

**CHILD
DEVELOPMENT
FOR EARLY YEARS
STUDENTS AND
PRACTITIONERS**

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SALLY NEAUM

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I CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

THIS CHAPTER

This chapter enables you to understand:

- different concepts of children and childhood through history;
- the nature–nurture debate in child development;
- our current understandings of children and childhood;
- child development as a combination of observable biological development and social experience within a specific social, cultural and historical context;
- the importance of seeing child development in a holistic way;
- how to be critically aware of the conceptualisation of children in literature, reports and frameworks associated with children and childhood.

Introduction

Have you ever thought about what it means when we talk about children or childhood? What is your understanding of what it means to be a child or have a childhood? What is child development? Where have these understandings come from? How do these understandings influence approaches to children? Consideration of these issues will allow early years practitioners to engage in critical thinking about current concepts of children and childhood and how they influence our thinking and practice. This chapter will enable you to understand different ways of seeing children and childhood and explore how this informs our current understanding of child development.

Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there has been a series of changes of focus in our understandings and perceptions of children and childhood. Academic disciplines such as science, medicine, psychology and sociology, and changes in the influence of faith in society, have had a powerful influence over how society is constructed. Concepts of children and childhood are part of these changes and re-conceptualisations.

The frameworks that determine understandings of children and childhood are ethical and political choices made within wider ideas, values and rationalities of a society (Moss and Petrie, 2002). These ethical and political choices determine what each society will construct as what it means to be a child and to experience childhood within that society at that point in history. As these ethical and political frameworks develop and change it is very likely that understandings of children and childhood within each society will also develop and change.

Alan Prout (2005) traces these changes through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He observes that, with regard to children and childhood, there has been a shift in both intellectual processes and material practices. Prout (2005) highlights the significant shifts in our understandings of children and childhood which have come together to form our current conceptualisation of what it means to be a child in our society.

The concept of childhood: an overview

In medieval times children, once they were weaned, were regarded as little adults. There was no distinct phase of life known or understood as childhood. Hugh Cunningham (ND) observes that childhood was not thought to be as important as we now consider it in the formation of personality and character. The predominant social force was the Church, whose focus was upon the baptism – to free the child from original sin and receive them into the Church. Children were regarded as imperfect and sinful and their upbringing usually reflected these harsh beliefs.

From the seventeenth century, in Western countries, a different concept of childhood began to emerge. This was heavily influenced by the work of the philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), whose ideas about learning and education suggested that there were differences between adults and children. Locke's work is characterised by his opposition to authoritarianism. He wanted individuals to use reason to search after truth rather than unquestionably accept the opinion of authorities, including the Church, or rely on superstition. One of Locke's most influential ideas was that we are all born as blank slates (*tabula rasa*), that we have no innate knowledge, but we acquire what we know after we are born through sensation and reflection. Similarly, the ideas of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) were highly influential in encouraging thinking about what is meant to be a child and how children learn and grow and develop. Rousseau proposed that we were all born essentially good and innocent; therefore children should be loved, nurtured and protected. Education, he believed, would support this process by cultivating the good in people. Both philosophers' ideas challenged the notion of original sin and began the process of a different way of thinking about children and childhood. These shifts and changes in our understandings of children and childhood have continued through to the present day.

ACTIVITY 1

- *What is meant by original sin?*
- *How did this influence the view of children in society?*

Find out more about the work of Locke and Rousseau.

- *How did their ideas challenge existing understandings of childhood?*
- *What impact do you think this had on how children were perceived in society?*
- *What is your view on these different conceptualisations of children?*

Children, childhood and modernity

From the eighteenth century onwards there were profound political, economic, technological, social and cultural changes in societies throughout Europe. Societies were changing from predominantly rural agricultural-based societies to ones based on industrial capitalism. The move was strongly influenced by advances in science and technology. These advances precipitated a strong belief in the power of the scientific and technological as a way to understand and control the world, including ourselves. Within this context, encouraged by the work of Charles Darwin, emerged the Child Study Movement. Its aim was to highlight the role of the biological processes in human development. Its approach was scientific: the belief in, and use of, testing, observation and experimentation to discover universal laws expressed as theory. The movement demonstrated, and popularised, the view that children's conception and mental processes differed from those of adults. This supported the conceptualisation of childhood as a different and distinct stage of life from adulthood. Children were conceptualised as being in a more primitive stage of development than adults, both biologically and socially. The development of children therefore became an area for scientific study and understanding, the outcomes of which, it was hoped, would identify focused interventions that would shape and mould children's lives.

