

Blog 1 - Can I help you with that?



(PowburnShow, 2024)

As parents, friends, teachers, we all want to help children reach their potential and we do everything we can to help support this. We spend countless hours talking, explaining, and teaching them new skills from the moment they are born, until the time comes, they can share their knowledge.

Until they are ready for this, it's down to me, and you, to provide the knowledge and experiences to children and young people to promote their development with a person-centred approach.

If you want to be involved in helping children learn, continue reading to find out how Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) believed that children's cognitive development, is down to us!

If you haven't heard of his influential method, known as the sociocultural theory, click the link for a short video to get you started. [Vygotsky in 60 seconds \(youtube.com\)](#) (TeachKloud, 2018)



Whilst there are many ways to support children's development, Vygotsky believed it couldn't be done without the help of others, emphasising the importance of social interaction in all his methods.

In The Zone

The 'zone of proximal development' is a widely used phrase to describe the difference between a child's ability to problem solve independently, and what they can achieve with the support of an adult, or child with a greater understanding. (McLeod, S. 2023) therefore, using the knowledge and experiences of others to enhance their own development

Although the official term 'scaffolding' was never used by Vygotsky, (McLeod, S. 2023) the process is similar. As you can see listed below, there are three stages a child experiences;

1. Level of potential development
2. Zone of proximal development
3. Level of actual development

It is the learning that takes place within the zone of proximal development that a child's knowledge increases until they are able to complete the task independently. This is when the support of a person with greater knowledge, known as a 'more knowledgeable other' (MKO) will be involved in developing the child's current understanding to expand their knowledge. The importance of an MKO is essential in Vygotsky's theory.

The MKO assists or scaffolds the learning experience to help the learner function within their ZPD. Through this guidance, the learner can tackle and master tasks they couldn't accomplish independently. (McLeod, S. 2023)

This is something that occurs daily in educational settings, one recent example involved a child who was unable to create lava from her volcano. She showed a willingness to learn, and after several attempts was unable to achieve her desired outcome. As the MKO I was able to use my skills to show her the process, step by step, including visual instructions. The other children became involved, explaining how they had created 'a volcano eruption' using their ingredients. As the MKO I was able to use my experience throughout the scaffolding process with a positive outcome for the child who was then able to independently follow the instructions, proudly showing her peers.



The possibilities are endless with Vygotsky's theory. It is commonly used in all aspects of children's learning and development, not only provided by teachers, friends and family can adopt this approach for a collaborative approach as seen above. Below is an example of how this theory has been used to develop a child's reading, at an age-appropriate level.

'a kindergartner who is learning how to read and write. He knows all the letters of the alphabet, but he can't yet read or write words. No matter how much guidance he was given, he could never read a novel on his own at this point, but with a teacher's help, he can learn how to read and write short words like "at," "boy" and "dog" because this skill is within his ZPD. It would have taken him much longer to learn this skill on his own, but it's still simple enough that he can understand it if he has someone to explain it to him.' (Sarikas C. 2023)

The Child at the Centre

The focus of Vygotsky's work was providing a person - centred approach to enhance each child's cognitive development through the use of social interaction. He strongly believed that language and social interactions are the most influential component that not only promotes

Kirstin Jones
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cognitive development but is significant to a child's thoughts and perceptions of the world around them.

Could this approach be the right one?



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Blog 2 - I can do it myself!



Whilst you've read about Vygotsky's (1896-1934) social constructivist theory, where children's cognitive development thrives on social interaction and the help of others, not every child is the same.

For the child you have in mind, the work of Jean Piaget (1896-1980) might be better suited. His theory on constructivism suggests that knowledge is developed through an individual's experiences.

'[Constructivism](#) is based on the idea that people actively construct or make their own knowledge, and that reality is determined by your experiences as a learner. Basically, learners use their previous knowledge as a foundation and build on it with new things that they learn. So everyone's individual experiences make their learning unique to them.' (WGU, 2020)

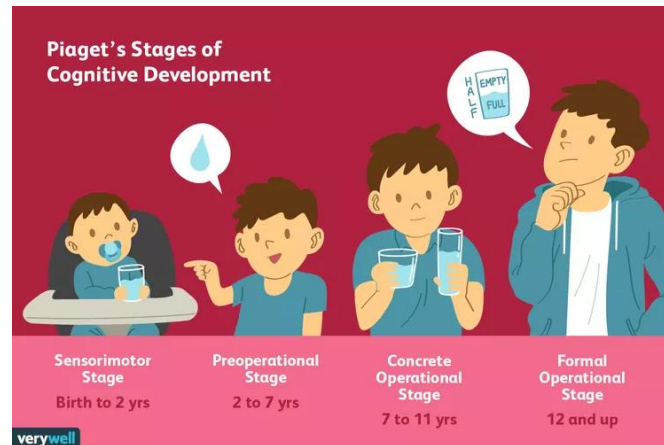
If this sounds like the one you've been searching for then let's start at the beginning...

