

Psychosocial Adjustment and Human Development

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Developmental psychologists realize that an accurate picture of the developmental pattern is fundamental to an understanding of children. They also recognize that knowledge of what causes variations in development is essential to an understanding of each individual child [1]. Knowing what the developmental pattern is like has scientific as well as practical value.

These values are –

First, knowledge of the pattern of human development helps developmental psychologists to know what to expect of children, at approximately what ages to expect different patterns of behavior to appear, and when these patterns will normally be replaced by more mature patterns. This is important because if too much is expected at a given age, children are likely to develop feelings of inadequacy if they do not live up to the standards their parents and teachers set for them. If, on the other hand, too little is expected of them, they are deprived of incentives to develop their potentials. Equally serious, they often build up resentments toward those who underestimate their capacities [2].

Second, knowing what to expect enables developmental psychologists to set up guidelines in the form of height-weight scales, age-weight scales, age-height scales, mental-age scales, and social- or emotional-development scales. Since the pattern of development for all normal children is approximately the same, it is then possible to evaluate each child in terms of the norm for that child's age. If development is typical, it means that the child is making normal adjustments to social expectations. Should, on the other hand, there be deviations from the normal pattern, this may be regarded as a danger signal of poor personal, emotional, or social adjustments. Steps can then be taken to discover the cause of the deviation and to remedy it. Should the deviation be the result of lack of opportunities to learn, for example, the child can then be given learning opportunities and encouragement to use these opportunities [3].

Third, since successful development requires guidance, knowing the developmental pattern enables parents and teachers to guide the child's learning at appropriate times. A baby who is ready to learn to walk must be given opportunities to practice walking and encouragement to keep on trying until the walking skill has been mastered. Lack of opportunity and encouragement may delay normal development [4].

Fourth, knowing what the normal developmental pattern is makes it possible for parents and teachers to prepare children ahead of time for the changes that will take place in their bodies their interests, or their behavior. For example, children can be prepared for what will be expected of them when they enter school. While this psychological preparation will not eliminate all tensions that come from such a radical adjustment, it will go a long way toward minimizing them [5].

Many people use the terms "growth" and "development" interchangeably. In reality they are different, though they are inseparable; neither takes place alone. Growth refers to quantitative changes i.e. increases in size and structure. Not only does the child become larger physically, but the size and structure of the internal organs and the brain increase. As a result of the growth of the brain, the child has a greater capacity for learning, for remembering, and for reasoning. The child grows mentally as well as physically. Development, by contrast, refers to qualitative and quantitative changes. It may be defined as a progressive series of orderly, coherent changes. "Progressive" signifies that the changes are directional, that they lead forward rather than backward. "Orderly" and "coherent" suggest that there is a definite relationship between the changes taking place and those that preceded or will follow them.

The goal of developmental changes is self-realization or the achievement of genetic potentials. This Maslow has labeled "self-actualization"—the striving to be the best person possible, both physically and mentally. It is the urge to do what one is fitted to do. To be happy and well-adjusted, a person must be given an opportunity to fulfill this urge. However, whether the person will achieve this goal will depend on what obstacles are encountered and how successful the person is in overcoming these obstacles. Obstacles may be environmental, such as growing up in an environment where children are deprived of educational and cultural opportunities; or they may be from within the person, such as a fear of attempting to do what they are capable of doing because of social criticism. Many potentially creative children, for example, fail to achieve the creativity they are capable of because of early social criticism of their creative endeavors [6].

Development is continuous from the moment of conception to death but it occurs at different rates—sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly. As Piechowski has emphasized, "Development does not occur at an even pace. There are periods of great intensity and disequilibrium . . . and there are periods of equilibrium. Development achieves a plateau and this may occur at any level or between levels". Furthermore, developmental changes do not always go forward in a straight line. They sometimes go backward, as when a jealous child regresses to babyish ways of doing things in the hopes of winning the parental attention enjoyed earlier. However, in the end, these changes lead forward. Since development is continuous, what happens at one stage influences the following stage. Unhealthy attitudes about self or about relationships with others during the early years, for example, are rarely eliminated completely. They are reflected in the individual's outlook on life even in middle and old age. "Basic trust" or "basic distrust," developed during the babyhood years, Erikson found, persist throughout life and color the persons reactions to people and to life situations [7].

Although the pattern of development is similar for all children, all children follow the predictable pattern in their own way and at their own rate. Some children develop in a smooth, gradual, step-by-step fashion, while others move in spurts. Some show slight swings, while others show wide ones. All children do not, therefore, reach the same point of development at the same age.

Dobzhansky has said, "Every person is indeed biologically and genetically different from every other". In addition, no two people have identical environmental influences, even identical twins. This means that individual differences are caused by both internal and external conditions. As a result, the pattern of development will be different for every child, even though it is similar in its major aspects to the pattern followed by other children [8]. Physical development, for example, depends partly on hereditary potentials and partly on such environmental factors as food, general health, sunlight, fresh air, climate, emotions, and physical exertion. Intellectual development is affected by such factors as inherent capacity, the emotional climate, whether one is encouraged to pursue intellectual activities, whether one has a strong intellectual drive, and whether one has opportunities for experiences and learning. Personality development is influenced by genetic factors as well as by attitudes and social relationships, both in the home and outside. There is evidence that physical and mental differences exist between the sexes and in children of different racial backgrounds. These differences are due in part to hereditary factors and, in part, to environmental factors. Of the two, there is evidence that the environmental factors play a more dominant role in producing the differences that do the hereditary factors [8].

People of all ages are well aware of these "social expectations." Even young children know, from what people say to them and ask them to do, that certain things are expected of them. They soon realize, from the approval or disapproval of their behavior, that these social expectations largely determine the pattern of their learning. Social expectations are known as "developmental tasks". Havighurst has defined a developmental task as a "task which arises at or about a certain period in the life of an individual, successful achievement of which leads to his happiness and success with later tasks, while failure leads to unhappiness in the individual, disapproval by society, and difficulty with later tasks." Some developmental tasks arise mainly as a result of physical maturation (learning to walk); others are developed mainly from the cultural pressures of society (learning to read or learning appropriate sex roles); still others grow out of

the personal values and aspirations of the individual (choosing and preparing for a vocation). Most developmental tasks arise from all three of these forces working together [9].

In a culture that is relatively static, developmental tasks remain much the same one generation after another. In a changing culture, however, the new generation must perform new developmental tasks, while some of the old tasks will become less important or be eliminated. In a culture that changes from hand labor to machine labor, for example, learning hand skills becomes less important than learning to operate machines.

Developmental tasks serve three very useful purposes. First, they act as guidelines to help parents and teachers to know what children should learn at a given age. If, for example, children are to make good adjustments to school, they must have mastered the tasks needed to be independent of teacher help, such as putting on or taking off outer garments, and they must know how to play the games other children in the neighborhood play. Second, developmental tasks serve as motivating forces for children to learn what the social group expects them to learn at that age. Children quickly learn that social acceptance depends on their being able to do what their age-mates do. The stronger their desire for social acceptance, the greater will be their motivation to learn to do what their age-mates do. Third, developmental tasks tell parents and teachers what will be expected of children in the immediate and remote future. As such, they alert them to the necessity of preparing children to meet these new expectations. When children begin to play with their age-mates, it alerts parents, for example, to the importance of teaching them how to play the games and sports that are popular among the older children of the neighborhood so that their children will be ready to play them when playing with age-mates becomes an important play activity for their children [10].

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