Paediatric medicine and child psychology

Prout (2005) identifies two important disciplines that strongly influenced the Child Study Movement and focused attention on the biological aspects of being a child: the development of the science of paediatric medicine and the child psychology movement.

Paediatric medicine

The development of the discipline of paediatric medicine was an important part of the rise of the scientific study of children. The understanding of childhood disease as

a separate branch of medicine became formalised in 1901 by the foundation of the Society for the Study of Diseases of Children. A medical model of children and childhood, in which children's development can be measured, monitored and managed, thus became part of our conceptualisation of children.

Child psychology

Alongside paediatrics, a discipline emerging from the Child Study Movement was the development of child psychology. Prout (2005) argues that there were multiple strands of research and investigation that came together to support the understanding of children and their development, namely: the work of Skinner on behaviourism; Bowlby's work on attachment; Freud and psychoanalysis; the work of Piaget and the cognitive psychology movement; and an emerging understanding of language development.

These psychological understandings came together to create a discipline of child psychology. In this emerging discipline children were examined and tested in order to identify 'normal' ranges of functioning and behaviour that were defined and named. These assertions of what constitutes normal functioning also created the potential for defining abnormal and pathological behaviour (Prout, 2005). This 'abnormal' functioning became the site for intervention and a range of professions developed around identifying children who would benefit from intervention – for example, educational psychology. These psychological frameworks for understanding child development quickly became part of a general understanding of children and childhood. The language of psychology such as 'stages of development', 'attachment' and 'bonding' entered everyday talk and practice via the work of child-rearing gurus such as Dr Benjamin Spock (Prout, 2005). At this stage in its development child psychology was predominantly informed by a biological view of child development; children and childhood were viewed as universal constants. The approach was to think about the individual child without consideration of the context of their social world. Within this discipline, development, whether typical or atypical, was regarded as a 'within-child' phenomenon and explanations sought through theories developed within a scientific and/or medical framework.

The emergence of a social model of childhood

Towards the end of the twentieth century there was growing criticism of how child psychology conceptualised childhood (Prout, 2005). The concern centred on an increasing awareness of, and sensitivity to, the social context of behaviour. Prout (2005, p.51) observes that *at the centre of this critical approach was the notion that children are shaped by their different social contexts and that this cannot be left out of the psychological account.*

He cites the work of Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky as having particular importance in the emergence of a social model of childhood. The work of Bronfenbrenner and

Vygotsky, and others, moved the debate about children's development away from the emphasis on child development purely as an inevitable biological unfolding towards an understanding that development occurs through the interplay of biology and social experience.

THEORY FOCUS

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917–2005)

Bronfenbrenner developed a model that focused on the importance of both biological factors and the social environment in children's development. He proposed that while a child's biological development unfolds there is also a complex pattern of interaction with people and social patterns, institutions and the environment around the child that similarly influences child development. Bronfenbrenner's work began to reframe the understanding of children, away from the ideas that children and childhood are universal constants that can be observed and defined in a scientific model, and towards a more complex view of children and childhood. This view recognised that childhood was experienced differently by different children in different societies. So, while it could be observed that many biological factors remained similar across different societies, differences in children and the experience of childhood were because of their social experiences. Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development is outlined in Chapter 2.

THEORY FOCUS

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934)

Lev Vygotsky's (1978) work, similar to that of Bronfenbrenner, emphasised the importance of the social in children's development. He argued that it is through others that we become ourselves. The main premise of his work is the interrelationship between thought and language. Language, he argues, forms the basis of thought. Language development is dependent on the child's social cultural experience and is also the primary tool by which we learn. In this way rich and effective language, developed in a social context, is vital to children's development and shapes the developing child.

The impact of these changes on the way society and its institutions are constructed was, and continues to be, profound. All of our everyday lives, particularly those of us who work with young children, have been affected by these shifts and changes in our understanding of children and childhood.

The nature–nurture debate

The nature–nurture debate is one about the relative importance of biology and social experience in who we are and who we become.

