
The Study Of The Child: History And Trends

Overview

Childhood as a concept did not exist until recent times. Before the seventeenth century children were seen as miniature adults. There was no scientific theory of child development. No one "studied" children.

Once science entered the picture the controversy over "nature or nurture?" heated up. The controversy is about whether children turn out the way they do because of heredity or environment. Even today there are theorists who take sides. However, most now take an interactionalist view--a perspective that heredity and environment influence each other in dynamic ways.

The question through the ages has been, "What is the basic nature of the child?" The answers to that question have influenced the ways theorists, parents, and even the general public look at, think about, and behave toward children. From a historical perspective, the church in medieval Europe saw the child as evil. John Locke in the seventeenth century saw the child as a "blank slate," whereas Jean Jacques Rousseau, who followed him, saw the child as pure, innocent, and good.

The scientific field of child development has contributed much to our understanding of children and how they grow and learn -- how they develop. Yet, myths continue to persist. The child development professional works to dispel these myths through various kinds of research and through parent education.

From the scientific study of children have come six principles: 1. All children have basic needs; 2. Development occurs in stages; 3. Children see the world from their own point of view; 4. Play is important to development; 5. Context affects development; 6. There are many theories and no one is "right".

Questions To Consider

1. Are beliefs of the early church, Locke and Rousseau in existence today?
2. How are your beliefs about children influenced by the scientific study of the child?
3. What are some traditional beliefs that are passed from one generation to another in your family?
4. How can researchers study children without harming or influencing them?
5. What are current methods of studying children?
6. How does theory affect research?

Vocabulary

Read these terms with their definitions before viewing the program.

Baby biographies Detailed observation of infants, usually the observer's own children. Charles Darwin kept a baby biography, which contributed to the early foundations of child study.

Child development The field study which views the child as full of potential, "unfolding" over time in a fairly predictable and orderly sequence of change.

Cognitive development The "unfolding" of intellectual skills.

Critical period The time during which the part of the organism that is developing most rapidly is most sensitive to external forces or influences.

Developmental norms A scientifically established range of when milestones of development most often occur. A standard, model or pattern typical of a specific group.

Environment Everything around the organism that affects and influences it.

Field study Research done in a naturalistic setting where the child feels at home and comfortable. Field studies are different from laboratory studies.

Heredity The characteristics and associated potentialities transmitted from parents to children through the genes. The influence of an individual's genetic make up.

Myth An idea of how things are, often handed down, based not on scientific evidence but tradition or convenience.

Nature - nurture Controversy An ongoing debate about what influences the individual most -- heredity or environment. The debate has cooled for many theorists who now take an interactional view that both heredity and environment influence and are influenced by each other.

Tabula Rasa John Locke's idea that the child is born neither good nor evil, but rather as a blank slate on which the environment will write.

Instructional Objectives

When you have successfully completed this module, you will be able to:

1. Identify three philosophical views on the nature of children that appeared around the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
2. Identify the nature - nurture controversy.
3. Identify an interactionist view of nature - nurture.
4. Recognize a major contribution to the scientific study of children by Charles Darwin; G. Stanley Hall; Sigmund Freud; John B. Watson; Arnold Gesell.
5. Identify three myths, beliefs, or misconceptions that are not based on scientific study.
6. Recognize six principles behind developmental theories.
7. Distinguish the difference between research conducted as a laboratory study from that conducted as a field study.

Self-Test

After studying the objectives and watching the video, take the self-test to check your progress.

Multiple Choice: Select the phrase which best completes each statement.

- ___ 1. Before the seventeenth century the official position of the church was that children were:
 - a. naturally good and pure.
 - b. naturally evil.
 - c. neither good nor evil but were blank slates.
 - d. dependent on the environment.

- ___ 2. John Locke believed that a child was a:
 - a. tabula rasa.
 - b. sinful being.
 - c. little angel.
 - d. an active shaper of its own experiences.

- ___ 3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed that children:
 - a. needed severe discipline.
 - b. needed strict adult supervision.
 - c. needed little adult supervision or correction.
 - d. needed to understand the concept of original sin.

- ___ 4. The nature - nurture controversy
 - a. was over the sinful nature of children.
 - b. was over the role of heredity and environment in development.
 - c. was settled in the seventeenth century.
 - d. was an argument between Locke and Rousseau

- ___ 5. An interactionist's view of the nature - nurture controversy is:
 - a. that heredity and environment interact to influence development.
 - b. that the child is a little angel.
 - c. that the child is conceived in sin.
 - d. both nature and nurture are myths.

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6. Fill in the name of the scientist in the blank after each concept associated with the scientists. Scientists are Charles Darwin, G. Stanley Hall, Sigmund Freud, John B. Watson and Arnold Gesell.
- a. Behaviorism _____
 - b. Developmental norms _____
 - c. Questionnaires _____
 - d. Baby biography _____
 - e. Children's sexual feelings toward parents _____

7. From the list below select the word which best completes the following statements.

formula	stimulation
needs	perspective
breast milk	miniature adults
frameworks	laboratory
playing	field
stages	context

- a. One misconception about babies is that a great deal of _____ is good, whereas, it's easy to overstimulate and continual overstimulation can hinder progress.
- b. Many different beliefs arose around _____ throughout history, including the myth that babies who drank anything else would be poisoned.
- c. Although babies can thrive on _____, scientific studies show that breast milk is better in some ways.
- d. It was a medieval belief that children should behave as _____ and still today some adults expect children to act much older than they are.
- e. All children have basic _____.
- f. Development occurs in a sequence of _____.
- g. Children have their own child-like _____.
- h. Children learn by _____.
- i. Social, family, and cultural _____ must be considered when studying children.
- j. Children's development can be explained from different theoretical _____.
- k. Researchers control the conditions of the experiment in _____ study.
- l. Observing children in their natural surroundings is known as a _____ study.