Laser Learning

Understanding **Child Development** Theories

An e-Book for childcare practitioners, educators, parents, and carers who want to understand major theories about how children grow and develop.

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Jean Piaget

Jean Piaget is famous as a cognitive development theorist, researching the young brain and how children learn and think. Piaget studied children from early years to teens and used naturalistic observations (often of his own children).

Piaget believed that children thought and understood differently to adults, and pioneered the theory that children 'go through' 4 stages of cognitive development.

Piaget believed that all children would follow the stages in the same sequence and not miss out a stage, although some children might not achieve the latter stages at all. Piaget was mindful that children were individuals and the rate at which children progressed through the stages would vary immensely. Piaget also believed that the same sequence occurred in all children all over the world, irrespective of their culture and life.

Vygotsky and Bruner

Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner researched cognitive development and both concluded that to extend learning there needed to be interaction and support from a 'more knowledgeable other'.

Lev Vygotsky was a leading theorist in cognitive development, he referred to the child's current level of development as the 'Zone of Actual Development' (ZAD) and believed that with support from a more knowledgeable peer or adult, children will develop cognitive skills; Vygotsky refers to this as the child's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD).

Jerome Bruner referred to a child being supported to achieve a skill as 'scaffolding'; once the child has achieved the skill, the scaffolding can be removed because he is competent at that skill. New scaffolding will have to be erected to support a new skill; the scaffolding is, of course, the support a parent / carer, or practitioner offers the child whilst they are practising the skills.

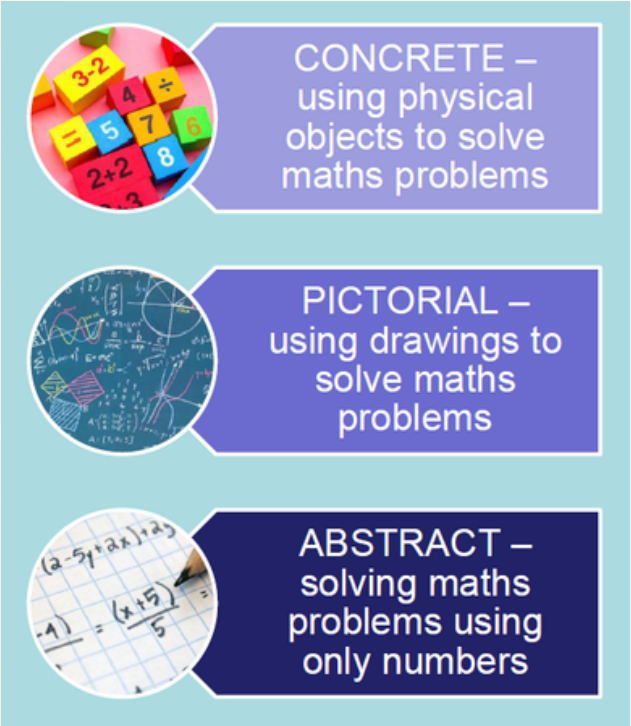
DID YOU KNOW? Scaffolding theory states that children need support and active help from their teachers and parents if they are going to become independent learners as they mature.

Jerome Bruner

Jerome Bruner's theory of cognitive development states that young children are able to learn complex concepts, given the appropriate educational practices, opportunity, support, and tools to do so.

He believed that children construct knowledge and meaning through active experience with the world around them. He disagreed with Piaget about children passing through stages, and suggested they learned and developed through different ways of thinking – modes of representation.

His theory suggested cognitive growth happens through three modes: Enactive (action-based knowledge), Iconic (image-based knowledge), and Symbolic (language-based knowledge). These modes are not sequential stages, but ways in which the mind organises and stores information.



His theory has been very influential in the way subjects, particularly maths, are taught in schools and colleges. The Concrete Pictorial Abstract (CPA) approach is based on Bruner's modes of representation.

