

CHILD DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PLAY

Aim

Describe the impact of play upon the psychological development of a child.

LEVELS OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Child psychology is concerned with the development of a person over the course of their childhood. This involves the development of a child's mental capacity (i.e. cognitive development); and the development of their emotional and social behaviour.

It is important to state that most of these forms of development do not simply cease as a child reaches adulthood. Adults also are capable of growing and changing in terms of their mental, emotional and social behaviours. Some characteristics are however more easy to develop and change during childhood.

It is important to note that distinctions between cognitive, emotional and social aspects of behaviour are purely theoretical (i.e. the distinction is made simply to help us learn and understand, but in reality, you should think of these aspects over-lapping and blending with each other, rather than being distinctly separate parts of the child's character.

When problems develop in any area of development, they usually become rapidly evident in other areas as well. The study of child psychology is partly concerned with identifying such interrelationships.

This course is limited in how much it can deal with the psychological development of children; however, if this area is of particular concern to you; the school does offer another course in Child Psychology. That course complements this play leadership course well.

THEORIES OF LEARNING IN INFANCY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD

Adults have an obvious mental (i.e. cognitive) ability to learn. This is not so obvious in a baby.

Never the less, babies do learn, and all types of skills develop as they grow.

What is learning?

Learning can be defined as a relatively permanent change in behaviour as the result of practice or environmental influence.

The four basic ways of learning that are available to infants at an early stage have been defined by child psychologists as:

1. Habituation
2. Vicarious Learning
3. Classical Conditioning
4. Operant Conditioning

Habituation

This is the infant's ability to "get used to" a particular stimulus until they no longer find it interesting.

When interest changes, wanes there is alert motor activity and alert directional movement of the eyes.

This is particularly important for a baby.

Vicarious learning

Also called "modelling", vicarious learning is learning through imitating the behaviour of those which the infant loves and respects.

Example:

It is common to find a little girl imitating her mother by pretending to do house keeping tasks in play.

Classical conditioning

This is a complex concept that involves an organism's recognition that two stimuli go together.

Ivan Pavlov was the pioneer of classical conditioning. He based his theory on experiments with dogs. Pavlov observed the relationship between an unconditioned stimulus such as a dish of food; with an unconditioned response -salivating at the mouth. He recognised that this was a natural, unlearned response. He proceeded to experiment with the possibilities of associating one stimulus (e.g. light) with the unconditioned stimulus (e.g. food) so that the dog would become conditioned to respond to light by salivating.

He set up the dog in a sound proof laboratory with a special device to measure the salivating response (attached to the salivary gland). A light was turned on followed by the delivery of meat powder by remote control. A high degree of salivation is measured. The procedure is repeated so that the dog is conditioned to associate the light with food. The repetition of this procedure is called reinforcement. It reinforces the association between light and food. When the experimenter turned on the light without presenting food, the dog still salivated heavily.

Operant conditioning

This is a more complex and theoretical concept than classical conditioning.

It involves an organism learning that a particular response to a stimulus will lead to a particular outcome.

The concept was formulated by **B. F. Skinner**. Skinner distinguished between respondent and operator behaviour.

- Respondent behaviour occurs as a direct unconditioned response to a stimulus (such as the reflex of the knee, or salivating at the smell of good food).
- Operant behaviour on the other hand involves the organism actively performing in the environment, without responding to a particular stimulus. Such behaviour is influenced not by causes, but more by the results which it produces.

Example of operant conditioning:

Because you are happy, you might smile at the people you pass in the street. The result of your friendliness might cause people to be warm and friendly in return, and maybe initiate pleasant conversations with you. This consequence of your undirected behaviour (smiling) can lead you to smile more often in order to encourage positive responses in others.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Cognitive development refers to the development of mental and perceptual skills, that is, to the child's ability to understand and reason about the things in his/her world.

