

Learning Theories in Childhood



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BANDURA, BRONFENBRENNER AND SOCIAL LEARNING

This chapter aims to:

- explore the work of Albert Bandura and how it contributes to our understanding of social learning
- examine the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner in relation to that of Bandura
- explore how Bandura and Bronfenbrenner's theoretical perspectives can help our understanding of children's learning and social development.



INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the work of two influential theorists who have attempted to explain the nature of social learning. It begins with the work of Albert Bandura before drawing upon the more recent views of Urie Bronfenbrenner. Bandura believed that social factors were central to the learning and development of the individual and, in the 1970s, he introduced his *social learning theory* (Bandura, 1977). In doing so, he moved significantly from some of his contemporaries who espoused a more purely behaviourist approach. For Bandura, learning did not always involve changes in behaviour and children could, for example, observe others without their observations necessarily leading to a change in their own behaviour. Unlike the early behaviourists, he suggested that motivation played a significant role in the link between children observing behaviours and subsequent changes in their own behaviour. Bandura saw motivation, therefore, as a key factor in the development and learning of young children.

Bronfenbrenner's theory differs from that of Bandura in a number of ways. In particular, he viewed factors in the child's wider social, political and economic environment as being of much greater importance than Bandura and other theorists working in the field of child development. Unlike Bandura, Bronfenbrenner's

theory has at its core the view that a child's own biology is a key factor influencing their development. His theory, therefore, can be best understood as the interrelationship of children with the environments in which they live.

A question that continues to exercise many professionals is why so many children in modern societies succeed when so many others fail. Why, despite years of formal education, do significant numbers of children fail to develop their potential and live lives characterized by lack of ambition, low self-esteem and disaffection whilst others gain material success and status and develop confidence in their own abilities? What factors in their early years cause one child's life to differ so much from another's? The newspaper columnist James Chapman, writing in a British newspaper, *The Daily Mail* (18 April 2011), recently commented:

Some 46 per cent of children are born to unmarried mothers, according to research by the Centre for Social Justice. The think-tank said a child growing up in a one-parent family is 75 per cent more likely to fail at school, 70 per cent more likely to become a drug addict, 50 per cent more likely to have an alcohol problem and 35 per cent more likely to be unemployed as an adult. (p. 6)

Such stark statistics need to be treated with considerable caution. Many children grow up in lone-parent families and are happy and successful. However, such newspaper articles do reflect a concern amongst some that many young children are failing to have access to important life chances that will enable them, as they grow older, to develop their potential (Buckingham, 2000). The following two cases present a number of issues common to many children and offer a focus for understanding the work of Bandura and Bronfenbrenner. Compare the examples below.

Example

- 1 Tracey, aged 6, is described by her teacher as, 'a lively little girl who can try very hard'. She lives with her mother and two older step-brothers. Tracey's mother has just begun a relationship with a man she met recently. He is aggressive and verbally abusive and both she and her brother Matthew, aged 3, become frightened when he gets angry. Matthew attends playgroup and is beginning to imitate the aggressive behaviours of his mother's new partner. Tracey's mother is unemployed. Tracey's recent school report described her reading as very poor and noted that she could not say the alphabet in sequence. Tracey is also described by her teacher as, 'not good at forming friendships' and as 'always seeking attention from the Learning Support Assistant'. When assessed by an educational psychologist following concerns about progress and occasional aggressive behaviour, she recorded low scores on vocabulary and verbal comprehension tests. Of note, however, were Tracey's abilities in areas of reasoning, which fell within the superior range, suggesting that she was very able but with specific learning difficulties compounded by delayed

language development, impoverished vocabulary and poorly developed strategies for sustaining attention.

- 2 Ben, aged 6, is described by his teacher as 'articulate, socially skilled and exceptionally bright'. He lives at home with his parents, two older brothers and Gemma, his sister, who is aged 2. Both his parents have benefited from university education and hold professional positions where they earn well and have a wide circle of friends, all of whom work as highly paid professionals. Ben's parents are patient with him and take time to explain to him why they become upset when he behaves in ways that they disapprove of. Though only 6 years of age, Ben has already travelled widely and is used to being in the company of successful, motivated and articulate adults. Ben was able to read simple books at the end of his first year of schooling and his reading and spelling ages are currently well in advance of his chronological age – his reading age was recently measured as 8 years and 6 months, and his spelling age as 7 years and 6 months. His vocabulary is considered by his teacher to be 'very advanced'. Ben is sociable and has many friendship groups.

