

A UNIQUE CHILD SERIES

Child Development

Child development ■ A skilful communicator ■ A competent learner

by Linda Pound

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Introduction: Unique child



What do we know about children's development?

In Western society in the twenty first century, practitioners make many assumptions about children's development. Progress is measured against published norms. Some people prefer to call these milestones, and children's arrival at these significant points is eagerly discussed and compared. It is therefore surprising to know that the views now widely held about ages and stages by which children should achieve particular milestones are relatively new and are not universally held to be true.

In the nineteenth century, Francis Galton (1822-1911), Charles Darwin's cousin, collected data from an extraordinary number of people – each one of whom had paid to have various personal measurements taken and recorded. In this way, basing his findings on measurements from 93,000 people including their height, weight, hand strength, lung power, and head size, Galton used his data to establish norms and averages. These, in turn, led to the development

of statistics and statistical analysis which drives so much policy and practice in many areas of everyday life.

Darwin's (1809-1882) own contribution to the study of children's development was in keeping an observational diary of the ways in which some of his own children grew and developed. Pestalozzi had kept a similar diary and, in the twentieth century, Piaget and his wife also kept observational studies of their children. These observations were to form the basis of many of Piaget's theories.

It is however an American, Arnold Gesell (1880-1961), who has even today most strongly influenced views of what counts in Western society as normal development. He, like Galton, began to collect huge amounts of data – but the population he chose to work with were children. Admiring the thoroughness of Galton's work, Gesell, using a sample of 500 children, filmed and in minute detail analysed children's behaviour. From this material he identified tiny steps in what he claimed to be typical or normal development. For each age group Gesell created normative

Section 1: Child development

EYFS Unique child Card 1:1 Child development

- Every child is a unique individual with their own characteristics and temperament.
- Development is a continuous, complex interaction of environment and genetic factors in which the body, brain and behaviour becomes more complex.
- Babies and children mature at different rates and at different times in their lives.
- Babies and children are vulnerable and become resilient and confident if they have support from others.
- Early relationships strongly influence how children develop and having close relationships with carers is very important.

The focus of this section is developing effective practice in relation to children's development by:

- promoting understanding of the processes involved in babies' and young children's growth and development;
- considering the individuality of each child with differing needs and interests; and
- exploring key debates underpinning current understandings of the way in which young children develop.

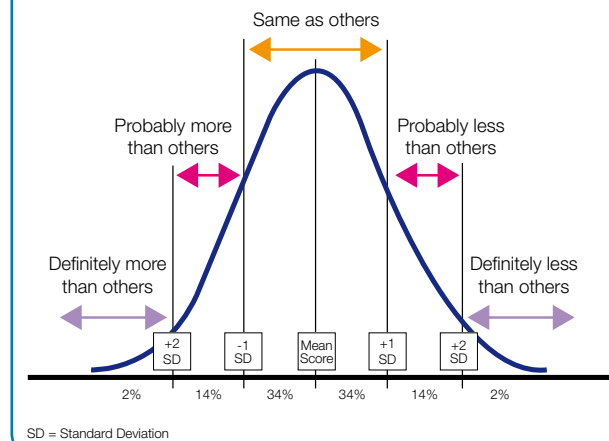
Historical understandings of child development

Our current understandings of child development have been largely shaped by the work of Galton, Darwin and Gesell (see introductory section, pages 2-3). Their legacy highlights some important considerations in the study of child development:

Normal distribution

An assumption, arising from Galton's work on normal distribution, that aspects of development follow a bell curve pattern – that is to say that, for example, height, weight or shoe size is distributed with very few people at either end and

Bell Curve Diagram



most people in the middle. When, for example, nurses talk about babies' weight being in the tenth percentile it is this bell shaped curve of distribution to which they are referring;

Child study movements

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw the rise of what was known as the Child Study Movement, largely influenced by the observational diaries which Darwin kept and by the emergence of psychology as a discipline in its own right. Observational diaries had been kept before Darwin – most notably by Pestalozzi. Famous amongst later diarists are Piaget and his wife, who kept copious and detailed observations of their own children's development. The danger is that the observations of such eminent figures carry a great deal of weight. Development which differs from their records may come to be seen as abnormal;

Developmental norms

Similarly, the milestones identified by Gesell have also become generally accepted as representing the ordinary development of all children. However, it is important to note that Gesell excluded from his observations children he identified as having extremes of intelligence, coming from poor homes or members of families where languages other than English were spoken. Despite this, he believed that the norms of behaviour which he outlined should be applied to all children. His descriptors of development continue to be used in some scales of development used today (see for example Bayley's Scales of Infant Development)¹.