Jean Piaget (1896-1980)

Jean Piaget was a Swiss psychologist with an interest in children's cognitive development. To many, he is known as one of the most influential theorists (Bates, B. 2019, P.50). He believed that children are actively involved in their own development, often referring to them as scientists, experimenting and observing to make sense of the world around them, enhancing their knowledge and creativity.

While Piaget's methods have influenced current practice and our understanding of children's development, his research was carried out solely within his own family, which some believe limited his research and could not promote the inclusive practice we aim to achieve today.

However, when studying the development of his family, he created a range of methods that provide a better understanding of his findings, including, what is known as, Piaget's stages of cognitive development, pictured below;



(Seong, J. 2023)

Stages Not Ages

As you can see Piaget categorised cognitive development into 4 stages, each containing a specific outcome. While ages are included, it is important to note that Piaget stated they act only as a guide and may not be achieved by the recommended age, if at all as each child is unique and individual. (maybe quote this)

With each stage, a specific outcome is necessary for the child to achieve in order to progress. For a better understanding, listed below you can see some developmental changes and characteristics that can be seen during the first, sensorimotor stage:

- 'Know the world through movements and sensations
- Learn about the world through basic actions such as sucking, grasping, looking, and listening
- Learn that things continue to exist even when they cannot be seen ([object permanence](#))
- Realize that they are separate beings from the people and objects around them
- Realize that their actions can cause things to happen in the world around them'(Cherry, K. 2023)



As children progress and mature their abilities improve and they are able to move onto the next stage, each with a different outcome developing skills such as; imagination, reasoning, organisation, and abstract thinking, on a range of topics, real or hypothetical. If you'd like to find out more about Piaget's stages of cognitive development visit: [Piaget stages of](#)

[development: The 4 stages and tips for each \(medicalnewstoday.com\)](#) (Sherrell, Z. 2024)

Making Memories

Closely linked as a part of Piaget's theory is a term he called 'schemas'. Described as memories stored in the brain created from each unique experience, schemas are essential in helping us understand and make sense of the world. (Cherry, K. 2023)



Schemas are essential, they are the foundation of how we think, act and behave towards others and ourselves. As children develop schemas are created, or adjusted when new information is processed and stored, allowing them to gain an understanding of themselves and the world. We form multiple types of schemas to help us understand the small things, like picking up a pen, to the bigger decisions we make, our friendships, job choices, political opinions. The process begins with a state of equilibrium, when a child has the desire to learn new information. When new skills are developed with no prior knowledge, new schemas are created, this is known as accommodation. If additional information is gained coinciding with previous schemas the assimilation process occurs.

Whilst schemas are imperative, they can contribute negatively to thoughts, behaviours, and decisions, such as stereotypes or prejudice. These are often developed through repeating negative behaviours, creating unwanted schemas in the same way positive schemas are developed.

Kirstin Jones
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Implementing Piaget's methods can provide us, as educators, a greater understanding of how children develop their cognitive abilities considering their biological development, as he believed they are closely linked and will only be achieved at the child's pace. (Jordan and Carlile and Stack, 2008, P.119) Such methods have been carefully considered and carried out in many educational settings by encouraging children to learn through play, make decisions independently, and explore their surroundings through meaningful experiences.

So, are you ready to give Piaget's constructivist theory a try?



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Blog 3 - Making the right choice!



Whilst there are many different theorists, each with their own methods and opinions relating to children's cognitive development, it is important to make an informed decision. Knowing the child is beneficial, understanding their wants and needs is essential to discovering the right approach. Are you unsure which path to take? To help you decide, let's narrow it down.

