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Psychological Observations and Benefits of Volunteering

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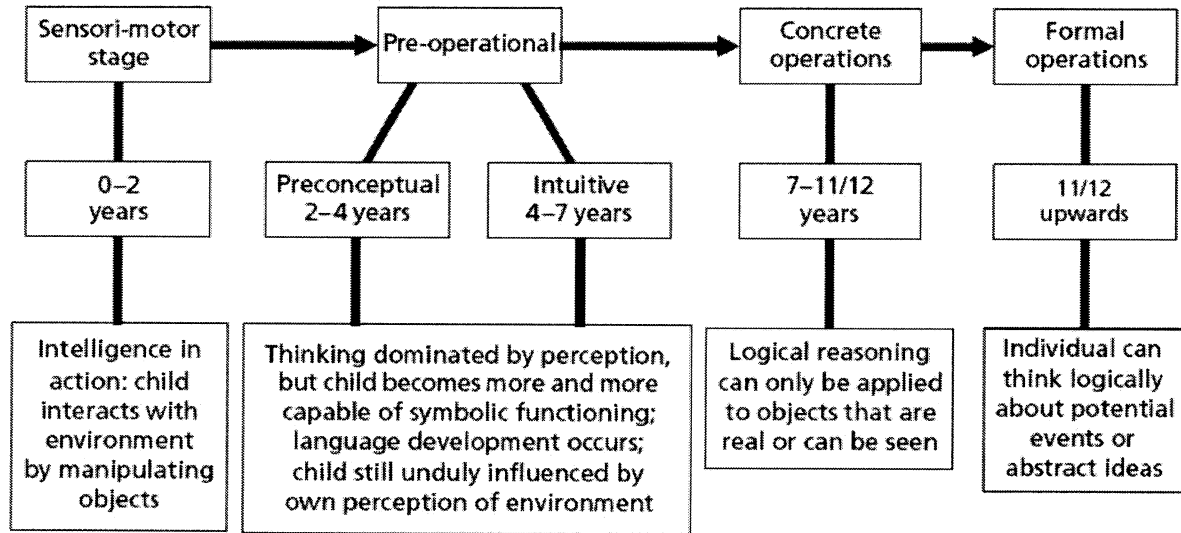
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For the past two semesters, I have been volunteering at Garden Hills Elementary homework club in Champaign. Twice a week, this after school program pairs third to fifth grade students with volunteers who help them with their homework. For me, this was a great experience for a couple different reasons. First, as a psychology student, it is important for me to try to understand people of all ages. It was great to be involved with kids and to observe the learning behaviors seen at their cognitive level. Second, getting involved in your community is always a good thing and can have many benefits. Personally, I had a great experience and definitely enjoyed my time tutoring.

Jean Piaget was a very influential psychologist and psychological researcher. He developed the Theory of Cognitive Development, which contains four stages of learning: the sensorimotor period, preoperational period, concrete operations, and formal operations. There is a lot of research support for Piaget's theory and his stages are widely used today. Proper development in each of these stages is very important to overall psychological health as an adult. Therefore, as a future psychologist, it's important that I understand the different levels of learning in childhood.

Piaget's four stages of cognitive development

Sensori-motor stage	Pre-operational		Concrete operations	Formal operations
0–2 years	Preconceptual 2–4 years	Intuitive 4–7 years	7–11/12 years	11/12 upwards
Intelligence in action: child interacts with environment by manipulating objects	Thinking dominated by perception, but child becomes more and more capable of symbolic functioning; language development occurs; child still unduly influenced by own perception of environment		Logical reasoning can only be applied to objects that are real or can be seen	Individual can think logically about potential events or abstract ideas

The first stage, sensorimotor, occurs during infancy. During this time, the brain is developing skills in memory, language, and motor functions. Next, the preoperational period occurs during the toddler and early childhood years; memory and language are further developed along with the appearance of imagination, but the thought processes of kids this age aren't always logical. The concrete operational stage is seen in elementary age kids to early adolescents. During this period, logical and systematic thinking is used when the children are dealing with concrete objects. Finally, in the formal operational stage during adolescence, children are able to think logically and can now understand abstract thoughts as well.

At Garden Hills, I spent most of my time in the third grade classroom with kids ages nine or ten. At this age, children are in the concrete operational stage. As stated above, they are now able to think logically with concrete ideas, but abstract situations are often still too complicated for them to logically comprehend. There are many different psychological characteristics seen during this stage of life, but there were four that stood out to me in this particular setting: transivity, decentering, reversibility, and the elimination of egocentrism.

