CHAPTER 7

Main Developmental Changes During Middle Childhood: The Role of Peers and School

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ABSTRACT

Middle childhood (6-11 years) is a complex period in human life in which children become pupils, having attained school maturity and readiness for reading and writing.

The younger school-age period is characterised by children's increasing awareness, control and purposefulness of attention, perception, memory and learning processes. Concrete operational thinking that children become capable of around 6 to 7 years of age makes it possible for them to reverse operations and decentrate. Both of these abilities are important for their social functioning, as they allow them to take others' perspectives and understand that their states and expectations are different from those of other people. The changes are associated with the development of children's identities and the formation and enhancement of interpersonal relations.

In middle childhood, children's sexual energy sublimates into explorations accompanied by defence mechanisms that, at this stage of development, play a positive role (Freud's latency period). They also learn to be productive and accept others' judgments on their performance (Erikson's industry vs. inferiority). By comparing their own and others' expectations, achievements, states and experiences, they start building their self-image; others' opinions become a basis for them to develop self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy. Their ability to take a wider perspective on things is reflected in their moral judgments, which they make considering external expectations or social norms.

In the early school years, children transition from a life focused on the family to a life concerned with peer relationships and school and develop a strong need to be part of a group. A special type of peer relationship is friendship, which can manifest itself in various forms.

School is the second developmental environment for children after the family home, in which the quality of teacher-pupil relationships, informal class structure and procedures enabling a supportive environment are important. Among the various problems faced by school children, emotional and behavioural disorders and learning disabilities are the most frequent. The creation of a safe and stimulating educational environment requires procedures protecting children from bullying and supporting talented pupils.

KEYWORDS

middle childhood, school maturity, concrete operational thinking, identity development, peers, friendship, emotional and behavioural disorders, learning disabilities, peer bullying

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1. Introduction

The physical and mental development of children between the ages of 6 and 12 (middle childhood) is characterised by significant changes. Starting school is a pivotal moment, as the child takes on a new social role and becomes more open to the influences of classmates and teachers. Unstructured playtime, which once dominated the child's life, gradually gives way to school demands and rules that they must now adapt to[1]. *School responsibilities* give direction to the child's rapidly developing cognitive abilities, which become more and more voluntary and controlled as the child's ability to consciously use attention, perception, memory and learning improves.

2. On the Threshold of School: School Maturity And Readiness for Reading and Writing

School maturity, understood as an appropriate level of emotional, social, intellectual and physical development, is a prerequisite for children beginning school to be able to cope with new responsibilities, learn and develop new skills required for teaching programmes, and adjust to the social life of their schoolmates and the school. School maturity is formed by developmental processes, as well as family and out-of-family factors influencing the child[2].

The acquisition of formal literacy skills is related to children achieving three states of mental readiness:

- psychomotor readiness – enabling children to learn to read and write; it requires the skill of analysing verbal and visual information, appropriately developed kinaesthetic and motor abilities and speech apparatus, manual dexterity, vision-sensorimotor coordination, efficient short-term memory and the ability to concentrate and sustain attention;
- vocabulary and conceptual readiness – achieved as a result of children's cognitive and language experiences; to understand a written text, children must possess substantial cognitive resources (general knowledge and knowledge of their surroundings) and good language skills (rich vocabulary, the ability to communicate and verbally express their thoughts and experiences in a manner that is adapted to the situation);
- emotional-motivational readiness – allowing children to understand how literacy relates to being successful in life; children with emotional-motivational readiness have a positive cognitive attitude to knowledge, are interested in

1 Stefańska-Klar, 2005, pp. 130–162.
2 Brzezińska et al., 2014.

books and feel motivation to explore, ask questions and overcome difficulties without asking others for help[3].

The three states of readiness are interrelated and determine the amount of time the child will need to acquire reading and writing skills and how efficiently they will be used as cognition and communication tools.

3. School-Age Children's Perception, Attention and Memory

The evolution of attention, perception, memory and learning ability represents a transition from (1) spontaneous, uncontrolled processes in these domains reflecting the child's current wishes and interests through (2) partly controlled processes in pre-school-age children to (3) increasingly conscious, voluntary and purposeful processes in younger school-age children, aligned with the caregiver's or teacher's intentions[4].

