 

timely techniques to help your child get through the school year

Psychology 101

A lot of what we know about an individual’s thinking, learning and behavior patterns stem from several psychological theorists, including John Watson, Ivan Pavlov, B. F. Skinner, Jean Piaget, Erik Erickson, Abraham Maslow and Sigmund Freud, among many others. Although some theories appear archaic at this point, several of them have laid the ground work for our foundational understanding of human behavior.

Behavioral Theories

Behaviorism: a theory of psychology founded by John Watson, that asserts that the human actions can be clearly measured, trained and changed. Additionally, behavior can be studied in a “systematic and observable manner with no consideration of internal mental states.” Mr. Watson believes that these behaviors are changed through measures called “conditioning.” There are two types of conditioning: “classical” and “operational.” Moreover, Behaviorism suggests that only observable behaviors should be studied, because “cognitions and emotions” are too subjective.

Classical Conditioning: Occurs when a naturally occurring stimulus is paired with a response. Next, a previously neutral stimulus is paired with the naturally occurring stimulus. Eventually, the previously neutral stimulus comes to evoke the response without the presence of the naturally occurring stimulus. The two elements are then known as the [conditioned stimulus](http://psychology.about.com/od/cindex/g/condstim.htm) and the conditioned response.

Example: You eat a new food and then get sick because of the flu. However, you develop a dislike for the food and feel nauseated whenever you smell it.

* The flu sickness is the US. (Unconditioned Stimulus)
* The nausea is the UR. (Unconditioned Response)
* The new food is the CS. (Conditioned Stimulus)
* The nausea to the new food is the CR. (Conditioned Response)

Operant Conditioning: method of learning that occurs through rewards and punishments for behavior. Through operant conditioning, an association is made between a behavior and a consequence for that behavior.

Example: Your car has a red, flashing light that blinks annoyingly if you start the car without buckling the seat belt. You become less likely to start the car without buckling the seat belt.

* The flashing light is a positive punishment.
* The consequence is given.
* The behavior of not buckling the seat belt decreases.

Schedules of Reinforcement: a rule stating which instances of a behavior will be reinforced. In some cases, a behavior is reinforced every time it occurs, other times it will not be reinforced at all. Either way, the goal is always strengthen behavior, either with positive reinforcement or negative reinforcement.

* Positive Reinforcement: anything that follows a behavior that will make it more likely to happen in the future; something being *added* to the situation to maintain or increase the behavior.
  + Examples: Providing praise for effort, getting a bonus for surpassing a sales quota, tangible rewards such as toys or candy
* Negative Reinforcement: a response of behavior is strengthened by stopping, removing or avoiding a negative outcome or aversive stimulus; something is being *subtracted* from the situation to make it better; eliminating something undesirable.
  + Examples: putting on sunscreen to avoid being sunburned, cleaning up the house so you don’t have to do it later, leaving early to avoid being stuck in traffic

2 Types of Schedules: Continuous or Partial

1. Continuous Reinforcement: a desired behavior is reinforced every time it occurs
2. Partial Reinforcement**:** a response is reinforced only part of the time.
   1. [Fixed Ratio](http://psychology.about.com/od/findex/g/def_fixedratio.htm): where a response is reinforced only after a specified number of responses. This schedule produces a high, steady rate of responding with only a brief pause after the delivery of the reinforcer. (Ex: Getting paid a certain set amount for every 5 candy bars sold)
   2. [Variable](http://psychology.about.com/od/vindex/g/def_variablerat.htm) Ratio: when a response is reinforced after an unpredictable number of responses. This schedule creates a high steady rate of responding. (Ex: Gambling and Lottery games)
   3. [Fixed-Interval:](http://psychology.about.com/od/findex/g/def_fixedinterv.htm)where the first response is rewarded only after a specified amount of time has elapsed. This schedule causes high amounts of responding near the end of the interval, but much slower responding immediately after the delivery of the reinforcer. (Ex: Getting the same amount of allowance on the 15th of every month)
   4. Variable Interval: when a response is rewarded after an unpredictable amount of time has passed. This schedule produces a slow, steady rate of response. (Ex: going fishing)

Major Psychologists: John Watson, B.F. Skinner, Edward Thorndike, Ivan Pavlov

Cognitive Theories

Cognitive Psychology refers to the ways that people perceive, think, remember and learn. There are several psychologists whom work under this theory, but Jean Piaget is the most notorious for describing the developmental stages from birth – adulthood.

