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Early Childhood Development

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The literature of developmental psychology, sociology, neurobiology, cultural anthropology, social work, education, and related fields is replete with discussions of early childhood development. In an effort to avoid duplication of the readily available literature on early childhood development, this article focuses on some of the major themes and ideas inherent in early child development studies from an intersectional perspective. Intersectionality is grounded in a critical analysis of race, class, gender, and other aspects of social location through which power is constituted. This framework is utilized to increase understanding of the broad concept of early childhood development within the field of human services, with a goal of speaking Directly to the issues of social determinants and power on a subject that is often held to be universal within its respective multidisciplinary contexts. Major areas of discussion include theories grounding the study of early childhood development, relational and ecosystems approaches to early childhood development theory and practice, and major areas of research and praxis, with a focus on multisystemic levels of intervention.

Early childhood development is a broad term within the human services professions. It refers to the individual processes of biopsychosocial maturation of children aged roughly 3 to 5 years, as well as the theories, literature, and interventions that drive practice, services, policy, and praxis for and about children in this age group. This article looks at the major areas of development, and discusses the theories and practices shaping current understandings of development.

Early Childhood Development in Mainstream U.S. Culture

The FrameWorks Institute, a nonprofit think tank dedicated to “changing the public conversation about social problems” through informed discourse, has identified early childhood development as a target area requiring an increasingly nuanced picture within mainstream U.S. culture. Literature from this project describes a typical understanding of the complex processes of early childhood development in the United States as a so-called black box. This discomfort leads to increased reductionist thinking, relying on what is familiar, observable, and tangible, rather than grappling with the complexity of the topic. Therefore, the default model of early childhood development in mainstream culture equates successful or healthy development with a self-reliant, autonomous individual, with physical safety, cognitive development, and socialization being the key determinants of a seemingly innate and mysterious process.

However, the vast literature on early childhood development makes it clear that the process of development is achieved in a relational context, inextricably dependent on the multiple, overlapping (and often invisible) environments in which development occurs. Fully understanding child development means also understanding an ecological or person-in-environment perspective in which individuals and their environment have active, multidirectional influences on each other. Individuals cannot be separated from the factors or influences of their immediate environments. This calls for a more precise understanding of the environmental and social contexts in which families raise children. A comprehensive understanding of early childhood development must incorporate an awareness of the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments, particularly in defining and shaping risk and protective factors for individuals and their communities.

The Separate Self Model

Ideas that become part of a culture's dominant narrative are inherently shaped by that culture's institutions. In early childhood development, the disciplines of psychology and sociology in the United States are key players in the idealization of a separate, self-reliant individual as the desired outcome of traditional models of development.

Traditional models and theories of development (as advanced by Sigmund Freud, Margaret Mahler, Erik Erickson, and Jean Piaget, among others) conclude that self-reliance and autonomy are obtained through the mastery of a series of increasingly complex and “essential” crises, largely involving separation of oneself from others. Therefore, the individual is defined as someone whose primary identification is in his or her separation from or nonreliance on others. Within separate self models, development occurs within a vacuum, in which the relationships of the growing child to caregivers, community, and environmental context are de-emphasized, leading to an appearance of universal applicability.

Traditional models of development are the frameworks that create benchmarks for healthy or normative development in the early years. The following brief overview of three major developmental theorists who have historically emphasized a separate self model focuses on descriptions of development during ages 3 to 5 years:

- ♦ Freud (1856–1939). In Freud's three-stage psychosexual model of development, infants and children become self-actualized through increasing mastery over unconscious drives. The anal stage is the second stage of development, and occurs from ages 1 to 3 years. The goal of this stage is to increase control over one's bowel and bladder, frequently identified in the contemporary developmental goal of toilet training.
- ♦ Erikson (1902–94). In Erikson's eight-stage psychosocial framework of development, an individual resolves basic psychosocial conflicts along a continuum of positive and negative outcomes in each stage. Each stage also lays the ground for the stage above it. In early childhood, the psychosocial conflict is termed “autonomy versus shame and self-doubt,” in which children are guided toward independence and individuation through exercise of free will. In this stage, Erikson notes that if children do not receive these critical opportunities in free choice, they will have a “lasting propensity for doubt and shame.”
- ♦ Piaget (1896–1980). Piaget's four-stage developmental model focuses on a child's ability to make meaning of the world through physical and cognitive experiences. Motor skills, language, and abstract cognition are viewed as dependent, sequentially acquired phenomena that develop completely through the individual's isolated experience. Early childhood is described in the preoperational stage, in which children use symbols to represent and communicate about their environment. In this stage, language and imaginative play are developed.

Critiques of the Separate Self Model

The relational movement in feminist psychology, most notably the work of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute and the Harvard Project on the Development of Women and Girls (spearheaded by Carol Gilligan), offers critiques of the universality of the separate self models. The work coming out of the Harvard Project is notable for its emphasis on the role of voice, authenticity, and power in the course of development, particularly the ways in which dominant power structures work to silence the voices and

experiences of women and girls.

Gilligan was one of the first scholars to explicate the essential problems in separate self models of development—mainly, that the theories were developed based only on the experiences of (and research with) white men and boys, and that all diversity or difference in these models (and therefore experiences that may appear different) was identified by the models themselves as a deficit. This did not adequately capture experiences outside of a narrow range defined as normal, and immediately defined alternate expressions as deviant, leading to increased labeling and stigmatization along the lines of race, class, and gender. Gilligan and colleagues argued that defining a single group's experience as normative reinforced preexisting structures of social power and did not adequately capture the experiences of marginalized groups.