Albert Bandura

Bandura was a social cognitive psychologist renowned for his impact on social learning theory and the field of education. He believed that:

- Humans are active information processors
- There is a relationship between behaviour and consequences
- Observational learning could not occur unless cognitive processes were at work
- Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do
- Modelling (demonstrating a task) engages children and young people and encourages learning

Modelling and scaffolding are very useful strategies for teaching students, especially students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson proposed a lifespan model of development, emphasising how social relationships shape our sense of self. He suggested that we go through 8 stages, each marked by a central conflict that must be resolved for healthy personality growth. His Stages of Psychosocial Development are:

Stage	Basic Conflict	Virtue	Description
Infancy 0-1 Year	Trust vs. Mistrust	Hope	Trusts or mistrusts that basic needs, including affection, will be met
Early Childhood 1-3 Years	Autonomy vs. Shame / Doubt	Will	Develops a sense of independence in many tasks
Play Age 3-6 Years	Initiative vs. Guilt	Purpose	Takes initiative on some activities, but may develop guilt when unsuccessful
School Age 7-11 Years	Industry vs. Inferiority	Competence	Develops self-confidence when competent or sense of inferiority when not
Adolescence 11-18 Years	Identity vs. Confusion	Fidelity	Experiment with and develop identity and roles
Early Adulthood 19-29 Years	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Love	Establish intimacy and relationships with others
Middle Age 30-64 Years	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Care	Contribute to society and be part of a family
Old Age 65+	Integrity vs. Despair	Wisdom	Assess and make sense of life and meaning of contributions

John B. Watson

John B. Watson founded behaviorism, the idea that psychology should focus on observable actions rather than thoughts or feelings. He believed behaviour is learned through interactions with the environment and can be shaped or controlled using conditioning techniques (reward, punishment, and association).

Watson's most famous (and unethical) experiment, involved conditioning a fear response in a young child known as Little Albert. The experiment demonstrated that emotional responses, specifically fear, could be learned through classical conditioning.

According to Simply Psychology, The Little Albert experiment sparked new thinking about how conditioning principles could be applied to understanding and treating phobias, which Watson argued were learned and therefore could be unlearned.

B.F. Skinner

B.F. Skinner proposed a theory of child development called ‘Operant Conditioning’. Operant conditioning is a type of learning where behavior is shaped by its consequences. When an action is followed by a reward, we are more likely to repeat it; when it is followed by a punishment, we tend to avoid it.

Operant conditioning shows how rewards and consequences shape behaviour, and can be very helpful for motivation with learning and development.

Children often experiment with different actions and quickly learn which ones bring rewards and which led to unpleasant outcomes. For example, a child rolls a ball to another child and they roll it back and play begins (positive reinforcer). Or the child takes the ball and refuses to give it back (negative reinforcer). Depending on the consequence of the action, the child will be more or less likely to repeat the behaviour.

DID YOU KNOW? The Premack Principle suggests that a preferred activity can be used to motivate a less preferred activity. For example, you tell a child if they do their homework then they can watch tv.

Abraham Maslow

Abraham Maslow made an important contribution to child development through his humanistic theory of motivation, particularly his Hierarchy of Needs.

Maslow proposed that children must have their basic needs met before they can grow, learn, and reach their full potential.

Maslow highlighted the importance of love, security, and positive relationships in healthy development. He also emphasised that development is not just intellectual, but also emotional, social, and psychological.