Key Terms:

Schema: the mental and physical actions involved in understanding and knowing; categories of knowledge that help us understand and interpret the world. It not only includes a category of knowledge, but also a process of obtaining new knowledge. Additionally, as people have different experiences, the new information is used to change, modify, or add to previously existing schemas.

Assimilation: the process of taking in new information and incorporating it into previously existing schemas; applying previously existing knowledge to something new.

Example: a child is familiar with dogs; knows they are kind of furry, have four legs, etc. However, then he or she sees a cow for the first time and says “doggy.”

Accommodation: changing or altering our existing schemas, in light of new information; changing behavior to account for new knowledge.

Example: In the previous example, a parent would say “no, that’s a cow.” From that point forward, every time the child sees a “cow” he or she knows that it’s a “cow.”

Equilibration: the process of balancing between assimilation and accommodation that children go through as they grow developmentally.

Cognitive Stages

Sensorimotor Stage (Birth – 2 years):

* Goal is to make sense of the world
* Behaviors are limited to simple motor responses such as looking, sucking, grasping, listening and they use these to learn about the world
* Main goal is to attain Object Permanence (child’s understanding that objects continue to exist even if they cannot see or hear them)
* Divided into 6 sub-stages that are marked by demonstration/learning of a new skill (Reflexes, Primary Circular Reactions, Secondary Circular Reactions, Coordination of Reactions, Tertiary Circular Reactions and Early Representational Thought)

Preoperational Stage (2 – 6 years):

* Language development is a major indicator at this stage
* Increasingly able to use play and pretend
* Able to use objects to represent something else (ex: a broom is a horse)
* Egocentrism is still a huge factor at this age (inability to take someone else’s point of view)
* Conservation is difficult as well (they can only focus on one attribute of something at any given time; Ex: understanding that two containers have the same amount of liquid even if the containers look different)

Concrete Operational Stage (6 – 12 years):

* Begin to think logically about concrete events
* Good at inductive logic (going from the specific to the general)
* Difficulty with deductive logic (going from the general to the specific)
* Reversibility: actions can be reversed (Ex: his dog is a Labrador, a Labrador is a dog, and a dog is an animal)

Formal Operational Stage (12 –Adulthood):

* Develop the ability to think about abstract concepts
* Deductive logic begins to appear
* Systematically solve problems in analytical ways (as opposed to trial and error)

Developmental Theories

As with cognitive psychology, Erik Erickson is one of the groundbreaking, foundational psychologists for personality/development and psychosocial theory. He theorized that people go through 8 distinct stages of development throughout their lifespan. Each stage is built on skills learned in previous stages and results are demonstrated with either positive or negative experiences during the specified ages. They are briefly discussed below.

Stage 1: Trust v. Mistrust (birth – 1 year)

* The most fundamental stage of life
* The development of trust is based on the dependability and quality of a child’s caregiver
* If a child successfully develops trust, he or she will feel safe and secure in the world. If not, the child will feel that the world is unpredictable and inconsistent

Stage 2: Autonomy v. Shame and Doubt (early childhood)

* Focused on developing a sense of control
* Toilet training and other bodily functions can lead to a sense of self-control and independence
* Also involves choices about food, toys and clothes

Stage 3: Initiative v. Guilt (preschool)

* Asserting power and control through play and social interactions
* Those who are successful feel capable and able to be a leader; those who are not are left with guilt and a lack of initiative

Stage 4: Industry v. Inferiority (5 – 11 years)

* Developing a sense of pride about their abilities and accomplishments

Stage 5: Identity v. Confusion (adolescence)

* Explore independence
* Develop a sense of self
* Main reference for behavior is peer group

Stage 6: Intimacy v. Isolation (early adulthood)

* Exploring close, intimate personal relationships

Stage 7: Generativity v. Stagnation (middle adulthood)

* Build lives, focus on career and family

Stage 8: Integrity v. Despair (old age)

* Focused on reflecting back on life

Humanist Theories

Abraham Maslow introduced his hierarchy of needs in 1943, stating that people are motivated to fulfill their most basic needs before moving on to more advanced needs. This theory is often illustrated as a pyramid with the most basic needs at the bottom, and more challenging needs towards the top. As you progress up the pyramid, the needs become more psychological and social in nature.