3.1. From Cursory to Intentional and Permanent Observations

The perceptions of 7-8-year-olds still tend to be inaccurate and disregard the salient aspects of things. Over time, they become capable of identifying and generalising the characteristics of objects they see and consciously directing their perception to their aspects that are of interest to them. Their improving perceptiveness is accompanied by inquisitiveness, insight, curiosity about the world and resolution to understand the world around them.

3.2. From Attention Responding to External Cues to Unstable Self-Control

Between the ages of 6 and 9, the child's ability to resist impulses, control emotions, and stay focused on a task increases rapidly. *Voluntary attention takes the place of involuntary attention, enabling the child to perform increasingly complex activities while ignoring their trivial aspects*. The scope of attention expands, and its resistance to distractors improves, but sustaining attention is still difficult for the child, making concentration on tasks that the child considers monotonous or boring difficult. In general, the attention of school-age children is focused on external objects and phenomena. However, as they approach the end of this stage, they become increasingly aware of their own mental activities and begin to direct their attention inward[5].

3.3. From Mechanical to Logical Memory – Memory Strategies, Metamemory and Constructive Memory

Along with the fast-improving cognitive abilities of younger school-age children, their memory processes undergo qualitative changes. First-formers may not remember well

3 Brzezińska et al., 2012, pp. 7–22.
4 Vasta, Haith and Miller, 2004.
5 Flavel, 1985.

what homework they are supposed to do, but they have no problem remembering things that are interesting for them or trigger strong emotions. Gradually, logical memory replaces mechanical memory, and voluntary memory supersedes involuntary memory. First-formers requested to learn a poem or a song by heart use a passive memorisation strategy involving multiple repetitions, but older children employ active strategies appropriate for voluntary memorisation (such as organisation and repetition), where data are organised and linked together and simultaneously integrated into the child's existing knowledge[6]. The child's effort to understand and organise information reduces the number of repetitions needed to memorise it and makes it more permanent and easier to recall. The developmental improvement of memory skills is significantly associated with *the emergence of metamemory, i.e. the child's knowledge of memory, its functioning, ways of memorising things and factors influencing memorisation and the quality of information stored*. Improving ability to memorise information implies its association with the expanding general knowledge of the child[7].

General knowledge is also a resource that constructive memory uses to create more comprehensive pictures of past events or experiences. Its elements are picked to make adjustments to memories or fill in the blanks, which, in some cases, may result in memory distortions[8].

4. Cognitive Changes: The Concrete Operational Stage (years 6/7-11)

4.1. Concrete Operational Thought: Reversibility, Decentration, Conservation and Inductive Reasoning

At the age of 6-7 years, a new stage of cognitive development begins, which Piaget called the concrete operational stage *because children become capable of performing mental operations on concrete objects and events.*

Concrete operational thinking differs from preoperational thinking in that it is associated with the child's awareness of the reversibility of operations and the ability to decentrate[9].

A child who understands that operations are reversible can track his or her reasoning backwards to where it started and correct it as needed, and decentration enables a child to see the characteristics of objects, situations and realities from different perspectives, and to understand their complexity[10]. *As a result, awareness of quality conservation, i.e. the understanding that objects (and their properties) that have been stretched, cut, elongated, spread, compressed, etc. remain the same objects, emerges and develops in the following order: number, length, volume, mass, area and weight. A child who*

6 Vasta, Haith and Miller, 2004.
7 Karably and Zabrucky, 2017, pp. 32–52.
8 Brzezińska et al., 2019.
9 See: Rzechowska, 2025, p. 161.: 4.1. Symbolic thinking: pre-operational years (2-6/7).
10 See: Rzechowska, 2025, p. 161.: 4.1. Symbolic thinking: pre-operational years (2-6/7).

is aware of quantity conservation knows that water poured from a tall and narrow container to a wide and narrow one, does not change its volume because the different heights of the containers are compensated for by their width.

