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Child Development

Over the years, people who study children have created theories to explain how children develop. While these theorists realize that every child is special and grows in his or her unique way, they also have recognized that there are general patterns children tend to follow as they grow up, and they have documented these patterns in their theories. This article will outline the various areas, or channels, of child development that have been recognized, to explain how children tend to develop through each of these channels over time, and to state in simple language the observations of the child development field's most important theorists.

First, it is important to understand that children have to grow and develop in many different areas in order to become healthy, happy, productive members of adult society. There are four main areas or channels in which children grow: physical, psychological and cognitive, social and emotional, and sexuality and gender identity.

First, the physical channel is most obvious. Children's bodies grow in height and weight over the years and change appearance during puberty. Children also develop certain physical abilities during their progression towards adulthood, including crawling, walking, running and (possibly) writing or shooting a basketball.

Secondly, children also develop psychologically and cognitively as their brains absorb more information and they learn how to use that information. Literally, children have to learn how to think on purpose and to process or organize all the information that comes to them from the environment. They must learn how to solve problems, to talk, and to complete mental tasks such as remembering telephone numbers or using computers.

Thirdly, children grow socially and emotionally. They learn how to interact, play, work, and live with other people such as family, friends, teachers, and employers. They learn how to understand both their own feelings and others' emotions. They also learn ways of dealing with strong emotions. In order to function well as independent adults, children must develop a sense of self-esteem as they go through the long process of figuring out what shape their identity, or who they are, will take. They develop a sense of morality as they learn the difference between right and wrong.

Finally, children have to develop sexually and form a gender identity. This developmental channel is unique because it spans developments across the other physical, psychological, and social channels. Early on, children learn how their bodies work and look and what it means to be a boy or a girl; they learn how boys and girls are different. As they grow older and enter adolescence and puberty, they continue to learn how their bodies work sexually and how to responsibly handle their sexuality so as to balance their sexual desires and appropriate behavior. They continue to decide for themselves what it means to be masculine or feminine throughout their lifespan.

Different theorists have come to different conclusions concerning how exactly children develop across the various developmental channels. Some theorists believe that children develop smoothly and continuously, but other theorists believe that children develop more discretely in a series of stages, each of which is fairly stable.

Theorists who believe children grow continuously believe that kids constantly add new lessons and skills on top of old lessons and skills as they get older. They believe that children grow at a steady, uniform speed. Even though parents can't see it with their eyes, children are growing all the time right in

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front of them. Their bodies make new cells. Their minds learn new skills as they play and interact with other people every day.

On the other hand, theorists who believe children grow discontinuously believe children grow in stages as they seem to develop chunks of abilities and to experience events at certain times in life. To some parents, it may seem that their children learn to do things all of the sudden, like when a baby goes from only being able to crawl to being able to toddle around on two feet almost over night. Or, parents of young teenagers may say that they were amazed how their children went from thinking that kids of the opposite sex had "cooties" to constantly daydreaming about them. It seems as if these kids are growing lots in spurts at special times and then are not growing so fast for a while in between the spurts.

Both camps, continuous development and staged development, are correct in its own way, of course. While it is true that development is a continuous process that never stops, it is also true that there are stages to growth and that developments unfold at predictable times across the life span. Often, developmental stages are defined by milestones. A milestone is a sort of marker that tells you where you are while traveling. The term is drawn from literal stone markers that were used to mark the passage of each mile on early roads. Today, the term milestone is used more figuratively, to indicate that a developmental stage has been achieved. Often, special milestones mark children's accomplishments, such as walking in infancy and entering school in early childhood, and these milestones can help mark children's movement inside and between developmental stages.

Children build new skills and developments on top of old skills and developments from stage to stage; each stage is cumulative. A child is able to run bases in a game of baseball in the middle childhood phase because she was first able to walk near the end of her infancy stage.

Entry and exit from the various developmental stages tends to occur at particular ages. Often, a child's stage of development can be figured out by a child's age because children generally experience the same stages at the same ages. However a child's age only provides a clue as to his stage; it does not determine it. Every child develops at his or her own speed. It is the tasks and skills children master that truly identify what stage they are in. Because of this, different children of the same age can be expected to be at different developmental stages.