



Introduction to Child Psychology

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Discuss what Child Psychology is
- ✓ Analyze the difference between development and growth
- ✓ Explore different stages of development in children.

Introduction to Child Psychology

What is Child Psychology?

Child psychology studies the various aspects of a human's development throughout childhood. Although child psychology usually explores infancy, childhood, and adolescence, the primary focus is on the earlier years of infancy. It represents a very important branch of psychology. Until today, it remains one of the most frequently studied specialty areas throughout the field of psychology.

Child psychology is a specific branch of developmental psychology, dealing not only with children's physical development, but with their mental, emotional, and social development, also.

When people hear the word 'development,' they think only of the *internal factors*, such as, genetics and personal characteristics. However, the influences that affect a child's growth involves, much more than the mixture of internal forces that arise from within an individual. *Environmental factors*, such as, social relationships and the culture in which a child lives, also plays an important role.

A comprehensive analysis of a child's development takes into account many different major contexts:

The Social Background: The influential factors of a child's social context includes his family, his relationships with peers and adults, his school environment, and his peer groups, each of these elements play an important role in shaping how the child thinks, behaves, learns, and develops.

The Cultural Background: A child's surrounding culture instils a set of values, shared assumptions, customs, and lifestyles. This over-arching list of expectations for how a child should live instils behaviours that potentially exist throughout her lifespan. Additionally, culture also plays a role in how children relate to their parents, the type of education they receive, and the type of child care that their parents provide for them.

The Socioeconomic Background: A child's family's social class affects both his social and cultural contexts. The family's *Socioeconomic Status* (often abbreviated as SES) usually acts as an appropriate representation of the level of education that the family members received, their overall living situation, the quality of the surrounding neighbourhood, the kind of job they have, and their salary. On average, children raised in households with a high socioeconomic status tend to have greater access to opportunities. On the other hand, those from households with lower socioeconomic statuses have restricted access to such things as medical care, nutritious food options, and proper education. All these factors may have a major impact on child psychology.

Scope of Child Development

Take a moment and think about the surprising process that develops a single-celled fertilized ovum into a human baby in nine months.

This newborn baby is already stocked with many complex systems, such as, the respiratory system, the nervous system and the skeletal system, that are necessary for survival. In fact, immediately after being delivered the baby can cry, smell, see, and touch, and, in turn, respond to all of this sensory information. These capacities help her perceive and adjust to the world, a completely different environment from the womb.

These abilities, however, are necessary but not sufficient for survival. The infant fully depends on the caregiver for nurturance. She cannot neither feed or clothe herself, nor defend herself in any way. But, with the proper guidance and love, a child will gradually learn to sit, stand, walk, and then run. She will learn how to express herself verbally, physically, and eventually sexually. She will get involved with group activities, make friends, and learn her place in the broader society and social hierarchy.

She will learn to work through tasks at home and eventually utilize these skills elsewhere to make money and start her own life. She may choose a vocation and end up taking courses to prepare for it. In the typical scenario, this child will grow into an adult, become economically independent, get married and have children, and this process of child development will start all over again.

From a broad perspective, Child Psychology seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the steps and influential factors of a human's transformation from a single celled organism in the mother's womb to a competent adult in a complex society?
2. What are the various components that combine to form a person?
3. How is it that your own brothers and sisters are different from you, in both the way they look and their behaviour?
4. Why is it that one child is popular in the neighbourhood while the other prefers to play alone?
5. What makes one child a leader in her group while the other is timid and stays close to the teacher all the time?
6. Do children, on average, develop various skills and abilities at the same time?
7. What similarities exist between most three year old children? How do they differ?
8. What, on average, should be expected from a child at different ages?
9. Is there a pattern in development by which one can expect a three year old to behave differently from a five year old?

Child Psychology answers these questions by scientifically examining the average changes in the behaviour of children over time and explaining why and how they occur. In order to accurately explain childhood

development in this way, Child Psychology must integrate the areas of physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive functioning.

Additionally, Child Psychology seeks to identify specific childhood experiences that impact that child's ways of thinking and behaviour in adulthood. In other words, the student of Child Psychology concerns herself with growth and behaviour that affects the entire lifespan.

Development and Growth

The term **development** describes the changes in a person's physical and behavioural traits. The three main characteristics of these changes are that they are **progressive, orderly, and long-lasting**.

