

Making Child Development Theories Visible

Theorist Focal Points and Highlights

Jean Piaget on Social-Emotional Development of Young Children

Introductory statement: Negotiating is a task that requires the ability to listen to other people's point of view while letting go of your own ideas or intentions. This is a difficult task for any adult to accomplish let alone for an egocentric child. With the support of caring adults and peers, children learn to negotiate successfully.

Highlights: Usually when we think about Jean Piaget we think about the cognitive aspects of his theory, when in reality his theory encompasses social-emotional aspects as well. For example:

- Children learn in the context of meaningful relationships.
- There is a social process of cognitive, affective, social, and moral development.
- As children acquire new cognitive knowledge, they also acquire social and moral understanding of the world around them.
- The concept of equilibration, the process of modifying or fitting new information into pre-existing ideas, applies to both cognitive and socio-emotional development.
- Intellectual adaptation is as much an adaptation to the social and emotional environment as to the physical environment.
- Through mutual respect, caring adults can help children develop "equilibration" or self-regulation. Piaget called this co-operation.
- The motive for cooperation emerges from feelings of mutual affection and mutual trust, which become elaborated into feelings of sympathy and consciousness of the intentions of self and others.
- Social life is a necessary condition for the development of logical thinking.

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Erik Erikson on Social–Emotional Development of Young Children

Introductory Statement: Identity, understanding your unique characteristics that make you definable and recognizable, is a dynamic process that is embedded in every developmental stage. As children grow and develop they begin to categorize themselves based on the recognition of their own abilities and characteristics or their roles within their family or community (e.g., “I am a sister” or “I am the youngest”). Children also begin to classify themselves in relationships to others. For example, “I have browner skin than Erin” (the color of my skin); “I am taller than Michael” (my height); “I am a girl” (my gender); “I can run faster than Stephen” (my abilities). Identity is both a state of ‘being’ and a process of ‘becoming’ (Uprichard 2008). As a child’s identity becomes stronger so does their membership in society.

Highlights: Erik Erikson talks about identity development as a dynamic process that happens throughout the life span. It is accomplished through the successful negotiation and mastery of a series of challenges that are present at each developmental stage. Identity development begins at birth as children navigate a “crisis” presented at different stages. These stages include:

- In the first stage, “TRUST vs. MISTRUST” (birth to one year), infants begin to develop a sense of their identity or who they are as the adult caregivers respond to them.
- In the second stage, “AUTONOMY vs. SHAME AND DOUBT” (2 to 3 years), children establish their ability to be independent and express their own free will, ideas, desires and abilities, against or separate from their elders and leaders.
- In the third stage, “INITIATIVE vs. GUILT” (4 to 5 years), children develop a sense of self that allows them to express their ideas and thinking. They begin to take ownership of “who they are” and what they choose to do both individually and as a member of a group.
- In the fourth stage, “INDUSTRY vs. INFERIORITY” (6 to 11 years), children master skills that help them to gain confidence and competence in their own abilities.

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Abraham Maslow on Social-Emotional Development of Young Children

Introductory Statement: Abraham Maslow focused his work on a humanistic perspective to the education of young children. He introduced the “hierarchy of needs” as a way to explain the importance of the steps required to achieve self-actualization or reach our fullest potential. This hierarchy of needs is often represented in the form of a pyramid, with the largest and most fundamental levels of human needs at the bottom, and the need for self-actualization at the top. As children satisfy the basic needs for food and shelter they progress to a higher level in the pyramid where love, personal esteem and acceptance take priority. This is what Maslow labels as gaining self-actualization of self-fulfillment; in other words the need to be the best that we can be. It is through relationships that this can eventually be achieved. The role of the teacher is to provide a space where healthy interactions take place. It is through self-initiated play that children can gain a sense of self-fulfillment.

Highlights:

- **Physiological Needs:** Air, water, and food for survival as well as clothing and shelter for protection from the elements.
- **Safety Needs:** Being able to trust your environment, including adults and peers; protection, stability and order.
- **Love and Belonging Needs:** Family affection, relationships and peers, friendship.
- **Esteem Needs:** Self-esteem, confidence, achievement, responsibility, mastery, independence, respect of others, and respect by others. Characteristics of self-reliance are based on the child’s own experiences. This allows them to avoid influences that may be damaging to their self-esteem.
- **Self-actualization Needs:** Morality, creativity, spontaneity, problem solving, lack of prejudice, acceptance of facts.

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Lev Vygotsky on Social-Emotional Development of Young Children

Introductory Statement: Vygotsky focused on the connections between people and the socio-cultural context in which they live. In his Socio-Cultural Theory, Lev Vygotsky states that humans develop tools and strategies while they interact with the environment. Culture, language, speech and writing serve the purpose of supporting children in expressing their feelings, needs and ideas as they navigate their social environment. The internalization of cultural tools leads to a higher level of thinking thus promoting more solid socio-emotional stability.

Highlights:

- Children construct knowledge as they engage with the cultural tools in the environment. Cultural tools include such things as written language, numbers, various signs and symbols, maps, models, and pictures.
- Knowledge is co-constructed and it always involves more than one person.
- Learning can lead development.
- Children can perform at a higher level when provided support by a peer, teacher or a caring adult. This is called the Zone of Proximal Development.
- Development cannot be separated from its social context.
- We are social creatures and our culture determines both the content and processes of our thought.
- Language plays a central role in mental development.