Nature refers to our biology – the genetically programmed process of physical maturation. Nurture refers to all the experiences we have after we are born that influence who we are and what we know.

The medical and scientific view of child development emphasises nature, and a social model of child development emphasises nurture. The current understanding is that both are significant in children’s growth and development. This reflects the historical shifts and changes in our views of children and childhood. What is now understood is that child development, in all areas of learning, is a complex combination of children’s biological maturational processes and their social experiences. For example, children are born with the potential for developing language. It is innate (nature). However, other aspects of language development, such as the rate of development, the sophistication of a child’s language skill and his or her individual accent and vocabulary are determined by interactive experiences after birth (nurture). This interplay between nature and nurture is different in different areas of development; for example, biological maturation plays a greater part in physical development than in social and emotional development. Beaver (1994) shows the relative influences of nature and nurture across the areas of child development. It is important to remember that these are relative influences; there is no definitive understanding of the relative impact of nature and nurture in the different areas of child development. See Figure 1.1.

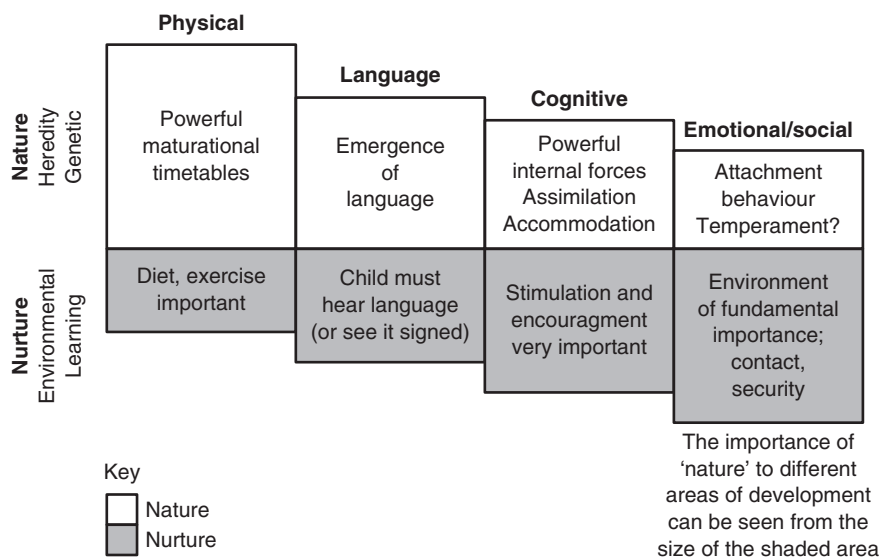


Figure 1.1 Chart showing the relative influence of nature and nurture on different developmental areas

CASE STUDY

Catrina is a talented flautist. Her mother is also an excellent flautist. Catrina's mum used to play her flute to her as a baby and toddler. Catrina loved listening to the flute and they would enjoy times together. As she got older Catrina was taken to 'music makers', a music group for toddlers where she developed a wider awareness of music. Catrina's mum taught her the basics of flute playing while she was still very young and when she was old enough she began lessons with a teacher. Catrina and her mum practise most evenings and really enjoy playing together.

ACTIVITY 2

- *How much of Catrina's ability is innate talent?*
- *What, if anything, do you think she inherited from her mother?*
- *How much of her talent comes from her experiences – for example, exposure to music at home, at music groups and lessons, regular focused practice, modelled behaviour and encouragement from her family and teacher?*
- *What does this tell you about the interplay of nature and nurture in what we know and can do?*
- *What are the implications of these different views for how we think about and organise provision in society for children?*

Contemporary views of children and childhood

The impact of historical shifts and changes in what we know about children's development and how it is viewed within the social and cultural context has resulted in a complex pattern of contemporary ways of seeing and understanding children and childhood. For example, Wright (2015) identifies a range of contemporary perspectives: anthropological, geographical, spiritual and philosophical. This chapter will consider biological and social models of children and childhood.

The biological child of child development

Work in the disciplines of science, psychology, sociology and education has enabled us to have a good understanding of development, including developmental sequences.

Clearly, this knowledge has application in understanding children's development, including atypical development, and in informing aspects of intervention.