The term **progressive** indicates that, throughout development, a child replaces an old set of learned behaviours with a new set of skills and abilities that are more complex, useful, and efficient than the ones that preceded them.

The term **orderly** suggests that each area of a child's development occurs in a sequence. Each step in this linear process builds upon the previous one and cannot occur before it.

For example, each step in a child's advancement from crawling to walking must occur in a linear fashion, so that the child's advancement to any next step depends on what she has already learnt or practised. She must effectively master the movements of crawling before she can walk and know how to walk before she can run. The act of walking, as we understand it, demands a child to move upright and balance one foot in front of the other in the desired direction of travel. This entire balancing act requires much greater muscle coordination and mental complexity than crawling. Additionally, each step in this process of learning *progressively* builds upon the last and requires a more refined, difficult set of skills to master. Furthermore, walking is infinitely more useful.

It frees the hands for other activities, allows for faster movements such as running and increases one's range of vision.

Similarly, the adult's ability to handle difficult situations requires the previously acquired capability to perform more basic tasks. The ability to make decisions in adult life, for instance, develops out of the childhood experiences of selecting which game to play or which book to read. Development, therefore, represents the process through which a person learns to function with greater ease and competence.

Growth refers to a *physical* increase of anybody part's size. This includes an increase both in a child's weight or height and in the size of any internal organs. In these cases, growth refers to a *quantitative change*, which is a change that can be measured.

But, we do not merely grow in size. If that were so, a newborn baby would simply grow into a bigger baby as the years passed by. Thus, as the baby develops, there is not only a change in form, but an increase in the functioning complexity of a child's body parts, his thinking abilities and his social skills, also.

To emphasize this point, it's important to restate that humans do not merely grow, they *develop*. Whereas, growth refers to merely quantitative changes, development deals with both quantitative, as well as, *qualitative changes*. This type of change can either affect the structure or the function of the part being measured.

With this in mind, **development** may be defined as progressive, orderly, and relatively continuing changes over time in a person's physical and neurological structure. The discipline focuses on the thought process and behaviour transformations that the typical humans undergo, from the beginning of their life to the end.

The main point here is that the development is almost always occurring under the surface, even when physical changes are not visible. This point is proven by how physical growth slows down considerably after adolescence but overall development does not. Development in a person's complexity of thought, social skills, and use of language can continue as long as a person lives!

Stages of Development

Psychology divides the human life span into the stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. These stages consist of characteristic differences in the thought processes and skills of individuals:

Infancy

Infancy refers to the period of time from a child's birth to two years of age. During infancy, the child is totally dependent on the caregiver for the fulfilment of her needs. After birth, this is the period of the child's most rapid growth and development. The child learns a number of skills and abilities during this time. Some of these include the ability to walk, run, communicate her needs verbally, feed oneself, identify family members, recognize oneself, and venture confidently in familiar surroundings.

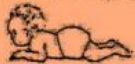
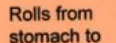
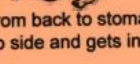
Childhood

Childhood is from two – to - twelve years of age. Development, at this stage, is less rapid than during infancy. During childhood, the child refines the skills, she has acquired during infancy, uses basic processes to progressively acquire more complex skills and learns entirely new skills. At this time, a child learns both to coordinate different of parts of her body and to behave in a way that society considers appropriate. The child begins not only to meet, on her own, many people outside the direct family, but to form attachments with these people, also. As the child grows and her thinking capacities are matured, she realizes that the fun that her developing abilities allow her to have. She can play on a swing, make a house from sand, draw, paint, or sing a song. With this newfound feeling of confidence, she gradually becomes more independent, though adult guidance is constantly needed.

The period of childhood is divided into two stages: the period of *early childhood* (2-6 years of age) and *middle childhood* (6-12 years).

In early childhood, which is also referred to as preschool age, the child learns skills that will help her complete the tasks associated with schooling. The preschooler has mastered the words to ask questions about objects, events and people. She learns about numbers, colours, shapes and the reasons for everyday events. All these concepts develop from *experiential learning*, actually seeing these events happen and physically performing various activities. This experiential component is vital for the child's ability to properly understand the world around her.