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John Dewey on Social–Emotional Development of Young Children

Introductory statement: John Dewey along with Maria Montessori and Felix Adler introduced the importance of considering and understanding every aspect of the child, including all the developmental domains (i.e., social, emotional, physical and cognitive). Dewey believed that freedom from restrictions is what allowed the child to become an individual and function effectively in society. He felt that learning must be child-centered, active, interesting and meaningful. Dewey's educational approach stressed greater freedom and spontaneity in play and involvement in the social life of the classroom instead of highly structured activities. He stressed that the process of democracy and collaboration was a mutual adaptation from the child as well as the environment in which he functions. He defined democracy as dynamic and organic where mutual respect between adults and children is gained for the better functioning of the unit or classroom.

Highlights:

- Learning is a social process that requires active participation.
- Learning starts at birth and is continually shaped by the environment, adults and peers that the child encounters.
- These interactions saturate the child's consciousness, forming his habits, training his ideas, and arousing his feelings and emotions.
- Learning happens when the child is stimulated to actively participate in the community to which he belongs. When the child differentiates, he becomes an individual that is capable of understanding the importance of belonging.
- The child's perceptions of, and reactions to, social situations are influenced by their attitudes, beliefs, habits, prior knowledge, and emotions.
- The child has his own instincts and tendencies, but we do not know what these mean until we can translate them into their social equivalents.
- Education is the process of living and not a preparation for future living.
- As Dewey stated, "I believe that the school must represent present life - life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the play-ground" (My Pedagogic Creed, School Journal vol. 54, January 1897, pp. 77-80).

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Louise Derman-Sparks on the Social-Emotional Development of Young Children

Introductory statement: Young children begin to notice differences early on in life. At birth they differentiate and discriminate based on these differences, e.g. they prefer the smell and touch of their primary caregiver rather than that of other adults that hold them. As adults we have the responsibility to ensure that children develop positive feelings about their own identity and gain respect for the identity of others.

Louise Derman-Sparks (1989) points out that the goals of an anti-bias approach are to enable every learner to construct confident identity and to develop empathy and just interactions within a community of learners. These interactions with diversity develop strong critical thinking skills that allow children to stand up against oppression and injustice. At the core of an anti-bias education are justice, equality and inclusion.

Highlights:

- Children notice differences and discriminate based on them at an early age.
- Children are capable of developing a strong sense of what is right or wrong and act or speak up for what they think is not fair.
- When children stand up against injustice their own identity is also validated and they acquire a strong sense of self and gain power and freedom.
- When children have a strong sense of self they are more comfortable in speaking up to support others.
- An environment that promotes a strong sense of community and mutual trust encourages children to articulate up their points of view and stand up for justice, equality and inclusion.

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Howard Gardner on Social–Emotional Development of Young Children

Introductory statement: Howard Gardner's Intelligences Theory emphasizes that intelligence is the result of the complex interactions between children's heredity and their social experiences. He argues that intelligence is more than the traditional view as measured by intelligence tests. He believes that there are different kinds of intelligences and that children express themselves in a variety of ways such as through language, music, physical abilities, 3-D modeling, understanding others or understanding themselves. As they communicate their thinking they may utilize one or more of these intelligences. These intelligences can function independently although they are also closely linked and interact with each other. Every child has the potential to develop multiple intelligences when provided with a supportive and nurturing environment.

For example, Thomas can be said to be strong in *intrapersonal* intelligence as he knows who he is, what he can do, what he wants to do, how he reacts to things, which things to avoid, and which things to gravitate toward. He knows that he can pedal a tricycle fast, that he cannot quite climb up the rope ladder, that he likes to observe in new situations, that he doesn't like to get messy, and that he can ask Teacher Debi to help him when he needs help. Charlie can be said to be strong in *interpersonal* intelligence. He has the ability to understand other people. He works in collaboration with Philip and Davy to build a model of Folsom Dam in the sand area with shovels and the water hose. He cooperatively works with them as he communicates clearly how to dig deeper and how to solve the problem of the water disappearing. He interprets Philip's grimacing facial expression to mean that he's unhappy with how Davy is filling the hole rather than emptying it and redirects Davy's actions. Elizabeth can be said to be gifted in *linguistic* intelligence as she has the capacity to use language to dictate a story about magic princess fairies, a snow festival, and purple violets to Teacher Christian. She delights in reciting the words to *One Two Buckle My Shoe* and *Brown Bear Brown Bear* during a small group gathering. With each of these children, the environment supports their social interactions with other children and with adults, and the use of their multiple intelligences promotes healthy socio-emotional development.

Highlights:

- ***Intrapersonal intelligence*** is the ability to understand the inner self. This is also known as self-awareness. It involves knowing your skills, limits, and feelings. It includes understanding your desires and motives.
- ***Interpersonal intelligence*** focuses on the ability to understand the intentions, motivations, ideas, and points of view of other people. It allows you to work collaboratively. People with *interpersonal intelligence* display excellent communication and social skills.
- ***Verbal-linguistic intelligence*** involves the ability to use language for expression. People with this type of intelligence have well-developed language skills.