

THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

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Margaret Donaldson (1926 -) Margaret Donaldson is a constructivist. She

began her career in developmental psychology when the dominant theory was behaviourism. She spent a term with Piaget in 1957, but although she was impressed by his methods, she was not convinced that he was necessarily right. Donaldson was also influenced by Vygotsky and Bruner and worked with both at Harvard in the 1960s. In 1978, Donaldson published the book *Children's Minds*. Donaldson came to the conclusion that children made errors because they were not only responding to what they were being asked to do but also trying to understand the meaning of the task. They were seeking to make 'human sense' of the situation. Donaldson's theory focusses on the concept of embedded and disembedded thinking. Thinking that is embedded or placed in a familiar context makes 'human' sense and is more easily understood by children who are able to reason with it. When children are asked to do something outside their limits of human sense, that is, when something is unfamiliar or unrealistic, their thinking is disembedded and it fails to make sense. Donaldson challenged Piaget's theory of children having a ceiling on their thinking. She encouraged practitioners to seek out what children are able to do rather than focussing on the things they cannot do. She believed that in order to educate young children effectively, practitioners must 'decentre' and try to present things from a child's point of view.

| Mode of thinking | Approximate age | Description |
|-------------------------|------------------------|---|
| Point mode | 2 to 3 months | Thinking is concerned with the here and now |
| Line mode | 8 to 9 months | Thinking includes specific events recalled from specific events |
| Construct mode | 3 to 4 years | Thinking involves considering how things are in the world or the general nature of things. There are two forms: the intellectual construct mode (such as doing sums) and the value sensing construct mode (such as appreciating a painting or piece of music) |
| Transcendent mode | Not achieved by all | Thinking moves beyond time and space. There are two forms: the intellectual transcendent mode (such as logic), and the value sensing transcendent mode (such as religious or spiritual thought) |

Tina Bruce

Tina Bruce is a social learning theorist and is influenced by the work of Froebel. She is a leading figure in early childhood education and an expert in children's learning.

In considering early childhood education, Tina Bruce looks at the three parts of the curriculum:

- 1. The child**
- 2. The context** - the people and places
- 3. The content** - what the child knows and wants and needs to know

Bruce links the three aspects of the curriculum to the ten principles of early childhood education (1996):

The best way to prepare children for their adult life is to give them what they need as children.

Children are whole people who have feelings, ideas and relationships with others, and who need to be physically, mentally, morally and spiritually healthy.

Subjects such as mathematics and art cannot be separated; young children learn in an integrated way and not in neat tidy compartments.

Children learn best when they are given appropriate responsibility, allowed to make errors, decisions and choices, and respected as autonomous learners.

Self-discipline is emphasised. Indeed, this is the only kind of discipline worth having. Reward systems are very short-term and do not work in the long-term. Children need their efforts to be valued.

There are times when children are especially able to learn particular things.

What children can do [rather than what they cannot do] is the starting point of a child's education.

Imagination, creativity and all kinds of symbolic behaviour [reading, writing, drawing, dancing, music, mathematical numbers, algebra, role play and talking] develop and emerge when conditions are favourable.

Relationships with other people [both adults and children] are of central importance in a child's life.

Quality education is about three things: the child, the context in which learning takes place, and the knowledge and understanding that the child develops and learns.

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970)

Maslow was a humanist; he is famous for his Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow worked with both Harry Harlow and E.L Thorndike. It was when Maslow was working with monkeys that he observed that some needs take priorities over others. He concluded that if you are hungry and thirsty, you will tend to have a drink first. You can live without food longer than you can without water; therefore thirst is a stronger need than hunger. In this way, being able to breathe is more important than quenching your thirst. Maslow took this idea and created a hierarchy of needs.

1. **Physiological needs** - The need for oxygen, water, protein, salt, sugar, calcium and other vitamins and minerals, temperature control, to be active, to rest, to sleep, to get rid of wastes, to avoid pain and to have sex.
2. **Safety and security needs** – When most of the physiological needs are taken care of, this layer becomes active. This includes the need for stability, protection, safe circumstances. There may be the need for structure, order and limits to be set.
3. **Belonging needs** – This layer becomes active when the previous two are mainly taken care of. A need is felt for friends, affectionate relationships and a sense of community.
4. **Esteem needs** – When the previous layers have been fulfilled we begin to look for self-esteem. There are two levels to self-esteem needs. The lower one is the need for the respect of others, the need for status, recognition, attention, reputation, appreciation and dignity. The higher level involves self-respect, confidence, competence, achievement, independence and freedom.
5. **Self-actualization** – To be able to self-actualize, you need to need to have your lower needs taken care of. When lower needs are not met, then you will not be able to fulfil your potential.

Maslow suggested that only two percent of the world's population are self-actualizers.

