

Theories of Child Development

Psychodynamic Theories

When most people think of psychodynamic theories, they initially think of **Sigmund Freud**'s extreme beliefs regarding the unconscious and his strong focus on psychosexual development. Although Freud provided a basis for understanding child development, his theory is not the only psychodynamic theory.

Erik Erikson, a psychodynamic theorist, was more focused on psychosocial development than on psychosexual development. Freud and Erikson shared a common belief that children must successfully complete a series of stages in order to function appropriately as adults.

We will cover these stage theories in later weeks.

Behavioral Theories

Behavioral theories of child development came about as theorists became frustrated with the often vague and untestable predictions that psychodynamic theorists promoted. Behaviorists believed that the unconscious that Freud and Erikson relied on so heavily is a useless construct because it is not visible to the naked eye. Conversely, behaviorists had a “see it to believe it” perspective.

Behavioral theorists, such as **John Watson**, **B. F. Skinner**, and Albert Bandura, held different views on how children learned behaviors, but they all agreed that children and adolescents develop their specific skills and abilities through the principles of reinforcement—reinforced behaviors persist but ignored or punished behaviors fade away.

Cognitive Theories

Until the late 1800s, theorists focused largely on child behavior but paid little attention to child cognition. Cognitive theories filled this gap by focusing on the process that children use to gain knowledge and to understand the world. **Jean Piaget** is the most well-known cognitive theorist because of his influential views on child cognitive development.

Like Freud and Erikson, Piaget believed that children developed through a series of stages. Piaget provided a great deal of information on children's thinking abilities, but

another cognitive theory, the information-processing model, has been much more influential when discussing the development of memory. By comparing the human brain to a computer, this model provides a framework for understanding how memories are formed and how this capability develops over time.

Contextual Theories

Understanding the impact of the environment on children (and vice versa) is necessary to form a complete picture of child and adolescent development. Two major theorists, **Urie Bronfenbrenner** and **Lev Vygotsky**, have provided a contextual perspective that explains the interaction between children (including their different physical and mental abilities) and their environments.

Bronfenbrenner developed the bioecological approach to development, which focuses on children's interactions within several "systems." Cross-cultural researchers commonly use his approach to explain the impact of culture on a developing child. Vygotsky examined the social relationships among people within a culture. He strongly believed that interactions among children and the people in their environments are necessary for appropriate cognitive and social development.

Evolutionary Theories

Although the previously mentioned theories provide information on our physical, cognitive, and social development, no theories have addressed the impact of our genes and inheritance on our developmental trajectories.

Evolutionary theories on development, which arose from **Charles Darwin's** work, consider the impact of inherited genes on our development. Obviously, our genes influence our physical features, but evolutionary theorists believe that our behaviors can also be genetically preprogrammed. **Konrad Lorenz**, the most well-known developmental evolutionist, focused on genetic behavior patterns by studying these patterns in geese.