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Research in Child Development

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TYPICAL CONCEPTS IN THE PRESCHOOL CHILD

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TYPICAL CONCEPTS IN THE PRESCHOOL CHILD

Learning is essential to understanding and understanding is based on concepts. Concepts are not direct sensory material; instead they are the grouping of discrete sensory experiences. "The common elements in diverse objects or situations serve to unite objects or situations into a common concept."¹

Concepts are symbolic in that they depend upon the properties of absent situations and objects as well as upon the properties of situations and objects present at the time the response is made. Frequently concepts have an affective quality--an "emotional weighting"--which becomes a part of the concept and which determines how the individual feels about the person, object or situation of which the concept is a symbol. "This emotional weighting determines, to a large extent, the type of response the person will make."² Concepts are then complex affairs which are always changing as one has new experiences.

Concepts may be related to objects; to people; to qualities; or to relationships. They may be definite or indefinite. Concepts are not always conscious, nor are they always verbalized. Some are well developed, and others will never develop beyond the foundation stages laid in childhood.

The child's concepts are important because they determine what a child knows, what he believes, what he values, and many times what he does. "Furthermore the accuracy or inaccuracy of his concepts affects his under-

standing."³ The more concepts a child has, the better developed they are, and the more accurate they are, the greater his understanding will be.

Concepts develop rapidly because of the child's curiosity about the world in which he lives. Whatever concepts a child has, they are a reflection of his own personal and unique development. Some concepts however, are so common among children in a given culture that one can accept them as "typical". Of these, the following types are most common.

The first concept is the concept of life. "Because of the young child's limited experience and knowledge, he does not distinguish between living and inanimate objects."⁴ On the contrary, he believes, as primitive peoples do, "that all objects have the same life qualities that one finds in the human being and are therefore animated."¹

"Children distinguish between 'living' and 'having life'. 'Living' is more often applied to inanimate objects than 'having life'. When they say an object is 'alive', they usually do not attribute sensory or functional characteristics to it. Therefore the child's ideas of 'alive' are different from that of an adult. To a child 'alive' usually means active."³

From kindergarten on, there is a progressive decrease in the number of children who attribute life to inanimate objects. As children reach school age, they become increasingly aware of the fact that movement is not the only basis of life.

The second concept is that of death. Closely related to concepts of life are the concepts of death. "Children's concepts of death, which largely depends upon their religious instruction, range from brutal destruction to liberation."⁵ In one study it was found that "children between the ages of three to five years looked upon death as a departure or change of abode. They deny that death is a regular and final process because, at this level

of development, they look upon everything as being alive. They cannot comprehend the finality of death."⁶

Between the ages of five and nine years, children personify death. At this age, they are not likely to worry about death unless they feel anxious and insecure in their family relationships. Few children, unless they have been very ill for a long period of time, think of death in relation to themselves. "To a great majority death is associated with old age, not with youth."⁷

Children's concepts of life after death are rather simple. They are not too much concerned about what happens after death. Unless religious instruction emphasizes Hell as a place of eternal punishment, the child learns to think of life after death as a pleasant experience.

If the child has no religious training about life after death he seldom wonders about it or builds up any concept of it.

The next concept to consider is that of space. To judge space accurately the child must learn to compare the space to be perceived with familiar objects whose size or distance from him is known. He must learn to regard the degree of clearness of outline and color and the amount of detail visible as clues, and he must learn that different sensations in the eyes, resulting from convergence or strain, help him to interpret what he observes.

"Little babies rarely reach for objects more than 20 inches away from them; this shows that they have some estimate of distance even before they are a year old. As soon as they begin to creep and crawl, they have more opportunity to learn to evaluate distance and size."³

By playing with blocks, carts, tricycles, and other play equipment, the child soon learns the common cues which enable him to perceive short distances accurately. Longer distances, because they are unrelated to his own body—

for example, the distance between two trees or the length of a street block-- are extremely difficult for him to perceive. Not until adolescence can he perceive long distances correctly, and even then his judgments are often erroneous."⁵

A child's concept of weight depends largely upon judgments of size and partly upon knowledge of the weight of different materials. The child judges mainly by size; as a result, when he picks up objects, he does not make the necessary muscular adjustments to handle them without breakage.

"Generally the child learns from experience that certain things are 'heavy', while others are light."³ Of even greater importance, he learns that he must consider what the object is made of as well as its size.

In an experiment in which children were asked to estimate the weight of a milk bottle when filled and when empty, "young children tended to understand both."³ With age, however, they gradually improved their estimates. In estimating the weight of two lumps of Plasticine, equal in size and in weight but different in shape, children showed a gradual increase in accuracy with age.

Now there is the concept of money to consider. Money becomes meaningful to a child only when he has the opportunity to use it. True, he may be able to identify different coins, but the names of the coins are relatively meaningless until he learns their value or knows what they can buy. Because few children in our culture have much opportunity to spend money until they reach the school years, the development of money concepts during the pre-school years lags behind that of many other concepts.

Time perception in adults is none too accurate, but it is even worse in children. This explains the apparent disobedience of young children when they fail to come home at the appointed time. Time seems to pass quickly when

they are active or interested in play, but slowly when they are doing nothing or idle.

By the time the child is ready for kindergarten, he has only the merest rudiments of conventional time knowledge; when he enters the first grade, "his concepts are still incomplete and often faulty."⁴ Concepts of time develop very slowly because they are abstract and involve subjective appreciation and more reasoning than the young child is capable of.

Many time concepts, especially those relating to conventional time, are dependent upon the growth of number concepts. A child cannot understand completely the meaning of "month" until he has a correct concept of 30 or 31 and its relationship to 7 days.

"Concepts of self develop earlier and are subject to greater change and modification than other concepts."³ Sometime during the first year of life the baby discovers himself as an individual. He does not, however, distinguish between himself and his environment as early as he distinguishes other people from his environment.

The child's self-concept includes physical and psychological self-images. The physical self-images are generally formed first; they relate to the child's general appearance and to the importance of the different parts of his body to his behavior and the prestige they give him in the eyes of the world. The child's psychological self-images are based on his thoughts, feelings and emotions; they consist of the qualities and abilities that play a role of importance in his adjustment to life, qualities such as courage, honesty, independence, self-confidence, and aspirations and abilities of different types.

Coordinating his physical and psychological self-images is often difficult for the child; consequently, he is apt to think of himself as a dual person,

with a specific appearance and a specific personality makeup. As he grows older, these self-concepts gradually fuse, and he perceives himself as a unified individual.

Concepts continue to develop from the impressions of the senses (balls are round; sandpaper is rough) to the workings of the mind (a year is long, a minute short). Concepts are continually revised with experience. They develop during the learning stage, become more complex and, in general, they become more differentiated and efficient with increase in age.

FOOTNOTES

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