John Bowlby

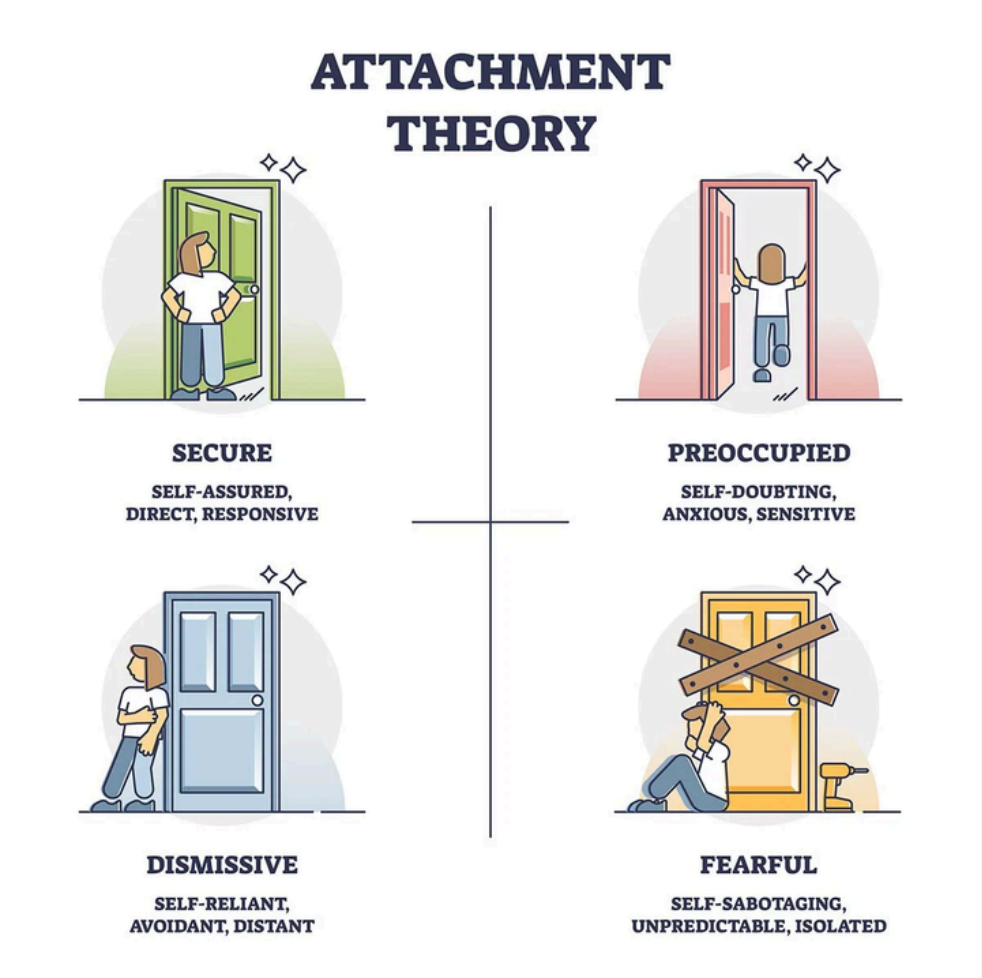
John Bowlby's theory of attachment is one of the earliest theories of social development. He believed early relationships with caregivers play a major role in child development and continue to influence social relationships throughout life. Bowlby was interested in the bonds, or attachments, between a baby and their caregivers; he believed positive, respectful relationships formed in the early years had a tremendous positive impact on the relationships formed throughout life.

John Bowlby identified four stages of attachment that children go through during the early years. He defined them as:

Age	Stage	Description
0-6 Weeks	Pre-Attachment	The infant does not show an attachment to any specific individual. They will not fuss when picked up by someone new.
6 Weeks To 6-8 Months	Attachment In Making	The infant begins to show preference for caregivers. The person who meets the infant's needs more than anyone else (primary caregiver) has a powerful effect on the infant's behaviour.
8 Months To 18-24 Months	Clear-Cut Attachment	There is an obvious attachment to the primary caregiver and the child will protest being separated from them.
24 Months+	Formation Of Reciprocal Relationships	A time of multiple attachments, and the child developing more understanding of what influences a caregiver's behaviour so they predict what happens - this makes the child less stressed and likely to show strong separation anxiety.

Mary Ainsworth

Mary Ainsworth's attachment theory and her experiment, The Strange Situation, added significant contributions that shape how attachment is still discussed to this day. The Strange Situation was developed to examine the attachment between mothers and children in an unknown environment. The experiment measured how a child explores their environment in the presence of their caregiver, in their absence, and in the presence of a stranger. It drove the formation of the attachment classification system.