One of the classic tests that Piaget developed to measure children's ability to perform operations mentally is the conservation test. In the test, children are shown *two identical objects, e.g. balls of clay, and their sameness in terms of* number, size, volume, etc. is highlighted. One ball is then rolled into a cylinder; because it is now longer and thinner than the ball, the preoperational child will say that quantity has changed, whereas the concrete operational child, capable of reversing operations and decentration, will know that it is the same because the cylinder can be made into a ball again (reversibility) and because its greater length translates into greater thinness[11].

School-age children use inductive reasoning, which assumes that their individual experiences and premises describe the world as it is. For instance, based on inductive reasoning, a child with three rude friends may conclude that friends are always rude.

4.2. Constructing the Conceptual Representation of the World: Classification

Underlying the development of the conceptual representation of the world is classification[12]. The pre-operational child, who does not yet understand the permanence of properties, determines the properties of an object empirically, and believes that they are specific to that object and the current situation. The ability to divide objects into classes develops at the concrete operations stage, as the child becomes capable of creating objective mental representations of directly experienceable properties of an object, with the term 'objective' meaning unrelated to the object and situation. Classification of objects that enables the child to organise his or her knowledge about the world requires two main operations to be formed: 1) dividing a set into subsets and 2) establishing how the set and subsets are related to each other (class inclusion). For instance, to answer the question *'Are there more girls than children in your class*?', the child has to determine the relationship between the class (children) and the subclass (girls). The preoperational child is likely to compare the sizes of the subclasses (represented by girls and boys) to determine which gender is in majority. The operational child, however, will deduce from the available information that there are more children, regardless of how many boys and girls are in the class.

As their experiences and lexical resources expand, children aged 7-11 years acquire the ability to organise objects according to different criteria, to understand classification hierarchies, and to allocate objects to general and more specific classes and subclasses simultaneously, using different types of comparison.

The hierarchical classification skills that most children acquire between the ages of 7 and 10 years have practical value for pupils who begin to understand and assimilate scientific and social concepts requiring comparisons and dividing living creatures into different groups based on whether they belong to the animal or plant world, etc.

11 Piaget and Inhelder, 1962.
12 Inhelder and Piaget, 1958.

4.3. Operations on Relationships: Seriation and Transitive Inference

Seriation is the ability to arrange items in a specific order (series) according to a selected criterion, i.e. size, length, height, or weight. Children possessing this ability can organise sticks from the shortest to the longest or according to objects' defining characteristics. Seriation is a prerequisite to understanding concepts such as numbers, time and measures.

Transitive inference is a type of reasoning where prior knowledge is used to establish unknown relationships between objects (if A>B and B>C, then A>C). It enables children in the second half of middle childhood to conclude that John is taller than Sue because he is taller than Mary, who is taller than Sue.

4.4. From Cognitive to Interpersonal Decentration

One significant consequence of preoperational children's egocentrism affecting their social functioning is that they do not see that they are internally different from others; as a result, they have difficulty understanding others' behaviour. The comprehension of why other people behave the way they do develops around the age of 8-9 years, together with the understanding with the reversibility of operations. The ability, referred to as interpersonal decentration, enables children to understand how others perceive the world and that their own perceptions, motivations and feelings may differ from those of other people.

School-age children with interpersonal decentration perceive people more comprehensively and more objectively, which enables them to further consolidate their knowledge of them. As they understand others' needs and expectations better and better, they can make more accurate judgments about what conditions enable cooperation and what is required to act effectively[13].

With the increasing objectivity of children's perceptions of others, their judgments undergo a qualitative change. *Value judgments predominating in 7-8-year-olds are gradually superseded by objective assessments in the second half of elementary school.*

5. The Portrait of a Developing Elementary School Child: Directions of Change

In the second half of middle childhood, cognitive abilities develop rapidly due to the onset of the concrete operational stage. *As children's egocentrism, typical of preoperational thinking, is defused by their interactions with peers, their relationships with them become deeper and richer*[14]. Between the ages of 7 and 8 years, children use summation and induction to make overall assessments of their worth, which will prospectively influence their perception of self within the complex hierarchy of social relations.

