

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Aim**

Describe the influence of children's cognitive development on their reading abilities and requirements.

Children's writing is a specialised craft. It is a rewarding, inspirational and often demanding branch of writing and it seems that there is a growing market for children's books. Because we have all been children, and because children's books often appear so simple, many would-be writers believe that writing for children is easier than writing for adults. This is not the case, for children are as choosy as what they read as any adult, maybe even more so, and will quickly put down a book that does not immediately hold their interest. Adult readers, on the contrary, are often more willing to wade through a couple of unexciting chapters before they decide that a story is not worth reading. Another point is that while many of us recall our childhoods and enjoy reminiscing about them, not many of us can write in ways that are relevant or appealing to children.

The fact is that there is not golden rule for children's writing. Many successful writers of children's stories and books succeed because they have developed sensitivity to children's needs and developed their ability to write well. Others succeed because they write well, even though they are not particularly sensitive to children or their needs. In other words, you do not have to have or even like children to write good books or stories that children will want to read. But you do have to write well, and that can take a lot of hard work.

### **UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN**

If one can be a successful children's writer without understanding children, why bother trying to understand them. There are two main reasons: the most obvious reason is that it can't hurt and it might help; the second is that in some situations, understanding children's abilities and requirements is important. Let's say that you are a fairly good writer, but not exceptional. In that case, your understanding of children's abilities and needs can help you tailor your writing to a specific target audience (say, pre-school children). On the other hand, if you want to write a text book or children's information column for a newspaper, your understanding of children's needs, abilities and concerns can help you choose and present information appropriate to the targeted audience. An understanding of child psychology can also help you create more believable, interesting, unique child characters and a more credible, realistic context for their motivations: in other words, create characters whose motives and behaviours are credible and not stereotypic or shallow.

### **Child Development**

Children's abilities and skills develop over time, and are influenced by two main factors: their genetic makeup (what they are biologically programmed to develop, and when), and their environment (the influence of parents, primary care givers, society, peers, culture, school etc.).

Genetic or biological development occurs under normal circumstances regardless of the child's environment.

For instance, infants will not be able to read no matter what kind of an environment they are raised in because they lack the full biological equipment (e.g. fully-developed brain and eye muscle control) needed for that task, but most children are physiologically capable of reading by around the age of four.

Environmental influences will affect what the child learns (what is called 'learned behaviour'), and this can vary greatly between children. Environmental influences can also affect biological development. Understanding these influences may help you appreciate why different age groups have different needs and why they may be interested in different kinds of stories.

The main areas of development are:

- physiological (which includes development of the neurological system – brain, nerves etc.),
- cognitive (their ability to think and understand, which is affected by their neurological development),
- social (their ability to relate to others, their tendency to conform to social norms and roles),
- moral (their ability to think in moral terms, to empathise, to make moral judgements etc).

Though we can talk of these as distinct areas, as was explained above, they are not, and development in one area will affect development in another. For example, social interaction is of more interest to older children, whereas interaction between the child and his/her physical environment is of greater importance for pre-school children. These differences are due, in large measure, to the physiological and cognitive development of the child at each stage. As the brain and nervous system develop, the child's ability to use a wider range of cognitive (thinking) strategies (for example, to understand a different perspective, to understand that things not present still exist, to empathise) increases.

What this means for the writer is that the very young reader will see the world differently and will prefer stories to be simple, with clearly stated motives, predictable and simple characters and easy to follow action. The older reader, on the other hand, will probably require the stimulation of 'finding out', of discovering motives, anticipating possible courses of action, and learning to know characters through their words and actions. As you will see in the sections below, children are biologically programmed to gradually develop deeper levels of awareness and understanding of their world and of the relationships between people, but what they actually understand and how they see the world will also be profoundly influenced by what they learn from the world around them: their environment.

### **Learning**

*Learning can be defined as a relatively permanent change in behaviour as the result of practice or environmental influence.* This definition goes beyond our usual understanding of learning as the conscious, intentional activity associated with gaining new knowledge or skills. The reality is that most of our learning occurs with little interference from our intention to learn.

Some believe that the infant is born as a 'blank slate' and that everything it thinks, does, believes and knows is learned.

