

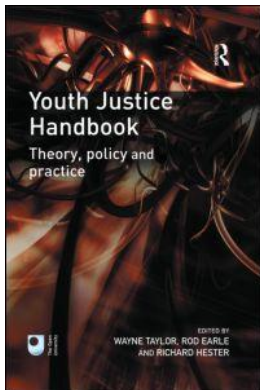
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### **From child to adult: theoretical assumptions in ideas about growing up**

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# From child to adult: theoretical assumptions in ideas about growing up

*Lindsay O'Dell*

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## Introduction

A major stumbling block in the path of those wishing to work for children in the UK is the status of children and childhood itself. (Mayall 2005: 79)

This chapter critically examines the notion of 'development' to look at ways in which moral agendas around about 'normality' are embedded and naturalized through our understandings of 'growing up'. Ideas from critical developmental psychology (for example, from Burman 2008) are used to demonstrate that development is not an inevitable, natural process but one which attends to the local and specific norms of the society in which young people develop. The chapter critically examines the construction of development as a progressive accumulation of skills acquired through a series of stages to examine how this construction sets up a 'normal' trajectory for development which can stigmatize and problematize young people who, for many reasons, fall outside the given norms. The chapter concludes by examining the implications of this for practice within a youth justice setting.

### 1. How do we develop?

While we all have ideas about how children develop, these are often derived from knowledge produced by developmental psychologists (Mayall 2005). The traditional, and still arguably dominant, view in developmental psychology is that development occurs through different stages; that we develop through a distinct process of progression from a less sophisticated stage to a more complex one. This is evident in our understandings of physical growth as well as for psychological, cognitive and other forms of development.

The key theories of development include Piaget's theory of cognitive development; Kohlberg's theory of moral development; and Erickson's psychosocial development. In Piaget's theory children develop through three stages: increasing cognitive abilities; learning to take another person's view into account; and developing abstract reasoning and logic. Piaget's theory has been extensively tested and re-evaluated, and the focus on cognitive development and skills remains an important area of practice, particularly with the cognitive skills training evident in youth justice practice (Pitts 2001). However, the basic premise of children being less developed than adults remains. The assumption of children as 'less' than adults – less developed and less competent – is discussed throughout this chapter.

Kohlberg's theory of moral development builds on Piaget's theory to suggest that children develop a view of morality progressing from self-interested action through to conformity to society's rules. Kohlberg argues that some people develop an individualized morality that transcends the law. This is usually explained by reference to people such as Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King who were both seen to draw on a higher sense of morality in justifying their acts of civil disobedience.

## 2. Progression

The implicit assumption within a stage model of development is that development is a cumulative acquisition of skills, moving from undeveloped, less sophisticated and immature to the endpoint of 'adulthood'. While there are substantial differences between the developmental theories of Piaget and Erikson (such as the focus they place on the child developing cognition and a sense of identity), they share some basic similarities. Both assume that development is the acquisition of skills to equip an individual to live an autonomous, independent life and to operate as a rational, logical thinker capable of individual actions. However, Walkerdine (1993) argues that the endpoints of development, as we view them, are culturally and socially constructed, reflecting the individualistic values of western society, in which independence and autonomy are valued over interdependency and collectivist solutions. Thus the dominant view of childhood and development – conceived as an orderly progression through time – involves ideological assumptions. This remains persuasive, so that even psychologists who disagree with a stage-based view of development conceptualize the process as a progressive one.

Walkerdine and other academics (such as Morss 1992 and Vandenberg 1993), however, question the very notion of development as seen in this way. Instead, they emphasize the cultural factors behind the idea of development as a progression, arguing that this can be seen, in part at least, as a legacy of the cultural and scientifically 'positivist' movements arising from modernism, particularly evolutionary theory and changes in Judeo-Christian theology (Vandenberg 1993).