Technological advances

Gesell's data was based on filmed material. He regarded

the camera as “the ideal observer”. He characterised cameras as being all-seeing and uniquely accurate. This view discounts the fact that what was filmed was predetermined by the researcher – cameras can never be all-seeing nor is the choice of material to be recorded without possible bias. The amount of minute detail outlined by Gesell has been ridiculed by some psychologists as absurd. For example he describes 53 stages of playing with a rattle and 91 stages in reacting to a bell. Nonetheless, both video and audio material has been highly influential in our understanding of child development.

Learning or developments?

Maturationist theories such as those put forward by Gesell may lead to the view that development is natural but learning is not. Although developmental psychologists do not differentiate between learning and development in this way, the man or woman in the street tends to do so. This distinction may be damaging since it pathologises the development of children which does not match the norms. It also ignores the fact that children’s development depends in great measure on the context in which they are growing up. Children’s behaviour will be shaped by materials, people and experiences to which they have access; aspects of development which are valued or not valued; as well as by adults’ expectations and interactions.

Current views of child development

In the twenty first century, understandings of child development have built on the successes and failures of nineteenth and twentieth century theorists. Current views of what is important in seeking to understand the way in which young children grow and develop highlight three key areas:

- Development does not stop in childhood but is a lifelong process.
- Development is holistic.
- Development is influenced by both internal and external influences.

Development does not stop in childhood but is a lifelong process

Child development is not just about young children (although for the purposes of this book that is where the focus will lie). There has been a growing recognition, perhaps prompted by Erikson’s work that development is a lifelong process, that as long as people live, they have the potential to change. Although some theorists chart



SECTION 1: CHILD DEVELOPMENT

development just up to adolescence, Erikson (1902-1994) was amongst the first to outline a lifelong process of development. He charted eight stages of development from birth right through to old age. For each of the eight stages he identified key characteristics and what he termed the central crisis. In early childhood Erikson suggests three stages:

- in the first year of life he suggested that key was the development of trust. The central crisis was described as arising if the baby was unable to develop a sense of trust in their caregivers, environment or self. Erikson claimed that failure to do so would result in a lifelong sense of mistrust of self and others;
- from one to three years of age, the key characteristic was independence. He argued that if the young child is not supported in developing a sense of autonomy and independence, they may have a sense of shame and doubt about their own abilities;
- from three to six years of age, an ability to take the initiative should be developing. A child who reacts aggressively or irresponsibly may develop a sense of guilt.



In the years since Erikson developed his theory, the work of developmental psychologists has highlighted similar aspects of development in the early years. In Sections 2 and 3 of this book, the vital importance of trusting relationships with others; developing independence and willingness to take the initiative will all be considered. In fact, the insights which many of the early psychological theorists held are today supported by developmental psychologists and by neuroscientific enquiry.

Development is holistic

Some approaches to learning in early childhood, such as Te Whāriki, emphasise the holistic nature of learning and ways in which all aspects are interwoven. Changes to the Early Years Foundation Stage², which define prime areas of learning – namely communication and language, physical development and personal, social and emotional development – underline the way in which development is dependent on the whole person – body and mind.

Studies of children's development tend to highlight separate elements such as physical, cognitive, linguistic, spiritual, social and emotional development. In fact development is holistic, with development in one domain influenced by and dependent on development in another. Piaget's theories led to the view that as children move through the sensori-motor, preoperational, concrete operational and finally the abstract stage of development, this is reflected in all areas of development. Bruner's theory, on the other hand, underlines the fact that we are not equally competent in all areas of development. He describes three stages of development through which we move whenever we meet anything new – so that we may be operating at very different stages at any one time³.

Current research into the development of young children shows clearly that:

- the ability to learn is strongly shaped by social and emotional experiences⁴;
- physical movement plays a much more fundamental role in learning than was previously believed⁵; and that
- the way in which things are taught influences the way in which they are learnt. We know for example that early relationships and experiences impact on development for the rest of our lives.

The first case study features a young baby, who demonstrates integration of physical action and sensory sensation. The second case study, which you will find on page 11, involves a four year old whose motivation to accomplish something leads him to draw on many aspects of learning and development.