

## Child Development

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### Introduction

This knowledge set seeks to explore some of the key concepts and messages from research and the wider professional literature in relation to the development of children with diverse needs and from different backgrounds.

### Child development and the policy/ legal context

The legislative framework within which family court advisors operate requires assessments and decisions to be based on a child's developmental needs. Sections 1 of both the Children Act 1989 and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 require consideration of the 'welfare checklist', both which include the child's developmental needs, and wishes and feelings, in accordance with their age and understanding. The 'threshold criteria' for care or supervision orders (s31 of the Children Act 1989) includes 'impairment of health' and 'impairment of development'. Aldgate (2006, p.17) explains: 'It is difficult to see how any professional can implement the primary legislation without knowing about, and understanding about, children's development'.

### Child development: Some key ideas and concepts

#### *Milestones and Stages*

The use of milestones, as outlined in the work of Sheridan (1997) and cited in the DH practice guidance accompanying the Assessment Framework (DH, 2000) provide a detailed framework for considering the developmental progress of infants and young children. The child development chart: 0-11 years produced by Research in Practice (2010) is a useful quick-reference tool for practitioners. This can be a useful tool to identify delay and impairments as early as possible, so that these can be addressed in order for the child to reach her or his optimal development. However there is also a risk of these being used to label children as 'abnormal' or 'defective'. Marchant (2000, p. 212) suggests that if a disability is identified, then the milestones for that individual child would have to be carefully redefined: 'Professionals should assess whether a child is developing in line with what would be expected of a child with similar impairments at a similar level of development (not necessarily age)'. This approach is in line with the threshold requirements for significant harm (s31 of the Children Act 1989).

When using ideas about developmental progression on the basis of the above or other normative framework, caution is advised. Woodhead (1990), and Owusu-Bempah and Howitt (2000) have highlighted the difference in emphasis that different cultures and societies place on the relationship between self and others.

## Developmental dimensions and theories

There are different interwoven areas of development, each which contribute to the development of the whole child, e.g. physical, emotional, cognitive, psycho-social. There is broad agreement that children have to progress systematically through different stages, often associated with age, to become more competent, integrated and complex, even though there can be considerable variation in the progression of individual children (Aldgate, 2006).

Bee (2000, pp 18 - 23) argues that when thinking about how our knowledge of how children develop, three grand schemes have exerted considerable influence. These are:

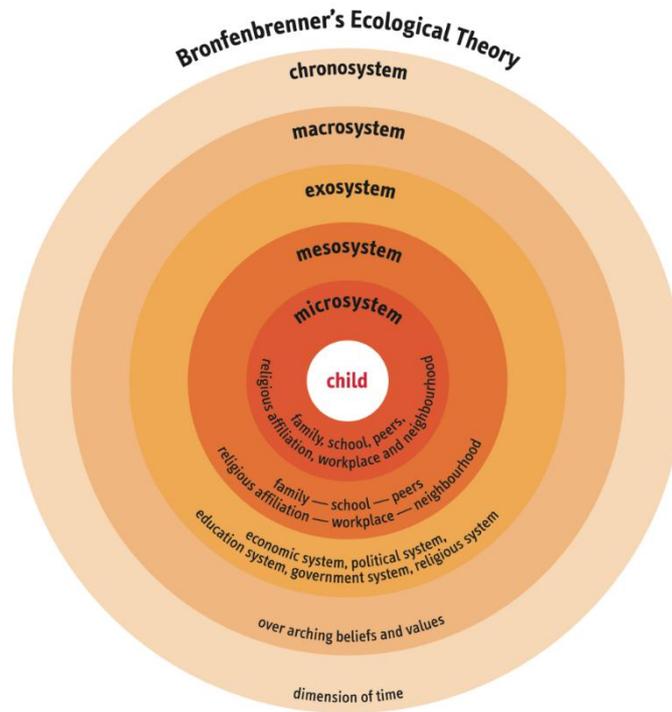
- *Psychoanalytic Theories* (Freud and Erikson). Although very different, both theorists see development in stages, with each stage centred on a particular form of tension or task. The degree of success a child experiences in meeting the demands of these various stages will depend very heavily on the interactions she has with key people in her world.
- *Cognitive-Developmental Theories* (Piaget and Vygotsky). Rather than personality development, these theorists' interests were primarily about a child's cognitive development. Vygotsky differed from Piaget in that he suggested that complex forms of thinking have their origins in social interactions rather than in the child's private explorations as Piaget proposed (Duncan, 1995)
- *Learning Theories* (Skinner and Bandura). The focus of these theorists emphasizes the way the environment shapes the child more than on how the child understands her experiences; seeing human behaviour as enormously plastic, shaped by predictable processes of learning, especially classical and operant conditioning, observational learning, and positive, negative and intrinsic reinforcements.

Bee (2000) argues that these grand schemes are less potent now, but still have a residual impact on the knowledge base, which increasingly highlights the dynamic and complex nature of human development.

## The Ecological Approach

Bronfenbrenner's (2005) ecological theory of child development has made a seminal contribution to our understanding of how children and young people progress

through childhood. The core ideas and principles are reflected in his 'person, process, context and time (ppct)' formulation. He depicts, as shown below, the multiple influences on a child's life through a tessellated configuration of spheres of social influence.



This model of child development provides a framework for understanding the process of mutual influence between a child, their family, local community and wider society. It focuses on the balance between supportive, protective factors, as well as adverse, stressful factors and the consequent impact on children's development. (Jack & Gill, 2003).

A number of studies, including the work of Rutter (2000), highlight the cumulative effect of various different kinds of stressors on children's development, including abuse, neglect and family conflict. A child may be able to cope with one or two, but as the stressors increase, so does the likelihood that the child's development will be impaired. Cleaver *et al.* (2011, p. 93) found that children most at risk of suffering significant harm are those living in families exposed to a multiplicity of problems, such as a combination of one or more of the following: parental learning disability, mental illness, problem drinking or drug use and domestic violence.

## Implications for the work of FCAs

Key issues that need to be considered prior to the first visit to a child and reviewed in light of on-going work include:

- What is the child's age and stage of development – are there any disabilities that need to be considered? If so, do additional arrangements need to be made to facilitate communication?
- What is the child's race, cultural, and religious background? What impact may the guardian's race and gender have on the child? What is the child's first language and is an interpreter required?
- What is the child's emotional state? What information is available on experiences of harm, separation and loss? If separated from parents, under what circumstances and what is known about the child's views?
- What information does the child already have about the court proceedings and role of the family court advisor?
- Given the above, what written information, toys and play equipment does the guardian need to take to the first visit? How are sibling groups with children of different ages and stages of development going to be managed? (Gupta, 2008)

## **Summary points**

- Whilst it is important to have an understanding of commonalities and the general parameters of children's development, it is crucial that differences are not used to stigmatize and pathologise children. This is particularly pertinent for children with disabilities.
- It needs to be acknowledged that the wider social and cultural contexts influence the development of normative ideas about children's development. Practitioners need to make critical use of the literature in ways that recognizes difference and values individuals intrinsically.
- The Ecological approach provides a useful framework a framework for understanding the process of mutual influence between a child, their family, local community and wider society. It focuses on the balance between supportive, protective factors, as well as adverse, stressful factors and the consequent impact on children's development. It reminds us that relationships matter and that human development is primarily a social affair.

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