13 Włodarski and Matczak, 1998; Matczak, 2003.

14 See: Rzechowska, 2025, p. 192.: 4.4. From cognitive to interpersonal decentration.

5.1. Identity Development in Middle Childhood

5.1.1. Sigmund Freud's Latency Period

Human psychosexual development has a latency period falling in middle childhood (years 6-7), during which the child's drives and interest in sexuality are repressed or dormant. In that period, sexual energy sublimates into activities such as learning and development of social and communication skills[15]. The child develops new abilities, among which those strengthening the child's ego and protecting from frustration and the fallout of failures are the most important. Sigmund Freud called the abilities defence mechanisms[16].

Defence mechanisms are psychological reactions to unsettling or potentially dangerous situations, which are to reduce the intensity and frustration one feels and increase protection from the consequences of internal conflicts and a sense of guilt.

The defence mechanisms that children in the latency period typically use include:

- rationalisation – justification of failures;
- projection – attribution to others of one's undesirable feelings, attitudes, behaviour and characteristics;
- displacement;
- denial of reality – refusal to acknowledge painful situations;
- compensation – using substitutes for compensating unachievable things;
- regression – return to behaviours from earlier developmental stages;
- sham reaction – behaviours and emotions disguising those actually felt;
- avoidance and withdrawal.

While defence mechanisms do not solve inner conflicts, they help children in middle childhood avoid the pain they bring or make it less intense. The downside of their use is that they address the symptoms of conflicts rather than their causes, so using them repeatedly or for long periods of time can hinder the formation of adaptation mechanisms.

Sigmund Freud's latency period coincides with Erik Erikson's fourth crisis of psychosocial development[17].

5.1.2. Erik Erikson's School Age Crisis: Industry vs. Inferiority

Elementary school-age children (years 6-12) face an industry vs. inferiority crisis. One of the main challenges they face is measuring up to established standards and expectations. For the first time in their lives, they want others – classmates and teachers – to see them as competent and worthy of respect. To achieve it, they strive to develop

15 In late childhood (stage 4), the development of the child's 'superego' is influenced by his or her strong identification with the parents. As a result, the child adopts their moral imaginations and ideals. A conflict between them and the child's ego can be source of shame and guilt.

16 Freud, 1920; Turner and Helms, 1995.

17 Erikson, 1982.

and perfect various skills, learn new knowledge, and feel pleasure and satisfaction when they can demonstrate their competence and agency. They also begin to make comparisons between themselves and their peers, feel proud and accomplished when they compare favourably to them, or inferior and inadequate when the comparison is negative, which affects their self-esteem. Also, their ability to understand and anticipate the likely outcomes and consequences of their actions and decisions is better than during the previous stage.

A resource of special significance for children is a sense of self-efficacy[18], measuring their belief in successful coping with various challenges. A sense of self-efficacy has different levels, ranging from a general one expressed as an "*I can cope with different situations*" to a specific belief in being able to achieve academically.

Frequent criticism from teachers, unfriendly peers, and excessively demanding, lax, or inconsistent parents entails the risk of the child developing an inferiority complex and having difficulty in social relations.

5.1.3. The Development of Self: Self-Understanding and the Role of Others in Self-Image

New properties of thought processes enable school-age children to see things from others' perspectives, different from their own. With that, they start to consider what other people are thinking, attach more weight to their mental states, notice the perspectives of those with whom they interact, and anticipate the potential consequences of such interactions[19]. The fact that they also become capable of seeing themselves through the eyes of others prompts the formation of their self-image and the emergence of self-concept and self-esteem based on others' opinions. Children in middle childhood view themselves more realistically than they did in early childhood and have better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Their self-esteem is determined by the degree to which they meet others' expectations of them (*I am good at school because my parents want me to*), their achievements (*I am not very good at school*), states and experiences (Answering the teacher's questions makes me more uneasy compared with my classmates)[20]. Because children at this age are very dependent on how others evaluate their performance in various fields, their self-esteem reacts to their successes and failures, with the strength of the reaction being related to how important a given activity is for them.