Along with new ideas in positivist science and theology, there was also a questioning of the traditional view that children are 'mini-adults'. For instance, work from the Child Study movement (a precursor of modern developmental psychology) argues that the view that children are qualitatively different from adults reflects the thinking of Victorian philanthropic movements which emphasized the need to protect children – 'saving' them from the harsh and inappropriate world of adult life. This can be seen in the call for compulsory education that arose from Victorian campaigns in which children were 'positioned' as ignorant or lacking in basic knowledge. It was also apparent in the changing perceptions of children and young people engaged in criminal behaviour and how the state should respond to this. Garland (1990: 201) argues that the move to see children and young people as different from adults set up the distinction of 'adult' and 'juvenile' justice.

The philanthropic intentions of the 'child savers' also produced unexpected effects, particularly with regards to the new status of the 'child'. Rose (1990), for example, argues that compulsory education served to produce compliant citizens and workers, and was part of new techniques for controlling the growing urban masses. In addition, he argues that the new welfare practices aimed at child welfare served to reinforce children's dependency on their families, particularly their parents, and to promote parental responsibility for children. The tension between family and young person, evident in the Victorian child-saving movements, is still very much in evidence today, particularly in the practice of parenting orders.

### 3. The construction of the child

The dominant view of childhood today arises from this historical and psychological context which emphasizes development as progression through time. Childhood is seen to be a time of innocence, due to cognitive immaturity, and a period of dependence on adults, again due to an immaturity that requires protection of the child by adults. This fosters a model of intervention that ignores the 'voices' of children and excludes them from the decision-making process because they lack the knowledge and maturity of adults (Mayall 2005). The implications of this are discussed below with reference to how we view 'normal' and 'abnormal' development; and how we operate from an adult-centred perspective.

#### Mapping 'normal' and 'abnormal' development

The concept of 'abnormal' development is crucially important to youth justice because it frames the way children are thought about – about what are considered to be appropriate interventions. Implicit within stage-based theories of development is the view of a 'normal' pathway or trajectory of

development which sets up expectations about how *all* children *should* develop (Burman 1994, 2008). Flear (2006) argues that we see children in an age-graded way and use these classifications of different stages to generate expectations about how children and young people should behave. Thus, expectations about what is 'normal' at different ages serve to regulate normality and determine the nature of the professional intervention. For example, if a two-year-old child hits another child it is assumed to be age appropriate, something they will grow out of. However, if a 12-year-old hits a younger child the behaviour is seen very differently (usually from a risk-based perspective) and responded to accordingly. The 'de-juvenilization' of youth justice work (Pitts 2001) and debates about the age of criminal responsibility are made sense of in terms of age-related abilities. However, while age-related capabilities are often easy to note in young people, it is important to examine the context within which young people live in order to make sense of their actions in a more nuanced and informed way.

A further implication of the dominant view of development (as a cumulative progression of skills through time) is that it is seen to be vitally important to get the foundations of children's development right. Work in prevention, and in identifying early signs of problematic behaviour, rests upon the assumption of a clear developmental trajectory. However, the links between early childhood problems and outcomes in later life are by no means understood or clearly proved for all children (O'Dell 2003). There are many ameliorating factors that can have a significant impact on how seriously a child is affected in the long term (protective factors include being believed, supportive adults, supportive schooling, the temperament of the child). This is not to argue that negative life experiences and trauma in childhood are not harmful but to recognize that there are many factors that need to be taken into account in a child's life rather than automatically assuming that they will struggle with the effects of early experiences for their whole lives.

