

Middle Childhood: Psychosocial Development

Chapter Preview

This chapter brings to a close the unit on middle childhood. We have seen that from ages 6 to 11, the child becomes stronger and more competent, mastering the biosocial and cognitive abilities that are important in his or her culture. Psychosocial accomplishments are equally impressive.

The first section explores the growing social competence of children, as described by Erikson and Freud. The section continues with a discussion of the growth of the self-concept. The section closes with a discussion of the ways in which children cope with stressful situations.

The next section explores the ways in which families influence children, including the experience of living in single-parent, stepparent, extended, and blended families. Although no particular family structure guarantees optimal child development, income and harmony and stability are important factors in the quality of family functioning.

Children's interactions with peers and others in their ever-widening social world is the subject of the third section. Although the peer group often is a supportive, positive influence on children, some children are rejected by their peers or become the victims of bullying.

Because middle childhood is also a time of expanding moral reasoning, the final section examines

Chapter Guide

I. The Nature of the Child

1. Erikson viewed middle childhood as a time for learning with devoted attention and perseverance when children face the crisis of *industry versus inferiority*. As children strive to develop competence, they correspondingly come to view themselves as either productive and *industrious* or inadequate and *inferior*.
2. According to Freud, middle childhood is a period of *latency*, during which emotional drives are quiet and unconscious sexual conflicts are submerged.
3. As their self-understanding sharpens, a child's self-concept during middle childhood becomes more specific and logical and less optimistic.
4. Academic and social competence are aided by children's more realistic self-perception. However, high self-esteem reduces *effortful control* and thus may lower achievement and increase aggression. Self-esteem is not universally valued; some cultures expect children to be modest.
5. Some children cope with and overcome stress better than others. *Resilience* is a "dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity."
6. Accumulated stresses over time, including minor ones, are more devastating than an isolated major stress.
7. In general, a child's interpretation of a family situation determines how that situation affects him or her. Some children can't wait to leave childhood behind. Other children feel responsible for whatever

8. Children are helped to deal with problems by social support from friends, relatives, and pets, for example, and their religious faith and practice.

II. Families and Children

1. There is an ongoing debate between those who believe that genes, peers, and communities are more important influences on children's psychosocial development and those who believe that a child's parents are much more powerful. *Nonshared* influences on most traits are far greater than *shared* influences. Even so, all researchers agree that both nature and nurture are important.
2. **Family function** refers to how well the family nurtures its children to develop their full potential. Families that function well nurture school-age children in five essential ways: by providing material necessities, encouraging learning, helping them to develop self-respect, nurturing peer friendships, and providing an environment of harmony and stability.
3. **Family structure** refers to the legal and genetic relationships among members of a particular family. Harmony and stability are especially crucial during middle childhood. Shared parenting decreases the risk of maltreatment of children. Another crucial factor in the well-being of children is the *parental alliance* between a mother and father who support each other in their commitment to children.
4. Family structures today include **extended, nuclear, single-parent**, blended, adoptive, **polygamous**, stepparent, grandparents alone, same-sex, and adoptive. Children can thrive in just about any family structure. Every family type is affected by ethnicity, nationality, and culture.
5. In general, nuclear families function best. Parents are usually wealthier, healthier, better educated, and emotionally more mature.
6. The United States leads the world in the rates of marriage, remarriage, and divorce. Divorce generally impairs children's academic achievement and psychosocial development.
7. Two factors that have a crucial impact on children are family income and the warmth or conflict that characterizes family interaction. According to the *family-stress model*, economic hardship in a family makes adults more hostile and harsh toward their partners and children.

III. The Peer Group

1. Children learn lessons from peers that adults cannot teach. The **child culture** includes the habits, styles, and values that reflect the rules and rituals that children understand and pass down from older children to younger children.
2. Personal friendship is more important to school-age children than is acceptance by the peer group. Throughout the world, children who are well liked tend to be kind, trustworthy, and cooperative. Beginning around the fifth grade, however, some children may be popular because they are athletic, cool, dominant, aggressive, and arrogant.
3. As children grow older, friendships become more intense and intimate.
4. Some children are simply *neglected*, not really rejected. Children who are actively *rejected*—who are unpopular most of the time—can be classified as either *aggressive-rejected* or *withdrawn-rejected*.
5. **Aggressive-rejected** children are antagonistic and confrontational; **withdrawn-rejected** children are timid, withdrawn, and anxious. Both types of children misinterpret social situations, lack emotional regulation, and are likely to be mistreated at home.
6. Researchers define **bullying** as *repeated*, systematic attempts to harm a weaker person. Bullying may be *physical, verbal, or relational*. *Cyberbullying* is a particularly devastating form of relational bullying. Bullying during middle childhood seems to be universal.
7. Withdrawn-rejected children tend to be particularly vulnerable to bullying. Aggressive-rejected children may also become victims, called **bully-victims** (or *provocative-victims*).
8. Most bullies have a few admiring friends and are socially perceptive.
9. Boys tend to use physical aggression and girls tend to use verbal aggression. Male bullies are above average in size.
10. The origins of bullying may lie in a brain abnormality or in a genetic predisposition; these are then strengthened by insecure attachment, a stressful home life, ineffective discipline, or hostile siblings.
11. One intervention that has proven to be effective in halting bullying is to change the school community as a whole, so that students and teachers learn ways to stop bullying attacks whenever they see them occur. It is critical that the program be evaluated on an ongoing basis.

1. Many forces drive children's growing interest in moral issues, including peer culture, personal experience, and empathy.
2. Kohlberg studied moral reasoning by telling hypothetical stories that pose ethical dilemmas to children, adolescents, and adults. In examining the responses to these dilemmas, he found three levels of moral reasoning, with two stages at each level.
 - I. **Preconventional:** Emphasis on getting rewards and avoiding punishments.
Stage One: "Might makes right."
Stage Two: "Look out for number one."
 - II. **Conventional:** Emphasis on social rules.
Stage Three: "Good girl" and "nice boy."
Stage Four: "Law and order."
 - III. **Postconventional:** Emphasis on moral principles.
Stage Five: Social contract.
Stage Six: Universal ethical principles.
3. Kohlberg's theory has been criticized for failing to take into account each culture's distinctive morals and values and for ignoring gender differences in moral reasoning. Kohlberg also did not seem to recognize the shift from adult to peer values.
4. When child culture conflicts with adult morality, children often align themselves with peers. Three common values among 6- to 11-year-olds are
 - a. protect your friends
 - b. don't tell adults what is happening
 - c. don't be too different from your peers
5. Piaget believed that between ages 8 and 10, children progress from *retribution* (hurting the transgressor) to *restitution* (restoring what was lost).