Also during this time, the child learns to make friends and to value relationships with people. Her ability to imagine and channel this imagination into the games she plays and the world she lives in improves dramatically. This shift is most apparent in the different types of games that preschoolers will start to play with each other. They enjoy playing games that require them to pretend and make-believe. Additionally, preschoolers continually switch from playing in collaboration with peers to playing independently.

	stage1: Birth to 6 months	Stage 2: 6 to 12 months	Stage3: 12 to 24 months	Stage 4: 2 to 3 years
Head and Body control	 Lies on stomach and holds head up  pushes up on hands  Rolls from stomach to	 Rolls from back to stomach  Rolls to side and gets into sitting		
Sitting	 Sits only with support  Sits leaning on hands	 Sits alone Twists and reaches  Catches self if pushed	 Moves into and out of sitting  Balances self if lifted	
Moving from place to place	 stand with support	 May crawl or shuffle  Pulls to stand	 Walks alone or with one hand  Squats to	 kicks a ball  Balances on one foot Jumps

At the beginning of middle childhood, at the age of 6, the child has matured a great deal. He/she is expected to behave more responsibly than the preschooler by parents, friends, siblings, and teachers. During the next 6 years, the child learns vocation-related skills, starts doing chores around the house, and

potentially attends school without any family member present. The child's store of information grows at a fast pace and her cognitive abilities develop rapidly.

As her interest in the outside world grows by leaps and bounds, there is active interaction with children of the same age. These children start to cooperate with each other during play and follow the rules of the game that they arbitrarily decide together both before and as the game progresses. Playing team games is a unique development of this period.

Adolescence

The beginning of **adolescence** (12-18 years old) is marked as puberty. Puberty refers to the stage around 11-14 years of age when a child undergoes a series of life-altering changes. The first of these important changes is a physical growth spurt that results in not only the rapid increase of a child's height and weight, but the emergence of *secondary sexual characteristics*, as well. Examples of these characteristics are the development of facial hair in boys and development of breasts in girls. On average, the onset of puberty is earlier for girls than for boys.

These rapid physical changes lead to a need for emotional readjustment, which is characterized by feelings of loyalty and pride for the peer group, country, and ideologies they identify with. As these groups slowly dominate an adolescent's time and life, she begins to follow the rules and codes of that particular group, which could conflict with those of the family.

As an adolescent experiences this conflict of values, she must also deal with multiple conflicting expectations. Sometimes she is expected to behave as an adult and at other times she is treated like a child. Yet, while at this stage, the adolescent typically must choose a vocation or prepare for marriage. Luckily, the adolescent also develops cognitively to a great degree, which helps her prepare for the roles and responsibilities she will be expected to carry out as an adult. Her thinking not only develops further and becomes more complex, allowing her to understand and deal with varied situations, but she can also think of abstract problems and work out their solutions purely in her mind.

Adulthood

Although **Adulthood** starts when someone turns 18 years old, there may be different societal criteria required for considering a person an adult. On the one hand, a person may start supporting himself economically, getting married, and even, starting a family. On the other, individuals from some families continue to remain financially dependent on their parents until their early twenties and beyond. In even other situations, both marriage and work may be the assigned responsibilities of an adolescent, before even adulthood. Other variations include various social and legal definitions of adulthood. But, the consistent factor is that an adult almost completely stops changing physically and is considered fully mature.

Remember that these divisions of the life span are not rigid. The child does not suddenly change from an infant to a preschooler or from a child to an adolescent. All changes represent a progressive, orderly process. Transitions from one phase of life to another will consistently differ for every individual.

Areas of Development

Child Psychology classifies the different areas of an individual's development, as such:

- Physical Development;
- Motor Development;
- Social Development;
- Emotional Development;
- Cognitive Development; and
- Language Development

Physical Development

Physical development refers to the measurable, visible changes that a child undergoes throughout their life span. Physical development can refer to the size and structure of one specific body part, a collection of body parts, or the proportion of various parts of the body and how that ratio changes from the point of conception.

Motor Development

Motor Development refers to the growing amount of control a child has over her body and the different levels of skills that a child can master as a result of this control. With increasing control and accompanying physical development, children not only have more coordination, but can utilize her larger body parts to perform for complex, useful tasks. For example, as the child becomes larger physically and smarter, she can learn to pick up plates, hold them steady if they contain food, and use her coordination to easily place them on a table.

Adults typically take their vast range of abilities for granted. They forget that these developments took years of training and learning from the time they were infants, only capable of reacting to their environments with built-in reflexes. In other words, even such simple physical tasks as rolling over, sitting, walking, jumping, climbing stairs, and swimming took practice to learn because they are not inherent abilities of an infant.

