# Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundations

This chapter provides an overview of theoretical foundations in child development, specifically exploring Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory and Erikson's Psychosocial Theory. The abstract summarizes the key points, methods, and findings of each theory, highlighting their strengths and weaknesses. The chapter begins by introducing theories as proposed explanations for human behavior, emphasizing their importance in understanding development. It then delves into Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory, discussing his stages of development (oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital) and the role of the id, ego, and superego. The chapter also explores Erikson's Psychosocial Theory, which emphasizes the importance of culture and society in shaping our behavior and motivations. Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development are outlined, highlighting the major tasks or crises that individuals face throughout their lifespan. The abstract concludes by noting the criticisms of each theory and their continued relevance in understanding human development.

#### Week 2 Glossary Terms:

* Theory
* Classical Conditioning
* Operant Conditioning
* Schema
* Accommodation
* Scaffolding
* Zone of Proximal Development
* Social learning

## What is a Theory?

(Lumen Learning et al., n.d.; Paris et al., 2019)

Students sometimes feel intimidated by theory. Even the phrase, “Now we are going to look at some theories...” is met with blank stares and other indications that the audience is now lost. Theories are valuable tools for understanding human behavior; in fact they are proposed explanations for the “how” and “whys” of development. Have you ever asked yourself the questions, “Why is my three-year-old so inquisitive?” or “Why are some fifth graders rejected by their classmates?” Theories can help explain these and other occurrences. Developmental theories offer explanations about how we develop, why we change over time and the kinds of influences that impact development.

A theory guides and helps us interpret research findings as well. It provides the researcher with a blueprint or model to be used to help piece together various studies. Think of theories as guidelines much like directions that come with an appliance or other object that requires assembly. The instructions can help one piece together smaller parts more easily than if trial and error are used.

Theories can be developed using induction in which a number of single cases are observed and after patterns or similarities are noted, the theorist develops ideas based on these examples. Established theories are then tested through research; however, not all theories are equally suited to scientific investigation. Some theories are difficult to test but are still useful in stimulating debate or providing concepts that have practical application. Keep in mind that theories are not facts; they are guidelines for investigation and practice, and they gain credibility through research that fails to disprove them.

Let’s take a look at some key theories in Child Development.

### Psychoanalytic Theory

#### Sigmund Freud’s Psychosexual Theory

(Carter et al., 2019)

We begin with the often controversial figure, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Freud has been a very influential figure in the area of development; his view of development and psychopathology dominated the field of psychiatry until the growth of behaviorism in the 1950s. His assumptions that personality forms during the first few years of life and that the ways in which parents or other caregivers interact with children have a long-lasting impact on children’s emotional states have guided parents, educators, clinicians, and policy-makers for many years. We have only recently begun to recognize that early childhood experiences do not always result in certain personality traits or emotional states. There is a growing body of literature addressing resilience in children who come from harsh backgrounds and yet develop without damaging emotional scars (O’Grady & Metz, 1987). Freud has stimulated an enormous amount of research and generated many ideas. Agreeing with Freud’s theory in its entirety, however, is hardly necessary for appreciating the contribution he has made to the field of development.

##### Freud’s theory of self suggests that there are three parts of the self:

The id is the part of the self that is inborn. It responds to biological urges without pause and is guided by the principle of pleasure: if it feels good, it is the thing to do. A newborn is all id. The newborn cries when hungry, defecates when the urge strikes.

The ego develops through interaction with others and is guided by logic or the reality principle. It has the ability to delay gratification. It knows that urges have to be managed. It mediates between the id and superego using logic and reality to calm the other parts of the self.

The superego represents society’s demands for its members. It is guided by a sense of guilt. Values, morals, and the conscience are all part of the superego. The personality is thought to develop in response to the child’s ability to learn to manage biological urges. Parenting is important here. If the parent is either overly punitive or lax, the child may not progress to the next stage.