Margaret Donaldson

Margaret Donaldson's theories about children's cognitive development form part of the theoretical position known as 'constructivism'.

Donaldson believed that children made errors because they were not only responding to what they were being asked to do, but also trying to understand the meaning of the task. They were seeking to make 'human sense' of the situation.

When a child makes 'human sense' of a situation they are then able to understand it clearly; this is called embedded thinking. When a child is unfamiliar to a situation it is called disembedded thinking.

She believed that to support children in their education it was important for practitioners to present activities and lessons from a child's point of view, and encouraged educators to seek out what children can do, rather than focussing on what they cannot do.

DID YOU KNOW? Constructivism is a learning theory stating that individuals actively construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences, reflections, and social interactions.

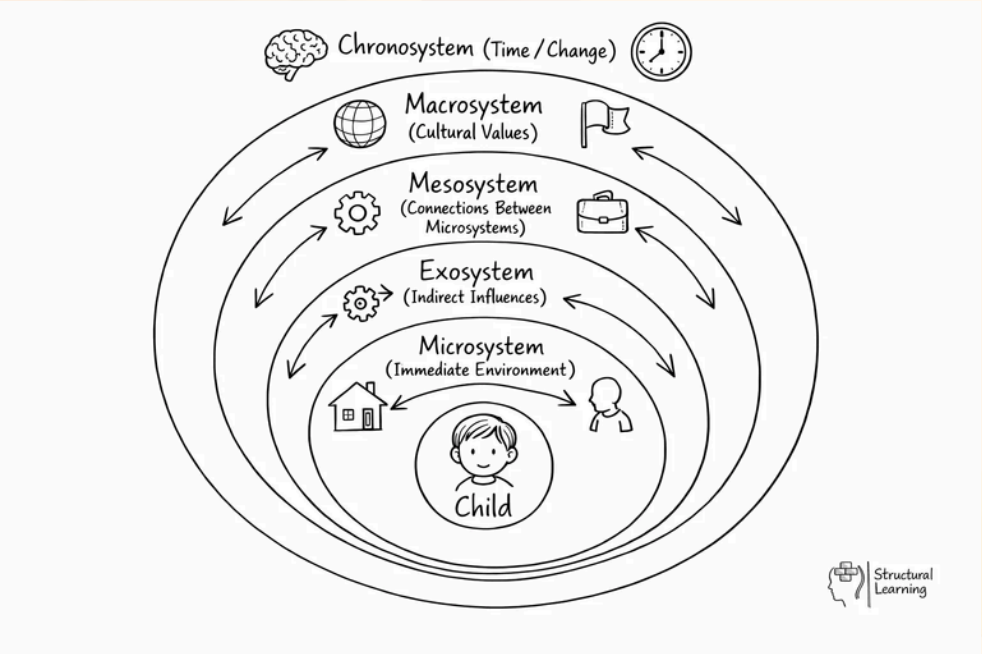
Urie Bronfenbrenner

Urie Bronfenbrenner was a developmental psychologist who created the Ecological Systems Theory.

Bronfenbrenner suggested that there were four systems that would affect the child's learning and development:

1. Microsystem
2. Mesosystem
3. Exosystem
4. Macrosystem

Bronfenbrenner emphasised that each system would have a different impact on the child in varying importance, which would ultimately impact the child as a whole.



Loris Malaguzzi

Reggio Emilia is an educational philosophy developed by a teacher, Loris Malaguzzi, and others in the villages around Reggio Emilia, Italy.

The theory is that people form their own personality during the early years and have symbolic languages (e.g. painting, sculpting, drama, etc.) to express their ideas. The aim of the approach is teaching how to use these symbolic languages in everyday life.

Respect, responsibility, and community are at the heart of the approach and the belief that discovery happens in a supportive and enriching environment based upon the interests of the child.