Harry Harlow (1906-1981)

Harry Harlow worked with Abraham Maslow researching attachment theories in primates (monkeys). His theory looked at the universal need for contact. His most famous experiment was with rhesus monkeys. He placed a baby rhesus monkey with two 'mother' monkey figures; one that was a wire frame and one that was wrapped in cloth. The wire 'mother' held a bottle for the baby to feed

from. However, the studies demonstrated that the need for affection created a stronger bond between mother and baby than physical needs such as food. The baby monkey would 'cuddle' the cloth 'mother' and only go to the wire 'mother' to satisfy its hunger.

Arnold Gesell (1880 – 1961)

Gesell's theory is concerned with the physical development of children. Through his observations of hundreds of children, he devised development norms attributed to ages. He determined the normal sequence of developments and the age range at which children should be able to do certain things, for example, roll over, sit up, crawl, walk, babble, talk etc. These age norms are still used today to study child development, and by those working in medicine, psychology and child-related fields.

When you are working with children, look out for the different stages of child development. Link this with the norms in your text books.

Kathy Sylva

Kathy Sylva is a Professor of Educational Psychology. Whilst teaching at Oxford University, she served on the Oxford Pre-School Research Group which was led by Jerome Bruner. She then published a book called *Childwatching at Playgroup and Nursery School* which broke new ground as she questioned the total free-play ideology and the limited structure of some of the sessions.

In the 1980s she evaluated the High/Scope pre-school programme which emphasises the 'plan, do and review' approach in each session. It was through this work that she began to explore structure within early education.

A theme throughout her work is the impact of education not only on subject knowledge but also on children's social skills, problem solving skills and their pre-disposition to learn. One of the related themes in her work is the role of early intervention in combating social disadvantage and exclusion. She has served on Government advisory panels including the curriculum for children from birth to seven years old, national assessment and the evaluation of programmes such as Sure Start. She is one of the leaders of the DfES research on effective provision of pre-school and primary education.

Chris Athey

Chris Athey is a constructivist. She has applied the theory of 'schema' to the

practical observation and analysis of children's learning.

Athey suggests that in Piaget's early work, he used schema to mean the general cognitive structures that are developing in children under the age of five. She sees schemas as a means to arrive at categories and classifications. For example, a baby will try out a wide range of schema on one object for example, sucking, shaking and throwing. This demonstrates the need and importance of a wide and varied range of experiences.

Schemas can be put together over a period of time to create powerful and higher level schemas.

According to Athey, schemas evolve from early actions and perceptions. They are part of the way in which young children make sense of relationships and of the environment around them.

During a research project in the 1970s when Athey (with Tina Bruce as her research assistant) was researching aspects of young children's development, her analysis of observations, drawings and paintings led the project team to identify a number of schemas.

Athey identified four stages that children go through in exploring and using schema:

1. a period of physical action where the movement does not carry any real significance.
2. using schema to symbolise something.
3. beginning to see the functional relationship between two things.
4. using schema to support thought.

Take as an example, a child interested in rotation:

Stage 1 The child twirls around and around.

Stage 2 The twirling is used to symbolise a carousel.

Stage 3 The child becomes interested in a yo-yo in that it can be shortened or lengthened when the string is wound around the yo-yo.

Stage 4 The child puts all of these ideas into words and expresses the reasoning behind rotation.

During the research project, Athey and her team identified a number of schema including:

- vertical
- back and forth and side to side
- circular or rotational
- going over, under and on top of

- going around a boundary
- containing and enveloping
- going through a boundary.

Schemas are happening in practice all of the time. Children's dominant interests of the moment will provide ways for them to represent their ideas in which they will include their preferred schema.

Schema-spotting has become an analytical tool in many early years' settings. Practitioners often think that very young children are acting in a random manner but once they scrutinise what is happening, a schema pattern may begin to emerge.

Lawrence Kohlberg

Kohlberg is a constructivist. He is well known for his theory of moral development, which he believes is dependent on the thinking of another constructivist, Piaget. Kohlberg's theory proposes that human beings develop philosophically and psychologically in a progressive fashion.

The theory proposes three levels of moral development: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional.

Pre-conventional Children are born and begin life with no sense of right and wrong. They do however quickly learn that some behaviours are rewarded whilst others are punished. Children learn to avoid the behaviours that are punished and use those that are being rewarded. The higher stage of this level is seen as the 'right' behaviour and children use this in their best interests (for their own advantage).

Conventional This second level of thinking is reached at approximately nine years of age and this is when children learn to behave according to what others want or need. They will follow established rules and respect authority. Children have now learned the conventional ways of acting on what is right and what is wrong. This level of moral thinking is what is generally found in society.

Post-conventional This level of thinking is reached at approximately 16 years of age. This is when people mature morally. Kohlberg feels that this is not reached by the majority of adults. However, most will have an understanding of and a genuine interest in the needs of others. A few reach a higher stage, based on respect for human rights and develop principles to guide their own behaviour. When this happens, they have progressed beyond just following the rules and motivation is from within.

Kohlberg believes that individuals can only progress through these stages one by one. They cannot jump the stages. He believes that moral development can be promoted through children's education. Kohlberg is in agreement with Piaget in that most moral development occurs through social interaction.