

## Effects of early experience

An important enterprise for developmental psychology has been to try to determine whether early experiences such as poor parenting affect later development, and if the effects of a deprived early life can be ameliorated. The experiments in Box 6.5 investigate this issue.

### Box 6.5. Investigating the effects of early deprivation

Raising monkeys in total or partial isolation (where they can see but not touch other monkeys) has shown that such conditions lead to highly maladaptive behaviour – these monkeys were socially withdrawn and aggressive to their peers, they had difficulty mating, and often subsequently became abusive mothers. However, if the monkeys were reintegrated by three months, or if they were given even one playmate, they could develop normally. Other experiments involved raising monkeys with ‘abusive mothers’ – which were cloth monkeys that blasted the infants with cold air. These studies found that the ‘abused’ baby monkeys showed stronger attachments to their ‘mothers’.

Although it would be unethical to carry out such experiments with human babies, case studies such as that of Genie (described in Box 6.1) give some information about the effects of early deprivation, and Box 6.6 describes a study which investigated how separation affects later development.

In general, studies suggest that infants who are securely attached are better equipped to cope with new experiences and relationships, and research is accumulating to suggest that poor attachment in infancy could be an early precursor on the developmental pathway to later

### Box 6.6. The effects of separating babies from their parents

In one study of children who had been placed in care by the age of 4 months, it was found that those who had been adopted by the age of 4 years subsequently developed much better than those who had been returned to their natural parents, or those who remained in the institution. This may have been due to the higher social class of the adoptive parents, or because the ‘returned’ children went back to homes that still had many problems. These results show that the detrimental effects of early separation can be ameliorated, and that attachments formed as late as 4 years old can provide a basis for healthy development. Moreover, the finding that some of the children who remained in the institution were doing better than those returned to their natural parents contradicts Bowlby’s view that ‘mother love’ is always best.

psychopathology. Such research findings can provide a sound scientific grounding for clinical theories, and may contribute to the development of better ways of relieving some clinical problems and helping parents to be better care-givers. Moreover, many studies show that the harmful effects of early experiences can be ameliorated, particularly if the child is still young when the conditions are improved. In fact, many researchers have been struck by children’s resilience in that there is a tendency towards normal development under all but the most adverse circumstances.

## Development over the lifespan

People continue to develop both physically and psychologically throughout their lives. Whilst changes such as puberty are at least partly

due to physical maturation, others reflect a substantial degree of environmental influence. For instance, people tend to adopt a more sedentary lifestyle with increasing age but this may simply be a reaction to environmental changes such as retirement and decreasing social involvement and physical health. In 1968 Erikson proposed a stage theory of lifespan development which suggests that human development follows the pattern set out in Table 6.2.

TABLE 6.2. Stages of development

Stages	Psycho-social crises	Primary activity	Significant relationships	Favourable outcome
First year	Trust vs. Mistrust	Consistent stable care	Main care-giver	Trust and optimism
2 to 3	Autonomy vs. Doubt	from parents	Parents	Sense of autonomy and self-esteem
4 to 5	Initiative vs. Guilt	Environmental exploration	Basic family	Self-direction and purpose
6 to puberty	Industry vs. Inferiority	Knowledge acquisition	Family, neighbours, and school	Sense of competence and achievement
Adolescence	Identity vs. Confusion	Coherent vocation and personality	Peers, in- and out-groups	Integrated self-image
Early adulthood	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Deep and lasting relationships	Friends and lovers; competition and cooperation	Ability to experience love and commitment
Middle adulthood	Generativity vs. self-absorption	Productive and creative for society	Divided labour and shared household	Concern for family, society and future generations
Late adulthood	Integrity vs. Despair	Life review and evaluation	Mankind, extended family	Sense of satisfaction; acceptance of death