Here is a brief introduction to Freud’s stages:

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| --- | --- |
| Name of Stage | Description of Stage |
| Oral Stage | The oral stage lasts from birth until around age two. The infant is all id. At this stage, all stimulation and comfort is focused on the mouth and is based on the reflex of sucking. Too much indulgence or too little stimulation may lead to fixation. |
| Anal Stage | The anal stage coincides with potty training or learning to manage biological surges. The ego is beginning to develop in this stage. Anal fixation may result in a person who is compulsively clean and organized or one who is sloppy and lacks self-control. |
| Phallic Stage | The phallic stage occurs in early childhood and marks the development of the superego and a sense of masculinity or femininity as culture dictates. |
| Latency | Latency occurs during middle childhood when a child’s urges quiet down and friendships become the focus. The ego and superego can be refined as the child learns how to cooperate and negotiate with others. |
| Genital Stage | The genital stage begins with puberty and continues through adulthood. Now the preoccupation is that of sex and reproduction. |

##### Strengths and Weaknesses of Freud’s Theory

Freud’s theory has been heavily criticized for several reasons. One is that it is very difficult to test scientifically. How can parenting in infancy be traced to personality in adulthood? Are there other variables that might better explain development? The theory is also considered to be sexist in suggesting that women who do not accept an inferior position in society are somehow psychologically flawed. Freud focuses on the darker side of human nature and suggests that much of what determines our actions is unknown to us. So why do we study Freud? As mentioned above, despite the criticisms, Freud’s assumptions about the importance of early childhood experiences in shaping our psychological selves have found their way into child development, education, and parenting practices. Freud’s theory has heuristic value in providing a framework from which to elaborate and modify subsequent theories of development. Many later theories, particularly behaviorism and humanism, were challenges to Freud’s views.

#### Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Theory

(Learning & Overstreet, 2017)

Now, let’s turn to a less controversial theorist, Erik Erikson. Erikson (1902–1994) suggested that our relationships and society’s expectations motivate much of our behavior in his theory of psychosocial development. Erikson was a student of Freud’s but emphasized the importance of the ego, or conscious thought, in determining our actions. In other words, he believed that we are not driven by unconscious urges. We know what motivates us and we consciously think about how to achieve our goals. He is considered the father of developmental psychology because his model gives us a guideline for the entire lifespan and suggests certain primary psychological and social concerns throughout life.

Erikson expanded on his Freud’s by emphasizing the importance of culture in parenting practices and motivations and adding three stages of adult development (Erikson, 1968, 1993).

He believed that we are aware of what motivates us throughout life and the ego has greater importance in guiding our actions than does the id. We make conscious choices in life and these choices focus on meeting certain social and cultural needs rather than purely biological ones. Humans are motivated, for instance, by the need to feel that the world is a trustworthy place, that we are capable individuals, that we can make a contribution to society, and that we have lived a meaningful life. These are all psychosocial problems.

Erikson divided the lifespan into eight stages. In each stage, we have a major psychosocial task to accomplish or crisis to overcome. Erikson believed that our personality continues to take shape throughout our lifespan as we face these challenges in living. Here is a brief overview of the eight stages:

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| --- | --- |
| Name of Stage | Description of Stage |
| Trust vs. mistrust (0–1 years of age) | The infant must have basic needs met in a consistent way in order to feel that the world is a trustworthy place. |
| Autonomy vs. shame and doubt (1–2 years of age) | Mobile toddlers have newfound freedom they like to exercise and by being allowed to do so, they learn some basic independence. |
| Initiative vs. guilt (3–5 years of age) | Preschoolers like to initiate activities and emphasize doing things “all by myself.” |
| Industry vs. inferiority (6–11 years of age) | School aged children focus on accomplishments and begin making comparisons between themselves and their classmates |
| Identity vs. role confusion (adolescence) | Teenagers are trying to gain a sense of identity as they experiment with various roles, beliefs, and ideas. |
| Intimacy vs. isolation (young adulthood) | Young adults in their 20s and 30s are making first long-term commitments in intimate relationships. |
| Generativity vs. stagnation (middle adulthood) | Adults through their 40s and early 60s focus on being productive at work and home and are motivated by wanting to feel that they’ve made a contribution to society. |
| Integrity vs. despair (late adulthood) | Adults look back on their lives and hope to like what they see, that they have lived well and have a sense of integrity because they lived according to their beliefs. |

