

# Developmental Psychology

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Saul McLeod, published 2012, updated 2017

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*Developmental psychology* is a scientific approach which aims to explain growth, change and consistency through the lifespan. Developmental psychology looks at how thinking, feeling, and behavior change throughout a person's life.

A significant proportion of theories within this discipline focus upon development during childhood, as this is the period during an individual's lifespan when the most change occurs.

Developmental psychologists study a wide range of theoretical areas, such as biological, social, emotion, and cognitive processes. Empirical research in this area tends to be dominated by psychologists from Western cultures such as North American and Europe, although during the 1980s Japanese researchers began making a valid contribution to the field.

The three goals of developmental psychology are to describe, explain, and to optimize development (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980). To describe development it is necessary to focus both on typical patterns of change (normative development) and on individual variations in patterns of change (i.e. idiographic development). Although there are typical pathways of development that most people will follow, no two persons are exactly alike.

Developmental psychologists must also seek to explain the changes they have observed in relation to normative processes and individual differences. Although, it is often easier to describe development than to explain how it occurs. Finally, developmental psychologists hope to optimise development, and apply their theories to help people in practical situations (e.g. help parents develop secure attachments with their children).

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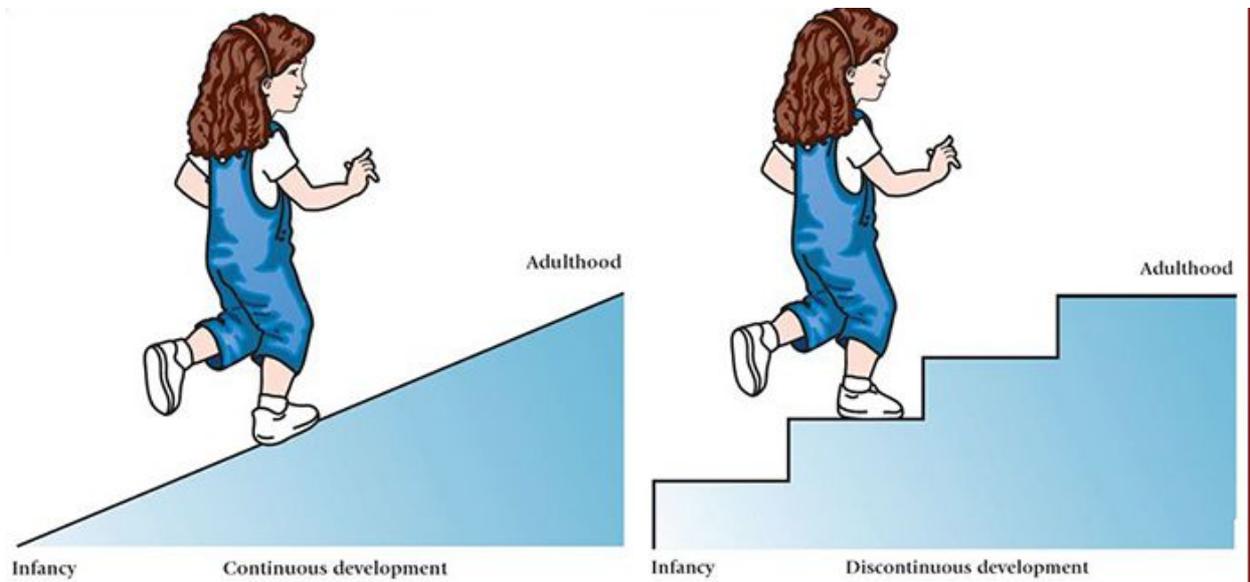
## Developmental Questions

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### Continuity vs. Discontinuity

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Think about how children become adults. Is there a predictable pattern they follow regarding thought and language and social development? Do children go through gradual changes or are they abrupt changes?



Normative development is typically viewed as a continual and cumulative process. The continuity view says that change is gradual. Children become more skillful in thinking, talking or acting much the same way as they get taller.

The discontinuity view sees development as more abrupt—a succession of changes that produce different behaviors in different age-specific life periods called stages. Biological changes provide the potential for these changes.

We often hear people talking about children going through “stages” in life (i.e. “sensori-motor stage.”). These are called developmental stages—periods of life initiated by distinct transitions in physical or psychological functioning. Psychologists of the discontinuity view believe that people go through the same stages, in the same order, but not necessarily at the same rate.

## Nature vs. Nurture

When trying to explain development, it is important to consider the relative contribution of both nature and nurture. Developmental psychology seeks to answer two big questions about heredity and environment:

1. How much weight does each contribute?
2. How do nature and nurture interact?

Nature refers to the process of biological maturation inheritance and maturation. One of the reasons why the development of human beings is so similar is because our common species heredity (DNA) guides all of us through many of the same developmental changes at about the same points in our lives. Nurture refers to the impact of the environment, which involves the process of learning through experiences.

There are two effective ways to study nature-nurture.

1. Twin studies: Identical twins have the same genotype, and fraternal twins have an average of 50% of their genes in common.
2. Adoption studies: Similarities with the biological family support nature, while similarities with the adoptive family support nurture.

## Stability vs. Change

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Stability implies personality traits present during present during infancy endure throughout the lifespan. In contrast, change theorists argue that personalities are modified by interactions with family, experiences at school, and acculturation.

This capacity for change is called plasticity. For example, Rutter (1981) discovered that somber babies living in understaffed orphanages often become cheerful and affectionate when placed in socially stimulating adoptive homes.

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## Historical Origins

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Developmental psychology as a discipline did not exist until after the industrial revolution when the need for an educated workforce led to the social construction of childhood as a distinct stage in a person's life.

The notion of childhood originates in the Western world and this is why the early research derives from this location. Initially developmental psychologists were interested in studying the mind of the child so that education and learning could be more effective.

Developmental changes during adulthood is an even more recent area of study. This is mainly due to advances in medical science, enabling people to live to an old age.

**Charles Darwin** is credited with conducting the first systematic study of developmental psychology. In 1877 he published a short paper detailing the development of innate forms of communication based on scientific observations of his infant son, Doddy.

However, the emergence of developmental psychology as a specific discipline can be traced back to 1882 when **Wilhelm Preyer** (a German physiologist) published a book entitled *The Mind of the Child*. In the book Preyer describes the development of his own daughter from birth to two and a half years. Importantly, Preyer used rigorous scientific procedure throughout studying the many abilities of his daughter.

In 1888 Preyer's publication was translated into English, by which time developmental psychology as a discipline was fully established with a further 47 empirical studies from Europe, North America and Britain also published to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge in the field.

During the 1900s three key figures have dominated the field with their extensive theories of human development, namely Jean Piaget (1896-1980), Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and John Bowlby (1907-1990). Indeed, much of the current research continues to be influenced by these three theorists.

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