Cognitive development theories can be divided into 3 categories;

1. Behaviourism
2. Constructivism
3. Sociocultural constructivism

With each one adopting a different method it can be a challenge to know which approach is best suited to the child. The first, behaviourism, is a psychological approach that involves reinforcing positive behaviours through a method known as conditioning, in an attempt to remove unwanted behaviour. If you think this might be the approach you're looking for visit [Behaviorism In Psychology \(simplypsychology.org\)](https://www.simplypsychology.org/behaviorism) (McLeod, S. 2023) for more information.

But if you think constructivism or sociocultural constructivism might be the one for you then look no further...

Who is Piaget?

If you want to know more about constructivism or sociocultural constructivism, then look no further while we consider the work of Vygotsky and Piaget and their influences on cognitive development. Jean Piaget's constructivist theory 'is a learning theory that emphasizes the active role of learners in building their own understanding.' (McLeod, S. 2023)



Piaget worked to develop 4 stages of cognitive development, believing that knowledge is constructed through the memories we create. As humans, we are intrinsically motivated, we do not require external encouragement to learn as we are biologically influenced to develop our interests as we progress through each stage.

Explaining Vygotsky

A differing opinion is the one of lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), who believed in the importance of scaffolding learners through social interaction to enhance development in his sociocultural theory. His methods included the use of a 'more knowledgeable other' to share their skills. When the child is in the 'zone of proximal development' their understanding increases and new abilities are formed, with a goal that the child is able to achieve the task independently when support is removed.

Making the decision on which approach to adopt is difficult, its important, as educators to research all the facts to create the best outcome for the child. When doing that, we consider all aspects, right? How many times have you looked at the pros and cons? Or, looked deeper for the bad reviews? It's something we all do, but a child's education isn't like buying a jumper you can return, we need to make sure we're doing the best we can for every child. So, let's compare, Piaget vs Vygotsky! Who will be your winner?



The Final Decision

Both Piaget and Vygotsky influence current development with their theoretical approaches, this isn't the only similarity, they both believed that children travel through stages of development, and as information is received children are able to organise their knowledge as it is acquired. Another concept they strongly believed in, was the importance of play in all aspects of development. Piaget's theory 'reinforces the importance of stimulating play environments that allow children to follow their own interests.' (Martin, E. 2021) Whilst Vygotsky agreed, he included the importance of play in building relationships and developing social skills.

With similarities comes differences, the biggest one involving the social influences. Piaget's method didn't include the importance of other until the later stages of childhood, with the belief that intellectual development firstly develops through environmental interactions and the presence of others wasn't initially required, whereas Vygotsky believed that social development was vital from birth and the more social relationships a child builds the more knowledge and language they acquire.

All influential theorists have faced criticism. Differing opinions provide open judgment, Piaget and Vygotsky's theories have been no different. Piaget carried out all observations on his family, limiting his research, whilst Vygotsky on the other hand, flaws were found in his person-centred approach. When supporting children with complex needs it is believed that this approach is not viable, although this might have been different if he was able to complete his research, unfortunately, he passed away at 37 years old.

Each theorist has a range of methods underpinning current practice that provides the basis for excellent support in educational settings, not only from teachers but peer interaction is influential in developing children's intellectual and social skills. Vygotsky's methods regarding social interaction is something included in all education settings, that doesn't

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excuse the work of Piaget, whose influence allows children the opportunity and freedom to make decisions, explore and learn independently which is important in promoting creativity and developing personalities. In my opinion, it's a difficult choice to make, but the final decision is made based on the child, as an individual. Ultimately, taking the time to observe the child and build a relationship will help you gain a better understanding of the most suitable approach.



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Blog 4 - Now you know, where do you go?



If you find yourself here, at the final blog, filled with knowledge and wondering where to start...

I've got you covered, putting theory into practice can be a challenge, and often hearing experiences from others can help, so I'm here to share a few of my favourite moments.

Although they may seem small, it's the little moments that make a big difference. As you progress with your chosen method, you can create your own special moments that make you proud of the difference you make.



Jean Piaget (1896-1980)

Piaget was dedicated to understanding children's cognitive development. His evidence was collected through observations carried out on his family. While this is a controversial topic, Piaget's work has hugely influenced educational settings.

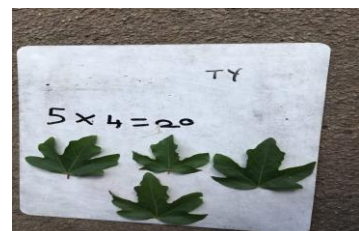
Piaget's methods replaced traditional teaching styles with a more hands-on approach that encourages children to be actively involved in their own learning experiences. The role of the teacher when following Piaget's approach is to provide exciting educational opportunities that spark children's interests, allowing them to explore their environment and learn from their experiences.

