

JEAN PIAGET'S COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT THEORY

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development suggests that children move through four different stages of mental development. His theory focuses not only on understanding how children acquire knowledge, but also on understanding the nature of intelligence.

Piaget's stages are:

- Sensorimotor stage: birth to 2 years
- [Preoperational stage](#): ages 2 to 7
- Concrete operational stage: ages 7 to 11
- Formal operational stage: ages 12 and up

Piaget believed that children take an active role in the learning process, acting much like little scientists as they perform experiments, make observations, and learn about the world. As kids interact with the world around them, they continually add new knowledge, build upon existing knowledge, and adapt previously held ideas to accommodate new information.

The Sensorimotor Stage

Ages: Birth to 2 Years

Major Characteristics and Developmental Changes:

- The infant knows the world through their movements and sensations
- Children learn about the world through basic actions such as sucking, grasping, looking, and listening
- Infants learn that things continue to exist even though they cannot be seen (object permanence)
- They are separate beings from the people and objects around them
- They realize that their actions can cause things to happen in the world around them

During this earliest stage of cognitive development, infants and toddlers acquire knowledge through sensory experiences and manipulating objects. A child's entire experience at the earliest period of this stage occurs through basic reflexes, senses, and motor responses.

It is during the sensorimotor stage that children go through a period of dramatic growth and learning. As kids interact with their environment, they are continually making new discoveries about how the world works.

The cognitive development that occurs during this period takes place over a relatively short period of time and involves a great deal of growth. Children not only learn how to perform physical actions such as crawling and walking; they also learn a great deal about language from the people with whom they interact. Piaget also broke this stage down into a number of different sub stages. It is during the final part of the sensorimotor stage that early representational thought emerges.

Piaget believed that developing object permanence or object constancy, the understanding that objects continue to exist even when they cannot be seen, was an important element at this point of development.

By learning that objects are separate and distinct entities and that they have an existence of their own outside of individual perception, children are then able to begin to attach names and words to objects.

The Preoperational Stage

Ages: 2 to 7 Years

Major Characteristics and Developmental Changes:

- Children begin to think symbolically and learn to use words and pictures to represent objects.
- Children at this stage tend to be egocentric and struggle to see things from the perspective of others.
- While they are getting better with language and thinking, they still tend to think about things in very concrete terms.

The foundations of language development may have been laid during the previous stage, but it is the emergence of language that is one of the major hallmarks of the preoperational stage of development.

Children become much more skilled at pretend play during this stage of development, yet continue to think very concretely about the world around them.

At this stage, kids learn through pretend play but still struggle with logic and taking the point of view of other people. They also often struggle with understanding the idea of constancy.

For example, a researcher might take a lump of clay, divide it into two equal pieces, and then give a child the choice between two pieces of clay to play with. One piece of clay is rolled into a compact ball while the other is smashed into a flat pancake shape. Since the flat shape looks larger, the preoperational child will likely choose that piece even though the two pieces are exactly the same size.

The Concrete Operational Stage

Ages: 7 to 11 Years

Major Characteristics and Developmental Changes

- During this stage, children begin to think logically about concrete events
- They begin to understand the concept of conservation; that the amount of liquid in a short, wide cup is equal to that in a tall, skinny glass, for example
- Their thinking becomes more logical and organized, but still very concrete
- Children begin using inductive logic, or reasoning from specific information to a general principle

While children are still very concrete and literal in their thinking at this point in development, they become much more adept at using logic. The egocentrism of the previous stage begins to disappear as kids become better at thinking about how other people might view a situation.

While thinking becomes much more logical during the concrete operational state, it can also be very rigid. Kids at this point in development tend to struggle with abstract and hypothetical concepts.

During this stage, children also become less egocentric and begin to think about how other people might think and feel. Kids in the concrete operational stage also begin to understand that their thoughts are unique to them and that not everyone else necessarily shares their thoughts, feelings, and opinions.

The Formal Operational Stage

Ages: 12 and Up

Major Characteristics and Developmental Changes:

- At this stage, the adolescent or young adult begins to think abstractly and reason about hypothetical problems
- Abstract thought emerges
- Teens begin to think more about moral, philosophical, ethical, social, and political issues that require theoretical and abstract reasoning
- Begin to use deductive logic, or reasoning from a general principle to specific information

The final stage of Piaget's theory involves an increase in logic, the ability to use deductive reasoning, and an understanding of abstract ideas. At this point, people become capable of seeing multiple potential solutions to problems and think more scientifically about the world around them.

The ability to thinking about abstract ideas and situations is the key hallmark of the formal operational stage of cognitive development. The ability to systematically plan for the future and reason about hypothetical situations are also critical abilities that emerge during this stage.

It is important to note that Piaget did not view children's intellectual development as a quantitative process; that is, kids do not just add more information and knowledge to their existing knowledge as they get older. Instead, Piaget suggested that there is a qualitative change in how children think as they gradually process through these four stages. A child at age 7 doesn't just have more information about the world than he did at age 2; there is a fundamental change in how he thinks about the world.