Additionally, the coordination between a child's five senses (seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling) and her physical ability to act on that information requires massive development over the first several years after birth. Improving coordination between her eyes and hands, for instance, will help her to eat

food without smearing it on her face and play sports or other games. In a similar way, the child gradually learns to cloth herself and performs other creative activities such as drawing, painting, writing, and dancing.

Motor development functions in two ways. In the first, it refines the skills and capabilities that the child already has to make them more useful and efficient. Second, the child, in the progressive, orderly manner, develops completely new skills and abilities based on what she already knows. In this way, the effects of a child's context are extremely powerful because they essentially determine which skills a child will have and how they will develop, if, at all.

Social Development

Social development refers to the steps that bring an infant from having no conception of rules or limits to behaving in accordance with the expectations of society, a peer group, and any type of play. The primary concern of a child's social development is her relationships with various types of people and her unique style of interacting with them.

As an infant, she can already recognize the difference between those who approach her lovingly and affectionately, as she will reach out to these people instinctively. As time passes, she learns more precise ways of distinguishing people, such as, recognizing her mother by the sound of her voice or how she looks. Through the distinction, the child gradually forms attachments to her family and other caregivers. Later, she will use these primary relationships to guide her in her relationships with non-blood-related people. Although an infant centres her actions on her own needs, a child steadily begins to form relationships with peers based on the idea of “give and take” around seven or eight years of age. At this time, children forms their first set of lasting friendships and can perhaps even identify a best friend. In her relationships with both peers and adults, the child will find out which behaviours are acceptable to each of them. In this way, a child begins to form her conception of what is right and wrong from her culture and peer group. For instance, she learns the proper manners of eating, dressing, and speaking to others, which are deeply rooted in her culture's way of life. She will also gradually learn, through repetitive warnings, that stealing, hitting, and speaking out of turn are not appropriated.

Over time, the child understands the expectations without having to be reminded constantly. At this point, she will typically learn complex behaviours such as cooperation, being helpful, and acting generously. These actions are all predicated on a child's emerging ability to intuit and understand another person's perspective and needs. A child who develops strong skills in the areas similar to cooperation will tend to form more satisfying relationships during adolescence and adulthood.

Emotional Development

An infant can only express the emotions of discomfort and delight. As the child develops emotionally, she not only begins to experience a variety of complex emotions ranging from anger, fear, anxiety, and sorrow to joy, happiness, and delight, but, she also learns the socially acceptable ways of expressing them. For example, initially, a child will react to an internal feeling of anger by hitting someone or throwing something in order to break it. Through proper training, however, she will learn to manage and express this anger in more constructive and healthy ways.

Emotional development can also refer to a person's personality, which can be viewed, from a Psychological standpoint, as how an individual decides to express her emotions. Personality also involves an individual's characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings, reactions to situations or different environments, and relationships to other people. Since a person constantly displays their personality, it can be analyzed in a wide variety of environments and over any period of time.

Each child's unique personality determines what the child thinks about herself and how she interacts with others. A confident, happy child typically acts affectionately toward others. In this way, personality also refers to a person's preferred, automatic ways of relating to others, how they feel about themselves, and how they feel about other people, friends, family, and enemies alike. The totality of a child's personality emerges from her personal experiences and her individual achievements in the other areas of development.

Cognitive Development

Cognitive Development refers to the progression and changes of an infant's thinking abilities from one age to the next. Remember, an infant has no reasoning, thinking, or other complex cognitive abilities that adults take for granted. In fact, studies show that an infant can only receive information from the present moment to such an extent that if an object is removed from her sight, she believes it has ceased to exist entirely. A normally developing child will slowly learn that objects and people continue to exist even when she cannot see them or hear them. Additionally, at around five years, the child understands concepts such as weight, speed, colours, and size, and can create distinctions, such as, heavy and light or fast and slow, which she could not previously comprehend.

At a certain point in their cognitive development, children begin to explore their surroundings. They continually ask questions such as 'why?' and 'how?' in order to gather the information from others and store the answers for future use. Even as her thought develops, a child needs further development before she can understand why different children have different capabilities. She cannot understand, for example, why another child could not climb a tree when she can easily do so. This example reflects a typical child's belief that everybody else is, or should be, exactly like her in terms of their abilities and feelings.