To sum up, the children's self-esteem is shaped by:

- successes and failures in various domains (as pupils, children begin to understand the relativity of their achievements);
- the importance of an activity for the child and others' evaluation of his or her performance (parents' insistence on the child being successful have a defining effect on child's aspirations);

18 Erikson, 1963.
19 Selman, 1980; see §5.2.
20 Ruble, 1983.

- opinions expressed directly (*you are gifted but lazy*) and indirectly *(we do not expect you to have all A's)*, from which the child infers about the parents' expectations and their evaluation of his or her achievements.

Although the child's ability to make more independent judgments about self increases with time, they still lack objectivity and are still influenced by others' suggestions and opinions. The child's self-esteem can also be affected by a discrepancy between what the child thinks of him- or herself and the ideal self. Depending on whether such a discrepancy diminishes or boosts the child's self-esteem, the effect can be reduced activity, well-being and self-efficacy, or traumas and conflicts provoked by more realistic judgments of other people[21].

The presence or absence of self-acceptance depends on the child's system of values and whether successes and failures are associated with behaviours, personality traits, or activities that are particularly important for the child. Self-efficacy, the belief that one can accomplish a specific task or goal, is a critical resource in childhood[22]. A substantial difference between perceived self-efficacy and ability makes motivational problems more likely. A pupil believing that his or her math skills are good will probably attempt to do math homework, but one with limited trust in his or her math skills will probably procrastinate, regardless of how good they really are.

As self-efficacy is a self-constructed judgment of one's abilities, children may miscalculate or misperceive what they can really do. Albert Bandura estimated that the optimal level of self-efficacy is equal to, or slightly above, ability[23].

5.2. Acceptance of Social Norms and Rules: Lawrence Kohlberg's Conventional Phase of Moral Development

Moral development of humans involves the gradual discovery of the universal sense of good, changing one's perspective on morality and the basis for moral judgments. In the first phase of moral development (pre-conventional), judgments are guided by individuals' personal interests[24], whereas in the conventional phase (stages 3 and 4), they are made to fit social norms and expectations that one will be able to tell right from wrong, many of which are enshrined in tradition, culture, or codes of conduct.

Children at stage 3 of moral development (good interpersonal relationships) want to be perceived as good and know that praise and appreciation are for those who follow the rules. Believing that a behaviour is appropriate when accepted, liked, and helpful for others, they behave as they think others expect them to instead of pursuing their own activities.

When reaching stage 4 (law and order morality), children become more aware of the wider rules in society and make judgments to uphold them and avoid guilt.

21 Boyd and Bee, 2019; Harter, 2012.
22 Bandura, 1977, pp. pp. 191–215.
23 Bandura, 1997.
24 See: Rzechowska, 2025, p. 180.: 6.4. Out-of-family care and secondary socialisation.

In that stage, they view a behaviour as good when it respects the law or is accepted by others. When making judgments upon others' actions, not only the motivations behind them, but also the actions' conformity with standards are important.One of Laurence Kohlberg's[25] best-known moral judgment tests[26] required subjects to decide whether Heinz, whose wife was gravely ill and desperately needed a drug he could not afford could steal as this is what a loving husband would do, or risk his wife's life not to commit an unlawful act. In either case, what other people think is right and wrong will influence the choice.

Children in the conventional phase of moral development accept norms but still have difficulty grasping their meaning and do not see how they relate to general values. As a result, they tend to obey the letter of moral rules rather than their spirit[27].

6. Social Development: From a Home Environment To School Life and Peer Relationships

Going to school involves the substantial expansion of the world in which children have lived until then[28]. They increasingly become less dependent on their parents, and display attachment behaviours and spontaneity in emotions more rarely, but parents continue to be a safe haven for them. Children at this age do not yet see their imperfections and do not directly question their decisions and authority, but this does not mean that they fully accept their parents emotionally and mentally. They frequently demonstrate their resistance through nervous or unacceptable behaviours, which turns into overt rebellion in adolescence. Their position in the family hierarchy determines the nature of their interactions with the siblings.

During middle childhood, parents' support and acceptance are still very important for children. At the same time, however, they feel an increasing need to be independent, and peers and non-family adults start playing an increasingly important role in their lives.