There are several theories about the cognitive development of children. One of the better known is:

Jean Piaget's theory

Piaget's theory began as a result of years of observational and experimental research conducted with his own children. Later he applied similar research methods with children in the general population.

Many of his concepts are based on children's responses during cognitive games or mental exercises that he played with them.

Through observation, he noticed how children of different ages approached these exercises in different ways. On the basis of this, he inferred certain patterns concerning the way the child thinks at different ages; or rather at different cognitive stages. Piaget views cognition as a mental structure that becomes increasingly more complex and efficient as the child grows older.

Piaget describes four major stages of cognitive development:

1. Sensorimotor stage

(Birth to 2 years)

During this stage, there is a close interplay between the baby's motor activity and its sensory perception.

2. Pre-operational stage

(2 to 7 years)

The child has the "new" skill of language, and this ability to use words allows development in a way that was not previously possible. Language allows the child to learn that an object can represent something which it is not (pretend games can become more feasible). At a latter part of this stage, conversation skills will develop rapidly.

3. Concrete operational stage

(7 to 12 years)

At this stage, children begin to learn about rules and relationships between people and things around them. They then learn to manipulate or operate according to these rules or restrictions.

4. Formal operational stage

(12 years and older)

In this stage, the child develops the ability to think in abstract terms about philosophical and ideological issues.

Piaget did make a further sub division in the first stage:

a/ The pre-conceptual period (2-4 years)

Focus is on symbolic substitution (e.g. a child substitutes a block for a car)

b/ The intuitive period (4-7 years)

Focus is on classifying things into categories (e.g. apple is fruit, carrot is vegetable)
Child develops an understanding of certain principles of conversation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

From a psychologist's perspective, there are four types of play in early childhood. They are:

1. Exploratory play
2. Constructive play
3. Symbolic play
4. Pretend play

During the sensimotor stage (0-2 years), play is primarily "exploratory". Some basic symbolic acts also occur after the first year. It is however mainly half way into the second year before symbolic play becomes prevalent. During symbolic play, a child learns that one thing can represent another (e.g. sitting on a log, a child can pretend that they are riding a horse).

After the second birthday, a child becomes like an "actor" in his own "theatre". This is called "pretend play", and it is largely through such play that a child moves towards becoming socialised. For instance, a girl may begin to play nurse with her doll. Later on she might act as the doctor and her friend as the patient.

It is not surprising that at the age of two, the child begins to understand social relationships a little more, instead of being self involved and egocentric like the younger infant.

It is important to realise that play is not an idle pass time for children, but in fact, it is essential to a full and balanced development of the person.

Moreover, child therapists claim that play can be a very healthful way for children to deal with stress - thus the use of dolls and toys during remedial therapy.

Play can represent a kind of language that the child uses, in place of verbal language that has not fully developed.

Anyone who frequently deals with children should encourage a variety of play, and should be receptive to what the child is learning through play; or even what message the child is trying to convey through play.

ASSIMILATION AND ACCOMMODATION

There are two more Piaget terms that are important to know: assimilation and accommodation.

Assimilation refers to how a child fits environmental stimuli into one of their cognitive ideas. The child's mental imagery remains the same, but the object is adapted to fit into his already existing schema.

Example: The child may already have an existing concept regarding motor cars; but does not have any concept of motor bikes. When they see a motor bike for the first time they might react "Look - car". Most parents will notice their child's obstinate refusal to learn the right names - as if they are not quite ready to form a new schema or concept when to them, the motor bike fits quite comfortably into their existing idea of a car.

Accommodation on the other hand refers to the child adapting their cognitive schemata

in order to accommodate new stimuli. A child thus perceives many things on wheels (cars, bikes, trucks, trolleys, etc) and ceases to call them all cars, beginning to develop new schemata or categories.

Piaget's discovery of different stages and the specific cognitive activities which the child uses during these stages is of extreme importance to both teachers and parents alike. Most adults know from experience how intimidating it can be when people expect us to understand something we know nothing about. Also the effects of our ignorance or failure in certain things can be debilitating for a long time.