The aim of much work with children and young people is to observe (what is assumed to be) 'normal' development and to rectify any 'abnormal' behaviours (Rose 1990; Mayall 2005). Children who do not fit within this 'normal' developmental trajectory are seen in ways that define them as problems (Mayall 2005; Burman 2008). For example, a common way of describing children whose lives do not accord with normative ideas about families and the context in which they grow up is often referred to as having experienced a 'broken' childhood and to have symbolically 'lost out' on their childhood. Children and young people who transgress from the characteristics assumed as 'normal' are therefore subject to interventions which invoke the dual agendas of 'welfare' and 'prevention', seeing young people as victim and/or a threat (Griffin 1993; Mayall 2005; Meyer 2007). Children or young people who are not passive and dependent, such as child workers or teenage parents, evoke strong reactions because their activities are deemed to be incongruent with their chronological stage, transgressing the assumed activities (and stages) of childhood. Therefore children and young people whose

behaviour defies the bedrock assumptions of childhood development are seen, symbolically, as 'lost children', and subject to protection (if they are viewed as a victim of circumstances) or punished (if they are seen to represent a 'risk' – in terms of posing a 'danger' to the public through serious or persistent offending). The boundary between victimhood and culpability is a tricky one in which strong emotional reactions are elicited.

We have strong emotional reactions to images of children who are seen as victims of their circumstances. Emotional reactions to crimes committed both by young people and against young people elicit a much higher level of emotional response than crimes by, or against, adults. This is partly because of the way offences by and against children involve a disruption in the taken-for-granted assumptions about children. The child as victim elicits a strong emotional concern to protect, but equally strong is the desire to correct misbehaviour. Therefore claiming to speak for the best interests of a child, when the child is positioned as a 'victim', conveys a strong message which is difficult to challenge. However speaking for a child who is seen to have transgressed dominant assumptions about the characteristics and capabilities of childhood remains difficult and is likely to be subject to challenge. A way of doing so in youth justice work is evident in the dichotomous construction of young people as both the 'offender' and 'victim' of their own problematic life events. However the focus for understanding and explaining this is attributed to individual psychopathology and thus action is based on work to transform individual young people. As a consequence, the focus on wider structural inequalities of opportunity and provision, which constitute a significant factor in explaining problematic behaviours, tends to be left out of the equation.

The dominant view of development is of children and young people as 'becomings' – whose importance lies in the fact that they will one day *become* adults. In viewing development as a progression through time we assume that we grow out of childhood and of children's knowledge. Authors such as Mayall (2005) and Mason (2005) argue that childhood skills and knowledge are lost, made invisible and devalued as a result of this. Hence: 'The construction of children as passive dependents – as not adults and therefore lesser beings than adults – enables adults to discount and marginalize children's knowledge' (Mason 2005: 96).

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that, while it seems self-evident that children do grow up, the ways in which we understand this process are currently dependent on outmoded and unreflective theory. This has led us to see childhood in a way which simplifies development into a set of 'stages', assuming a largely universal progression through time. Much child protection and youth justice work draws on this dominant construction of children as

immature, deficient in adult skills and, thus, in need of intervention. In so doing, it raises concerns that we view children and young people – who for many reasons have experiences outside this conceptual framework – in potentially unhelpful ways. Children and young people live in a complex relationship balancing security with the need to take risks in developing their skills in autonomy and self-agency. As discussed, this contradiction is echoed in the criminal justice system in the operation of the two agendas of ‘prevention’ and ‘welfare’, where children are deemed to be morally responsible for their offending yet where the sentences imposed also suggest reform and moral training via rehabilitation programmes.

Garland (1990) stresses the value of theory in helping us to reflect on practice. In accounting for how children and young people develop, a helpful way of understanding is to draw on the theoretical work of Vygotsky (1986) developed in the discipline of cultural psychology. Here children are seen to develop in accordance with local, culturally specific knowledge, norms and practices. The emphasis is placed upon the child’s active role in shaping and developing cultural tools (knowledge and practice relevant to their lives) and not on formal stages of development. Children are seen to develop in partnership and in relationships with others, often older or more skilled peers or family members. From this perspective the role of those working with children and young people is to attend to the lived realities of the young person and to understand the context within which this takes place. Here the principle of responsivity – being engaged with the world of the young person – is essential to devising intervention packages (where appropriate) that seek to work alongside them, developing a meaningful conversation between the practitioner and the young person, recognizing the different priorities and concerns of both.

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