These eight stages form a foundation for discussions on emotional and social development during the lifespan. Keep in mind, however, that these stages or crises can occur more than once. For instance, a person may struggle with a lack of trust beyond infancy under certain circumstances. Erikson’s theory has been criticized for focusing so heavily on stages and assuming that the completion of one stage is prerequisite for the next crisis of development. His theory also focuses on the social expectations that are found in certain cultures, but not in all. For instance, the idea that adolescence is a time of searching for identity might translate well in the middle-class culture of the United States, but not as well in cultures where the transition into adulthood coincides with puberty through rites of passage and where adult roles offer fewer choices.

### Behaviorism

(Baker & Sperry, 2025)

While Freud and Erikson looked at what was going on in the mind, behaviorism rejected any reference to mind and viewed overt and observable behavior as the proper subject matter of psychology. Through the scientific study of behavior, it was hoped that laws of learning could be derived that would promote the prediction and control of behavior.

#### Ivan Pavlov

Ivan Pavlov (1880–1937) was a Russian physiologist interested in studying digestion. As he recorded the amount of salivation his laboratory dogs produced as they ate, he noticed that they actually began to salivate before the food arrived as the researcher walked down the hall and toward the cage. “This,” he thought, “is not natural!” One would expect a dog to automatically salivate when food hit their palate, not before the food comes. The dogs knew that the food was coming because they had learned to associate the footsteps with the food. The key word here is learned. A learned response is called a conditioned response.

Pavlov began to experiment with this concept of classical conditioning. He began to ring a bell, for instance, prior to introducing the food. Sure enough, after making this connection several times, the dogs could be made to salivate to the sound of a bell. Once the bell had become an event to which the dogs had learned to salivate, it was called a conditioned stimulus. The act of salivating to a bell was a response that had also been learned, now termed in Pavlov’s jargon, a conditioned response. Notice that the response, salivation, is the same whether it is conditioned or unconditioned (unlearned or natural). What changed is the stimulus to which the dog salivates. One is natural (unconditioned) and one is learned (conditioned).

Let’s think about how classical conditioning is used on us. One of the most widespread applications of classical conditioning principles was brought to us by the psychologist, John B. Watson.

#### John B. Watson

John B. Watson (1878–1958) believed that most of our fears and other emotional responses are classically conditioned. He had gained a good deal of popularity in the 1920s with his expert advice on parenting offered to the public.

He tried to demonstrate the power of classical conditioning with his famous experiment with an eighteen-month-old boy named Little Albert. Watson sat Albert down and introduced a variety of seemingly scary objects to him: a burning piece of newspaper, a white rat, and so on. Albert remained curious and reached for all of these things. Watson knew that one of our only inborn fears is the fear of loud noises so he proceeded to make a loud noise each time he introduced one of Albert’s favorites, a white rat. After hearing the loud noise several times paired with the rat, Albert soon came to fear the rat and began to cry when it was introduced. Watson filmed this experiment for posterity and used it to demonstrate that he could help parents achieve any outcomes they desired, if they would only follow his advice. Watson wrote columns in newspapers and in magazines and gained a lot of popularity among parents eager to apply science to household order.

Operant conditioning, on the other hand, looks at the way the consequences of a behavior increase or decrease the likelihood of a behavior occurring again. So let’s look at this a bit more.

#### B.F. Skinner and Operant Conditioning

B. F. Skinner (1904–1990), who brought us the principles of operant conditioning, suggested that reinforcement is a more effective means of encouraging a behavior than criticism or punishment. By focusing on strengthening desirable behavior, we have a greater impact than when we emphasize what is undesirable. Reinforcement is anything that an organism desires and is motivated to obtain.