A child will perceive everything, including the sun, stones, pencil, dolls, and random objects, as having a human life and feelings. Although a ten year old has the capacity to reason and analyze, these abilities are limited to situations that occur in real life. In other words, children at this age, on average, cannot think in abstract terms or predict future events. In fact, the typical child won't fully develop the capacity for abstract thinking until adolescence. Thus, in terms of a child's ability to think, each stage of a person's life builds upon the last, creating a qualitative improvement compared to the last stage.

In Child Psychology, the terms *intelligence* and *cognitive development* can be used interchangeably. To clarify, cognitive development refers to the process of a child's mental development over the life span, intelligence commonly refers to an individual's ability to “act purposeful, think rationally, and deal effectively with the environment.”

Cognition, however, is a separate term that involves the process of how a child 'comes to know,' which is usually accomplished through the gathering and processing of information. As a child grows progressively more capable of processing more complex information in more intricate ways, their cognitive abilities expand drastically to the point that they can remember, accurately perceive and identify their surroundings, solve problems, and think about an object without it being present in front of them.

The cognitive development of a child also includes his or her awareness of morality and the acquisition of a sense of right and wrong or just and unjust. Because an infant has no moral code, the concepts of right and wrong are taught through the early socialization process, another reason why a child's cultural and social contexts affect his development so deeply. As a child slowly understands the rules, which are laid down by parents, teachers, and peers about what can be done and expectations about what should be done, she integrates these rules as a part of her values so that he will act according to the societal rules.

Language Development

An infant's Language Development progresses, from communicating primarily through crying and laughter, to a series of changes. It allows for the child to understand words and then sentences that allow for fluent conversation. The process through which a child learns to speak grammatically correct sentences is amazing! At first ,the child indicates her need for water, for example, through crying. Then she learns to identify the substance that she thirsts for as "water."A little later she might ask her mom for the water like so: "Mummy water." Later still, at about three years old, she can finally speak in complete sentences: "Mummy, I want to drink water."

Interrelationship among Various Areas of Development

Until now, our discussion of the different areas of development has left the impression that each occurs independently of the others. Development in one area, however, affects development in all the others. As

a child grows and becomes more competent in a variety of physical skills, she enjoys more mobility and explores her surroundings with great ease and enjoys a larger range of activities.

This also helps in Cognitive Development. Language Development helps the child to communicate better. With increased communicative ability, the child successfully interacts with the people around. This interaction has a significant influence on her social development. The increasing complexity of thought and social interaction helps her to understand concepts like right and wrong and good and bad.

As she learns from the experiences of others and gains a greater complexity of thought, she begins to understand the world from a much broader perspective and gains a cultural knowledge of right and wrong. Thus, when observing or talking about the development of the child, Child Psychology studies the entire child in the context of all of these seemingly “disparate” factors. As a complete person, the experiences and skills in one area greatly influence the development of others. As a result, Child Psychologists cannot possibly understand a child until a proper knowledge of her capabilities in all areas comes into view.

Importance of the Study of Child Development

Any student of child development learns how the typical child behaves at different ages and in different societal or social contexts. This knowledge also provides the students with a much better understanding of their own life and of how they developed into the person they are today.

Here are some other benefits of studying Child Psychology:

Universal Patterns of Development

As we've previously outlined, children progress in their development in a particular, linear sequence. When you begin fully appreciate this fact, a curiosity will be born in you that persuade you to observe other children and figure out exactly how old they are and how far in that progression they have come. You may also find more curiosity towards your present-day peers, asking yourself which patterns of development, social contexts, and societal influences have shaped your friend into who they are.

Remember that, even though, your friends currently communicate fluently, every child must first communicate through only sounds and gestures. No infant is born with a natural understanding of any particular language, but they are almost all born with the capacity to learn one. This is why different languages exist throughout the world. All children, regardless of culture, must have the capacity to learn a language, but the particular language they speak depends on their family and culture.

This pattern of emerging abilities exists throughout all areas of development, and is common to all children. No infant possesses the skills of an adult and all children must undergo some universal patterns of development. In most cases, the progression of these skills occurs at particular ages. It can be said that, on average, children learn how to sit when they are six months old, speak their first words around one

year, and think abstractly around the age of 12. Furthermore, every child must learn to sit before having the required skills to crawl. Similarly, no child can properly relate to other people without relating first to her primary caregiver. To go over, each successive stage of a child's development in any area is completely dependent on and always follows the previous one.

