

## Introduction to Child Psychology

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### Lesson Aim

Identify key concepts and issues in child psychology.

### INTRODUCTION

Child psychology is concerned with the development of a person over the course of their childhood. This involves the development of a child's mental processes (i.e. cognitive development); emotional and social behaviour. It is important to state that development does not end at adulthood. Adults continue to experience changes in their mental, emotional and social behaviours. Some characteristics are however more easily developed and changed during childhood.

For convenience, a distinction is made between the cognitive, emotional and social aspects of behaviour. However, this distinction is purely theoretical. It is made simply to help us learn and understand. In reality, the different aspects of behaviour interact with each other. When problems develop in any area of development, they usually become rapidly evident in other areas as well. The study of child psychology is partly concerned with identifying such interrelationships.

### NATURE-NURTURE

Needless to say, child psychologists are particularly interested in discovering the causes of certain patterns of behaviour in children. They are interested, for instance, in how the child's environment and relationships (e.g. home, school & neighbourhood) affect the child's development. This involves an attempt to establish causes. They are also interested in "outcomes" of certain childhood experiences; for example, how does the experience of living in a poverty stricken environment affect the later behaviour of the child? It is difficult to identify "one" solitary cause for any behaviour. Usually a behaviour is far more complex, having been influenced by a mixture of prior experiences. If you have already studied some psychology, you have probably learned that there is considerable debate amongst psychologists as to whether human behaviour is determined primarily by our genetic makeup or whether it is primarily determined by what we learn through interaction with our environment. This is called the nature-nurture debate, and is of great interest when trying to understand children's behaviour.

#### Nature

'Nature' refers to biological influences on our behaviour. Psychological attributes such as intelligence, addictiveness and depression may be caused by genetic influences (such as a gene passed on by one parent, or the human genetic makeup) or by biological factors (such as a hormonal imbalance, developmental stages, nervous system damage etc.). **Hereditary** refers to behaviours or characteristics which have been transmitted from parents to offspring. The units of hereditary are **genes**, which determine the course of development in the growing human embryo.

#### Isolating hereditary characteristics

An interesting research method used by child psychologists to determine which traits and behaviours are inherited is by comparing monozygotic twins and dizygotic twins. This provides a way of isolating genetic influence. The rationale is that since monozygotic (identical) twins are born from the same zygote (an ovum that has been fertilised by a sperm cell), they will have an identical genetic make up. Dizygotic twins are born from two different zygotes, thus their genetic make up differs as much as any two siblings genetic make up would.

For example, in a study to determine if intelligence is genetically determined, the researcher will want to learn if the intellectual capacity of identical twins is more similar, or more closely correlated than that of dizygotic twins. If it is (and this has actually been discovered to be correct) then the evidence indicates that intelligence is largely genetically determined.

# SAMPLE

## Nurture

'Nurture' refers to environmental influences, which affect the child's psychology from its birth, from the way a child is raised to the food the child eats. Environmental factors can be very difficult to identify, because in order for them to affect the child's psychology, they must be registered by the child's awareness in a way that has an impact. For instance, most infants will grow sickly and apathetic if they are deprived of human touch or affection, yet some will be far less affected, perhaps because they do not register the neglect as strongly, or maybe they have different inner resources. In general, however, we can include in environmental influences the behaviour and attitudes of parents, family and peers, the amount and kind of stimulation provided, what a child learns from parents, society, school etc., social and cultural influences, and the surrounding situation, whether it is predictable and safe or dangerous and unpredictable.

### Definition

**Correlation** – The association found between two variables.

## CAUSE VERSUS CORRELATION

Another issue in studying children's behaviour is the impossibility, in most cases, of identifying exact causes. Given the richness of human experience and the abundance of influences upon it, it is generally not possible to attribute one cause to one characteristic. For example, it has been found that children brought up in an impoverished environment often have a low level of cognitive ability. Yet we cannot say that an impoverished environment causes low cognitive ability, because we also know that there are disadvantaged children who succeed brilliantly in intellectual pursuits. Also, even if we accept that the environment does affect intelligence, we cannot isolate which particular influence in the environment causes that effect: is it inadequate education, poor nutrition, stress in the home, lack of play things (e.g. toys), lack of parental attention, or something else? It could be any one (or several) of these.

To overcome this dilemma, instead of considering "cause", child psychologists will consider the "correlation" between two variables. In the above case they say that there is a high correlation between impoverished environment and low cognitive ability in children. A correlation suggests that there is an association/relationship between two variables – in this case – the environment and cognition.

A correlation does not show that one variable causes another or the direction of the relationship. For example, if we say aggressive boys show a strong relationship with watching violent TV. Is it because watching violent TV makes children violent? Or is it because aggressive children tend to watch more violent TV?

## CONTINUITY VERSUS DISCONTINUITY

There is much debate among psychologists on the way people change as they get older.

- Some theorists argue that human development is a **process** which is continuous and sequential, with no abrupt changes.
- Others argue that development occurs in **stages**. The person moves through each stage of development in a fixed sequence.

## CROSS SECTIONAL AND LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Prominent research psychologists in the field of child psychology have employed the following two research methods to investigate how children change as they grow older.

**Cross sectional studies** involve a short term study, investigating groups of children from various different age groups, and looking into how they behave in the same situation. The behaviours of children of different ages are

# SAMPLE

compared in order to find out how a child's behaviour changes with age. This method can show how children's patterns of behaviour change as they grow, but it cannot explore the influences behind such change. Nor can it determine the "stability" of characteristics (i.e. It cannot show whether a child of a certain age, exhibits the same characteristics at a later age). Cross sectional studies cannot do this because they don't investigate the same children again at a later age. Longitudinal study is useful in overcoming this problem.