6.1. Relationships With Peers

The reliance of young children on adults can be seen in the early school years in their use of adults' criteria to select and evaluate their mates. As adults would, they prefer to associate with peers accepted by adults (parents, teachers), and good grades largely determine a child' popularity with the classmates. Gradually, they establish their own criteria, and their judgments become more and more independent. As well as starting to react to what another person is doing, seeing and experiencing, they also adjust

25 Kohlberg, 1963, pp. 277–332.
26 See: Rzechowska, 2025, p. 180.: 6.4. Out-of-family care and secondary socialisation.
27 Kohlberg, 1983, pp. 277–332.
28 Rubin et al., 2013, pp. 242–275.

their behaviour to what they know about other people, their expectations, probable consequences of their activities, etc.[29]

Early school children feel a strong desire to belong to a group, which culminates in 9-year-olds. In the case of older children, peers have a stabilising and normalising influence on one another and being accepted by them becomes more important for a child than being accepted by adults. Relationships with peers are a vital source of information for children[30], help them develop social skills they need to communicate and negotiate differences, teach them how to perform various tasks and be popular, what to wear or say, and how to behave. What children learn about relationships and about themselves in relationships with others has a defining effect on their self-image.

6.2. Children's Friendship and the Role of Others

A special form of peer relationships is friendship, defined as a long-term connection between two individuals based on loyalty, intimacy and the mutual exchange of positive emotions[31].

Robert Selman has identified five partially overlapping stages of friendship based on how people at different ages perceive their friends and their relations with them, three of which occur in school-age children[32].

6.2.1. Momentary Playmates (3-7 years)

For 3-7-year-olds, a friend is someone with whom they play. Their friendships usually emerge by chance (e.g. a neighbour's child) rather than as a result of similarities. Children at this stage still have difficulty understanding others' perspectives and assume that other children think like they do, so they get very upset when they find out that it is not so and usually conclude that '*she or he doesn't want to be my friend anymore.*'

6.2.2. One-Way Assistance (4-9 years)

Children in this age group describe a friend as someone who is nice to them (shares a treat, saves a seat on the bus, gives presents, etc.). They are engaged in their friendships, but they do not think a lot about how they contribute to them. Occasionally, they are ready to tolerate someone who is not very nice simply to have a friend. Some may try to benefit from friendship, for instance, by saying things like '*I will be your friend if you do this*!'

6.2.3. Two-Way, Fair Weather Cooperation (6-12 years)

For children between the ages of 6 and 12, a friend is someone who returns favours. Fairness and reciprocity are very important for them, but they define them rigidly, so

29 Blatchford and Baines, 2010, pp. 227–276.
30 Baley, 1958.
31 Vasta, Haith and Miller, 2004.
32 Selman, 1980.

having done something for a friend, they expect the favour to be returned at the next opportunity. They are ready to terminate friendship if the friend disappoints them. They tend to be jealous and are very concerned about fitting in and not being different from others.

6.2.4. Intimate, Mutually Shared Relationships (9-15 years)

Children in this age interval characterise a friend as someone with whom they can share thoughts and feelings that others should not know. They believe that friends should help each other with problems, seek compromise, and show mutual kindness without 'keeping score' just out of true care for the friend.

As children deepen their awareness of others' perspectives and become able to integrate these with their own viewpoints, they begin to display deeper understandings about other people, their thoughts, feelings and motivations.

6.3. School as the Child's Developmental Environment

The main environments wherein children develop and grow are the family home and school[33]. The decline in the number of informal places for peer interactions, such as yards, has caused contemporary children to have fewer opportunities to spend time together after school[34].

6.3.1. The School Class and Its Informal Hierarchy

After going to school, children soon learn their position in the class. Between the ages of 9 and 10, they start attaching more weight to others' opinions about them, which causes them to actively pursue, sustain, or strengthen a position of significance among their peers. Research on informal classroom structures[35] has shown that pupils have different but relatively stable positions in the class hierarchy. There are typically children who are more popular than others (the 'class stars'), small groups who stick together simply because they enjoy each other's company, and children who exist on the margins of the class, avoiding group activities and often isolated by their peers. Additionally, there are rejected-withdrawn children, who are easy targets for bullies due to their shyness and timidity, and rejected-aggressive children, who are avoided for being loud, intrusive and confrontational. Lastly, there are controversial children, who attract attention, and are both liked and disliked by their peers[36].

