

Theories of child development

Key theorists

- Use the buttons below to navigate your way through some of the key theorists in the field of child development.
- For each theorist you are given the key words/terminology associated with their ideas.

Gesell

Freud

Erikson

Skinner

Bandura

Vygotsky

Piaget

Theories of child development

Arnold Gesell - 1880-1961

Main points

Development genetically determined by universal "maturation patterns" which occur in a predictable sequence.

Key words

Biological maturation; milestones; normative development; cephalo-caudal; proximo-distal; nativist (nature) language development; biological/genetic determinism.



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Nature



Nurture

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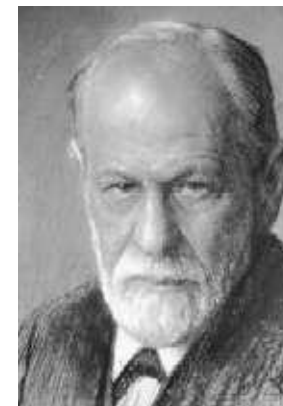
Sigmund Freud - 1857-1959

Main points

Experiences in early childhood influence later development. Assumes sexual factors are major factors, even in early childhood.

Key words

Psychodynamic; psychosexual; libido; oral stage; anal stage; phallic stage; latency stage; genital stage; id; ego; super-ego; Electra complex; Oedipal complex; conscious; unconscious; psychoanalysis



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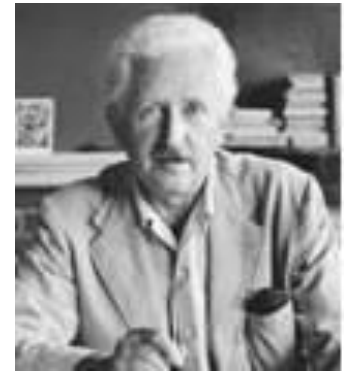
Erik Erikson - 1902-1994

Main points

Develops beyond Freud's ideas. More stages (8) and more influence of environmental factors.

Key words

Psychodynamic; psychosexual; psychosocial; 8 development stages; identity; crises/dilemmas



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B.F. Skinner - 1904-1990

Main points

Reinforcement and punishment moulds behaviour. Children are conditioned by their experiences.

Key words

Operant conditioning; positive/negative reinforcement; consequence; reward; punishment; respondents; operants; social learning theory; behavioural learning theory



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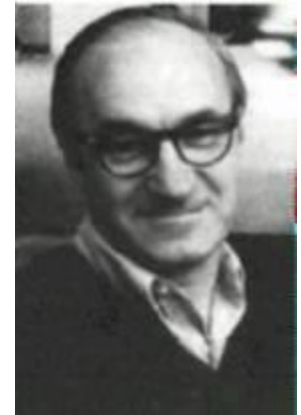
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Alfred Bandura - 1925-current

Main points

Learning takes place by imitation. This differs from Skinner's "conditioning" because there is more emphasis on inner motivational factors.



Key words

Imitation; copying; modelling; role models; reinforcement; social learning theory; observational theory (social cognitive theory); Bobo doll experiment.

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Lev Vygotsky - 1896-1934

Main points

Development is primarily driven by language, social context and adult guidance.

Key words

Zone of proximal development; zone of actual development; social constructivist; social constructivism; social interaction; language; internalisation; play; social context; cognition; constructivism



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Jean Piaget - 1896-1980

Main points

Development takes place in distinct stages of cognitive development. Adults influence but the child is building their own thinking systems.

Key words

Cognitive learning theory; assimilate; symbolism; accomodate; egocentric; decentre; conservatism; active learners; schemata; sensory-motor; stages; pre-operational; animism; moral realism; concrete operations; formal operations



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More on Gesell



Gesell's classic study involved twin girls, both given training for motor skills but one given training for longer than the other. There was no measurable difference in the age at which either child acquired the skills, suggesting that development had happened in a genetically programmed way, irrespective of the training given. A child learns to whether or not an adult teaches him/her, suggesting physical development at least is largely pre-programmed.



By studying thousands of children over many years, Gesell came up with "milestones of development" - stages by which normal children can accomplish different tasks. These are still used today.



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More on Freud

Freud's work was heavily criticised for lack of substantial evidence. He regarded basic sexual instincts as being the driving force behind virtually all behaviour. He regarded the development of personality as being the balance between the Id, the Ego and the SuperEgo. The Id strives for unrealistic gratification of basic desires, the SuperEgo strives for unrealistic moral responsibility and conscience while the Ego acts to compromise these two opposing forces.

There are many unproven aspects to Freud's work, for example Freud theorised that characteristics like generosity or possessiveness were related to childhood factors like parental attitudes to toilet training.

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Erikson's stages of personality development

Freud's stages of personality development

Stage	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Oral	Basic trust vs. mistrust							
Anal		Autonomy vs. shame, doubt						
Phallic			Initiative vs. guilt					
Latency				Industry vs. inferiority				
Genital					Identity vs. role confusion			
Young adulthood						Intimacy vs. isolation		
Adulthood							Generativity vs. stagnation	
Maturity								Ego integrity vs. despair

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More on Skinner

Skinner maintained that learning occurred as a result of the organism responding to, or operating on, its environment, and coined the term operant conditioning to describe this phenomenon. He did extensive research with animals, notably rats and pigeons, and invented the famous Skinner box, in which a rat learns to press a lever in order to obtain food.



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More on Bandura

Bandura's theory known as "Social Learning Theory" has been renamed "Social Cognitive Theory" to accommodate later developments of the theory. Bandura is seen by many as a cognitive psychologist because of his focus on motivational factors and self-regulatory mechanisms that contribute to a person's behavior, rather than just environmental factors. This focus on cognition is what differentiates social cognitive theory from Skinner's purely behavioristic viewpoint.

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More on Vygotsky

Lev Vygotski was a Russian psychologist who died prematurely. His most productive years were at the Institute of Psychology in Moscow (1924–34), where he developed ideas on cognitive development, particularly the relationship between language and thinking. His writings emphasised the roles of historical, cultural, and social factors in cognition and argued that language was the most important symbolic tool provided by society..



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More on Piaget

Jean Piaget is known for his research in developmental psychology. He studied under C. G. Jung and Eugen Bleuler. He was involved in the administration of intelligence tests to children and became interested in the types of mistakes children of various ages were likely to make. Piaget began to study the reasoning processes of children at various ages. Piaget theorized that cognitive development proceeds in four genetically determined stages that always follow the same sequential order.

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