Transivity is the ability to recognize relationships among various objects in serial order. For instance, if you were to tell a ten-year-old to put some books on a shelf according to height, it would be likely that the child would chose the tallest book then work his way down to the shortest book. One day at Garden Hills, some kids were arguing about who was taller (trust me, this is an important topic in the third grade). I won't use the students' names, so we will call them student A, B, and C, respectfully. Student A measured herself against student B and discovered that she was taller. Between students B and C, B was taller. Therefore, student A would be taller than student C, right? Interestingly, only approximately half of the children in the discussion understood this concept, and after a rather heated debate, they ended up measuring the students A and C anyway; student A was taller, of course. This was interesting because some students in the class had developed transivity in their thinking, but others had not. It was a great example of how kids may be in the same class, but they can still

be on different learning levels.

Decentering is the ability to take into account multiple aspects of a problem to solve it. For instance, a child in the concrete operational stage is able to understand that a cup that is short and wide can hold just as much as a cup that is tall and skinny (children below the concrete operational stage would more likely say that the taller cup holds more). Quite often if a student didn't have homework, I would have them read a book out loud to me. While reading the book, the child would come across words they didn't know. To find out what the word was, they would look not only at the letters in the word but at the sentence as a whole to try to figure out the context. Instead of simply looking at the letters, they had a broader view of the situation as a whole. This was a great example of decentering and looking at a problem from multiple viewpoints.

Reversibility is the understanding that numbers or objects can be changed and then reverted back to their original state. For instance, if a young child's ball is deflated, they may believe it is beyond repair because it has been altered so drastically. However, a child in the concrete operational phase understands that the ball can simply be blown back up again and reverted back to its' original state. This characteristic is very apparent when children are doing math problems. In third grade, students are learning math equations such as multiplication and division. One math assignment I completed with a child showed them that if you divide a number by ten and then multiply the answer by ten, you end up back at the original number. Although it took some

explaining, the student was able to understand this and therefore possesses at least some level of reversibility.

Elimination of egocentrism is the ability to view a situation from another person's perspective. Younger children generally think about how they feel and are often oblivious to the feelings of the people around them (or, they think that everyone feels exactly as they do). It was great to see the kids interact with each other and attempt to be considerate of other's feelings. An example of this is when one student lost a five dollar bill. The other kids knew from their past experiences that the student's parents would be mad if she didn't bring home the money, so they helped look for it; instead of going about their own business, they saw the situation from her perspective and decided to help. However, elimination of egocentrism also comes with some downsides. Now that the kids understand their peers better, that also means that they know how to make them angry and how to push all their buttons. But, I suppose that kind of behavior is expected of ten-year-olds, regardless of their current stage of learning.

By understanding Piaget's levels of cognitive development, individuals will be more equipped to work with kids of all ages and are more capable of understanding their thought processes. Although reading about psychological theories is important, information from a book is no match to real life experiences. It was great to work with the kids at Garden Hills and experience this level of cognitive development firsthand.

Not only was it great to observe the kids at Garden Hills, it was great to just be a

tutor. Volunteering is incredibly important and it is always rewarding to be involved in your community. After doing some research, I discovered volunteering may have some psychological benefits for adolescents and adults alike.

Adolescence is an essential time during the development process and it is important to maintain good mental health during this period. During this time, it is crucial to learn prosocial behaviors; studies show that volunteering is a great way to learn these behaviors. In fact, some schools now require their students to do volunteer work, but this rule has been met with conflicting opinions. Although most people support volunteer work, some have suggested that forcing teens to volunteer will give them a negative attitude about helping others. However, studies show just the opposite; very few adolescents who volunteer, required or not, leave with a negative attitude on volunteer work. In fact, most teens have reported positive experiences and say that they learned a lot from their time spent volunteering.

But volunteering isn't only for those in adolescence; adults have plenty to gain from the experience as well. The University of Konstanz in Germany did research on the subject by asking a sample of over a hundred people to fill out questionnaires twice a day: after work and before going to bed. These people worked five days a week and volunteered an average of six hours per week. The results of their questionnaires showed that those who spent more time on volunteer activities were more likely to report learning new things, feeling satisfied, and experiencing less stress from work.

Not only does volunteering lower stress levels, it gives us a sense of fulfillment while making a difference in our communities. Of course, those who volunteer are different from their peers to start with, so it can be hard to judge the benefits of volunteering in psychological studies. Nonetheless, volunteering has showed to increase social responsibility, tolerance, and the importance people place on helping others. The negative effects of volunteering are few and far between and our society simply cannot function without the help of and devotion of our nation's volunteers.

Personally, I had a great experience as a tutor at Garden Hills. I left feeling fulfilled and satisfied that I had helped my community. I developed great relationships with the third graders and my fellow tutors. I would recommend volunteering as a tutor to everyone, regardless of age. I had a wonderful time at Garden Hills and there is no better way to get involved than tutoring in a local school.

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