The environment is the third teacher and children can best create meaning and sense of their world through environments which support complex, varied, sustained, and changing relationships between people, the world of experience, ideas, and the many ways of expressing ideas.

Maria Montessori

Maria Montessori was an Italian physician and educator and her educational approach followed extensive research with special needs children. She emphasised the need for independence, freedom within limits, and respect for a child's natural psychological, physical, and social development.

Choice and discovery were essential for effective learning with uninterrupted (3 hour) blocks of time for play using specialised educational materials.

Montessori play focuses on self-directed, purposeful, and hands-on learning, often using natural materials to build independence and concentration.

Montessori education guides children to lead their own development and become independent thinkers.

Rudolf Steiner

Rudolf Steiner was a philosopher and architect. He founded a number of schools and the first was called the Waldorf school. Waldorf education is also known as Steiner education.

This approach to learning emphasises the role of imagination in learning, striving to integrate the intellectual, practical, and artistic development of pupils.

Steiner believed that child development had three major stages, which indicated a change physically and mentally, and there are learning strategies appropriate for each stage. Each stage lasts approximately seven years and was similar to those described by Piaget.

- 0-7 Years: The Physical Body
  - Focus for educators: Physical development
- 7-14 Years: Imaginative / Feeling Phase
  - Focus for educators: Emotional development
- 14-21 Years: Intellectual / Thinking Phase
  - Focus for educators: Cognitive development

DID YOU KNOW? Steiner believed that children should be nurtured and educated as whole individuals, and that holistic development created 'free human beings'.

John Dewey

John Dewey made contributions to child development theory through his philosophy of progressive education, emphasising that children learn best through active experience and social interaction. He believed that:

- Children learn most effectively through hands-on activities, rather than passive memorisation
- Teaching should start from the interests, needs, and abilities of the child, not from a fixed curriculum
- Social interaction is essential for cognitive and emotional development
- Growth happens through the interaction between the child and their environment
- The teacher acts as a guide or facilitator, structuring environments that encourage inquiry and reflection
- Schools should foster critical thinking, participation, and respect for others

Friedrich Froebel

Friedrich Froebel (Fröbel) understood that young children have unique needs and capabilities. In 1840, he introduced the word ‘kindergarten’ and his great insight was to recognise the importance of the activity of the child in learning.

He introduced the concept of ‘free work’ and suggested that the ‘games’ children played had great educational value. He stated that play was the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone was the free expression of what in in the child’s soul.

At the time his philosophy was revolutionary as it was a time when play was viewed as idle and unnecessary.

Froebel designed open-ended play resources called ‘gifts’ and encouraged children to use them creatively and discover endless play possibilities.

DID YOU KNOW? Froebel grew up near a forest and this closeness to natural things greatly influenced his thinking – centred on the unity and inner connectedness of all life.

Tina Bruce

Tina Bruce is a Professor in Early Education who has written a number of books and contributed to many academic articles concerning children's play. Bruce's theory is heavily influenced by Frobel's work about how children learn through play and experiences. Bruce's theory includes 12 features of play.

Children Use Experiences	Children Create Rules	Children Use Symbols
Children Choose To Play	Children Rehearse Their Future	Children Play Alone Sometimes
Children Pretend	Children Play Cooperatively	Children Have A Play Agenda
Children Are Deeply Engaged	Children Try Out New Skills	Children Coordinate Ideas, Feeling, And Relationships

Bruce believes that understanding children's past experiences can impact their present learning and development. She also emphasises how the environment and resources impact the child's learning experiences and the need for independent and supported play.

Fraser Brown

Fraser Brown believes that children learn and develop through play, and our opportunities for play are being increasingly restricted. Brown has been influential in playwork and suggested the role of the playworker was to create the conditions for children to play freely.

Brown believes children have a right to play freely outdoors, and when they do not have these opportunities - they lose out on social interaction, physical activity, and cognitive interaction with the environment. He studied the play of Roma children, and found that interacting with the environment is fundamental to children's future development. He also found a link between freely chosen interaction with the environment and cognitive stimulation, creativity, social interaction, and motor skills development.

