

Part 1

The Study of Human Development



Jacquilyn aged 6 months



Jacquilyn aged 2 years



Jacquilyn aged 4.5 years



Jacquilyn aged 15 years

Jacquilyn (now aged 15 years)

- 1. **Who/what has helped you grow and change?** 'My family – they have been there for me and helped me realise right from wrong – they have given me a good life – and secondly going through school – school has helped me to grow as a person and educated me and given me confidence and helped me be a more outgoing person.'
- 2. **What does the future hold for you?** 'I would like a family, good quality job and happiness with people around me that love me in a safe environment.'

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Excerpt  
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Seeing children in context

'... still within the little children's eyes'

I sought no more that after which I strayed  
In face of man or maid;  
But still within the little children's eyes  
Seems something, something that replies,  
They at least are for me, surely for me!  
I turned me to them very wistfully  
But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair  
With dawning answers there  
Their angel plucked them from me by the hair.

Francis Thompson, 'The Hound of Heaven'

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- After reading this chapter you should be able to:
- explain the nature of psychology and developmental psychology
  - understand the reasons for studying child development
  - identify factors shaping the way we view children and families
  - list a number of commonly held views of children
  - explain how theoretical orientations flow from views of children.

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## Introduction

General and academic interest in the study of child development has continued to increase. The interest in the field extends broadly across various disciplines. For example, a report in April 2009 by the US-based Robert Wood Johnson Foundation concluded that interventions most likely to improve the health of all Americans were ‘programs that promote early childhood development and that support children and families’. A report from Brazil recommended prioritising ‘actions related to health promotion of children and adolescents’. ‘We look forward to assessing how to adapt the policy recommendations for England to the rest of the world,’ says Rüdiger Krech, director of the World Health Organization department of ethics, equity, trade and human rights. He argues that giving every child the best start in life ‘is critical in setting the foundation for a lifetime of health and successful contribution to society’.

A quick glance in the relevant sections of the local library or bookstore will show that through the ages children have been the subject of description by poets, novelists, philosophers and playwrights. Dietrich Tiedermann is generally acknowledged by historians of child psychology as a pioneer in the field of systematic description in child development. In 1787 Tiedermann published a study of his own child, predicting that it would soon be followed by many others. True to his prediction, the late 19th century was witness to a growing interest in child and adolescent development. The latter part of the 20th century has in many ways produced a veritable harvest of knowledge regarding child, adolescent and family development.

In this chapter consideration is given to the various factors that shape the way we view children and the approaches psychology has taken to the study of children. Some of the many different ways of defining the word ‘family’ are outlined in the first of the family life-cycle series.

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## The nature of psychology

Psychology is a relatively young discipline, and it would be fair to suggest that some confusion still exists amongst the general public as to just what it involves. In all likelihood an informal chat with friends or family would elicit a wide range of answers to a question concerning the nature of psychology. The answers would probably include misconceptions (for example, psychology involves reading people’s minds or body language), and/or confusion (such as about the difference between psychiatry and psychology). Psychology basically grew out of the disciplines of philosophy and physiology. Most psychologists would *generally* agree that psychology includes the study of:

- overt, observable or otherwise measurable behaviour – for example, facial expressions, or physiological changes such as heart rate
- unseen mental processes, such as thoughts and dreams.

As psychology has emerged as a field of study in its own right in the past 100 years, different branches of the discipline have evolved. Psychologists now work in many areas: teaching in tertiary institutions, counselling in schools, studying animal behaviour, working with people who have a physical or intellectual handicap, to name but a few. In Australia, the minimum period for basic training in psychology is six years: four years of undergraduate university training and two years of supervision by a qualified psychologist. Many psychologists have additional training at a Masters or PhD level.

Psychologists are now being challenged in this postmodern era to think beyond mainstream empirical ways of researching and understanding child development and to embrace a more critical approach to the theories and assumptions that underpin the field of developmental psychology.



'Joy is my name' (W. Blake): an image of childhood.

Developmental psychology

A field of study in psychology that is concerned with how the individual grows and changes from conception till death is known as **developmental psychology** (Sroufe 2009). Within this field one special avenue of interest is child development, which is particularly concerned with the study of the individual from conception to adolescence. This text is essentially a child development text. In focusing on child development, consideration is given to describing the physical, cognitive and socio-emotional changes the individual undergoes. More particularly, a number of broad questions are addressed in this text:

**developmental psychology**  
the study of the individual from conception.

- How do children change as they develop?
- What factors influence the developmental changes?
- What individual differences exist in children’s growth and development?

Cairns and Cairns (1998, p. 90) have noted that ‘developmental psychology has its own distinctive history, which is associated with, but independent of, the history of experimental or general psychology’. It is reasonable to argue that a dominant theme in the field (as verified by an examination of the contents page of significant journals) is that of raising children (e.g. Darwin’s research – see Chapter 3). This arose from the writings of early philosophers such as John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and religious writers such as John Wesley (discussed later in this chapter).