In **longitudinal studies**, the researcher observes and investigates the behaviour of a group of children over an extended period of time. The same children are assessed at intermittent intervals, allowing the researcher to determine how a specific child's behaviour changes (or remains the same) as he/she grows older. Under certain conditions, the researcher will also be able to determine factors that influenced a particular developmental pattern. There are obvious advantages to this type of study, but the time and the cost involved mean that it is used as often as it could be.

In the UK, a longitudinal study currently taking place is studying children born between certain dates in 2000 and 2001. The Project is called *The Child of the Millennium* study and will follow the children from birth to adulthood. This will produce a range of rich data that psychologists, sociologists and other researchers can use in their research. Preliminary findings are already being published. Similar longitudinal studies have also taken place in other countries.

## RELIABILITY OF VERBAL REPORTS

The first thing that researchers need before they can start working is information on the behaviour of their subjects. Such information can be obtained through observing a subject under either natural or experimental situations. In most areas of psychology, however, the research is based upon information acquired from the subjects themselves, that is, through verbal questioning and verbal report. With children, this may present some difficulties.

Children may lack the cognitive ability to clearly understand the experimenter's questions, or may be unable to express themselves well enough. In addition, they are emotionally vulnerable in strange situations, so their responses might not be an accurate reflection of their actual experiences. Investigators have also found that parents are not as reliable as might be desired. Parents' long term memory of their children's behaviour is not generally accurate, and often they are confused as to which of their children exhibited certain behaviours. Also, parents may tend to idealise their children, and subliminally censor out their child's negative behaviours.

### Definition

**Subliminal** – below our conscious perception.

Comparisons between parents verbal accounts of their child's past behaviour, and evidence in medical records of their child's previous habits (e.g. thumb sucking), often show that parents will deny remembering such habits, even when they themselves had previously reported those habits to a doctor. Parents are so very keen to give a positive image of their child-rearing practices, that they often make errors of omission, unconsciously and unintentionally. This phenomenon is known as "social desirability" for a respondent will give an answer that he/she thinks the researcher wants or answer in a way that makes them (or their child) appear to be better than they are.

Solutions to such problems of verbal inaccuracies might be to seek greater detail, hence making parents think more deeply, for example:

- Asking parents to write a detailed, hour by hour diary of a child's behaviour patterns.
- Researchers contacting parents at regular intervals to prompt them to record the child's behaviour.

## ETHICS AND EXPERIMENTS

The experimental method of research differs from the purely observational method in that the researcher manipulates aspects of the environment, and measures how this 'manipulation' affects the behaviour of the child. It is important to note that in using experimental conditions in the laboratory, or in the natural setting, the psychologist must remain ethical. Ethics is concerned with maintaining moral standards and fairness to all involved. Experimental practices must never involve any action that may harm or disturb the child subject.

While the parent usually volunteers their child as subjects in psychological experiments, the children too must be informed of such in a way that is easily understood by them. Young children however do not have the cognitive ability to totally understand the reasons and purpose of an experiment, so they may be vulnerable to feelings of unease. Such feelings should be reduced by way of a caring, sympathetic attitude in the experimenter.

Withholding information may be necessary for effective research. For example, you cannot tell a child that you are looking to see how dependant they are on their mother. Deception of the child, though, should be avoided at all costs. The child does have the right to be told information obtained from the research, as well as any conclusions made from the research.

The child's welfare should always be a top priority. A child should also be completely free to withdraw from any experiment at any stage. If significant levels of distress are identified during an experiment, the child should be withdrawn, whether they ask or not. However, it is becoming a requirement in many countries that for children under 16 to take part in experiments the parent's written permission is required.

## SET TASK

### Set Task 1

Talk with two different parents or people who work with children (e.g. teachers) about aspects of children's behaviour they have observed. These might be friends, relatives, colleagues, neighbours, or casual acquaintances.

To start the discussion, ask them:

From observing children's behaviour...

- What aspects of their behaviour do you think is influenced by genetics?
- What aspects do you think are influenced by the nurturing the child receives?

Take notes of what they say.

## Congratulations on finishing the Lesson

Now do the SAT on the next page

## Assignment 1

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### Question 1

Discuss (in no more than 1 page) why it is difficult for researchers to isolate specific causes of child behaviour - using two of your own examples.

How is the term “correlation” a solution to this problem?

### Question 2

Discuss what environmental and social aspects you think are necessary to create the “ideal” environment for a developing child in your country. You will not find the answer solely in the course notes.

Submit your own ideas and opinions.

Talk to others involved in teaching and/or caring for children in order to formulate your own opinion.

(Write 1 page)

### Question 3

Write a one sentence definition of each of the following terms in your own words, and use those definitions to start compiling a glossary that you can add to throughout the course. (A good way to do this is to keep the glossary in a separate file on your computer. This will allow you to add to the glossary and maintain alphabetical order as it develops.)

- Correlation
- Cognitive development
- Ethics
- Experiment
- Longitudinal study

### Question 4

From your Set Task, list the behaviours that the parents thought were mainly influenced by genetics, and those that they thought were mainly influenced by nurturing.

NOTE: Communicating clearly and concisely is an important skill for anyone dealing with children or parents (who may have limited time to concentrate on and understand what you are presenting). With this in mind write no more than four pages in total for this assignment, and attempt to be concise in all future assignments.

## Congratulations on finishing this

[Now start the next section on the next page](#)