

DEVELOPMENTAL AND MATURATIONAL THEORY

Developmental theory places focused attention on the way in which nature shapes human development after birth. Developmental theory is closely linked to maturational theory. It suggests that throughout life an individual's growth and development follows a predictable sequence governed by genetic programming.

The term maturation, used by Gesell in 1925 describes genetically programmed sequential patterns of change experienced by an individual.

Developmental and maturational theories track changes in human development including changes such as body size and shape, muscles and bones, cognition and changes in the nervous system.

It is argued that the timing of these changes may differ from one child to another, but the basic sequence is essentially the same for all children. It is this predictability in development that supports the notion of the 'universal' child. That is, the child we know and the commonalities amongst cohorts of diverse children.

According to developmental and maturational perspectives, development is characterized by three qualities.

- Firstly it is universal, appearing in all children across cultural and social boundaries.
- Secondly, it is sequential involving some patterns of unfolding skill or characteristics that is universally predictable.
- Thirdly, it is relatively unaffected by environmental influences such as culture, socio-economic status and gender.

More recent contributions to developmental and maturational theory have acknowledged the role environmental factors play in development, for example it has been acknowledged that poverty may have an impact on children's development.

Developmental theory was popularised by the theorist Jean Piaget. Piaget, one of the world's most influential developmental psychologists outlined in one of his most popular books four developmental stages.

The first developmental stage is the sensorimotor stage. During the sensorimotor stage (birth to age 2) children experience the world through movement and senses, using their five senses to explore the world. During the sensorimotor stage children are extremely egocentric, meaning they cannot perceive the world from others' viewpoints.

The second developmental stage is the preoperational stage (ages 2 to 7) Egocentrism begins strongly and then weakens.

The third developmental stage is the concrete operational stage (ages 7 to 12). During this period children begin to think logically but are very concrete in their thinking. Children can now conceive and think logically but only with practical aids. They are no longer egocentric.

The fourth developmental stage is the formal operational stage (ages 12 onwards). During the formal operational stage children develop abstract thought and can easily conserve and think logically in their mind.

It is worth noting that Piaget's theory did not escape criticism. Criticism included a critique of Piaget's belief that all children will automatically move to the next stage of development as they mature. Some data suggests that environmental factors may play a role in the development of formal operations. Further researchers now agree that children possess many of the abilities at an earlier age than Piaget suspected. Recent research on theory of mind has found that children of 4 or 5 years have a rather sophisticated understanding of their own mental processes as well as those of other people. For example, children of this age have some ability to take the perspective of another person, meaning they are far less egocentric than Piaget believed.

Whilst there are critics of developmental theory it is important that early years educators develop a sound knowledge of developmental theory. Through developmental understandings educators can identify children in need of additional or targeted support whilst of course casting a critical eye and avoid over generalisations.

Fundamental to the Early Years Learning Framework is a view that children's lives are characterised by belonging, being and becoming. From a developmental and maturational perspective:

- Educators facilitate children's learning by planning a rich environment with routines and play based experiences appropriate for children's unique and holistic development.
- Planned experiences may link to learning objectives in order to assist children achieve developmental expectations and milestones.
- Educators use observations of children in everyday activities to understand and interpret children's development and individual differences.
- Observations may take many forms and from diverse records, educators plan learning environments that support children's learning
- Interpretation of observation records is based on knowledge of developmental theory and research in order to draw inferences about children's learning across developmental domains (DEEWR, 2009).