops and explores the world, a variety of caregivers will influence her life.

THE NATURE OF GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

As human beings, we experience certain inevitable, observable changes: we grow; we grow up (mature); we grow old. The passage of time is the primary reason these changes occur. But many contributing factors cause the quality of this growth to vary from individual to individual. In this study unit, you'll explore the nature of the growth and development of children from before birth to age twelve.

Growth and Development Defined

Growth refers to the changes that occur in the size and shape of a human being. For example, the hands and feet of a newborn look thin and flat. Within a few months, however, they take on a rounded and well-padded look. Increases in height and weight are another example of growth.

Development refers to the changes that occur in the complexity of a human being. For example, the simple cooing and babbling of a six- or eight-month-old infant leads to the baby's first spoken word when he or she is around one year old.

The words *growth* and *development* are used together to indicate the interactions of changes in size, shape, and complexity. All of these changes result in more mature functioning (Figure 2).

Learning to climb and learning to write are examples of more mature functioning because they include changes in physical as well as mental ability (Figure 3).

Organization of This Study Unit

From conception to five years of age, a human being changes from an embryo to a fully functioning child. The changes that occur in size, shape, and complexity are dramatic. Growth and development occur in four major areas: *physical*, *social*, *emotional*, and *intellectual*. However, the growth and development in these four areas don't occur at the same rate. For example, a child may quickly develop intellectually while that



FIGURE 2—A child's interests and abilities change and expand at different stages of growth and development.



FIGURE 3—This child's ability to climb results from both growth—*increase in size*—and development—*increase in complexity*.

same child may develop physically much more slowly. Or a child may develop quickly physically but may develop socially and emotionally much more slowly.

Growth and development for all human beings are basically the same and occur in recognizable time periods. The time periods that have been identified for the focus of this study unit are as follows:

- Conception to birth
- Birth to eighteen months
- Eighteen months to three years
- Three years to five years
- Five years
- Six to eight years
- Nine to twelve years

Within each of these time periods, growth and development occur in each of the four major areas: physical, social, emotional, and intellectual.

POINTS OF VIEW ABOUT GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

There are many points of view concerning what determines optimum growth and development of children. Learning about what others who have studied children think will help you to form your own point of view.

The Nature-Nurture Controversy

As you probably already know, you inherited many characteristics from your parents, among them the color of your hair, eyes, and skin. These traits were passed to you by your parents before you were born through complex molecular structures called *genes*. Together, all of these inherited characteristics are your *genetic inheritance* (Figure 4). The traits that you inherit from your parents are part of your *nature*.

Once you're born, you're exposed to the environment—the people and world around you. Factors in the environment have an effect on your development. The environment is the *nurture* part of your development.

So, which is more important in determining the person you'll become—nature (genetic inheritance) or nurture (interactions with the environment)? This question has created the ongoing *nature-nurture controversy*, which emphasizes the importance of both factors and their interactions with each other.

Often people confuse genetic inheritance with the nurturing effect of the environment. For example, five-year-old John is tall for his age, has brown eyes and black hair, and looks like his father. These physical traits are part of his genetic inheritance. Also, John loves to play kickball just as his father did when he was a boy. At first, you might think that John inherited his love of kickball from his father. Actually, John's environment and the people who interact with him have encouraged him to play kickball by teaching him how and giving him attention and praise whenever he plays it. Thus, John's love of kickball has been nurtured by the people in his environment.



FIGURE 4—This child inherited some physical traits from her parents through genes.

The Psychodynamic Theories

The *psychodynamic theories* state that growth and development result from psychological (mental) needs of which we may not be aware. These needs originate in our earliest experiences in relating to our parents and to others who care for us. Such experiences provide unconscious motivation for our behavior. It's believed that these experiences are very significant to our growth and development throughout life.

Sigmund Freud's *psychoanalytic theory* proposed that personality was the most important aspect of development. This theory suggests that human relationships, especially the mother-child relationship, have the greatest influence on development.

Erik Erikson's *psychosocial theory* expanded on Freud's theory. Erikson, a German psychologist, proposed that human development occurs in a series of stages. Each stage represents a critical period during which individuals must solve certain developmental tasks. Accomplishments of each stage are based on development in the previous stages. Healthy personality development is characterized by a balance between satisfaction of personal needs and requirements of social and cultural settings. Erikson's ideas have been very helpful in understanding the social and emotional development of young children.

Behavioral Theories

Behaviorism is a theory based on the view that learning is the result of interaction with the environment. Behavior is understood in terms of stimulus and response. A stimulus that strengthens a behavior is called a *reinforcer*. *Positive reinforcers* increase the likelihood of a behavior when the reinforcers follow the behavior. For example, allowing a boy to play his favorite game after he completes his homework is an example of a positive reinforcer. Such behavior modification stresses the use of rewards, rather than punishment.