Child development patterns and charts are used throughout childhood to inform the work of professionals who work with children; for example, babies are offered a series of developmental checks in which their progress is mapped against typical development. This enables babies to be screened for possible congenital abnormalities, emerging behavioural difficulties and developmental delays.

This, in its purest form, is a view of children and childhood as a series of unfolding biological states. The focus is on the individual child who follows a predetermined series of developmental stages that are biologically determined. Child development is thus regarded as observable, measurable and quantifiable (Moss and Petrie, 2002). Where development is assessed as atypical, interventions can be applied with the aim of supporting children's development, and, where possible, bringing it back within the parameters of developmental expectations.

Childhood development as a social construction

Childhood does not exist – we create it as a society.

(Rinaldi, 1999, in Moss and Petrie, 2002, p.20)

This is a different understanding of children and childhood. This understanding regards childhood as being socially constructed. That is, that our understandings of what it means to be a child are created within society. What childhood means will therefore be different in different societies and at different times in history. This view does not challenge the notion that there are some observable stages of development in childhood, but recognises the limitation of a biological approach to development in exploring what childhood means within each society and how children experience it.

Childhoods within their historical, social and cultural contexts

These case studies show how different children's experiences of childhood can be because of when and where they were born. These understandings and expectations of young children are created within each society's historical and cultural context. They are different because different societies' expectations about what constitutes childhood are different.

Victorian children

In Victorian times many poor children worked in mills, mines, as servants and on the streets. Tony Robinson (2005), in his book entitled *The worst children's jobs in history*, describes their lives. The jobs that came out of the Industrial Revolution made Britain one of the richest nations in the world. Men invented machines that made complicated work so easy even a child could do it – and tens of thousands of them did just that.

CASE STUDY

Elizabeth is six years old and works in a cotton mill. Her day starts at 5.30 a.m. and she works until 8 p.m. The cotton mill is a very scary place. Huge machines made of wood and metal clatter, rattle, swish, bang, whirr, thud and clunk away all day. They make some people very rich but not Elizabeth and the other children who work there ... for them they are hellish places.

Elizabeth works on the spinning mule. The spinning mule spins cotton thread much faster than a spinning wheel could. Elizabeth works as a piecer. She sticks any broken bits of cotton together while the mule is moving. In order to do this she has to spit on the ends and twist them backwards and forwards which makes her fingers bleed. She isn't allowed to sit down while she is working. The machine moves right across the room and back as it winds the thread on the bobbins and Elizabeth has to walk alongside it without stopping. Each day at work she walks about 20 miles.

While the mule is spinning and Elizabeth is piecing, bits of cotton fluff drift under the machines. These have to be cleared because they could start a fire. The easiest way to do this is for one of the smallest children to crawl under the machine with a brush. This has to be done while the machine is working. These children are called scavengers and Elizabeth has seen many get their heads, arms, legs, hands and toes crushed by the moving machinery.

Adapted from Robinson (2005)

Yanomamo people

Napoleon Chagnon spent nineteen months living with, and completing an anthropological study of, the Yanomamo people. The Yanomamo lived in a remote part of Venezuela and northern Brazil. When Chagnon completed the study, between 1964 and 1966, most of the villages had never had any contact with outsiders. Criticisms have been levelled at Chagnon's study; however, these were for interpretive and ethical reasons (Borofsky, 2005), not his descriptions of the lives of the people. Chagnon (1968) describes below what he observed about the daily activities of Yanomamo children.

CASE STUDY

Kaobawa spends a great deal of time exploring the wonders of the plant and animal life around him and is an accomplished botanist. At twelve years of age he can name twenty species of bees and give the anatomical or behavioural reasons for their distinctions.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Bahimi, an eight-year-old girl, brought me a tiny egg-like structure on one occasion and asked me to watch it with her. Presently it cracked open and numerous baby cockroaches poured out, while she described the intimate details of the reproductive process to me.

The younger children stay close to their mothers, but the older ones have considerable freedom to wander about the garden (the planted areas around the village centre) at play. Ariwari and his friends hunt for lizards with miniature bows and feathers. If they catch one alive they bring it back to the village and tie a string around it. The string is anchored to a stick in the village clearing and Ariwari and his friends chase it gleefully, shooting scores of tiny arrows at it. Since lizards are quick and the boys poor shots, the target practice can last for hours.