A reinforcer is something that encourages or promotes a behavior. Some things are natural rewards. They are considered intrinsic or primary because their value is easily understood. Think of what kinds of things babies or animals such as puppies find rewarding. Extrinsic or secondary reinforcers are things that have a value not immediately understood. Their value is indirect. They can be traded in for what is ultimately desired.

The use of positive reinforcement involves adding something to a situation in order to encourage a behavior. For example, if I give a child a cookie for cleaning a room, the addition of the cookie makes cleaning more likely in the future. Think of ways in which you positively reinforce others.

Negative reinforcement occurs when taking something unpleasant away from a situation encourages behavior. For example, I have an alarm clock that makes a very unpleasant, loud sound when it goes off in the morning. As a result, I get up and turn it off. By removing the noise, I am reinforced for getting up. Think of ways in which you negatively reinforce others.

Punishment is an effort to stop a behavior. It means to follow an action with something unpleasant or painful. Punishment is often less effective than reinforcement for several reasons. It doesn’t indicate the desired behavior, it may result in suppressing rather than stopping a behavior, (in other words, the person may not do what they are being punished for when you’re around, but may do it when you leave), and a focus on punishment can result in not noticing when the person does well.

Not all behaviors are learned through association or reinforcement. Many of the things we do are learned by watching others. This is addressed in social learning theory.

#### Social Learning Theory

(Lumen Learning, 2024a)

Albert Bandura (1925–2021) is a leading contributor to social learning theory. He calls our attention to the ways in which many of our actions are not learned through conditioning; rather, they are learned by watching others (Bandura, 1977). Young children frequently learn behaviors through imitation.

Sometimes, particularly when we do not know what else to do, we learn by modeling or copying the behavior of others. A kindergartner on their first day of school might eagerly look at how others are acting and try to act the same way to fit in more quickly. Adolescents struggling with their identity rely heavily on their peers to act as role-models. Sometimes we do things because we’ve seen it pay off for someone else. They were operantly conditioned, but we engage in the behavior because we hope it will work for us as well. This is referred to as vicarious reinforcement (Bandura et al., 1963).

Bandura suggests that there is interplay between the environment and the individual (Bandura, 1986). We are not just the product of our surroundings, rather we influence our surroundings. Parents not only influence their children’s environment, but children influence parents as well. Parents may respond differently with their first child than with their fourth. Perhaps they try to be the perfect parents with their firstborn, but by the time their last child comes along they have very different expectations both of themselves and their child. Our environment creates us and we create our environment.

#### Bandura and the Bobo Doll Experiment & Today’s Children and the Media

(Lumen Learning, 2024a; Rasmussen, 2017)

A major influence on children is TV and media. Bandura (Bandura et al., 1963) began a series of studies to look at the impact of television, particularly commercials, on the behavior of children. Are children more likely to act out aggressively when they see this behavior modeled on screen? What if they see it being reinforced? Bandura began by conducting an experiment in which he showed children a film of a woman hitting an inflatable clown or bobo doll. Then the children were allowed in the room where they found the doll and immediately began to hit it. This was without any reinforcement whatsoever. Not only that, but they found new ways to behave aggressively.

Children view far more television today than in the 1960s. So much, in fact, that they have been referred to as Generation M (media). The amount of screen time varies by age. As of 2017, children 0–8 spend an average of 2 hours and 19 minutes. Children 8–12 years of age spend almost 6 hours a day on screen media. Teenagers 13–18 spend an average of just under 9 hours a day in entertainment media use.

The prevalence of violence, sexual content, and messages promoting foods high in fat and sugar in the media are certainly cause for concern and the subject of ongoing research and policy review. Many children spend even more time on the computer viewing content from the internet. The amount of time spent connected to the internet continues to increase with the use of smartphones that essentially serve as mini-computers. The ways children and adolescents interact with the media continues to change. The popularity of YouTube and the various social media platforms are examples of this. What might the implications of this be?