Observational learning, or *modeling*, is especially powerful in young children. *Social learning theory* is a point of view that explains how children learn by observing models whom they imitate.

The point of view of the social learning theory is that changes in a human being result from the individual's exposure to certain situations. Learning results from those situations. For example, when given a spoon, a baby explores and examines it and tries to use it in a variety of ways. With a little help, the baby eventually learns to use the spoon appropriately. A parent, a sibling, or some other caregiver teaches the baby what's to be learned by example and serves as a model to imitate.

Cognitive Theory

The focus of *cognitive theory* is human thought processes and intellectual development. Jean Piaget's theory of *cognitive development* has been a powerful influence on early childhood education. Piaget, a Swiss theorist, studied how children think and discovered that they think in different ways depending on their stage of development. Through processes of maturation and interaction with their environments, children construct and organize their own knowledge.

Humanistic Theory

According to the *humanistic theory*, an individual's *self-concept* is the most important aspect of his or her growing and developing in a positive and complete manner. A self-concept is the mental image a person has of himself or herself. Humanists believe that how individuals see themselves—their own unique wishes, wants, desires, and fears—is the main source of change that brings about growth and development.

American psychologist and human behaviorist Abraham Maslow's theory of *self-actualization* states that human behavior is motivated by basic needs such as food, shelter, and safety. When these needs have been satisfied, individuals can pursue growth needs such as love and self-esteem.

Biological Theories

The *biological theories* offer explanations for growth and development that focus on biological factors. For example, the *maturation theory* provides information about common characteristics of children at different ages.

The study of *temperament* provides a helpful perspective from which to understand differences in human behavior. The current concept states that temperament is a “relatively consistent manner of interaction,” which is based on biological characteristics and is clearly evident in early infancy. These characteristics influence the nature of the relationship between a child and the person caring for the child.

Contextual Theories

Contextual theories center on the child as a member of a social environment. The *ecological theory*, as outlined by Urie Bronfenbrenner, professor emeritus of Cornell University's College of Human Ecology, describes a nested structure of dynamic ecological systems, including the family, community, and school. Each of these systems influences development. The *sociocultural theory* developed by Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, focuses on development and learning as a result of dynamic interactions between a child and the environment within a cultural context.

Developing Your Own Point of View

You've just read about seven generally accepted views of what causes human beings to grow and develop as they do: psychodynamic, social learning, behavioral, cognitive, humanistic, biological, and contextual theories. Knowledge of these viewpoints will help you to understand what you see when you observe people. It will also enable you to know what to expect from others, both children and adults.

You may wish to learn more about these and other viewpoints of growth and development. You can do so by visiting your local library and reading books related to child growth and development. If you prefer, you can search the Internet for the specific theory or theories that interest you. As you read, you'll accept some ideas and reject others. To this knowledge, you'll also add your own ideas and experiences with children, until you arrive at your own point of view. Working from your own point of view will enable you to foster positive growth and development in the children you encounter.

In the next section, you'll examine some principles and stages of growth and development. Before you go on to that material, please take some time to complete *Self-Check 1*.



Self-Check 1

At the end of each section of *Child Development*, you'll be asked to check your understanding of what you've just read by completing a "Self-Check." Writing the answers to these questions will help you review what you've studied so far. Please complete *Self-Check 1* now.

1. Growth is a change in
 - a. size and shape.
 - b. nurturance.
 - c. complexity.
 - d. stimulation.
2. Development is a change in
 - a. size and shape.
 - b. nurturance.
 - c. complexity.
 - d. stimulation.
3. In a child, the patterns of growth and development are
 - a. different today than they were 30 years ago.
 - b. related to the family structure in which the child lives.
 - c. basically the same for all human beings.
 - d. easily changed by a person caring for the child.
4. Learning what others who have studied children think about growth and development will help you to
 - a. handle a crying child.
 - b. understand people and to form your own ideas.
 - c. choose specific activities to stimulate growth and development.
 - d. stop two children from fighting.
5. A child's temperament is primarily influenced by _____ factors.
 - a. emotional
 - b. environmental
 - c. social
 - d. biological
6. The sensorimotor stage is characterized by an infant's need to explore the world through his or her
 - a. hands.
 - b. eyes.
 - c. motor activity.
 - d. senses.
7. The sensorimotor stage occurs during the first
 - a. 6 months.
 - b. 10 months.
 - c. 18–24 months.
 - d. 3 years.

Check your answers with those on page 61.