Our understanding of Tracey and Ben's learning, and their social and emotional development, can be greatly enhanced by drawing upon the theoretical perspectives offered by Bandura and Bronfenbrenner. First, however, it is important to examine the key elements of Bandura's social learning theory.

ALBERT BANDURA

Albert Bandura (born 1925)

Albert Bandura was born in 1925 in Canada and is perhaps best known for his *social learning theory*, and the Bobo doll experiment conducted in 1961. In this experiment, Bandura filmed a woman aggressively hitting a large toy doll known as a Bobo doll. Bandura then showed this film to a group of young children who were given the opportunity to play in a separate room which contained a Bobo doll. These children then began to hit the doll as they had observed the woman doing. In this regard, they were imitating the aggressive behaviour of the woman. Of interest was the fact that the children were not being rewarded for hitting the doll. They were in fact engaging in behaviours they had observed but that had not been reinforced. Learning was, therefore, taking place, not as behaviourists of the time would have argued, as a result of reinforcement, but as a result of observation. Bandura believed that the stimulus-response explanation of learning proposed by the early behaviourists was overly simplistic and did not go far enough in explaining human behaviour and emotions.

Whilst Bandura acknowledged that classical and operant conditioning (see Chapter 3) could go some way in explaining social learning, he also argued that there were two other factors that were of great importance, namely *imitation* and *identification*.

Bandura suggested that both of these factors provided for accelerated social learning in children. With the first of these, children imitate the behaviours of others whilst, with the second, new learning is assimilated into existing concepts that have already been internalized by the child. In this way, Bandura argued, whole patterns of behaving become internalized by children such that they then act upon new situations in the way they think that the adults from whom they have modelled their behaviour would behave. In the case of Tracey and Ben, they have internalized quite different patterns of behaviour that have been modelled by the adults in their families and by significant others they have come into contact with during those crucial pre-school years, and their first years of schooling. Tracey's younger brother Matthew will also have learned from observing the behaviours that Tracey models, which may be characterized at times by anxiety and anger. On the other hand, Gemma, Ben's younger sister, will have observed Ben as being confident and enthusiastic and socially skilled. She will also have benefited from listening to Ben's more sophisticated use of language and from observing non-verbal communication such as his mannerisms and listening skills that he employs when he presents himself in social situations. In this way, her social learning is very different to that of Matthew.

Of course, it was recognized by Bandura that for positive and meaningful learning to take place, the behaviours of those adults being imitated by children need to be appropriate. Take the case of Tracey's younger brother, Matthew, who regularly witnesses his mother's partner being physically and verbally aggressive towards his mother. When Matthew observes arguments between his mother and her new partner, he often feels that he is to blame and that their arguments are due to his own behaviours. He may well even come to internalize a perception of himself as being a 'bad' child. This is unlikely to happen in the case of Gemma, Ben's younger sister, who will almost certainly come to internalize a view of herself as being capable and successful, and loved, as she observes the behaviours of others around her as being wholly appropriate, positive and purposeful. Unlike Matthew, Gemma is almost certain to receive regular positive feedback from her parents and older brothers, which will serve to reinforce those behaviours that her parents desire of her such as attentiveness, confidence and independence. In this way, these aspects of her personality and the manner in which she presents herself in social situations will have been imitated and identified with – in other words, they have become learned. Here, we can make reference to the approaches found in Steiner Waldorf settings. Miller and Pound have commented:

Steiner practitioners observe that young children are nurtured by the security of rhythm and repetition – within which their inherent skills and abilities can flourish ... Having well thought through and repeated routines builds habits that are useful (properly washed hands), respectful (creating a peaceful mood at the table) and comforting ('this is how we always do it here'). (2011, p. 92)

Whilst Tracey and Matthew, unlike Ben and Gemma, fail to have the security of rhythm and repetition in their home life, where most of their everyday experiences are characterized by chaos and inconsistency with, for example, irregular meals and bedtimes, they can, however, gain from feelings of security and nurturing in their primary school and playgroup, respectively.