### Cognitive Theories

#### Jean Piaget’s Theory of Cognitive Development

(Lumen Learning, 2024b; Lumen Learning et al., 2021)

Jean Piaget (1896–1980) is one of the most influential cognitive theorists. Piaget was inspired to explore children’s ability to think and reason by watching his own children’s development. He was one of the first to recognize and map out the ways in which children’s thought differs from that of adults. His interest in this area began when he was asked to test the IQ of children and began to notice that there was a pattern in their wrong answers. He believed that children’s intellectual skills change over time through maturation. Children of differing ages interpret the world differently.

Piaget believed our desire to understand the world comes from a need for cognitive equilibrium. This is an agreement or balance between what we sense in the outside world and what we know in our minds. If we experience something that we cannot understand, we try to restore the balance by either changing our thoughts or by altering the experience to fit into what we do understand. Perhaps you meet someone who is very different from anyone you know. How do you make sense of this person? You might use them to establish a new category of people in your mind or you might think about how they are similar to someone else.

A schema or schemes are categories of knowledge. They are like mental boxes of concepts. A child has to learn many concepts. They may have a scheme for under and soft or running and sour. All of these are schemas. Our efforts to understand the world around us lead us to develop new schemas and to modify old ones.

One way to make sense of new experiences is to focus on how they are similar to what we already know. This is called assimilation. So the person we meet who is very different may be understood as being “sort of like my brother” or “his voice sounds a lot like yours.” A new food may be assimilated when we determine that it tastes like chicken!

Another way to make sense of the world is to change our mind. We can make a cognitive accommodation to this new experience by adding a new schema. This food is unlike anything I’ve tasted before. I now have a new category of foods that are bitter-sweet in flavor, for instance. This is accommodation. Do you accommodate or assimilate more frequently? Children accommodate more frequently as they build new schemas. Adults tend to look for similarity in their experience and assimilate. They may be less inclined to think outside the box.

Piaget suggested different ways of understanding that are associated with maturation. He divided this into four stages:

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| Name of Stage | Description of Stage |
| Sensorimotor Stage | During the sensorimotor stage children rely on use of the senses and motor skills. From birth until about age 2, the infant knows by tasting, smelling, touching, hearing, and moving objects around. This is a real hands-on type of knowledge. |
| Preoperational Stage | In the preoperational stage, children from ages 2–7, become able to think about the world using symbols. A symbol is something that stands for something else. The use of language, whether it is in the form of words or gestures, facilitates knowing and communicating about the world. This is the hallmark of preoperational intelligence and occurs in early childhood. However, these children are preoperational or pre-logical. They still do not understand how the physical world operates. They may, for instance, fear that they will go down the drain if they sit at the front of the bathtub, even though they are too big. |
| Concrete Operational | Children in the concrete operational stage, ages 7–11, develop the ability to think logically about the physical world. Middle childhood is a time of understanding concepts such as size, distance, and constancy of matter, and cause and effect relationships. A child knows that a scrambled egg is still an egg and that 8 ounces of water is still 8 ounces no matter what shape of glass contains it. |
| Formal Operational | During the formal operational stage, children at about age 12 acquire the ability to think logically about concrete and abstract events. The teenager who has reached this stage is able to consider possibilities and to contemplate ideas about situations that have never been directly encountered. More abstract understanding of religious ideas or morals or ethics and abstract principles such as freedom and dignity can be considered. |

#### Criticisms of Piaget’s Theory

Piaget has been criticized for overemphasizing the role that physical maturation plays in cognitive development and in underestimating the role that culture and interaction (or experience) plays in cognitive development. Looking across cultures reveals considerable variation in what children are able to do at various ages. Piaget may have underestimated what children are capable of given the right circumstances.