More so with children! We need to be sensitive to the cognitive stage of the child when we present that child with toys and games for instance. It would, for example, be no use to give a child a pack of playing cards before he/she has learnt to classify things into groups. To give a child more than it can chew for instance, risks causing feelings of inadequacy that persist for a long time - and to feel inadequate early in life, will provide absolutely no support for proper learning and development throughout the rest of childhood.

A thorough understanding of the concepts children grapple with at certain ages can be an important guide. As we know from perceptual recognition theories, children enjoy testing their schemata and hypotheses. They enjoy experimenting with ideas and phenomena that are familiar to them. Thus playing peek-a-boo with a child on the brink of understanding object performance will be appropriate and stimulating for that child; but would be boring and not stimulating for a child who is preoccupied with learning to classify things.

A more appropriate pass time for the latter child would be a scrap book and picture of cars, or animals to paste them in order of their classification.

Piaget's theory was the first comprehensive and exhaustive study made of the development of cognition in childhood. Theories of cognition, which have since been developed, owe a lot to the basic foundation that Piaget provided. It is nevertheless inevitable that more recent research has found some problems with Piaget's theories.

Today, many cognitive psychologists claim that cognitive development is more continuous and far less segmented than what Piaget suggested. They claim moreover, that some children arrive far earlier at certain stages than others, suggesting Piaget did not account for such variances.

A more important contention is that certain studies show that children may reach an understanding of conservation, for instance, far earlier than Piaget's subjects did -if they are "trained" or taught to attend to the appropriate features of the objects they are dealing with.

What Piaget may have called cognitive deficiency at a certain age, may really have been an attention deficiency (i.e. the child has the capacity to understand, but does not have the attention span to focus on the problem).

SOCIALISATION

Social cognition is the ability to understand who we are, and how we stand in relation to other people and society in general. We are all primarily social beings, and we define ourselves in relation to our view of others. (E.g. if I define myself as a studious person, I am implicitly comparing myself with other people's behaviour).

We are consistently being influenced by how others perceive us and how we perceive them.

When we speak of environmental influences on the psychological development of a child, we are not only concerned with the structure of the child's environment, and the objective world that he/she is exposed to. We are also largely concerned with the influence of other people, including parents, family peers, teachers, etc. on the child's development.

Basic cognitive abilities acquired in early childhood are indispensable to social development; for example:

How does a child learn self awareness in the first place?

How can we relate to other people if we don't reflect on our own experience?

How does a child learn to sustain a relationship -for instance, if an individual has not attained recognition of object performance? Such an infant will be unlikely to view his mother as a person with a life of her own. The appearance of people will seem merely incidental to the infants needs - every time he cries...someone appears. This example demonstrates that a certain level of cognitive skill is necessary before a child can function adequately in a social relationship with other individuals.

Some of the basic concepts of social cognition are:

- Self awareness
- Awareness of others as individuals in their own right
- The development of empathy
- Taking turns
- Having a point of view/perspective
- Ability to see something from another person's perspective.

All of the above are important if a person is to become socially well developed.

	<p>SELF-ASSESSMENT Perform the self-assessment test titled 'Self-Assessment Test 4.1'. If you answer incorrectly, review the notes and try the test again.</p>
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SET TASK

1. Observe one or more children below the age when they attend school.
You might observe a relative, friend's children, or even simply gain permission to observe children at a child care centre or pre school.
Observe them for half an hour, preferably in a situation where they are not overly conscious that they are being observed.
Make notes of what they do, how they interact with both things and with other people (or animals).
2. Observe two or more older children at play (primary or secondary school age).
Observe them for half an hour, and take note of anything that is relevant to what you have read in this lesson.
You might observe children in a formal play program; or make obscure observations by simply sitting on a park bench near a playground.



ASSIGNMENT 4

Download and do the assignment called 'Lesson 4 Assignment'.