According to Bandura's social learning theory, Matthew may come to imitate the aggressive behaviours of his mother's new partner and these may, in turn, be played out at his playgroup when he is with other children. It is possible that Matthew will identify with his mother's partner and may come to be viewed by others at his playgroup as an aggressive child, and he may start to live up to this perception by others. Bandura's social learning theory would suggest that Matthew is beginning to acquire a type of exterior, which has been learned through observing and imitating the behaviours of his mother's partner. Such was the case with the young children in the Bobo doll experiment referred to earlier, which Bandura used to emphasize how young children will observe and imitate the behaviours of others. It is an interesting, and worrying, aspect of human social and emotional development that individuals may, in stressful situations, 'identify with the aggressor' simply as a means of defending themselves.

Bandura suggested that children not only observe physical behaviours but that they also observe the verbal behaviours of others, which includes expectations that others make of them (Linden, 2005). He suggested that young children observe adults as they offer verbal narratives and descriptions of events and as they use language and gesture to communicate their ideas, thoughts, instructions, questions, and so on. Given that Ben is frequently in the company of articulate and successful adults, it is certain that he will learn many positive aspects of behaving and interacting with others through observing their behaviours, as well as the responses they receive, which invariably will be characterized by the attentive and interested responses of others. It is worth noting that Bandura also proposed a type of symbolic modelling where children engage in imitation and identification of individuals who are not real but fictional, such as the type of characters found in fairy tales and children's stories. The ever-increasing number of visual stories and cartoons found in children's television, the cinema and computer games can be included within this type of symbolic modelling.

A further key element of Bandura's theory, which is directly relevant to practitioners working with young children, is that of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Having a better knowledge and understanding of self-efficacy is very important for professionals working with young children in educational and care settings. Bandura saw self-efficacy as a child's belief in their abilities to do well and to succeed in certain situations, and as their capacity to exercise control over their own actions in order to gain success. He proposed that self-efficacy is directly related to

how children think and act, as well as to their emotional state. In effect, Bandura has influenced the way in which we try to understand the goals that individuals – be they children, parents or professionals – aim to achieve. Children with poor self-efficacy, for example, have a tendency to avoid tasks that present them with a challenge, preferring instead to focus on the negative and frame their thinking within constructs whereby they come to convince themselves that they cannot achieve. Children with poor self-efficacy typically present themselves in social situations as having low self-confidence.

Directly linked to a child's capacity to gain success are the child's feelings about themselves and others, and the world around them. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest amongst psychologists and educators regarding self-efficacy, and particularly an increased recognition of how a child's self-efficacy influences and affects their learning and behaviour. Faced with having to organize their own time and with identifying learning goals and targets, children with poor self-efficacy will typically do less well than those with strong self-efficacy. They may, for example, demonstrate little interest in attempting tasks and seeing them through to completion and may feel less committed to working with their peers. They may also demonstrate greater signs of anxiety than their peers when asked to engage in problem-based learning tasks. Colver and Hodgkin have stressed how children in learning situations may:

place limits on what they think is possible, believing a task is beyond their capability. Lack of self-belief affects their motivation and their commitment to learning. 'I can't do this, it's boring' signals 'I don't believe I can be successful with this and therefore I don't want to take the risk – it may or may not be boring'. (2011, p. 36)

Bandura believed that a key factor in developing a strong sense of self-efficacy was the development of 'mastery' through experiences, for example in observing others who are succeeding, having positive and affirming comments from others, and understanding one's own emotions and feelings. Self-efficacy as an integral part of a child's early learning experiences, therefore, has enormous implications for practitioners working with children in early years settings and primary schools.

Exercise

Identify occasions when you have observed children displaying 'good' self-efficacy. Consider how this has developed within the children and what factors might have influenced this process. Consider how modelling might have influenced the development of self-efficacy in these cases.

In order to understand social learning more fully as well as the impact upon children of their wider social environments, it is helpful to look more closely at learning within the wider social, political and economic contexts within which children grow up. Whilst Bandura's work tended to focus on the individual, other theorists have focused more upon more extraneous factors. One particular theoretical perspective that goes much further in exploring these wider contexts is that offered by Urie Bronfenbrenner. Bronfenbrenner's work offers a further dimension to that of Bandura's and provides the means for much greater critical reflection and understanding of how young children learn, and the cultural contexts and factors that influence the course of their development from early childhood through adolescence and into adulthood.

