

Human Development Theories

The scientific study of children began in the late nineteenth century and blossomed in the early twentieth century as pioneering psychologists sought to uncover the secrets of human behavior by studying its development. Two early scholars, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed theories of human behavior that are the direct ancestors of the major theoretical traditions of developmental psychology today. Locke, a British empiricist, adhered to a strict environmentalist position, that the mind of the newborn as a tabula rasa (“blank slate”) on which knowledge is written through experience and learning. Rousseau, a Swiss philosopher who spent much of his life in France, proposed a nativistic model in his famous novel *Emile*, in which development occurs according to innate processes progressing through three stages: infancy, childhood, and adolescence. Rousseau detailed some of the necessary progression through these stages in order to develop into an ideal citizen. Although some aspects of his text were controversial, Rousseau’s ideas were strongly influential on educators at the time.

The importance of learning more about human development is significant as “Knowing about other people and their circumstances can help us live and work with them more effectively. Therefore, to get a full picture and systematize knowledge about this subject, studying major human development thinkers is essential.

Psychoanalytic Theories of Human Development

Sigmund Freud’s stage theory of **psychosexual development** grew out of his psychoanalytic approach to human personality and psychopathology. Freud based his model of child development on his own and his patients’ recollections of their childhood and developed a stage model of development in which the libido, or sexual energy, of the child, focuses on different “zones” or areas of the body as the child grows to adulthood. Freud’s model is “interactionist” since he believed that although the sequence and timing of these stages are biologically determined, successful personality development depends on the experiences the child has during each stage. Although the details of Freud’s developmental theory have been widely criticized for lacking evidence and being difficult to test, his emphasis on the importance of early childhood experiences, prior to five years of age, has had a lasting impact.

Freud believed that personality developed through a series of childhood stages in which the pleasure-seeking energies of the id become focused on certain erogenous areas. An erogenous zone is characterized as an area of the body that is particularly sensitive to stimulation. During the five psychosexual stages, which are the oral, anal, phallic, latent, and genital stages, the erogenous zone associated with each stage serves as a source of pleasure. Each stage of development is marked by conflicts that can help build growth or stifle development, depending upon how they are resolved. If these psychosexual stages are completed successfully, a healthy personality is the result. If certain issues are not resolved at the appropriate stage, fixations can occur. A fixation is a persistent focus on an earlier psychosexual stage. Until this conflict is resolved, the individual will remain “stuck” in this stage. A person who is fixated at the oral stage, for example, may be over-dependent on others and may seek oral stimulation through smoking, drinking, or eating.



Erik Erikson (1902-1994) also adopted the psychoanalytic approach, but he diverged from Freud by focusing more on social influences in personality development proposing eight stages of **psychosocial development** with each stage including a conflict or developmental task to progress through each stage. His theory covered the entire lifespan, from infancy through late adulthood, as opposed to Freud, whose last stage ended after adolescence. Although Erikson’s stages catalyzed research into social, emotional, and identity development, but it was criticized for lacking adequate detail in how people resolve each crisis. People may not progress through these stages in the same order, and some stages may be limited to certain cultural and historical contexts. However, many find his stages to be a useful summary of social tasks across the lifespan. A brief description of each stage follows.

- **Stage One, First Year of Life: Trust versus Mistrust:** During the first year of life, children are completely dependent on others. Erikson believes that a basic attitude of trust or mistrust is formed at this time. Trust is established when babies are given warmth, touching, love, and physical care. Mistrust is caused by inadequate or unpredictable care and by parents who are cold, indifferent, or rejecting. Basic mistrust may later cause insecurity, suspiciousness, or an inability to relate to others.

- **Stage Two, 1–3 Years: Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt** In stage two, children express their growing self-control by climbing, touching, exploring, and trying to do things for themselves.

- **Stage Three, 3–5 Years: Initiative versus Guilt:** In stage three, children move beyond simple self-control and begin to take initiative. Through play, children learn to make plans and carry out tasks. Parents reinforce initiative by giving children freedom to play, ask questions, use imagination, and choose activities. Feelings of guilt about initiating activities are formed if parents criticize severely, prevent play, or discourage a child's questions.

- **Stage Four, 6–12 Years: Industry versus Inferiority:** The industry vs. inferiority stage is all about building skills and confidence, full of trial and error, but an important part of growing up. It's when kids begin to figure out that they can actually *do* things—whether it's playing a sport, learning an instrument, or getting good grades. How kids manage this period of development helps set the stage for how they'll deal with challenges and successes later in life.

- **Stage Five, Adolescence: Identity versus Role Confusion** Identity versus role confusion is the fifth stage of ego in psychologist Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. This stage occurs during adolescence between the ages of approximately 12 and 18. During this stage, adolescents explore their independence and develop a sense of self. Identity vs. role confusion is a stage characterized by asking "Who am I," and learning more about your own goals, values, and beliefs. According to Erikson, people progress through a series of stages as they grow and change throughout life. During each stage, everyone faces a developmental conflict that must be resolved to successfully develop the primary virtue of that stage. Erikson was interested in how social interaction and relationships affect development and growth.

