Piaget’s Developmental Stages

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INTRODUCTION

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a Swiss psychologist whose cognitive-developmental theory left a lasting impression on how child development is viewed. He felt that children are not simply empty vessels into which adults pour knowledge (Piaget, 1952). Piaget based much of his theory on his masterful observations of children, and demonstrated many experiments that study how children adapt and react to their world (Vidal, 2000).

One of the main points of his theory was that of adaptation (Piaget, 1971). The child’s mind adapts from infancy to childhood to adulthood to achieve a better fit with external reality. Piaget sensed that children construct knowledge actively as they manipulate and interact with their environments. Many of his thoughts and ideas were influenced by his background in biology. This document will provide insight into Piaget’s Stages of Development as well as look at technology that meets the needs of children at specific times during their life.

BACKGROUND

Piaget’s Terminology

The framework that exists in a person’s mind to organize and interpret information was termed “schema” by Piaget. Schema can be thought of as the mental file folders that we have in our minds for different topics.

“Adaptation” is equivalent to learning and happens in two ways: through assimilation and accommodation. For example, a baby girl knows how to take a pacifier and thrust it into her mouth. It is a schema that has been mastered. She will then try to assimilate this concept by taking the mother’s necklace and thrusting it into her mouth. Piaget called this “assimilation” because the child is assimilating a new object into an old schema.

When this same infant comes across another object, she might accommodate an old schema into a new object. If that child is handed a soccer ball, she may realize that it will not fit into her mouth and simply just drool on it as she puts it to her lips because it will not work the original way. Hence, she practiced what Piaget called “accommodation.”

THE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Piaget determined that there is a sequence of four major stages of a child’s cognitive development. Each stage is age-related and involves distinct ways of thinking. He believed that adults could not force the training and teaching to accelerate a child through the developmental stages. Rather, children need to directly experience and initiate the transformation.

Sensorimotor Stage (Birth to Two Years of Age)

The first two years of a child’s life are considered to be the sensorimotor stage (McCormick & Pressley, 1997). The word “sensorimotor” alludes to the use of senses (e.g., hearing and seeing) and motor skills (e.g., reaching and touching) to gain understanding about one’s environment. Infants begin by reflecting and imitating what they experience.

If infants cannot see or touch an object, they tend to stop thinking about it. For example, if the mother puts a ball behind her back, the child believes that the ball is truly gone because the child cannot see it. The game of Peek-A-Boo helps the child to understand “object permanence” which is the idea that although the object or person is no longer seen by the child it still exists. The company Brainy Baby has a DVD on the market called Peek-A-Boo™ that incorporates music, rhymes, and visuals to teach important skills. Such tools for learning help to teach skills such as object permanence, communication skills, and cause-and-effect.