URIE BRONFENBRENNER

Bronfenbrenner (born 1917)

Bronfenbrenner was born in Moscow and when he was 6 years of age he moved with his family to the USA. Bronfenbrenner gained a scholarship to Cornell University in 1934 where he studied psychology. He subsequently served in the army from 1942 to 1946 in the latter years of the Second World War working as a psychologist. In 1979, Bronfenbrenner published a seminal text, *The Ecology of Human Development*, in which he set out his views on child development. Bronfenbrenner was co-founder of the Head Start programme and is perhaps best known for his *Ecological Systems Model*, now redefined as the *Bioecological Model*.

Bronfenbrenner emphasized how children grow up in constantly changing and dynamic cultures in which they must interact with and relate to those around them in ever-shifting contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994). As children grow and develop, the nature and quality of their interactions change and this process occurs within communities, cultures and wider societies, all of which have their own definable and recognizable characteristics (Johnston and Nahmad-Williams, 2009). Bronfenbrenner 'emphasizes the importance of studying "development-in-context", or the ecology of development' (Smith et al., 2003, p. 9). Take, for example, the cases of Tracey and Ben – consider that they are now older and in their first year of secondary school. Here, it is important to emphasize how early years practitioners need to think ahead and see the children they work with not only as 'early years' children but as unique individuals who are in the beginning stages of the rest of their lives.

Example

Some years have passed and Tracey and Ben are now in their first year of secondary school where there are relatively high levels of disaffection amongst a small number of the older pupils, but high levels of achievement and aspiration amongst the majority of pupils who are aiming to move into the school's sixth form and then on to third-level education. Tracey's mother has become more settled in her life and has gained employment. Her previous partner has left the family home and a new partner has moved in. Though he is not aggressive, he is unemployed and has been for over 10 years. Ben's life has changed dramatically in that his mother has died. Money has become an issue and his father has had to take on extra part-time work in order to look after the family. Despite these challenges Ben continues to be highly motivated and focused and is developing some positive friendships with like-minded pupils in his year who are also focused and motivated. Following transfer to her secondary school, Tracey has become increasingly influenced by her new peer group, which consists mainly of children who have experienced problems in their primary schools relating to behaviour and lack of progress. She appears to be more drawn to the older pupils who are disaffected and during break times observes them closely.

Not only is the physical and geographical context of Tracey and Ben's new school very different to their primary school, the culture of their new school environment is also fundamentally distinctive with new rules to be learned, new expectations exercised by teachers, and more particularly, a whole new set of expectations from their peers. Differences in fashion are more pronounced in their new school and they have to start absorbing and understanding the hidden rules and behaviours of their peers and especially the older teenage boys and girls. In addition to these more immediate factors, society and its legal structure recognizes that Tracey and Ben are now older and as such they will increasingly have expectations placed upon them to act and behave with much greater responsibility and accountability. The other children in the school, and particularly the older children, will act as role models for Tracey and Ben. It will be Tracey and Ben's early upbringing and the modelling of their own parents, and the relationships they had in their early years with significant others, that will now serve to give them stability and support them in resisting being drawn into potentially problematic social situations and maintaining a focus and good motivation in their new educational setting.

Whilst Bronfenbrenner placed significant emphasis upon the wider environment when attempting to explore child development, he also proposed that it is important to think of a number of layers that encompass children as they develop. These layers, both directly and indirectly, affect the biological maturation of every child. Bronfenbrenner's theory, therefore, requires that in order to fully explore child

development, we need also to take into account the wider environmental influences upon the child. The layers that define Bronfenbrenner's theory are sometimes likened to Russian dolls, where smaller dolls are placed within much bigger ones (Linden, 2005). Bronfenbrenner gave a name to each of the layers that surrounded the child. The closest and most immediate layer to the child is the 'Microsystem'.

Definitions

Microsystem: Immediate environments (family, school, peer group, neighbourhood and childcare environments).

Mesosystem: A system comprised of connections between immediate environments (i.e. a child's home and school).

Exosystem: External environmental settings which only indirectly affect development (such as a parent's workplace).

Macrosystem: The larger cultural context (Eastern vs Western culture, national economy, political culture, subculture).

