

Introduction to Child Development Theories

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Key concepts, major perspectives, and their practical implications

1. Why Study Child Development Theories?

Purpose	What It Offers
Framework for Observation	Guides what to look for at each age (cognitive, social, emotional, physical).
Explanation of Change	Provides hypotheses about <i>how</i> and <i>why</i> development proceeds.
Guidance for Practice	Informs parenting, education, and intervention strategies.
Basis for Research	Generates testable predictions and shapes study design.

2. Classic Theories & Core Ideas

Theory	Proponent(s)	Central Tenets	Developmental Focus	Typical Age Emphasis
Psychosexual	Sigmund Freud	Personality develops through stages driven by sexual energy; unresolved conflicts cause later problems.	Personality, emotional regulation	Oral (0?1 yr), Anal (1?3 yr), Phallic (3?6 yr), Latency (6?12 yr), Genital (12+ yr)
Psychosocial	Erik Erikson	Eight stages, each a crisis between <i>psychological</i> and <i>social</i> demands; successful resolution builds virtues.	Identity, social relationships	Trust vs. Mistrust (0?1 yr), Autonomy vs. Shame (1?3 yr), ..., Identity vs. Role Confusion (12?18 yr)

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Cognitive	Jean Piaget	Children construct knowledge through active interaction; four qualitatively different stages.	Thinking, problem solving	Sensorimotor (0-2 yr), Preoperational (2-7), Concrete-operational (7-11), Formal-operational (11+)
Sociocultural	Lev Vygotsky	Development is mediated by cultural tools and language; learning occurs in the <i>Zone of Proximal Development</i> (ZPD).	Language, higher mental functions	Emphasizes continuous scaffolding rather than fixed stages
Ecological Systems	Urie Bronfenbrenner	Development occurs within nested environmental systems (microsystem & macrosystem).	Interaction of child with multiple contexts	All ages; highlights the role of family, school, community, policy
Information Processing	Various (e.g., George Miller)	Mind is likened to a computer: attention, encoding, storage, retrieval develop over time.	Memory, attention, executive function	Gradual improvements from infancy through adolescence
Attachment	John Bowlby & Mary Ainsworth	Children form <i>attachment bonds</i> that serve as a secure base for exploration; quality predicts later relationships.	Emotional security, social competence	Infancy (0-2 yr) but effects persist

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Social Learning / Cognitive? Behavioral	Albert Bandura	Learning occurs through observation, imitation, and reinforcement; self-efficacy shapes behavior.	Modeling, moral development	Throughout childhood; emphasizes peer influence
Life-Span Development	Paul Baltes (and later scholars)	Development is multidirectional, plastic, contextual, and involves gains & losses across the whole life.	Integration of earlier theories into a broader timeline	From birth to death

3. Comparative Overview

Dimension	Psychosexual	Psychosocial	Cognitive	Sociocultural	Ecological
Nature of Change	Stage-driven, driven by internal drives	Stage-driven, driven by social conflict	Stage-driven, driven by logical operations	Continuous, mediated by cultural tools	Continuous, shaped by multiple contexts