"*A healthy play environment contains lots of opportunities for children to dig holes, light fires, play with animals, and so on.*"

Mildred Parten

Mildred Parten researched the different stages of children's play and when this may occur during their age and stage of development. She observed that as children grew, their play becomes more socially interactive.

Parten suggested that there are six stages of play:

1. Unoccupied play: The child is not actively playing but may observe others
2. Solitary play: The child plays alone without interacting with others
3. Onlooker play: The child watches others play but does not join
4. Parallel play: Children play beside each other with similar materials but without interaction
5. Associative play: Children interact and share materials but without organised goals
6. Cooperative play: Children play together with shared goals, roles, and rules

Susan Isaacs

Susan Sutherland Isaacs was an educational psychologist. She published works on the intellectual and social development of children and was a strong supporter of nursery education.

Isaacs believed that play was essential for learning and emotional development. She argued that through play, children express feelings, explore ideas, and make sense of the world. She believed the best way for children to achieve independence was through play guided by an early year's educator.

Isaacs supported progressive, child-centred approaches to education. She believed learning should be based on children's interests, curiosity, and natural exploration.

She did not believe that formal education should begin until the age of 7 and parents should be 'good – strict' and control the child's instincts to harm themselves or others.

DID YOU KNOW? Susan Issacs promoted careful observation of children as a key method for understanding development.

Chris Athey

Chris Athey was best known for her work on the development of schema theory. Athey defines a schema as "*a pattern of repeatable behaviour into which experiences are assimilated and that are gradually co-ordinated. Co-ordinations lead to higher-level and more powerful schemas.*"

Athey's work on schemas has been influential in helping adults understand the importance of repetition in children's learning. Children explore patterns, possibilities, and predict outcomes from repetitive play - when children engage in this type of play, they make connections, develop skills, and solve problems.

Athey's constructivist approach to children's learning and development is key to children's development in our practice today. Careful observations of children's schemas help practitioners to plan and extend children's learning both in the moment and over time. This helps children follow their interests and develop their thinking skills.

Schemas of Play

Schema	Possible Behaviour	Example extension ideas
Trajectory	Throwing items, climbing up, and jumping off	Play with ribbons, build towers from a variety of materials
Enveloping	Wrapping self in a blanket, covering painting with one colour, putting notes in envelopes	Make dens, practice wrapping presents, make lego houses with roofs
Enclosure	Filling and emptying containers, climbing into boxes, making dens	Use lego to build houses, design borders on paper
Transporting	Carrying small items in bags and buckets, pushing toys in prams and pushchairs	Give items that can be moved, take on trips to see trains, buses, etc., draw maps, follow roads
Rotation	Rolling and being spun round, playing with wheeled toys, watching the washing machine	Visit roundabouts, roll with rolling pins, explore cogs and water wheels
Connection	Joining items with ribbon, joining train tracks together, sticking models together	Different types of knots, explore with a stapler, use construction sets that join together
Positioning	Lining up objects, walking round the edge of things	Practice sorting and positioning language, make caterpillars
Assembling	Making piles, stacking things randomly or neatly	Use construction items that can be piled such as wooden bricks

Credit: Birth to 5 Matters

Cathy Nutbrown

Cathy Nutbrown is an early years expert and author of the 'Foundations for Quality' review, which considered how best to strengthen qualifications and career pathways in the early years and childcare sectors. Nutbrown recommended that better qualifications and more qualified practitioners were key to high-quality early years provision and, amongst other things, Level 3 qualifications should include more on child development and play.

Nutbrown was influenced by Chris Athey and champions the importance of schemas and their value to early learning. She has developed on how to use schemas in play for richer learning experiences.