Numerous questions arise out of everyday observations by parents, teachers and healthcare workers regarding child development. For example, what are the guidelines for normative development (see Gesell, in Chapter 6)? Another significant theme is whether there is some sequence to development such that an orderly progression can be identified. Other significant themes concern the nature of the factors influencing such development. That is, what respective roles do genetics and environment play in the development of children? Questions such as these are an important part of the subject matter of psychology and in particular of child development. As Sroufe (2009, p. 179) has noted:

If there is an overall message from our 30-year study of individual adaptation, it is that persons develop (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, and Collins, 2005). We are not simply born to be who we become. Our patterns of adaptation and maladaptation, our particular liabilities and strengths, whether and how we are vulnerable or resilient – all are complex products of a lengthy developmental process.

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## Why study child development?

Child development is a young science and the systematic study of children is a relatively recent phenomenon. Courses in child, adolescent and family development today embrace a range of professions including teaching, psychology, social work, child care and nursing, to name but a few.

The reasons for studying children are as broad and complex as the field itself. In reading the literature one becomes aware of how accurately theorists such as Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Karen Horney, Leila Berg and Jean Piaget observed children. In part it is recognised that through the study of children’s behaviour we may better come to understand adult behaviour. As John Milton commented in *Paradise Lost*, ‘the childhood shows the man as morning shows the day’.

From a somewhat different perspective, Charles Darwin believed that the child was the link between animal and human species. The birth of his son William Erasmus (nicknamed ‘Doddy’) on 27 December 1839 prompted Charles Darwin to begin a

diary description of the development of his son – ‘a baby biography’. By observing the development of the infant, Darwin believed some understanding could be reached of the species itself. For example, in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (first published in 1872), Darwin argued that emotional expressivity was basically a physiological matter and that expressive gestures were largely universal and innate.

Everyone who has had much to do with young children must have seen how naturally they take to biting when in a passion. It seems instinctive in them as in young crocodiles, who snap their little jaws as soon as they emerge from the egg (Darwin 1965, pp. 241–2).

Charles Darwin's observations were designed to explore the links between animal and human species. The infant was essentially depicted as a biological organism influenced and shaped to a greater or lesser degree by the environment. The study of children along with the study of ‘primitives’ was seen as the key to better understanding the development of ‘normal’ behaviour. The concept of ‘recapitulation’ – understood as the idea that ‘ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny’, or that the individual in her/his lifetime demonstrates the patterns and stages exhibited in the development of the species – underpins the writing of many of the early theorists. The surge of interest in the study of children, the identification of their ‘stages’ of development and the obsession with minutely recording ‘normal’ growth and development underpinned the motivations of much early research.

Other investigators were less interested in comparing human and animal species than Darwin was. Thus, Gabriel Compayre believed that information concerning the child's early years would serve to illuminate later development: ‘If childhood is the cradle of humanity, the study of childhood is the cradle and necessary introduction to all future psychology’ (Compayre 1896, p. 3).

Medinnus (1976) identified four main reasons for studying children:

1. an intellectual curiosity concerning natural phenomena
2. the need to gain information to guide children's behaviour
3. increasing our ability to predict behaviour
4. the need to understand our own behaviour.

In searching for an answer to the question of why we study the development of children, it is vitally important not to lose sight of the historical and cultural context in which childhood exists. It is a salutary point to consider that the very words ‘child’ and ‘childhood’ have changed their meaning within the context of recent Western history and have different meanings in different cultures.

### ‘Gazing at’ children

The study of child development does not occur in an historical, cultural or philosophical vacuum. Slee and Shute (2003) consider the nature of developmental psychology. The conduct of the science of the study of child development went hand in hand with the development of an empirical methodology that clearly separated the ‘observer’ from





Gazing at children.

the ‘observed’ in the best interests of the scientific endeavour. The infant/child/adolescent was ‘objectified’, in the spotlight of this critical ‘gaze’. As Burman (1994) notes, this exercise involved a ‘gendered division of labor’ with men viewed as having the necessary credentials to conduct objective, verifiable observations. ‘Women were excluded from the investigative enterprise because they were declared constitutionally incapable of regarding their children with the requisite objectivity’ (p. 12).

Furthermore, in a postmodern era childhood is best viewed as a cultural and historical construction in order to appreciate ‘the ways in which characterizations of children function symbolically as carriers of deep assumptions about the construction of human subjectivity, about the

ultimate meaning of the human life cycle, and about human forms of knowledge’ (p. 514). This will necessarily challenge the manner in which research is conducted (see Chapter 2) as a means for furthering our understanding of child development.

Factors shaping views of children and families

Writers have identified a number of factors that have shaped our views of children and families over the centuries. Childhood, instead of being viewed as a stage of life worthy of respect in its own right, with its own unique features, has been too often viewed as disconnected from important human endeavours, or at best as preparation for the future. It is important for educators to recognise that the child is not a deficient adult who is shorter in stature, lighter in weight, limited in experience, and less cognitively sophisticated. Recognition of the qualitatively different nature of the child’s life is important.