### Sociocultural Theory

#### Lev Vygotsky

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) was a Russian psychologist who wrote in the early 1900s but whose work was discovered in the United States in the 1960s and became more widely known in the 1980s. Vygotsky differed with Piaget in that he believed that a person not only has a set of abilities, but also a set of potential abilities that can be realized if given the proper guidance from others. His sociocultural theory emphasizes the importance of culture and interaction in the development of cognitive abilities. He believed that through guided participation known as scaffolding, with a teacher or capable peer, a child can learn cognitive skills within a certain range known as the zone of proximal development (Lumen Learning, 2024b). His belief was that development occurred first through children’s immediate social interactions, and then moved to the individual level as they began to internalize their learning (Leon & West Hills Community College Lemoore, 2021).

Have you ever taught a child to perform a task? Maybe it was brushing their teeth or preparing food. Chances are you spoke to them and described what you were doing while you demonstrated the skill and let them work along with you all through the process. You gave them assistance when they seemed to need it, but once they knew what to do you stood back and let them go. This is scaffolding and can be seen demonstrated throughout the world. This approach to teaching has also been adopted by educators. Rather than assessing students on what they are doing, they should be understood in terms of what they are capable of doing with the proper guidance. You can see how Vygotsky would be very popular with modern day educators (Lumen Learning, 2024b).

### Evolutionary Theory

(Lazzara, 2020)

Evolutionary psychology focuses on how universal patterns of behavior and cognitive processes have evolved over time. Variations in cognition and behavior would make individuals more or less successful in reproducing and passing those genes to their offspring. Evolutionary psychologists study a variety of psychological phenomena that may have evolved as adaptations, including the fear response, food preferences, mate selection, and cooperative behaviors (Confer et al., 2010).

Many think of evolution as the development of traits and behaviors that allow us to survive in a competitive world, like strong leg muscles to run fast, or fists to punch and defend ourselves. However, physical survival is only important if it eventually contributes to successful reproduction. That is, even if you live to be a hundred years old but fail to mate and produce children, your genes will die with your body. Thus, reproductive success, not survival success, is the engine of evolution by natural selection.

Charles Darwin describes this process in the theory of evolution by natural selection. In simple terms, the theory states that organisms that are better suited for their environment will survive and reproduce, while those that are poorly suited for their environment will die off. There is a growing interest in applying the principles of evolutionary psychology to better understand lifespan development in humans.

#### Lifespan Development and Evolutionary Psychology

As we consider development from conception to death, there will be many opportunities to understand how evolutionary psychology enhances our understanding of development. For instance, women and men differ in their preferences for a few key qualities in long-term mating, because of somewhat distinct adaptive concerns. Modern women have inherited the evolutionary trait to desire mates who possess resources, have qualities linked with acquiring resources (for example, ambition, wealth, industriousness), and are willing to share those resources with them. On the other hand, men more strongly desire youth and health in women, as both are cues to fertility. These male and female differences have historically been universal in humans.

Just because a psychological adaptation was advantageous in our history, doesn’t mean it’s still useful today. For example, even though women may have preferred men with resources in previous generations, our modern society has advanced such that these preferences are no longer necessary. Nonetheless, it’s important to consider how our evolutionary history has shaped our automatic or instinctual desires and reflexes of today so that we can better shape them for the future ahead.

As we follow the journey of life, from conception to death, think about how the theory of natural selection and the concepts of evolutionary psychology can enlighten our understanding of why some automatic reflexes or instinctual desires are more common than others. Remember that the end product of the theory of evolution by natural selection is successful survival and reproduction. Can you think of some ways that the ultimate goal of reproductive success affects our selection of a mate, how we parent young children, why we are motivated to achieve certain goals, or what differentiates families with traditionally longer lifespans? In order to achieve reproductive success, the theory of evolution by natural selection states that organisms should be suited to their environment. Consider how different environments or cultures require different traits for successful survival and reproduction. Can you think of some ways that we may be shifting to be better suited to our changing culture?

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