

The Real Child in Front of Us

Much can be learned from theories of child development and from the results of research studies that examine how children learn and develop. Theory and research can help focus our observations of children and illuminate the important processes and milestones of development. It is helpful to know, for example, when most children utter their first words and take their first steps if we are concerned about the development of a particular child. It is also helpful to know how most children learn to read when trying to help a child become a skillful reader.

There is, however, one caution that must be remembered when considering the use of child development theories and research: the children of theory and research never existed. That's not to say that the person who formulated the theory or conducted the research never observed, tested, or worked with a real child. Good theory and valuable research always emerges from a deep understanding of children and their development. But the children of a formulated theory and the children of research results are the children of averages and norms, and these are not real children. An average child is not the real child that a parent or teacher deals with every day; an average child is not the specific child who exists in a specific time and place.

The real child right in front of us is not an abstraction, a norm, or an average. He or she is an individual developing along her own trajectory, embarking on her own developmental journey. Children are individuals in a myriad of different ways, some obvious and some more subtle. Children, of course, develop at different rates. Some children will be stringing more than one word together to make sentences by the time they are eighteen months old while others may not do so until sometime past their second birthday. Some children will have mastered walking by their first birthdays while others may take many months longer. In most cases, these differences don't make a difference over the long course of a child's development.

Children also have different personalities, a fact which is very clear to parents who have more than one child. Some children are more outgoing than others, some are more curious, and some are more willing to take risks. Put ten three-year-olds in a room full of toys and you will find that some of them gravitate towards building with blocks, a few will want to act out little stories with the dolls, and still others will spend a considerable amount of time fitting puzzle pieces together. Some of the children will stay with one activity the entire time, others will move from activity to activity. Some will become frustrated when faced with a challenge, others will patiently persevere. It turns out that there is not an average child among this group of three-year-olds.

Those of us who spend time with children need to remember that we are always in the presence of an individual, a child with particular talents, desires, passions, fears, and who comes from a particular culture. We can look to theories of child development and to research studies for some guidance as to how best to understand and nurture the child but those theories and research studies won't tell us who this child is. To understand this particular child and to best understand how we can help her learn and

develop we have to pay attention to this child; we have to take the time to observe her at play, to listen to her as she expresses her ideas and concerns, and to spend time with her in ways that give us the opportunity to get to know who she really is. It's not possible to know a particular child from a theory in a book; we can only get to know who she is by being with her in real life.

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