Some believe that the infant is born with certain tendencies or dispositions (such as personality or capacity to excel in certain areas etc.) that may or may be developed through learning. Either way, an infant learns from the moment it is born, perhaps even earlier. By the time a child has turned four, he or she has learned to speak correctly in the language of the parents or primary caregivers, to walk, run, climb, somersault and carry out a large range of activities, to draw, colour, make things, to communicate and relate appropriately with different people, to dress, bathe, use eating utensils, ride a tricycle and so much more. Some four year olds go far beyond even these skills.

Psychology identifies four basic methods of learning:

- Habituation
- Vicarious Learning
- Classical Conditioning
- Operant Conditioning

*Habituation* – Learning to become accustomed to a particular stimulus so that it is no longer of interest. It is indicated when the infant no longer shows an active response to the stimulus.

*Vicarious Learning* – Learning through imitation (of parents or others). Also called "modelling", vicarious learning is learning by imitating the behaviour of those whom the infant loves or respects. Gender and other social roles (mother, teacher, father) are learned in this way. For example, a little girl plays at being a mother or imitates her mother's cooking behaviour, while a little boy might imitate his father's actions and attitudes.

*Classical Conditioning* – Learning through repeated association of stimuli. This is a little more difficult to understand, but it also plays a large part in learning, both for children and adults. When something that makes us happy, sad, fearful etc. (call it 'A') is repeatedly associated with a neutral item (such as a person, a colour, a sound, an image or a sensation) (call it 'B'), we learn to respond to 'B' in the same way that we respond to 'A'. For example, a child dislikes loud sudden noises. If each time a child is shown a stuffed toy, it is accompanied by a loud alarm that upsets the child; the child will learn to be upset by the toy, even when the alarm is no longer present. Many phobias are learned in this way, and can be un-learned in the same way through a process called 'desensitisation'.

*Operant Conditioning* – Learning as a result of what follows behaviour. Most people are aware of this kind of learning, but there is more to it than just rewarding desirable behaviour. Operant conditioning always *reinforces* or strengthens behaviour (whether the behaviour is considered good or bad). Positive reinforcement refers to the process of 'rewarding' a child (or adult) for a behaviour (e.g. praising a child; allowing a favourite activity). Negative reinforcement refers to the process of rewarding behaviour by removing something that is not liked (e.g. reducing work hours; eliminating an unpleasant task). One problem that we often encounter is that parents and others frequently 'reward' behaviour that they do not like. Consider the child or employee who continually gains attention by being disruptive. For that individual, the attention may be more desirable than the anger or criticism that it generates is undesirable.

## **Children's Cognitive Development**

One of the better known theories of the states of development was formulated by Jean Piaget. As a result of years of observational and experimental research conducted with his own children. Later he applied similar research methods with children in the general population. Many of his concepts are based on his observations of children's responses during cognitive games or mental exercises that he played with them. Piaget noticed that children of different ages approached these exercises in different ways, and inferred certain patterns concerning the way the child thinks at different ages. In Piaget's view, cognition is a mental structure that becomes increasingly more complex and efficient as the child grows older.

Piaget describes four major stages of cognitive development:

- Sensorimotor Stage (Birth to 2 years) – The child learns through its motor activities and its sensory perception (touching, tasting, hearing, seeing).
- Pre-Operational Stage (2 to 7 years) - The child's growing language skills allow development in ways not previously possible. Language allows the child to learn that an object can represent something that it is not (to play pretend games)..
- Concrete Operational Stage (7 to 12 years) – The child's growing social skills increased its socialisation – learning how to conform to the rules and expectations of family and society and approved ways of relating to others.
- Formal Operational Stage (12 years and older) – The child can engage in abstract thought, which means he/she can think about ideas (philosophical and ideological issues) rather than events or persons.

### *Implications for the Writer*

Even this simple overview of Piaget's theory can help the writer gain a better understanding of children's needs, interests and limitations at different ages, even though some recent research has found problems with Piaget's theories. Some cognitive psychologists claim that cognitive development is more continuous and far less segmented than Piaget suggested, and that some children arrive far earlier at certain stages than others. However, the theory is still valuable, and helps us understand why, for instance, small children might delight in playing peek-a-boo while an older child is more interested in understanding the relationship between things. The small child would probably be delighted by a picture book based on peek-a-boo (with hidden things that are quickly revealed) whereas the older child might be fascinated by a picture book of different kinds of aeroplanes or a book that allows them to paste animal stickers in correct groupings.