The young girls' experience is different. Bahimi and her friends soon learn that it is a man's world for they must assume much of the responsibility for tending their younger siblings, hauling water and firewood, and in general helping their busy mothers.

Adapted from Chagnon (1968)

ACTIVITY 3

Read through the two case studies of children's lives above.

- *How do they demonstrate that children's lives are socially and culturally determined by where and when they grow up?*
- *What are the social and cultural contexts that have been shown to impact on children's lives in our society?*
- *In what ways can these contexts impact on children's lives?*
- *In what ways do we, in our provision for children, aim to ensure that all children have a chance to fulfil their potential?*

Considering contemporary childhood

Understandings of children and childhood that inform current discussion and debate are based on a wide range of social, cultural and biological understandings of children and childhood. These understandings are not necessarily cohesive because they have been formed and patterned over time from a variety of

influences. These understandings come together to form complex, sometimes competing, views of children and childhood in contemporary society (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Moss and Petrie, 2002).

Representations of what we believe about children in contemporary society are evident in what we read and the frameworks we use for children. These representations can reveal the complex understandings that we have built about children and childhood.

Read these different conceptualisations of children and childhood that are evident in literature, reports and frameworks associated with children. Consider what they reveal about contemporary understandings of children and childhood.

1 Reggio Emilia

The work of the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy has been highly influential in shaping early years education in Britain. Pre-school provision in Reggio Emilia is based upon an understanding of children who are active authors of their own lives, influential in others' lives and in shaping society. The child is understood as being *rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and most of all, connected to adults and other children* (Malaguzzi, 1993, p.75).

2 Diagnostic criteria for Rett's disorder

(A) All of the following:

- apparently normal prenatal and perinatal development;
- apparently normal psychomotor development through the first five months after birth;
- normal head circumference at birth.

(B) Onset of all of the following after the period of normal development:

- deceleration of head growth between ages five and 48 months;
- loss of previously acquired purposeful hand skills between ages five and 30 months with the subsequent development of stereotyped hand movements (e.g. hand-wringing or hand washing);
- loss of social engagement early in the course (although often social interaction develops later);
- appearance of poorly coordinated gait or trunk movements;
- severely impaired expressive and receptive language development with severe psychomotor retardation.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM IV, published by the American Psychiatric Society

3 A good childhood (Layard and Dunn, 2009)

In many ways our children have never lived so well. Materially they have more possessions, better homes, more holidays away. They enjoy a whole world of technology which brings them music, information, entertainment and an unprecedented ability to communicate. Our children are also more educated and sick less often than before. They are more open and honest about themselves and more tolerant of human diversity in all its forms. And they are more concerned about the environment. And yet there is also widespread unease about our children's experience – that somehow their lives are becoming more difficult. The report showed how children are faring in all 21 of the world's richest countries. It began with an overall ranking of the 21 countries ... Britain came bottom of the class.

4 Declaration of the Rights of the Child

Proclaimed by General Assembly resolution 1386(XIV) of 20 November 1959:

Principle 2

The child shall enjoy *special protection*, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity.

5 Child growth chart

(See Figure 1.2)

6 OFSTED (2014) *Are you ready? Good practice in school readiness*

This report sees the role of early years as preparation for school. OFSTED argues that early years provision should focus on the next stage of education: that of formal schooling. This is justified by the explicit argument that *the quality of a child's early experience is vital for their future success and crucial in countering the effects of socio-economic disadvantage*.

(OFSTED, 2014: 4)

7 DFE (2017) Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage

Foundation Stage Principles – A unique child. Every child is a unique child who is constantly learning and can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.

