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Introduction

Raising healthy children is a labor-intensive operation. Contrary to the news from the broader culture, most of what children need, money cannot buy. Children need time and space, attention, affection, guidance and conversation. They need sheltered places where they can be safe as they learn what they need to know to survive.

Mary Pipher

It isn't anyone's imagination that working with American children is getting harder and harder. Despite our attempts at optimism and the old lyrics "Why can't they be like we were, perfect in every way—what's the matter with kids today?" every experienced educator knows that the job was easier three decades ago. There are so many theories about why this is so that the topic could fill volumes. At a recent conference of educators at Harvard University, Jerome Kagan pointed out that in addition to the impact of both *heredity* (genes inherited from our birth parents) and the *environment* (people and places affecting our experiences after birth), psychologists are seeing more and more how society and culture at large affect growth and development (Jerome Kagan, *Three Seductive Ideas,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

What factors in American society affect the growth and development of our children? We live in one of the

more violent countries of the developed world. Many Americans feel it is not safe to walk alone in their own neighborhood at night. This concern is well founded. According to the Sentencing Project, a nonprofit agency devoted to improving the justice system, the crime rate in the United States exceeds that of most other nations (Larry J. Siegel, *Criminology,* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1998).

Media influences and consumerism are often not in the best interest of our children. In the past forty years, more than a thousand studies on the effects of media and film violence have been conducted. In the past decade, the American Academy of Pediatrics, The American Medical Association, The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the National Institute of Mental Health have separately reviewed many of these studies. Each of these reviews has reached the same conclusion: television violence leads to real-world violence ("Media Violence and Medical Literacy" in New Hampshire Pediatric Association Newsletter).

Family and community life have changed dramatically in the last fifty years. Much of the public discussion of these changes has focused on the negative. People express fear that the family is endangered. Campaign slogans call for a return to family values. In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz points out that trying to solve today's challenges to family life through a return to "traditional" family forms is pointless (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). Americans, she writes, cherish a myth of stable, happy families that exist primarily in the minds of those who indulge in nostalgia. Families in every era have dealt with poverty, stress, death, illness, and emotional misunderstandings between

family members. Child abuse, racism, and the inequities of class and gender are constants throughout our nation's history. Nostalgia for "the good old days" is not an answer, but addressing the changes of our times is necessary. Our challenge is to find adequate and creative ways to adapt to these changes.

Workplaces and community organizations have not kept pace with the changes. For example, numerous community organizations for children continue to hold events such as "father/daughter dances" or "father/son campouts," ignoring the fact that fewer than half of all American families resemble the stereotypical family of two opposite-gender married parents with children living in a single household. Similarly, many schools have not creatively adapted their parent involvement components to match the lives of dual-career or single-parent families. Failure to adapt to these social changes stresses our children.

Fifty years ago, projections were made that filling our leisure hours would be the challenge for most Americans in the 1990s. This has not proven to be true. We work more hours than ever. The Harris Poll reports that since 1973, free time has fallen nearly forty percent, from a median figure of twenty-six hours a week to slightly under seventeen hours. At the same time, research shows that employed hours have risen for Americans in all income categories (Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American,* New York: HarperCollins, 1992). We spend less time with family and friends. The debates of the 1980s over quality time versus quantity time have disappeared. Today, for many, it is a stretch to find *any* time together!

By now, I'm sure the reader is asking, "What does all of this have to do with Piaget and Erikson?" Teachers in

early childhood programs spend many hours discussing child and family struggles. Many of the teachers I talk with are discouraged. “The behavior problems are too much to handle,” they tell me. Some of them blame parents. Some even make statements like, “If parents don’t want to care for their kids then why do they have them?” This attitude usually comes from the frustration of having daily interactions with children in pain. When we can’t make it better, we want someone to blame, and parents are an easy target. Many parents are stressed also. They know their long hours are taking a toll on family life. Like teachers, they often don’t know what to do to make it better.

This is where Erikson, Piaget, and the other theorists come in. When I ask teachers what they learned in college that might help them respond to children under stress, many of them just laugh. Some make comments such as “I could never keep all of those theorists straight” or “That textbook approach doesn’t work once you’re in a real classroom.” Teachers will say, “Now, which one was he?” or “Wasn’t Piaget the cognitive theory?” but rarely pause to reflect on how understanding child development theory might benefit their day-to-day classroom practices. The purpose of this small text is to look for those benefits.