Physiological Needs: the most basic needs required and vital to survival.

Safety/Security Needs: examples include desire for steady employment, health insurance, safe neighborhoods, and shelter from environment.

Social Needs: friendships, romantic attachments, and families help fulfill the need for acceptance, as well as religious and/or community groups.

Esteem Needs: Self-Esteem, personal worth, social recognition, and accomplishment.

Self-Actualization: people who are self-aware and have concern about personal growth; less concerned with the opinion of others and care about fulfilling their own potential. (According to this theory, not many people maintain this level of self-awareness, and often instead fluctuate between the lower levels).

PsychoSexual Theories

Sigmund Freud, the founding father of Psychoanalysis and one of the most famous psychologists of all time, developed a psychosexual theory of development that has remained controversial since it was first published. However, for the purposes of childhood development and the notoriety of his name, the theory will be briefly discussed below.

According to Freud, most of development occurs between the ages of birth – 5 years, as early experiences occur and shape actions at a later time in life. During this time, the pleasure seeking energies of the id (unconscious psychic energy that works to satisfy basic urges, needs and desires) is focused on certain erogenous zones and the libido (psychosexual energy) is the driving force behind the behavior. If the psychosexual stages are completed successfully, a person will grow up to have a healthy personality. If not, however, fixation occurs, in which a person persists and focuses on an earlier stage.

The Oral Stage: (Birth – 1 year)

* Infant’s primary source of interaction occurs by the mouth
* Rooting and sucking reflexes are important
* Infant derives pleasure from these reflexes
* Because the infant is dependent on the caregiver, he or she also develops a sense of trust at this stage
* Primary conflict is the weaning process
* If fixation occurs here, individuals may have issues with dependency or aggression and can result in problems with drinking, eating, smoking or nail biting

The Anal Stage: (1 – 3 years)

* Primary focus is on bowel and bladder movements
* Major conflict at this stage is toilet training
* Developing appropriate control leads to autonomy and independence
* Success at this stage is dependent on how parents approach toilet training
  + Praise and rewards at appropriate times lead to positive outcomes and help children feel capable and productive
  + If punishment or ridicule occur, two types of personalities may develop…
    - Anal expulsive: messy, wasteful or destructive personality
    - Anal retentive: stringent, orderly, rigid and obsessive

The Phallic Stage: (3 – 6 years)

* Primary focus of the libido is on the genitals
* Discovering the difference between males and females
* Oedipus Complex: boys can develop feelings of wanting to possess the mother and the desire to replace the father
* Electra Complex: similar but opposite feeling to describe girls; they may also develop penis envy
* Eventually, the child begins to identify with the same-sex parent as a means of viariously possessing the other parent

The Latent Period: (6 years to puberty)

* Libidos and interests are suppressed
* Development of the ego and superego allow for calm
* Ego: mediates the demands of the id and the superego
* Superego: composed of internalized ideals that we have acquired from our parents and society
* A time of exploration in which the sexual energy is still present, but it is directed into other areas such as intellectual pursuits and social interactions

The Genital Stage: (Puberty to death)

* An individual develops a strong sexual interest in the opposite sex
* Interest in the welfare of others
* If other stages completed successfully, the person will be a well-rounded, caring individual

Some information for this article was taken from:

Miltenberger, R. (2011). *Behavior modification: Principles and procedures, 5th Ed.* Wadsworth Publishing: CA.

[www.psychology.about.com](http://www.psychology.about.com) accessed by the School Psychologist on June 25, 2012.