Younger children cannot read as well as older children and have a limited attention span, so writing for this age group should be simpler (more concise, with shorter words etc). Also, greater emphasis may be placed on illustrations for books aimed at small children, both in fiction and non-fiction writing. Children of all ages enjoy looking at images, and illustrations can be an important feature of writing for older children as well. However, the older child's ability to imagine, pretend and think abstractly can reduce the need for images, and even primary-school children can enjoy novels (which have no or few images) if the story is interesting and well written.

## **Socialisation**

Social cognition is the ability to understand who we are, and how we stand in relation to other people and society in general. Socialisation is the process by which we come to understand (learn) about these things.

We are primarily social beings and we define ourselves in relation to our view of others. Therefore, we are influenced by how others perceive us and how we perceive them. Others' perceptions, expectations, attitudes and beliefs are communicated to each of us directly, symbolically or otherwise, in the behaviour and words of those around us. Family is the first influence on a child's socialisation, and through family, the child learns the values, expectations and beliefs of the wider society and culture (perceptions of gender roles, sexuality, family, duty, success etc.). Later, school plays a vital role in socialisation, as do the media and peers. In fact, we are so continually being influenced by those around us that we learn to see the world and ourselves in ways that seem natural and inevitable, and only as adults – if at all – do we begin to recognise that most of what we think is natural or normal is actually learned.,

Some of the basic elements of social cognition are:

- self awareness
- awareness of others as individuals in their own right
- development of empathy
- ability to take turns (e.g. I speak, you listen, then you speak, I listen)
- having a point of view/perspective
- ability to see something from another person's perspective.

As we can see, these elements of social cognition require different levels of cognitive ability. A child who is not self-aware will not be able to appreciate that others have different perspectives or experiences. A child who is empathic knows that others have different perceptions to him or herself, and is able to see him or herself from another perspective. Each of the aspects listed above contributes to the good social development of the individual.


### *Culture*

Another aspect of social influence is culture. Broadly speaking, culture is the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, technologies and products (artefacts) that a society holds, follows, uses or produces to live in their environment, and passes on from generation to generation. In today's world, a society may be made up of people from different cultural backgrounds, and that background may have a strong influence on what a child learns within the family context.

### *Implications for the Writer*

Whether writing fiction or non-fiction, the writer should be prepared to observe and reflect social and cultural influences and considerations where relevant. For one thing, the writer who is aware of the social context in which he or she is writing will be better able to communicate meaningfully with readers. For instance, if a writer expresses racial bigotry in a society that disapproves of bigotry, or expresses contempt for another culture in a society committed to multicultural harmony, many readers will neither respect nor accept that writer's thoughts, even in fiction.

For another thing, social and cultural influences affect every one of us, so characters should reflect the socio-cultural context in which the writer has placed them. For instance, telling a story about a South Pacific Island boy requires a certain degree of authenticity in the setting of the story and in the behaviour of the child and his family. Furthermore, cultural diversity can itself be a challenging and interesting theme, as it concerns many thousands of young readers. Cultural differences can (and often do) generate misunderstanding, confusion, distrust or conflict. They can also be a source of excitement, beneficial change and growth for the individual.


	<p><b>SELF ASSESSMENT</b> Perform the self assessment test titled 'Test 1.1' If you answer incorrectly, review the notes and try the test again.</p>
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### SET TASK

1. Watch children of two or three different age groups at play – perhaps your own children or a friend's children, or visit a pre-school and a primary school (get prior permission from the school). Take notes on:

- How the different groups play
- what kinds of games each group plays
- cooperation, competition, and power within each group.

2. Visit a school or public library and a bookshop and note the kinds of children's books offered for different age groups. If possible, ask the sales person or the librarian what kinds of books are most popular with the different age groups.

	<p><b>ASSIGNMENT</b> Download and do the assignment called 'Lesson 1 Assignment'.</p>
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