Chronosystem: The patterning of environmental events and transitions over the course of life.

It is within the Microsystem that the child has their most direct contact with, for example, their family, their nursery school or playgroup, their community and their neighbours. Bronfenbrenner proposed a two-way process within this layer that influenced the child, referring to these as 'bi-directional influences'. Whilst the child is influenced by the behaviours, actions and beliefs of their parents, the child in turn also influences the parents. Take the example of an infant in the cot who suddenly and for no apparent reason makes a joyful cooing noise. When the mother hears the noise, she comes running from the other room and lifts the child and gives lots of warm, nurturing hugs. In this situation, the child has initiated the interaction and the mother has responded. As such, the infant is in fact influencing the mother's behaviour. As Bronfenbrenner would suggest, the relation is bi-directional. Bronfenbrenner has suggested that these bi-directional influences are very strong.

The next layer outside of the 'Microsystem' is the 'Mesosystem', which relates to the construction of connections between, for example, the child's mother and father and their first teacher, or between their local community and their school. Here, the child relates experiences gained in school to those gained in their family. The child is, therefore, drawing comparisons between their teachers and their parents, between their new school friends, and friends in their neighbourhood, and between the wider family such as between brothers and sisters, and cousins. If the child's

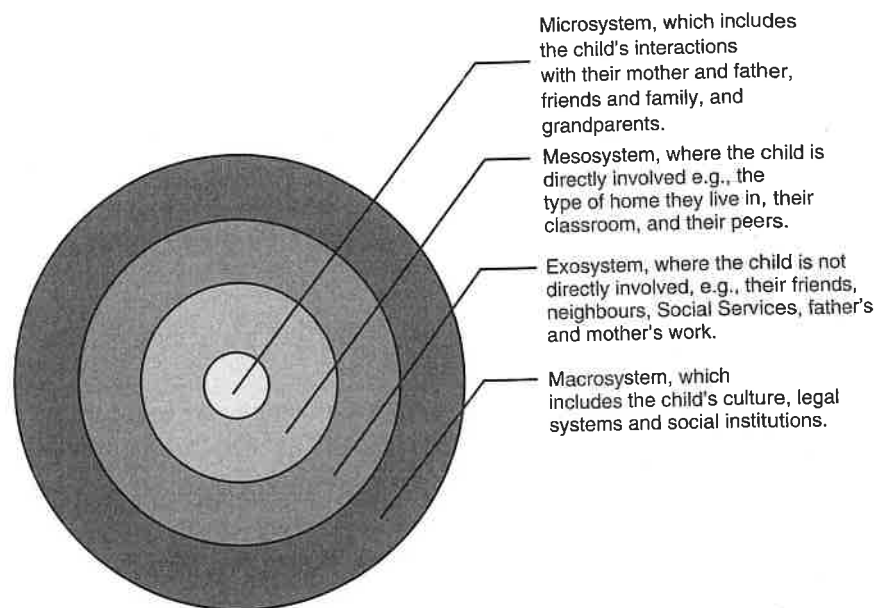


Figure 6.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of individual development

family members are regular and frequent members of a sports club, for example, then there will be connections and comparisons made between those individuals within the club and their lifestyles and their own family context.

Outside of the 'Mesosystem' lies the 'Exosystem' – the child's wider social system. Here, for example, the work commitments of parents, or their levels of income, impact upon the child's Microsystem. Within the Exosystem the wider social experiences of children will also impact indirectly upon them. An example is the current economic climate in the UK where it is proposed that many public libraries will be closed and that the Forestry Commission will sell a percentage of its forested land to private developers, thus promoting fears amongst many that important resources and activities will become lost to many children, young people and their families. A further example can be seen in the UK where the new coalition government in 2011 is proposing to introduce significant changes to schooling through the introduction of 'free schools', much greater choice for parents, and a restructuring of the way in which teachers are trained. All of these external factors will exert significant influence upon the lives of many children in the UK.