This theory suggests that there are definite stages, each involving a specific task or *psychosocial crisis*, that everyone progresses through during a lifetime. For example, the main task of adolescence is seen as being a search for identity. Initially, largely on the basis of observations of adolescents referred for treatment, adolescence was seen as a turbulent period characterized by rebellion and rejection of authority figures. However, studying the general population of adolescents revealed that many do not rebel against authority but maintain good relationships with parents and teachers throughout. This is one example demonstrating the pitfalls which arise when observations are taken from a small and unrepresentative sample of the larger population. Subsequent studies investigating adolescents from all backgrounds have been more struck by the amount of *role transition* during this period. During adolescence many new roles such as that of worker or boyfriend/girlfriend, and adult-to-adult interaction patterns are acquired. Erikson suggests that the most important task during adolescence is the process of coming to terms with these new roles: finding a single, integrated identity, in spite of having to act differently in many new roles. As each stage lays the foundation for the next one, this coherent sense of identity is thought to lay the foundation for later relationships and productivity in adulthood. Without an integrated identity, Erikson thought that people would experience *identity diffusion* and would have difficulty forming relationships, planning for the future, and achieving their goals. Without a clear sense of who we are, deciding what we want from the future is difficult.

Studies of declining cognitive functioning with increasing age also demonstrate the pitfalls of looking at subsamples of the population. Studies comparing intelligence test scores in groups of older and younger people showed that younger people had higher IQs, suggesting that intelligence declined with age. However, these studies failed to take account of the *cohort effect* – social determinants of performance on IQ tests and the fact that intelligence scores of the whole population had increased with better education and nutrition.

When intelligence was measured repeatedly in the same people there was no evidence that it declined with age; rather, it increased slightly for those who continued to use their minds. Similarly, the supposed deterioration of memory with age does not stand up well to scientific investigation but suggests that the system responds to the demands you make of it. Comparisons of memory for everyday events show that older people perform slightly better than younger ones, possibly because they are more concerned about their memories and are more attentive and motivated during testing. The myth of declining memory with increasing age appears to be partly due to a self-fulfilling prophecy: because people expect to become more forgetful they try less hard and notice forgetting more than remembering. It appears that as long as people continue to keep their minds active, they need not expect a noticeable decline in their mental abilities until very late in life (in the absence of medical conditions such as dementia).

Although there is little scientific basis for the myth of declining intellect with age, there are some changes in behaviour that are typically associated with ageing. For example, in Western societies older people tend to be much less prominent than other age groups. *Disengagement theory* proposes that, as people age, a biological mechanism is activated and encourages them to gradually withdraw from society, just as an animal creeps away to die once its evolutionary function (ensuring the survival of its offspring) has been fulfilled. However, the analogy is a poor fit because in humans this process of disengagement does not tie in with the end of child-rearing, nor is it associated with poor physical health. In contrast, *activity theory* explains the disengagement of older people as a societal process: there are fewer roles for older people to play in society, and retirement may reduce opportunities to play a valuable part in everyday living. Although some people replace their working roles with other valuable activities, others do not, and may feel useless or isolated. The effects of changes in activity associated with ageing may be exacerbated in Western societies by 'ageism'. Stereotypes of older people are generally negative – that they are less

intelligent, sickly, lazy, rigid in their views, and bad-tempered. As with other forms of prejudice such stereotypes are largely false – for example, it is the exception rather than the rule for older people to become confused. Like other prejudices, ageism can be self-maintaining in that positive contributions made by older people are overlooked while negative factors are remembered (see Chapter 9 for a fuller description of prejudices and how they can be overcome).

We have seen that many biological, social, and environmental factors influence developmental processes. Although there is a rough pattern for development, and self-righting tendencies stimulate constant adaptation, there are also many potential pitfalls. Because development is such a complex process, we should be cautious in interpreting differences between different age groups as such differences could result from changes over the generations, rather than from ageing itself. Nevertheless developmental psychology can indicate which factors affect development adversely and which do not, in fields as diverse as moral development, language acquisition, and the development of thinking and gender identity. Future challenges for developmental psychologists focus on finding ways of ameliorating the effects of negative early experiences, finding remedies for when development is not proceeding normally, and looking at ways of enhancing adjustment throughout the lifespan.