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chapter 5 THEORIES APPLIED to TEACHING and LEARNING: Foundations for practice



LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Explain Piaget's theory of cognitive development.
2. Describe Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and how you can apply it.
3. Explain how Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences contributes to early childhood education.
4. Explain behaviorism and how to apply it to your teaching.
5. Describe Erikson's stages of psychosocial development and their implications for teaching.
6. Explain Maslow's theory of self-actualization/human motivation.
7. Explain Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development.

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NAEYC STANDARDS

HERE we discuss the pioneering work of theorists who have contributed to our knowledge and understanding of how children learn, grow, and develop cognitively, behaviorally, and socially. Theorists Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky laid the foundation for the practice of *constructivism*, which is based on the theory that children construct their own knowledge and that their knowledge is unique for each child. We also discuss the multiple intelligences theory of Howard Gardner, which maintains that intelligence based on IQ is much too limiting and that children possess many different intelligences; the psychosocial theory of Erik Erikson, which explains how children develop socially and emotionally; the basic needs theory of Abraham Maslow, which stresses the role of basic needs in learning; the cultural context theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner, which encourages us to consider how environments influence children's development; and the behaviorist approaches to learning of B.F. Skinner and Albert Bandura, which emphasize the roles of stimulus-response behavior and observation in children's learning.

Teaching without an understanding of the various theories and an understanding of how children learn and develop is like driving off the highway with no idea of where you are going. Theories guide and direct us on the roadways of teaching. Sure, off-roading can be good weekend fun, but when you are serious about where you want to go, you can't beat an interstate highway! The same is true of using theories to guide your professional practice. A **theory** is a statement of principles and ideas used to explain how things happen. In our case, theories explain how children learn and develop.

theory

A set of explanations of how children develop and learn.

Theories explain how children grow and change physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually over time. The theories of Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson are age related or stage related because they describe what children are able to do, cognitively and socioemotionally, as they grow and mature.

Understanding and using learning and developmental theories are an important part of your professional practice for these reasons.

- **Guidance.** Theories help you understand how, why, where, and when learning occurs. As a result, they guide you in developing programs for children that support and enhance their learning. For example, knowledge about how children learn directly influences classroom arrangements and the early childhood curriculum—what you teach; and how to teach. For example, developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and other teaching approaches stress the importance of matching children's developmental stages with instructional practices. Developing programs and curriculum is an important part of your professional practice.
- **Evaluation.** Evaluation of children's development and learning is another important job of all teachers. Theories describe behaviors and identify what children are able to do at certain ages. You can use this information to evaluate children's learning and plan for teaching.
- **Decision-making.** Early childhood teachers make decisions every day about their instructional practices. Many ongoing decisions involve matching what and how you teach to each child's unique developmental characteristics.

- **Communication.** Theories enable you to explain to others, especially parents and families, the complex process of learning and what you and they can expect of children. Communicating with parents and others with clarity and understanding about how children learn is one of the most important jobs for all early