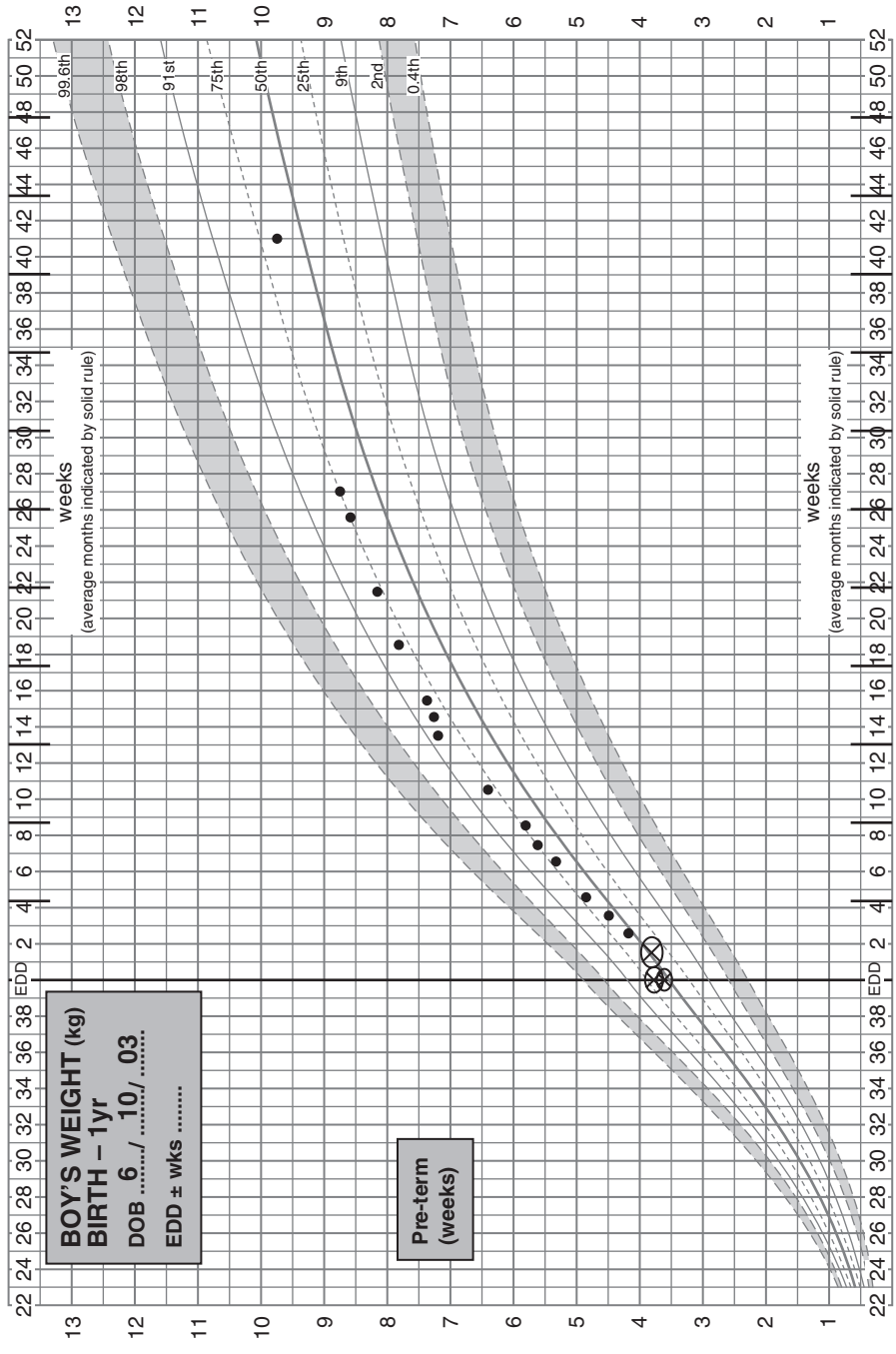


Figure 1.2 A sample child growth chart

ACTIVITY 4

- *What is the understanding of a child and/or childhood in each example?*
- *Think about the interplay of the biological and the social in child development. Which is emphasised in each example? Why do you think that this is?*
- *Taken together, what do they tell you about the current conceptualisation of children and childhood?*
- *What are the implications of this for early years practitioners?*
- *Look at the 'Development Matters' section of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Where can you find evidence of these different ways of conceptualising children and early childhood?*

It is important that early years practitioners working with children and families are aware of all the different ways in which society constructs children and childhood and how this is reflected in the ways in which we think about, talk and write about, and assess children. We need to ensure that we are careful to see children in a holistic way, recognising that children's development is a complex combination of observable patterns of development embedded in the context of children's social and cultural environment, and that their experiences within that context will be highly influential in who they are and what they can do.

Early years theorists, thinkers and pioneers

In addition to a wide range of societal and cultural influences, such as medical and social models development, our understanding of children and early childhood has been influenced by a number of individual theorists, thinkers and pioneers. These people developed particular views on children and childhood which were both influenced by and helped to shape wider cultural and societal understandings. Their ideas have come together to influence and inform our current understandings of children and childhood.