There is research evidence that children rejected by peers are more at risk of running into conflicts, experiencing low self-confidence and having adjustment problems[37].

33 Shaffer and Kipp, 2013.
34 Juul and Oien, 2012.
35 Boulton, 1999, pp. 944–954.
36 van der Wilt et al., 2018, pp. 793–807.
37 Klima and Repetti, 2008, pp. 151–178; Schwartz, 2008, pp. 289–299.

6.3.2. Teacher-Pupil Relationship

To adjust to the school environment, the child needs to possess skills to communicate and negotiate with peers and be able to adapt to the school's rules and requirements. With the beginning of schooling, a new meaningful person appears in the child's life – the teacher – and it is the only time *when the teacher's status is so high*.

The quality of the relationship between the child and the teacher forms the child's self-assessment, self-perception and attitude towards school and school responsibilities. Younger children's perceptions of their teacher and the caregiver are very similar, and central to their relationship is emotional closeness. Children who feel safe in their attachment to the teacher are more willing to participate in school life, have better grades, and are more likely to continue education beyond mandatory levels[38].

6.4. Creating a Supportive Environment for Children: The SELF-REG Method

In addition to its educational function, school also provides an environment where children learn to live in society and self-regulate their emotions. Self-regulation is the ability to manage one's energy states, emotions, behaviours and attention in a way that is socially acceptable and helps achieve positive goals, such as good relations with others, *effective* learning and sustained wellbeing.

The Self-Reg method was created by the Canadian psychologist Stuart Shanker as a tool for parents and teachers of children at different ages[39]. The inspiration for it came from his observations that the conditions in which children develop can adversely affect their nervous systems and that adults can contribute to creating environments that enable children to build the capacity for self-regulation. The method recommends reducing the presence of stressors, creating an environment for children to feel safe again, giving them time to regenerate and helping them find a way of regeneration that is most appropriate for them (depending on the child, sitting quietly or engaging in intense physical activity will work better), teaching children how to recognise their states of arousal, and trying together to find ways to regulate them. As regards teachers, they have to make sure that the learning environment does not overwhelm pupils (has few visual and sound distractors, discourages unhealthy competition, presents errors as an opportunity to learn, and promotes mutual kindness) and organise activities bearing in mind pupils' mental and emotional states.

Stuart Shanker defined five critical domains of self-regulation and formulated recommendations addressing each of them in the school context:

- biological domain– fostering a sensory-friendly environment, taking account of pupils' sensory difficulties, making sure that their physiological needs for food, drink, physical activity, etc. are met;
- emotional domain – creating space for emotions such as curiosity, joy, peace; addressing pupil's emotions; helping them modulate negative emotions (anger, fear, frustration, etc.); addressing emotions and situations that trigger them;

38 Hamre and Pianta, 2001, pp. 625–638.
39 Shanker, 2021.

- cognitive domain – choosing tasks of appropriate difficulty, explaining them, dividing them into parts as needed, presenting materials at the right pace, reducing distractors, ensuring that class activities are predictable and allowing pupils time to switch between activities; building on their natural sensitivity, talents and interests, helping them understand things that make learning easy or difficult and coping with stress;
- social domain – building a friendly atmosphere of mutual understanding in the class; promoting cooperation and discouraging competition (which tenses up the atmosphere); encouraging win-win solutions to conflicts and healthy interactions (apologetic or empathetic reactions require a certain level of self-regulation to be possible);
- prosocial domain – fostering good relations and friendly atmosphere in the class, creating opportunities for children to take care of one another; making them realise their strong points and uniqueness, and helping each child to feel attractive and important.

Shanker also emphasised the importance of caregivers and teachers being aware of their emotional states and how they express them because of their influence on children's capacity for self-regulation.

7. Common School-Age Problems

Among the typical problems experienced by school-age children are emotional and behavioural disorders[40] and learning difficulties[41].

7.1. Internalising and Externalising Disorders

Internalising disorders or overcontrolled behaviours include anxiety, depression, somatic conditions (occurring without any specific organic cause), withdrawal (avoidance of social interactions (social anxiety) and difficulty experienced in social situations.