(On schemas) "*The job of the [educator] is to spot that action and ask themselves 'Can I see that same action elsewhere?' After that, it's your role to decide what you offer the child to help advance this deep fascination. It's a tool…a way of thinking.*"

DID YOU KNOW? Nutbrown added to Athey's original list of schemas: Scattering, Transporting, Rotating, Trajectory or Angles, and Connecting.

Kathy Sylva

Kathy Sylva conducted large-scale studies on the effects of early education and care on children's development, and evaluated the effectiveness of parenting interventions.

Her most notable study was the Effective Provision of Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE) study, which tracked thousands of children from 3 years to 16 years to understand how early education impacts lifelong learning and wellbeing. Sylva found that:

- Children who attended pre-school generally achieved higher GCSE results, especially in English and maths, compared with peers who did not attend pre-school
- **High-quality** early education has stronger outcomes
- Pre-school appeared to help compensate for less stimulating home learning environments
- Pre-school education leads to lasting gains in social and behavioural development
- Social cognition and feelings are influenced by school, and may be just as powerful for predicting later achievement as intelligence or curriculum.

DID YOU KNOW? Social cognition refers to the mental processes - perception, memory, and interpretation - used to understand, store, and apply information about people and social situations.

Janet Moyles

Janet Moyles started as an early years playgroup leader and parent helper and is an early years/primary specialist and consultant, particularly in the areas of play, learning and practitioner research.

Moyles' theory is based on a spiral approach to curriculum. The spiral curriculum consists of allowing children to create their own structure of play where they are able to explore and learn by themselves without interruption from practitioners.

Moyles strongly argues that play is the foundation of children's learning and development.

Moyles links to Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal development as practitioners must understand when to intervene in the child's learning and play to support the child. This links to the Early Years Foundation Stage as it expresses the need for child-initiated play and adult-led activities.

DID YOU KNOW? Moyles encourages practitioners to reflect on their teaching methods and continuously evaluate how effectively they support children's development.

Barbara Rogoff

Barbara Rogoff's research focuses on sociocultural learning, and proposes that child development occurs in everyday experiences, which, for all children everywhere, are cultural experiences. Her work placed an importance on culture and community in early childhood education.

Rogoff challenges the idea that learning happens mainly through adult instruction. Instead, she shows that children learn by observing, contributing, and gradually taking on responsibility within their communities. She describes a gradual involvement of children in the working life of adults and communities as 'guided participation'.

Sociocultural learning is important in the early years as it helps children develop confidence, communication skills, and a sense of belonging. By learning alongside others, children build understanding in meaningful, real-world ways. It supports social, emotional, and cognitive development by valuing children as active participants in their learning, rather than passive recipients.

DID YOU KNOW? Sociocultural learning is the idea that children learn through relationships, shared activities, and everyday experiences. Learning happens through participation, not just through instruction.

Ferre Laevers

Ferre Laevers is a professor who created the Leuven involvement and well-being scales. These scales are used during observations to identify the engagement and well-being of the children being observed.

Laevers suggests that the higher children are rated on either scale indicates how intensely the child is learning and developing. Both scales rate from extremely low (1) to extremely high (5).

This scale has impacted the Early Years Foundation Stage as it provides a tool for practitioners to observe and record the child during their play. Practitioners can analyse areas that children are showing lower / higher levels in, and use this information to create individual learning plans that would support the child's learning and development.

Daniel Goleman

Daniel Goleman is best known for popularising the concept of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and showing how emotional skills are essential to child development.

Goleman has published a variety of books on emotional intelligence, and argues there are five components of emotional intelligence:

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-regulation
3. Motivation
4. Empathy
5. Social skills

Drawing on neuroscience, Goleman explained how the emotional brain (especially the amygdala) influences behaviour. He highlighted the importance of helping children manage strong emotions to support healthy brain development.

DID YOU KNOW? Goleman found that children who learn emotional regulation and empathy tend to perform better socially and academically.

If you enjoyed this e-Book and would like to learn more about the topics covered here, then you may be interested in our Education short courses or using our lesson resources for Early Years Educator and Children and Young People qualifications.

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