Two factors consistently identified as providing an understanding of how we view children are history and culture. As Ariès (1962) has reminded us, little, if anything at all, escapes history and culture, not even the central elements of life itself – women, men and children. A third factor that will also be discussed in this chapter is the philosophy of science.

On the issue of development, Nelson Mandela has commented:

In judging our progress as individuals, we tend to concentrate on external factors such as one’s social position, influence and popularity, wealth and standard of education ... but internal factors may be even more crucial in assessing one’s development as a



human being: humility, purity, generosity, absence of vanity, readiness to serve your fellow men – qualities within the reach of every human soul (letter to Winnie Mandikizela Mandela, 1977).

## The child and family in history

In beginning a study of childhood, it is important to appreciate the view expressed by the social historian Philippe Ariès, that childhood as it is understood in Western society is a relatively recent phenomenon. Following Ariès' (1962) pioneering writings on the history of childhood, a number of writers have supported his views.

Schorsch (1979, p. 11) observes that:

thinkers of the 16th century, and of the preceding centuries as well, agreed that the child is nothing more than a lower animal – 'the infant mewling and puking in the nurse's arms' as Shakespeare put it baldly but succinctly.

As Schorsch goes on to note, our contemporary beliefs regarding the innocence and importance of the early years may blind us to the frequent heartlessness and cruelty with which children in Western cultures were treated in the past. For example, consider the message preached by the Bishop of Worcester in 1552:

I exhort you, in God's behalf, to consider the matter, ye parents: suffer not your children to let, or tell false tales. When you hear one of your children to make a lie take him up, and give him three or four good stripes and tell him that it is naught; and when he make another lie, give him six or eight stripes and I am sure when you serve him so, he will leave it (Pinchbeck & Hewitt 1969).

Elkind (1987) has captured some of the complexity of the changing views of childhood from antiquity to the present time. He notes that in ancient Greece the stress was upon educating children into the laws and cultural mores of the time. Children in Babylon went to school at the age of 6, while in Roman times the children attended school around the age of 7 to acquire reading and writing skills. However, according to Elkind, children in mediaeval Europe fared far less well. During this time the prevailing image of children emphasised that the child was a chattel or piece of property of the parent and the state. All in all, during the mediaeval period the child did not account for much in the eyes of society, as a 16th-century rhyme indicates:

Of all the months the first behold,  
January two-faced and cold  
Because its eyes two ways are cast  
To face the future and the past.  
Thus the child six summers old  
Is not worth much when all is told.

Cited in Schorsch 1979, p. 23

**Children as property**

In Western societies history shows that for centuries children have been looked upon as property and, more particularly, as the property of their fathers. Paternalism and patriarchy have been significant elements in parent–child relationships for quite some time. Some basis for understanding the contemporary status of children in Western societies is found in the writings of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. In Bertrand Russell's description of Aristotelian ethics, he noted that while Aristotle considered human beings as 'ethically equal':

[T]he justice of a master or a father is a different thing from that of a citizen, for a son or slave is property, and there can be no injustice to one's own property. (Russell 1974, p. 186)

Law elaborated between AD 1300 and AD 1800 prescribed the relationship between parent and child in terms of trust. The parent's rights came from the Crown and the Crown reserved the right to intervene and protect the child's rights and interests. However, as Fraser (1976, p. 322) notes:

While the court would intervene to protect a child's interests, it did not provide the child with a vehicle to present his grievances to the court, nor did it guarantee the child the right of independent representation.

Apart from the law, some interesting insight is gained into the status of children in Western society from the writings of 17th- and 18th-century philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and John Stuart Mill. Hobbes, writing in the 17th century, argued that children were cared for solely because they were capable of serving their father and should be assigned a position of complete dependence. 'Like the imbecile, the crazed and the beasts over ... children ... there is no law' (Hobbes 1931, p. 257). The implication of Hobbes' argument is that children have no natural rights and no rights by social contract, because they lack the ability to make formal contracts with other members of society and cannot understand the consequences of such contracts.

Later in the same century, John Locke, arguing from a different perspective, considered children to be under the jurisdiction of their parents until they were capable of fending for themselves. Until such time, children were thought to lack understanding and therefore they could not assert their will (Russell 1974). Unlike Hobbes, Locke believed that both adults and children possessed certain natural rights, which needed protection. Parental benevolence was believed to be sufficient to ensure that children's rights were protected. Locke's outlook rejected the proprietary aspect of parenthood, replacing it with the concept of children as God's property. Locke's description of children as lacking in understanding reflected the view that children needed to develop adult capacities for reasoning and understanding. Until such time, parents were under a God-given obligation to care for children. By implication, where parents failed to fulfill their obligation to children, the state would be empowered to do so.

The late 18th and 19th centuries in Europe were witness to the dramatic social and economic changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. In large part children fared