As adults, we are continuously discovering new ways to promote independence and support children's learning. In my experience, the benefits for children, particularly during play, positively influences development. One example of how this was achieved in my setting, was by creating a choosing board and dividing activities into separate areas. Although the purpose was to promote independent choices and calm, quiet spaces to accommodate the needs of a child who was overwhelmed during this time, the results were successful for all children. During 'choosing time' I created a number of indoor and outdoor activities in designated areas. Each child would choose where they would like to play using the choosing board, designed with words and symbols to be inclusive of each child's abilities. The outcome was successful as each child was provided with equal opportunities to independently make decisions, explore their interests, and learn from their environment in a place where they were able to better focus their attention. This links to Piaget's methods as it promotes independence at each child's developmental stage when choosing their activity with meaningful experiences for each child available to develop their knowledge and skills.

Piaget believed it was important to 'congratulate your learners on their efforts as well as their achievements' (Bates, B. 2018, P.51) personally, I couldn't agree more. Mistakes are not failures; they are the motivation to continue. Often during these times, the biggest discoveries are made, with guidance from supporting adults when required. Previously, when supporting a child with additional needs in a mainstream setting who was finding it difficult to understand multiplication. I adapted her activities to provide a hands-on approach, explaining the process during each activity with visual resources including number lines, whiteboards, and multiplication squares. We used repetition to create schemas as she developed an understanding of multiplication through indoor and outdoor activities similar to those pictured below.



(Morris, 2021)



One of Piaget's biggest influences on current practice is the importance of meaningful outdoor experiences that provide learning opportunities. 'Forest School allows for constructivist learning to take place in which the children construct understanding and meaning' (Gibson, L. 2021) Opportunities including forest schools and the Reggio Emilia approach encourages the freedom to express themselves, building confidence while developing skills for life, such as problem solving and creativity through adventurous activities.



Vygotsky (1896-1934)

If Vygotsky's sociocultural approach is the one you're considering and would like to know more, then continue reading for an insight into my experiences using this approach.

Following Vygotsky's method in educational settings provides an approach that involves social interaction to progress through each developmental stage. Vygotsky believed that through scaffolding from a more knowledgeable other, children would achieve skills beyond their current developmental level.

When supporting children with additional learning needs, further support can be required in some areas. Vygotsky's scaffolding method can be beneficial during these times to ensure each child is provided with the support to develop their skills and reach their potential. A strategy used daily for a child I work closely with, known as the 'TEACHH' approach involves scaffolding to provide him with the knowledge and skills to complete the activity independently. Each day providing support in completing 3 tasks, each designed specifically

to meet his needs and tailored to his interests. As his skills improve, support is slowly withdrawn with the intention that he is able to complete each activity independently.

Vygotsky's methods aren't limited to adult intervention, support can be provided from peers. Having supported children in a number of settings, this is something I have witnessed numerous times. Children are often very supportive and enjoy using their knowledge to teach others. Personally, it's heartwarming to see children supporting each other. For some children, large groups can be a daunting experience. To benefit from the support of their peers, working in pairs can be the place to start, and the outcome was positive for a young boy who was having difficulty learning to read. Each day he would use a 5-minute timer and read to his 'book buddy' who was available to listen and offer help when needed. Once the timer had finished, they could choose how to spend the remaining time, often choosing to reenact the story with finger puppets. Both children's confidence increased, and his reading improved dramatically during this time. The child was incredibly proud that he had reached his goal and was able to read a bedtime story to his younger sister.

Vygotsky's theory, although ultimately benefiting children, is used to support adults learning. When a new member of staff is employed, myself included, Vygotsky's scaffolding approach is provided. A member of staff with experience, acts as a more knowledgeable other to provide essential skills during the training period. Their knowledge and experiences are shared and withdrawn once they are ready to complete their role independently.

Both theories are widely influential in educational settings, having experience of each, personally I have seen the most benefits using Vygotsky's sociocultural theory as the social impact provides more visible results as observations show the use of others in problem solving whereas Piaget's methods encourage children to build confidence through exploration to develop these skills independently. Leave a comment below with your opinion!

Kirstin Jones
2214408



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