Piaget's 4 Stages Of Cognitive Development

Sensorimotor Stage

(birth to age 2)

Infants acquire knowledge and understanding via their sensory interactions with their physical environment and learn they exist separately from the environment. This is a time of exploration, as they learn about the world via their sensory systems. Piaget broke this stage into six substages. By the end of this stage, children begin to understand object permanence and develop a sense of self.

Preoperational Stage

(age 2 to age 7)

In this stage, children begin playing with symbols—a wooden block may be a race car one day, a slice of cheese the next, and a smartphone on day three. Thinking in this stage is still egocentric—they believe everyone sees the world as they do and struggle to see the world through someone else's eyes. Language skills grow more sophisticated. Their curiosity grows and they ask questions about everything.

Concrete Operational Stage

(age 7 to age 11)

Thought processes mature and problem solving becomes more logical in this stage, but hypothetical thinking skills are not yet developed. They are, however, better at understanding complex abstract concepts like time, space, and quantity. They can use inductive logic (reasoning from a specific idea to broad generalization), can differentiate between facts and fantasies. Children also begin learning to see things from other people's perspectives.

Formal Operational Stage

(age 11 and up)

In this final stage, children grow more capable in abstract, hypothetical, and theoretical reasoning. They learn to think about thinking and solve problems in logical and methodical ways. They learn to reason deductively (logically drawing specific conclusions based on abstract concepts). They are able to play with hypothetical "what-if" situations, which may or may not be based on reality.

Based on the works of developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980)

Piaget's 4 stages offer valuable insight into children's cognitive development, but there are criticisms. For example, some question whether development progresses linearly from stage to stage, and others feel he failed to factor in the influence of culture on cognitive development.

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