By now, you may have noticed that whenever we speak of the sequences of a child's development the phrase 'on average' is included. All children do not develop in the same sequence, but they do so at their own individual pace, which can be represented on a bell curve. This curve provides a reasonable estimate for individual differences and an average estimate for when any child might be expected to acquire a particular ability.

Thus, while we say that children start walking around one year old, other children start at nine months, others at ten months, and others still at 15 months. The estimate that we provide is simply the most common time that children start walking. It also represents the average time that children will acquire that particular capacity. Similarly, when we say that children start thinking abstractly at around 12 years of age, some adolescents may achieve this skill far earlier, and others much later. In truth, even though, there is an age range for each of these abilities to develop, we simply provide the average, expected time if all other things were held constant. A child should only receive special attention or concern when the development of particular skills lags considerably behind this average.

These previously mentioned age ranges that suggest when nearly all children acquire a certain skill are used to identify *norms of development*. These norms help the normal person evaluate and decide whether the child is developing at a normal pace for her age or if there is cause for concern.

Let's take, as an example, a child's acquisition of the skill of walking. Although the average, expected age is 12 months old, the range that represent individual differences in the rate of development allow for learning between 9 and 15 months. Thus, if the child still fails to walk even after 15 months, then the parents have reasonable grounds to start worrying and seek help.

At this point, another clarification must be made about the term *optimal development*. Although many people would consider optimal development as their child learning the most complex skills at the fastest rate, in Child Psychology it simply refers to growth and changes that occur at an expected rate. In other words, the child's development is simply following the expected norms.

Thus, when there are no special problems, a child will develop optimally, following the expected rates in each area. Since cultural and social contexts play a large role in what a child learns, a wide range of skills and abilities will fall within the range of optimal development.

Individual Differences in Development

Although a universal pattern of development exists among all humans, no two children are identical. They vary in their preferences, interests, skills, abilities, and the way they talk, look, and behave are also distinct characteristics. Individual differences, then, can refer to the numerous possible variations in different children's personalities, skills, attitudes, or preferences.

These differences are made most apparently in the realm of a household with the study of siblings. While one child may prefer to remain reserved and comply with all the tasks her parents assign, another might enjoy socializing and resisting her parents' orders at every opportunity. Similarly, some children enjoy singing songs and others completely avoid most music. Some children run fast, others slowly. Some can jump high, others not more than a few inches. Furthermore, the ages at which a child might develop the ability to socialize, run, or jump may vary completely.

Understanding that children possess these individual differences in every area of development and in every stage of that area's development helps us realize that every child developing at her own rate and should not be compared with peers to determine her worth.

On the other hand, a child's aggression toward family and friends should not be simply dismissed as the way that she is. Parents should make an effort to talk to the child and figure out why she believes that her way of behaving is appropriate or acceptable. Since aggression in this context is a learned behaviour, the child may be fully aware that she is using that tactic to get the attention of adults, the lack of which gives her a sense of insecurity. In this case and many other similar instances, the attitude and behaviour of the adults is the root cause of the child's aggressive behaviour.

Understanding Human Behaviour

Thinking about this point, you should reflect on how many of the attitudes and behaviours you have today, as an adult, has roots in your childhood experiences. Throughout your childhood and adolescence, your particular reactions to success and failure, challenges and opportunities, and the way that you related to others instilled a habit pattern that you still live out today.

Thus, if a child felt that she received inadequate love and attention from parents, then, she may, as an adult, still maintains the sense of insecurity that nobody likes her. Similarly, a child who constantly receives harsh scolding from parents for the smallest mistake may grow up into an adult who dreads taking initiative.

Remember, however, that behaviour constantly varies as an adult or child moves from one context to another. Therefore, before arriving at any conclusion regarding a child, it is important to understand the complete situation and to observe her in variety of contexts.

Take the case of Dave, who is four years old and attends a nursery school. In school, Dave is a quiet and shy child. He lacks friends and does not speak a single word in the four hours that he is in school. He does not initiate any activity, prefers to play by himself, and always does what the teacher asks him to do. But, Dave completely changes when he comes home. He narrates the experiences of the day to his mother, plays with his elder brother, and sings all the songs he heard throughout his day.

