

Understanding our children's development by Lloyd Robertson

During the 1950s Jean Piaget proposed a theory of child development so powerful that it still forms the basis of modern child psychology. Now, in her 1999 book, *Building Character and Culture*, former University of Regina professor Pat Duffy Hutcheon uses Piaget's stages of development to propose an equally powerful explanation of moral development. In the process she may have also provided an explanation as to why many Northern youth and adults have been attracted to cultish belief systems.

In Piaget's formulation, sensorimotor operations last from birth to approximately age two. Infants understand the world that they can touch and feel. When an object is absent it ceases to exist. The infant will often respond with surprise and pleasure when he or she "makes" a caregiver "reappear" with a cry. The major intellectual task of this stage is to realize that objects continue to exist even when they are not immediately sensed.

The second of Piaget's stages is called "preoperational thought" and lasts from approximately age two to seven. An "operation" is a mental thought or activity that is subject to certain rules of logic. A "preoperational" child believes his intuitions to be true without reference to logic. For example, if I pour water into a container that is taller but thinner, the pre-operational child might believe that there is suddenly is more water. The major developmental task of this stage is to learn to allow logic to modify perceptions.

Children in "concrete operations" (ages seven to 11 or 12) understands that if I take a ball of plasticine and make it into a different shape it still has the same amount of mass. They also understand that there may be different explanations for the same event. But their thinking continues to be tied to the concrete. They have to "see it" to understand. The major developmental task of this stage is to think in abstractions.

Adolescence is a time of formal cognitive operations. Adolescents learn to think about the hypothetical and about what could be. They are capable of both deductive and inductive reasoning.

According to Hutcheon children at the sensorimotor stage of development need positive reinforcement developing appropriate habits and an "intuitive" sense of good and bad. "Telling" is fruitless. It is necessary, as parents, to make clear what the desired behavior is and reward that behavior.

Preoperational children need to acquire the habit of obedience without which it "will be difficult to establish, at some later date, the necessary virtue of respect for law". Explanations as to "why" are most often beyond their grasp. It is, however, necessary to build up in these children a clear grasp of reality as opposed to fantasy.

Children at the level of concrete operations are ready to learn empathy. They need "virtuous role models" to live by. They need to "see" the examples they are to model.

Adolescents operating at the level of formal operations are ready to learn complex and abstract concepts. Prior instruction in religious or philosophical concepts amount to indoctrination and are harmful to their mental and moral development. They are now ready to learn complex concepts and are ready to become idealistic.

People believe in UFOs, new age animism, astrology, magic and mythology due to arrested development at one or more developmental levels. People stuck at the sensorimotor level will be satisfied with magical explanations - some body or some thing just willed it to happen.

Those stuck in "pre-operations" will be satisfied by merely naming and mapping their world. If their family was dysfunctional, well, that is the way the world is and how they will operate.

People stuck in concrete operations will tend to see causes as "hidden motivations". For them the question "Why do we have mosquitos?" has nothing to do with evolution and everything to do with some planned purpose. Such people will find a "purpose" in everything and will suffer an accompanying lack of empowerment.

People, insecure as youth in formal operations will turn to the certainties provided by ideology. People, including family, will become less important to them than their religion, ideology or belief system.

Secure individuals who have mastered formal operations will show a commitment to the universality of "cause and effect" and will take a tentative stance to knowledge. To Hutcheon we, as parents, can lead each of our children thru their developmental stages to this desired result.