These theorists, thinkers and pioneers were not a cohesive group of people working together. They came from different disciplines, they worked in different ways, in different countries, at different times and focused on different aspects of children and childhood. What they all had in common was a desire to understand children and childhood; how children grow and learn and, for some, the ways in which society should provide for and support this development. Their ideas have had a significant impact on our current understanding of children and childhood and their work is continued today in research as we strive to understand how children grow and learn and how best to support this.

The pen portraits below present these people's main ideas.

Theorists
<p>These people developed and articulated a theory about a particular aspect of children's learning and development. Their work is outlined in more detail throughout this book. This chart highlights their main contribution to our understanding of young children's learning and development.</p>
<p>Jean Piaget (1896–1980) Swiss developmental psychologist Chronological age-based stages of children's cognitive development (Piaget and Inhelder, 1972).</p>
<p>John Bowlby (1907–1990) British psychologist, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Attachment theory. Bowlby articulated the necessity of a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with a mother (or permanent mother substitute – one person who steadily 'mothers') in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment (Bowlby, 1965, p.13).</p>
<p>Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) Russian psychologist The social dimension of children's learning. Zone of Proximal Development. The relationship between speech and language and conceptual development (Vygotsky, 1978).</p>
<p>Jerome Bruner (1915–2016) American psychologist Learning as an active rather than passive process. Scaffolding – the role of others in children's learning. Social interactionist theory of language development (Bruner, 1960).</p>
<p>Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917–2005) American psychologist Ecology of human development – the socially embedded nature of children's learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).</p>

Table 1.1 Theorists

Thinkers and pioneers
<p>These people articulated ideas about children and childhood and their growth and development that enabled us to further understand how children think and learn. Some made direct links between their ideas and provision for children.</p>
<p>John Locke (1632–1704) Philosopher Suggested that there were differences between the way adults and children think and learn. Argued that children were born as blank sheet (tabula rasa) and that we learn everything through the experiences that we have after we are born.</p>
<p>Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) Philosopher, composer and writer Rousseau looked to nature as inspiration for his theory on human nature. His most famous work on childhood and education is <i>Emile; or, On Education</i>. He argues that education should be concerned with developing a child's character and moral sense so that he/she is able to remain virtuous in the unnatural and imperfect social society. He was an early advocate of developmentally appropriate education and the importance of understanding the consequences of action rather than punishment in learning right from wrong. He advocated that children learned through direct experience in the natural world.</p>

(Continued)

Table 1.2 (Continued)

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) German thinker and educator

Best known for his insight that the first early learning experiences of the very young are of crucial importance in influencing their later education and therefore the health and development of society as a whole. He devised a set of principles that underpinned an interactive learning process and set up settings where this could take place. He named settings for young children '*kindergarten*' (children's garden): a place where children can be nourished.

Robert Owen (1771–1858) Social reformer

Owen endeavoured to improve the health, education and well-being of working people. He was instrumental in developing a model community set up in the mill town of Lanark in Scotland. The community provided education for all children, including an infant school, a crèche for working mothers, free medical care and evening classes and leisure activities for adults. Children were not allowed to work in the mill until the age of ten. This was a radical departure from existing ways that children and workers were treated in the mills. His work had an impact in the development of infant education, humane working practices and trade unionism.

Rachel McMillan (1859–1917), Margaret McMillan (1860–1931) Socialist reformers

Rachel and Margaret McMillan were social reformers concerned with the link between the physical environment and intellectual development. They led campaigns to improve the well-being of industrial workers, and they supported the suffragette movement. In their work with children they emphasised the importance of physical health in a child's development. They campaigned for school meals for children living in poverty, they opened the country's first school clinic to improve children's health and provided a Night Camp where children living in slums could wash and wear clean nightclothes. The sisters stressed the importance of fresh air and play outdoors for young children and so in 1914, in accordance with these beliefs, they opened an open-air nursery and training centre in London.