Outside of the Exosystem lies the 'Macrosystem', which comprises the child's culture, societal values, legal structures, and so on. These all affect the inner layers. A child who grows up in a very traditional society or community that

strongly advocates the importance of children being reared by both parents and rejects the idea of parental separation and divorce, may well receive less support of a practical nature than a child growing up in a community that is much more accepting of separation and divorce. Within the Macrosystem, the ideological views that are historically dominant in the culture of an individual are viewed as being of great importance. Take, for example, children growing up in Northern Ireland where communities were, for many years, divided on the grounds of religion, or the southern states of the USA where generations experienced racial prejudice as part of their everyday lives, which in practice guided the thinking and education of whole communities of children and young people.

Bronfenbrenner identified a further layer, the 'Chronosystem'. The Chronosystem is about time and how it interfaces with those environments in which the child grows up. As children age, they interact differently with their environments and can become more engaged in managing aspects of their environment and those changes that they must negotiate as they grow older. Here, transitions are very important, for example starting nursery school, playgroup or primary school for the first time or, in other cases, the transition from a two-parent family through the separation and divorce of parents over an extended period of time. As transitions and chronological events occur, the child is developing not just physically and cognitively but emotionally, as well. It is worth considering how the Chronosystem has exerted influence upon Tracey and Ben as they make the transition to secondary school.

Bronfenbrenner's theory can be criticized on the grounds that it does not pay adequate attention to the individual psychological needs of children, as is the case with the work of Bandura. Take, for example, the experiences of children who have lost parents through divorce or, more particularly, those who have lost a parent through death and find themselves entering a stage of grieving. Whilst Bandura would focus upon the individual child's self-efficacy and learning modelled through those around him/her, which would underpin their resilience and coping mechanisms, Bronfenbrenner might focus upon the argument that grief occurs in all cultures and in all societies and, therefore, existing social and economic systems are in place to support the child.

Exercise

How might Bronfenbrenner's theory explain the impact upon young children of their parents' work patterns and lifestyles and how can his theory help practitioners understand the difficulties experienced by young children growing up with special educational needs and/or disabilities?



Summary

In attempting to further our understanding of social learning in young children, we can draw upon the work of a number of theorists such as Bandura and Bronfenbrenner. Their carefully considered and tested ideas and hypotheses offer effective frameworks to encapsulate and test our own ideas, thoughts and perceptions, from which we gain through our own personal experiences and learning. Bandura suggested that learning did not always involve change in behaviour and that children could observe others without their observations necessarily leading to changes in behaviour. He further suggested that motivation played a significant role in the link between observation and change in behaviour. Bandura saw motivation as a key factor in the development of children and young people and viewed self-efficacy as being central to educational development. Bronfenbrenner saw societies and communities across the globe as undergoing radical change. He argued that world economies have changed radically and we now have much greater emphasis upon the technological factors that drive our economies, but much of our working practice has not changed in tandem leading to enormous stress being experienced by many parents. Bronfenbrenner proposed that research into child development should take account of wider economic, social and political factors.

Table 6.1 Similarities and differences between Bandura and Bronfenbrenner

Similarities	Differences
Both Bandura and Bronfenbrenner acknowledge the part played by wider influences in society.	Bronfenbrenner placed much greater emphasis upon indirect influences such as the family environment and the community. He also viewed wider factors in society, such as the economic and political climate, as having a major influence upon children's learning and development.
Whilst not fully accepting the principles set out by more traditional behaviourists, they both emphasize the significance of social learning.	
They both viewed children's social interactions with others around them as being central to learning and development.	Bandura placed greater emphasis upon children's cognitive development, especially in terms of them acting upon information received from their environments. Unlike Bronfenbrenner, Bandura emphasized the importance of children imitating and identifying with others around them.
They both saw culture as playing a significant part in the education and schooling of children.	
Both theorists were also similar in that they did not view children's development in terms of stages.	Bandura placed greater emphasis upon self-efficacy than Bronfenbrenner.

RECOMMENDED READING



Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: Freeman.

This is a key text for any student or practitioner wishing to gain a much deeper understanding of self-efficacy and how it affects individual development.

Dowling, M. (2005). *Young Children's Personal, Social and Emotional Development*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

A useful resource for students and practitioners wishing to gain greater understanding of the social and emotional needs of children.

Miller, L. & Pound, L. (2011). *Theories and Approaches to Learning in the Early Years*. London: Sage.

An accessible and informative text, which will be of considerable help to students and practitioners wishing to develop their understanding of child development and the theoretical positions that underpin this most important stage in the lives of individuals.

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