- **Stage Six, Young Adulthood: Intimacy versus Isolation** In stage six, the individual feels a need for

intimacy in his or her life. After establishing a stable identity, a person is prepared to share meaningful love or deep friendship with others. By **intimacy**, Erikson means an ability to care about others and to share experiences with them. Failure to establish intimacy with others leads to a deep sense of **isolation** (feeling alone and uncared for in life). This often sets the stage for later difficulties.

- **Stage Seven, Middle Adulthood: Generativity versus Stagnation** According to Erikson, an interest in guiding the next generation provides emotional balance in mature adulthood. Erikson called this quality **generativity**. It is expressed by caring about oneself, one's children, and future generations. Generativity may be achieved by guiding one's own children or by helping other children (as a teacher or coach, for example). Productive or creative work can also express generativity. In any case, a person's concerns and energies must broaden to include the welfare of others and society as a whole. Failure to do this is marked by a **stagnant** concern with one's own needs and comforts. Life loses meaning, and the person feels bitter, dreary, and trapped (Friedman, 2004).

- **Stage Eight, Late Adulthood: Integrity versus Despair** People who have lived richly and responsibly develop a sense of **integrity** (self-respect). This allows them to face aging and death with dignity. If previous life events are viewed with regret, the elderly person experiences **despair** (heartache and remorse). In this case, life seems like a series of missed opportunities. The person feels like a failure and knows it's too late to reverse what has been done. Aging and the threat of death then become sources of fear and depression.



Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) ranked behind Skinner as the second most eminent psychologist of the 20th century, and his stage theory of cognitive development revolutionized our view of children's thinking and learning. His interest lay in children's knowledge, their thinking, and the qualitative differences in their thinking as it develops. Although he called his field

“genetic epistemology,” stressing the role of biological determinism, he also assigned great importance to experience. In his view, children “construct” their knowledge by building **schemas**, or mental models. To Piaget, knowledge grows through processes of “**assimilation**,” in which people evaluate and try to understand new information based on their existing knowledge of the world, and “**accommodation**,” in which they expand and modify their mental models based on new experiences. If a young child has a pet cat, they develop a schema that cats are typically four-legged, furry, and they meow. When they see a new cat that has a different color coat, they assimilate it into their current cat category or schema. However, if they see a furry, four-legged creature that barks, they may mistakenly identify it as a cat, but be corrected that it’s a dog. They need to accommodate their schema, or mental categories, and create a new category for dogs. Piaget proposed four stages of cognitive development from infancy through adolescence, and his work inspired more research than any other theorist. Many of his concepts are still foundational to developmental psychology. More recent cognitive psychologists found that Piaget underestimated the cognitive capabilities of infants and children and overestimated the abilities of adolescents. Piaget was also criticized for his stage approach, which doesn’t capture all the individual differences in cognitive development.

The four stages of Piaget’s theory are as follows:⁴

- **Sensorimotor stage:** The first stage of development lasts from birth to approximately age 2. At this point in development, children know the world primarily through their senses and movements.
- **Preoperational stage:** The second stage of development lasts from the ages of 2 to 7 and is characterized by the development of language and the emergence of symbolic play.
- **Concrete operational stage:** The third stage of cognitive development lasts from the age of 7 to approximately age 11. At this point, logical thought emerges, but children still struggle with abstract and theoretical thinking.
- **Formal operational stage:** In the fourth and final stage of cognitive development, lasting from age 12 and into adulthood, children become much more adept at abstract thought and deductive reasoning.

Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory

Although Lev Vygotsky was born in the same year as Piaget, he died at age 37 of tuberculosis. He was a Russian psychologist interested in how children’s thinking developed. He and Piaget both believed in the

importance of the child being actively involved in their learning, but Vygotsky differed from Piaget in that his **sociocultural theory** focused more on social influences and how cultural tools transform one’s thinking. Vygotsky did not propose a series of stages like Piaget. Two of Vygotsky’s concepts, the **zone of proximal development**, and **scaffolding**, are still influential in education circles. The zone of proximal development refers to the skills or abilities that a novice can accomplish if they have help from a more skilled person. According to Vygotsky, it is “the distance between the actual development level (of the learner) as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers. As children are allowed to stretch their skills and knowledge, often by observing someone who is slightly more advanced than they are, they are able to progressively extend this zone. Scaffolding, on the other hand, refers to temporary supports that more skilled people provide to help children advance in their cognitive and physical skills. This support can be provided in many different ways, such as modeling or asking questions, and is used across different subjects and age groups.