Susan Issacs (1885–1948) Psychoanalyst and teacher

Susan Issacs' radical approach to education was evident in her Malting House School. Her educational philosophy saw all children as able and willing to learn given the right environment for learning. Issacs' Malting House School didn't follow a traditional curriculum; instead, children were free to follow their curiosity and interest in a rich environment that included woodworking areas, a large garden, and chemistry lab. She observed the children learning and adapted her interaction and approach to meet their needs. This child-centred approach to education has been highly influential in the development of current early years practice.

Maria Montessori (1870–1952) Italian medical doctor who became a professor of pedagogy at the University of Rome Montessori's work focused on women's rights and social reform. Within this she developed an innovative approach to the education of young children – the Montessori method. The approach is underpinned by the belief that children are profoundly affected by society and by their immediate environment. It holds that all children have the potential and drive to learn and that mixed aged groups and freedom to work and explore their environment facilitate this potential. The approach requires specially prepared child-centred environments called children's houses. These children's houses include specifically designed materials that enable them to develop social and intellectual capabilities. The approach emphasises the importance of the child exploring the environment with the adults acting as observers, only intervening on the periphery and only when necessary.

Rudolph Steiner (1861–1925) Austrian philosopher

Steiner developed the idea of Anthroposophy. He believed that we build a healthy society by focusing on the material, soul and spiritual needs of human beings. Steiner described three major developmental stages in child development that extend from early childhood to adolescence. His engagement with schools and schooling arose from a lecture that he gave at the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in 1919 that resulted in the opening of a school based on his views. Steiner/Waldorf schools are now worldwide. Their stated aim is to provide an unhurried and creative learning experience where children find joy in childhood and in their learning, in contrast to an early specialism or a strong academic focus. The curriculum is a flexible set of guidelines that take account of all aspects of a child's learning, working in harmony with the different phases of child development. Collaborative learning is encouraged and there is a strong emphasis on the arts, including Eurythmy – an expressive movement art performed in response to the spoken word and music.

Elinor Goldschmied (1910–2009) Early years educator

Goldschmied contributed a number of ideas to the field based on her experiences working with very young children in Italy and London. Her significant contributions include treasure baskets, heuristic play and the key person system. All of these are now regarded as important aspects of nursery provision for young children.

Margaret Donaldson (1926–) Developmental psychologist

Donaldson was working at a time when the predominant view of children's learning was behaviourist. She challenged this notion, arguing that children were active in trying to understand and pattern meaning from things that they are asked to do. She used the terms 'embedded' and 'disembedded' thinking. Embedded thinking is thinking that has a context that makes sense to the child. In contrast, disembedded thinking is when tasks have no familiar or realistic context for the child to engage with and thus are difficult to make sense of. To achieve this Donaldson recognised the importance of seeing and presenting things from a child's point of view, decentring from an adult perception of the world. She also stressed the importance of focusing on what children can do rather than what they cannot do.

Chris Athey (1924–2011)

Chris Athey developed the notion of 'schemas' in young children's learning. Schemas, she argued, are means of learning classifications and categories. They are cognitive structures that develop initially through motor action and symbolisation to support thinking. They are built on and put together over time to create detailed and powerful higher-level schemas. She developed her ideas through close observation of children's drawing and painting. She argued that the schemas that children are interested in and are evident in their artwork are similarly evident in their play as children explore and represent their thinking. Observing and identifying schemas is used in many early years settings as a way of analysing and providing appropriately for children's learning.

Ferre Laevers (1950–) Professor Laevers' team at the Research Centre for Experiential Education in Leuven, Belgium, developed the Leuven Scale for observing and assessing children's well-being and involvement. It was developed in response to the question of what constitutes quality in early care and education. The team believes that quality is determined by the degree of emotional well-being and involvement that the children experience, and argues that deep learning will occur when children have high levels of involvement and well-being.

Table 1.2 Thinkers and pioneers

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter we have considered the historical concepts of children and childhood and how this informs contemporary understandings. Through the case studies we can see that different children experience childhood differently because of the social, cultural and historical context of their childhood. We have seen how current understandings of child development have been patterned over time to include both biological and social aspects of development and how this is reflected in the nature–nurture debate in child development. The work of different theorists, thinkers and pioneers has been outlined and identified as important in shaping our ideas. By looking at some different ways in which children are written about and assessed we can see how our current understandings of children and childhood are complex. From this we have concluded that it is important to see children and child development holistically; that child development is both a biological maturational unfolding and a consequence of the context in which the child grows up.

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