Joining Theory to Practice

Anthropologist and teacher Margaret Mead said, “If one cannot state a matter clearly enough so that an intelligent twelve year old can understand it, one should remain within the cloistered walls of the University and laboratory until one gets a better grasp of one’s subject matter” (*Redbook* magazine, 1963). The field of early

childhood education needs to listen to this wisdom.
"I need to drop this course," a student of mine told me recently. "I'm a full-time student, the single mother of a three year old, and I work at Pizza Hut on weekends. I don't have the time or patience to figure out what this means!" She thrust her child-development textbook onto my desk and pointed to a highlighted passage in the introductory chapter. It read: "The improvement of research tends to increase divergence in the treatment of evidence and to multiply mystification in the interpretation of specific findings. As research on a problem matures, the angles of vision multiply."

I shared with her my memorized interpretation. "It means studying children is really complicated. The more we learn, the more there is to understand about a single topic."

The student looked annoyed. "Well why can't they just say that?" she asked. Then in a sad and quiet voice she added, "When I see words that I've never even heard of, I get discouraged and think I'm crazy to be going to college. The director at my center told me all that theory won't help me once I'm working with kids anyway."

As a teacher of child development I am always alarmed when students share these stories, which they do frequently. To leap from disregarding difficult texts that do a poor job of introducing the subject, to disregarding the importance of theory in shaping practice, seems a huge mistake. Knowing the theoretical foundations of early childhood education is critical to providing quality early care and education.

Not everyone agrees with me. A few years ago a survey of child care directors was done in my state to guide the investment of training dollars. Many directors

responded that they didn't care if teachers knew who Vygotsky or Erikson were, but that they wanted them to know what to do when the children were hitting or biting each other. The point these directors missed is that teachers who know what to do when children are hitting or biting are teachers who understand child development. Many of the directors interviewed said such things as "When I hire those college students, they are full of theory but don't know what to do in the classroom. I'd rather hire someone with no college but a true enjoyment of young children." We need teachers who have both a true enjoyment of children and a true understanding of how they grow and learn. It seems that we have not been successful at presenting child development as a usable tool for working with young children more effectively. Perhaps we need to take a different approach to introducing theory and its practice to the beginning student or teacher.

It is true that most of us chuckle when we say, "Well, in theory …" because we all expect gaps between any theory and the way we are able to apply that theory in real life. But these gaps are part of our growing understanding of the complexity of growth and development. They are inevitable. This is not a good enough reason for practitioners to dismiss theory as "irrelevant" to their day-to-day work with children.

Jargon does not help students to grasp the important ideas of Piaget or Erikson. Memorizing names and stages, out of context, does not build the bridge we need between child development and children. I know that too many classrooms offer this textbook approach to theory, because when I ask teachers what they remember about child development theories from their college

classes, too many of them respond, "Very little!" Others will tell me that they could never remember whether Erikson was the one who talked about feelings and Piaget about thought, or the other way around. I can picture these students chanting "Piaget, Swiss psychologist, cognitive development theory" as one might memorize state capitals and major rivers. Given this kind of introduction to theory, it is no wonder so many directors say, "Just send me someone who has good sense about kids!"

As directors struggle with staffing shortages and inadequately prepared teachers, however, it is more important to them that teachers know basic development information such as that babies always need to be held during feeding. Teachers may not need to know that Erik Erikson was born in Germany and brought us the psychosocial theory of development, but they will do their jobs better if they know that holding babies while they are being fed helps the children to develop trust in grown-ups. Theory needs to be real to the developing teacher. It needs to be tested in practice and adapted to the realities of individual children and classrooms. This ongoing process is what builds the bridge between theory and practice. When directors and teachers see how understanding child development theory makes their days with children smoother, their jobs easier, and their programs stronger, then they will value this knowledge.

About This Book

Theories of Childhood is a practitioner's manual as well as a college textbook. It is designed for the person working with young children who wants to better understand how children think and act and how to be more effective with them. It begins with a discussion of the interactive

nature of theory and practice that is necessary to make either meaningful. It includes information about and reflection on the work of five of the major contributors to the body of knowledge upon which our best practices in early childhood education are based. It is a basic introduction and is not intended to be academic or scholarly. I'm hoping to whet the appetite of those interested in the relationship of theory to practice and its impact on real children, teachers, and classrooms. For this reason each chapter concludes with discussion questions and suggestions for further reading.

The stories shared here are from real classrooms where I have either worked or observed others at work. Each chapter provides the reader with background information on the theorist's life and work. Classroom stories are used to illustrate the point of the original writings. This is not a comprehensive introduction to the field or even to the individual theorists included. I hope that this brief introduction to early childhood's theoretical foundations will give readers a foundation for understanding how child development affects how we work with children in early childhood programs, and encourage them to go on to the more in-depth readings.