Gilligan's colleagues at the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute developed the relational cultural theory, which included revised models of development. Relational cultural theories of development are built on the essential premise that individuals grow in, through, and toward relationships throughout their life spans. The model notes that strength occurs in relationship, and development moves toward ever-increasing relational complexity rather than toward isolation. The goal of relational models of development emphasizes the self in relation to the world, positing that human beings are hardwired for relational connection and are inevitably shaped by their relationships to others and their environment. The concepts of relational cultural theory become particularly important in people's understanding of the importance of attachment for prosocial development and the complex web of environmental factors that form the most recent advances in early childhood development.

From Theory to Practice

Current practice in early childhood development revolves around understanding and enhancing the growth and maturation of children from ages 3 to 5 years, their families, and their communities. This area is identified as a critical period of growth for children, laying a foundation for intellectual, physical, and emotional well-being throughout their lifespans. Research and interventions focus on differences in developmental outcomes and ways of strengthening various levels of the environment to increase the likelihood of fostering ongoing growth for children and their communities. Areas for environmental interventions include (1) the microenvironment of the family, (2) the mezzoenvironment of the neighborhood or community, and (3) the macroenvironment of the wider society.

Scholar Judith Bernhardt traces the understanding of diversity in the field of early childhood development and identifies the following four phases from the discipline's formative years through the present: (1) diversity as deficit, (2) diversity as disadvantage, (3) diversity as noncore difference, and (4) diversity as fundamental heterogeneity. She notes that the stages are broad sweeping but have real impact in policy design (particularly in the definitions of need over time), implementation, and efficacy.

Major Domains in Early Childhood Development

Practitioners in early childhood development have identified the following domains as major, interconnected areas of development:

- ♦ *Cognitive and neuro-development.* The development of the architecture of a

child's brain, leading to the capacity to make meaning of one's experiences, to engage in the world, and to regulate affect and behavior.

- ♦ *Affective and social development.* A child's capacity to identify, regulate, and express emotional responses, and then to utilize these experiences in relationships with family, peers, and institutions.
- ♦ *physical development.* A child's internal and external biological maturation, leading to increased capacity to act in the world, locomotion, and the so-called hardwired circuitry developed in the child's body.
- ♦ *Identity and relational development.* A child's sense of self in the world, particularly as related to issues of social location, power, and ability to affect change in the world, achieved through relationships. The concepts of attachment theory (a child's sense of security and stability in relationships) are included in this domain and have significant impact on affective regulation and social development.

Significant Trends in Policy and Praxis

Much of the literature and interventions in early childhood development focus on identifying differences in developmental outcomes in the four domains listed above and determining effective strategies for increasing the likelihood of optimal development. This is largely done through the identification of risk and protective factors, including stress and relationships.

Stress. The presence or absence of stress plays a significant role in the development of a child's neural circuitry, which lays the foundation for affect and behavior regulation, and later capacity to engage in educational opportunities. Children who are exposed to prolonged stress are shown to have decreased skills in executive functioning, caused by chronic activation of the flight-or-fright response in the face of pervasive stress. Children who are exposed to prolonged stress have increased difficulty with working memory, attention, and impulse control, leading to difficulties in responding accurately to actual or perceived stressors throughout their life spans. However, if children possess or develop the capacity to regulate stress effectively, they are able to manage adverse situations more effectively throughout their life spans.

The neurobiology of stress is compounded by overlapping factors of chronic poverty, exposure to racism and societal devaluation, and witnessing or surviving interpersonal and/or community violence. Thus, children in communities where there is more stress are significantly more likely than those in lower-stress communities to experience the adverse developmental effects associated with stress.

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Relationships. The presence of caring, strong relationships with caregivers or caring adults significantly increases developmental outcomes, particularly the ability to regulate affect and behavior. Growth-fostering, mutually empathic relationships are the operative ingredient in secure attachment, increasing a child's sense of safety and mitigating the impact of stress in a child's life. When these relationships are compromised (e.g., through trauma, loss, or increased stress on the part of caregivers), children are less likely to internalize a sense of safety or expectation that their needs will be met. This sense of uncertainty can amplify the impact of stressors.

Intervention

Early childhood is the preferred time for interventions because it provides opportunities for change before patterns of neural activity and behavioral trajectories are firmly established.

The double and triple jeopardy of being a poor child of color exposed to trauma increases risk for individuals as well as communities. Thus, multiple levels of ongoing intervention are indicated. These include interventions specifically aimed at increasing individual and family capacities for managing stress simultaneously with policy and social justice interventions focused on eliminating the root causes of increased stress and adversity in disadvantaged communities. Best practices literature also stresses the efficacy of interventions developed with individual and community ownership and participation across all levels of the intervention process.

Conclusions

Early childhood development identifies major milestones and normative growth trajectories from the ages of 3 to 5 years in U.S. culture. These areas include physical development, cognitive development, and social development. Early childhood development is a broad field with implications for human services professionals in a number of fields, including education, childhood mental health, pediatrics, clinical case management, advocacy, and research across the social sciences. A comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to this complex subject is critical to collaboration across disciplines, leading to more effective outcomes.

- early childhood
- childhood
- relational development
- children
- maturation
- the self
- praxis

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See Also:

- [Behavioral Health Disparities for Racial and Ethnic Minority Populations](#)
- [Changing the Client Versus Changing the Environment](#)
- [Childhood Trauma](#)
- [Discrimination and Institutional Racism](#)
- [Head Start/Prekindergarten Programs](#)
- [Poverty](#)

Further Readings

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