In this example, categorizing Dave's personality as one constant set of behaviour is clearly impossible. There exists a very big contrast in his behaviour in just these two contexts. If one had observed Dave only in the school situation, one could quickly conclude that he was a shy, obedient child. And although, this characterization of Dave might have seemed true in that context, it would not have completely described the truth of Dave's total personality. In this way, observing Dave at home, at school, and in many other settings is necessary to draw a conclusion.

Application in Day-to-Day Interactions with Children

In your day-to-day interactions with children, it's important to keep both the description of the universal pattern of development and the concept of individual differences in relation to the provided norms in mind. This awareness provides sensitivity to a child's behaviour and a heightened ability to deal with them and help them along in their development.

On the one hand, norms provide a set of averages for the expected age that a child should develop any particular ability. This knowledge helps parents and professionals to ascertain whether the child is experiencing any obstacles to their ongoing development. When the child still fails to develop any given ability far after even the age range suggests, and then a parent can say with confidence that professional assistance is needed.

Additionally, this knowledge of norms and the sequences of development, allows parents to plan for the next stages in the sequence of their child's development. For example, a child who has completed the pre-requisite steps to start fully talking may be continually encouraged by their parents to do so. The parents might start playing language games, singing songs, and asking the child direct questions to illicit verbal answers.

On the other hand, expecting children to perform tasks that they are not ready for can produce feelings of inadequacy and inferiority in the child. Remember, they have no knowledge of these norms or how they are supposed to progress. They are simply living their lives. So, in the previous example, a balance must be struck between playing these language games with the expectation that the child should speak and playing the games because they are fun for the child. The goal is to provide children with a challenge that they can face, which provides some degree of complexity requiring skills slightly more complex than the ones they have mastered, but which are not so difficult that they could neither possibly understand what they are trying to master nor fail to achieve the desired outcome despite repeated attempts.

The most important point discussed in this unit is that development revolves around the concept of possibilities rather than absolute outcomes. One should never assume that a certain development will definitely occur as a result of a child's particular experience. For example, we cannot say with certainty that a child without satisfying relationships in childhood will necessarily find it difficult to relate to others in adulthood. We can, however, state that there is likelihood for this difficulty arising, and we could know its cause if it does arise, but whether it actually happens will depend on many other factors. Such factors include a child's temperament, peer group, and whether she forms any satisfying relationship later on in life.

Remember that an external situation does not automatically dictate the behaviour of the child. Instead, when two children face the same type of ridicule, while one may develop into a shy, withdrawn person, the other could perceive the attacks as a challenge, which would encourage her to prove her worth. Each child, with their individual personality, will use her personal characteristics and past experiences as a guide to figure out how to handle the present situation. Combined, all of this information indicates that a psychologist or parent should never try to predict, with absolute certainty that any type of experience will result in a particular type of development. Rather, an individual will always take different paths in the course of her development.

Erik Erikson's Theory of Development

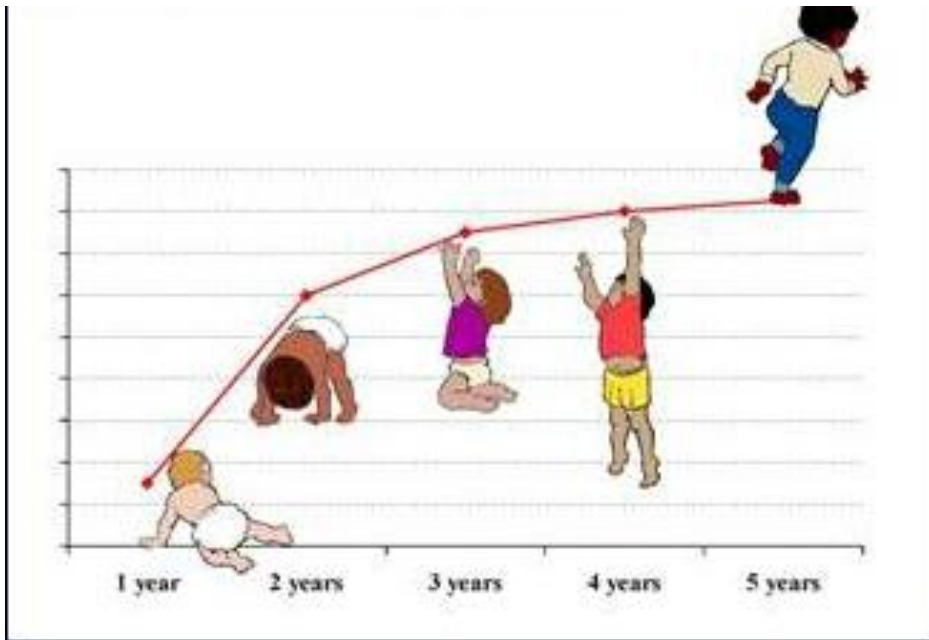
Erik Erikson's Theory of *Psychosocial Development* represents one of the best-known theories of personality in psychology. Much like Sigmund Freud, Erikson believed that personality develops in a series of stages. Unlike Freud's Theory of *Psychosexual Stages*, however, Erikson's theory describes the impact of social experiences across the whole lifespan.

