

Childhood development during the early years

Childhood Space



ANNA IZABELA BRZEZIŃSKA
Institute of Psychology, Adam Mickiewicz University
in Poznań

Committee on Psychological Sciences,
Polish Academy of Sciences
anna.brzezinska@amu.edu.pl

Prof. Anna Izabela Brzezińska works on developmental
psychology and studies how children's closest surroundings
influence their early development



ELŻBIETA HORNOWSKA
Institute of Psychology, Adam Mickiewicz University
in Poznań

elzbieta.hornowska@amu.edu.pl
Prof. Elżbieta Hornowska works on social research
methodology, including adapting foreign tools
for use in Poland

A research project underway at the Institute of Psychology at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań aims to adapt tools to study the development of young Polish children.

The Act on the Welfare of Children Under Three Years of Age, passed by the Sejm on 4 February 2011, poses considerable challenges for psychologists, calling for early stimulation and education of infants and toddlers as well as support for the functioning of families, as the key environment during the early years of development. These challenges demand the accurate assessment of children's abilities, their developmental needs, the resources available to their caregivers, and the quality of their physical and social surroundings.

No comprehensive studies have yet been carried out in Poland into the factors that stimulate childhood development, and the basic questionnaires and scales widely used around the world for assessing the quality of childhood development have yet to be adapted to reflect Polish conditions.

Researchers at the Institute of Psychology at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań have been working on the psychometric and cultural adaptation of two assessment tools: the American HOME Inventory (devised in 1984), and the Portuguese AHMED questionnaire (from 2005). Both are used to diagnose the physical

and social development of young children between the ages of 6 months and 3 years. The aim of such adaptation, rather than devising original Polish tools, is to facilitate the comparative analysis of results obtained in Poland and across the globe (http://www.staff.amu.edu.pl/~zpbp/?page_id=64).

Individuals and development

The concept of developmental space has its roots in dynamical systems theory, adapted to describe human development by Esther Thelen. Developmental space encompasses two subsystems: the physical environment (the child's contact with objects), and the social surroundings (in particular contact with significant others). We assign particular importance to people who are closest to the child, following the concept formulated by Lev Vygotsky and his principle of development proceeding from exteriorization to interiorization, and through Reuven Feuerstein's associated concept of mediated learning experience (MLE theory). The people who interact with the child most closely – parents, caregivers, and other figures of attachment – mediate between the child and the environment. The physical space in which a young child lives and meets their needs is in fact also a social space, on the one hand arranged and filled with objects, and on the other shared and given significance by other people.

Research into childhood development indicates that it is determined by the presence of stimulators and stabilizers in the child's environment, in particular during the early years. The most important of these constitute a space defined as "home." Analysis of this space isolates two main elements: the active presence of the mother/father/main carer (i.e. figure of attachment), and the location or surroundings (known as oriented space). There can be no doubt as to the significance of affection and the key role played by the main caregiver in childhood development. However, not much is known about which environmental parameters – the physical and social environment, and the mediating role of the main caregiver which co-creates the home – are key for the initiation and stimulation of a young child's development.

Dynamic description of the home

When analyzing the accuracy of tools used to diagnose the home space, an important theoretical guideline is a certain popular belief in the field of developmental



www.damowoz.zdjęcia.org

Research into childhood development indicates that it is determined by the presence of appropriate stimulators and stabilizers in the child's environment, in particular during the early years

psychology, a notion dating back as far as the work of Jean Piaget, that the development of motor skills and manual manipulation abilities is closely linked to a child's progressing perceptual and intellectual abilities. In recent decades, this conviction has been reinforced and reformulated in the dynamic perception approach commonly adopted in ecological psychology, inspired by theories formulated by James Gibson. Eleanor J. Gibson posited that babies gain understanding of their surroundings through actively exploring them, and that their developing motor abilities are a filter through which they obtain information on "affordances" such as objects, surfaces, and events. However, while in Piaget's concepts motor development is understood as a starting point for the development of cognitive abilities, in the dynamical system approach the emerging motor, perceptual, and cognitive abilities are closely intertwined and interdependent throughout childhood development. Also used is Vygotsky's theory of two zones of development, with one zone of actual development and another of proximal development. The description of the objective dimensions of the home, and the ways in which the child interacts with its environment directly or through a "proxy" (another person), make it possible to study the child's development in a comprehensive way and to establish key moments of transition from the zone of actual development to the zone of proximal development.

Measuring quality of development

The HOME Inventory questionnaire devised by Betty M. Caldwell and Robert Bradley (2003) is designed to assess specific aspects of the child's immediate environment, such as family structure, customs and rituals, family engagement in interacting with the child, and the level to which the family uses available resources. The HOME Inventory has been used in studies of many societies around the world, in numerous cultural contexts, and in families with a varied socioeconomic status. The aim of the AHMED questionnaire, devised by Luis Rodrigues, is to provide researchers, teachers and especially parents with a reliable tool for measuring the quality and level of motor development in the home space during the early months and years. The author of this tool posed the hypothesis that ecological information reveals a common structure, which can be depicted using defined dimensions of the home space.

These advanced diagnostic tools can be used as a basis to build personalized programs for optimizing the development of young children, including early intervention programs for children in risk groups and those with congenital or early-stage physical, cognitive, or learning difficulties. Their adaptation for use in Poland therefore represents an important step forward. ■

Further reading:

Thelen, E. (2005). Dynamic systems theory and the complexity of change. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 15 (2), 255-283.