One unique aspect of Erikson's psychosocial stage theory is the progressive development of an *ego identity*. Erikson defines ego identity as the conscious sense of self, or self-concept, that a child develops through social interaction. This idea of identity is constantly changing due to new experiences, different environment, and interesting information we acquire in her daily interactions with others. Think back to Dave's case. At school and at home, his ego identity was completely different.

Erikson also believed children are motivated by a sense of competence in their growing repertoire of learned behaviours and actions. Each stage of Erikson's theory is concerned with a distinct set of competencies in a given area of life. If a child successfully reaches the level of competency in these designated areas, then the child recognizes their own success and feels an *ego strength* or *ego quality*. If the child fails to acquire the competencies for that particular stage, then she is left with an ongoing sense of inadequacy.

Erikson also believed that each stage was fuelled by a conflict, which served as a turning point in development. These conflicts centred on either developing the necessary psychological quality or failing

to develop that quality. As the child's inner instincts are struggling to unconsciously fulfil these demands, the potential for both personal growth and failure are high.



Psychosocial Stage 1 - Trust vs. Mistrust

- Between birth and one year of age, a child either develops a sense of trust or mistrust in their primary caregivers;
- This represents the most fundamental stage in life because it dictates how a child will choose to progress in the future stages;
- A child with successfully developed trust will feel safe and secure exploring the world;
- The problem with caregivers who are inconsistent or emotionally unavailable is that their children feel that their parents' love is either unpredictable or unobtainable, respectively; and
- Failure to develop this fundamental trust results in a child feeling a deep-seated sense of fear that the world is inconsistent and unpredictable.

Psychosocial Stage 2 - Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

- During early childhood, a child needs to develop a sense of personal control;
- Similar to Freud, Erikson believed that potty training played a vital role in this process;
- Erikson reasoned, differently from Freud, that, as a child learns to control her bodily functions, she feels a sense of control over her body and strong enough to assert her own independence;
- Other important events in this particular process include gaining more control over food choices, toy preferences, and clothing selection; and

- Children, who successfully complete this stage, feel secure and confident, while those who do not, are left with a sense of inadequacy and self-doubt.

Psychosocial Stage 3 - Initiative vs. Guilt

- During the preschool years, children begin to assert their personal power through the games they play with peers and their social interactions more broadly.
- Children, who are successful at this stage, feel capable about their abilities to lead others. Those who fail are left with a sense of guilt, self-doubt, and lack of initiative.

Psychosocial Stage 4 - Industry vs. Inferiority

- This stage covers the early school years from approximately 5 – to – 11 years old;
- Through social interactions, children begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments and abilities; and
- Parents and teachers who encourage and commend their children help them develop a feeling of competence and belief in their skills. Those who receive little - or - no encouragement from parents, teachers, or peers will doubt their abilities.

Psychosocial Stage 5 - Identity vs. Confusion

- During adolescence, children explore their independence and develop a sense of self.
- Those who receive proper encouragement and reinforcement, through their personal exploration, will emerge from this stage with a strong sense of self and a feeling of independence and control. Those, who remain unsure of their beliefs and desires, will feel insecure and confused about themselves and the future.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Introducing Child Psychology: A Practical Guide, (2011), By Kairen Cullen*
- ✓ *Child Psychology: A Very Short Introduction, (2014), By Usha Goswami*
- ✓ *An Introduction to Child Development, (2009), By Thomas Keenan, Subhadra Evans*