Children with overcontrol can be overcautious in new or challenging situations, shy in contact with others, underperform at school, and feel that others do not appreciate them enough. Feeling anxious, they obey rules, which earns them the opinion of nice and controllable children. In tension-laden situations, however, these usually passive kids can explode with uncontrolled outbursts of emotion. The punishment they receive for such reactions is usually proportional to the surprise they have caused, so they withdraw even more.

Externalising disorders (undercontrolled behaviours) stem from a limited ability to control emotions and cause the outward expression of personal problems. They can

40 See: Achenbach, 1982: internalising and externalising problems.
41 Prinstein et al., 2019.

have the form of criminalised delinquent behaviours or incompliance with the school rules (skipping lessons, swearing, lying), maladjustment behaviours (ignoring group rules, participation in informal groups) and disrespect for social norms (aggression against people and/or property, provoking conflicts).

Many children are affected by both types of disorders at the same time. Their impact is infrequently further compounded by dysfunctional relationships with peers, thought problems implying obsessive-compulsive or anxiety disorders, etc., and attention problems, with symptoms varying depending on their cause[42].

Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) are characterised by poor attention control and/or hyperactivity and impulsiveness, which impair their normal functioning[43]. It is estimated that about 5% of children have ADHD, with family and twin studies pointing to genetic changes as a significant factor in developing the condition[44].

Children with impaired control of attention have difficulty, and therefore avoid, completing activities that require sustained attention (conversations, reading, etc.), fail to follow instructions (which prevents them from completing schoolwork and other assignments, etc.), and are disorganised (have poor sense of time, problems with keeping things tidy or completing work in an orderly manner). They are also inattentive to detail, easily distractible and forgetful. Their hyperactivity manifests itself through excessive movements such as fidgeting or squirming, getting up when expected to be seated, having trouble sitting still, running around, climbing on things, replying before a question has been completed, and interrupting others.

The academic and social challenges faced by children with ADHD are enormous. Compared to non-ADHD children, they have poorer grades and score lower on tests; their expulsion and retention rates are higher; and they are more likely to drop out of school[45]. Unsurprisingly, they are also less popular with peers and usually avoided by them[46].

Among interventions developed to assist children with ADHD are social skills training, behavioural treatment, cognitive behavioural therapy, parent and teacher education, recreational programmes and lifestyle changes[47]. Depending on the severity of their condition, pharmacological treatment may also be recommended.

7.2. Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities are developmental disorders impeding the acquisition of reading (dyslexia), writing (dysgraphia) and calculating (dyscalculia) skills by children.

42 Wysocka and Ostafińska-Molik, 2014, pp. 131–151.
43 APA, 2013.
44 Burt, 2009, pp. 608–637; Gizer, Ficks and Waldman, 2009, pp. 51–90.
45 Loe and Feldman, 2007, pp. 643–654.
46 Hoza et al., 2005, pp. 411–423.
47 Clay, 2021.

Dyslexia is a functional impairment of the ability to read and write. Children with dyslexia have difficulty *mentally processing* printed and handwritten words, so completing written schoolwork and reading *is a challenge for them*. Dysgraphia involves physical problems in writing letters and figures, which cause handwriting to look careless and frequently make it illegible. Akin to dysgraphia is dysorthography, which hinders remembering the correct spelling of words and reproducing them in writing. The last of the learning disabilities is dyscalculia, which makes it more difficult for children to learn or comprehend arithmetic (understand and manipulate numbers, perform calculations, etc.)[48].

It is important to note that children with learning disabilities are in the normal intellectual range and do not show any symptoms of delayed mental development or lack of motivation. The causes of their problems have not yet been precisely identified, but they are usually attributed to genetic determinants, micro-injuries to the central nervous system, emotional disorders (stress, traumas and experienced aggression), poor economic conditions, the parents' child-raising model, the school environment and teachers' attitudes, inadequate teaching methods and irregular cognitive development.

8. Safe and Stimulating Educational Environment

The world in which contemporary school-age children develop is marked by the ubiquitous presence of digital technologies. Technological advancements and the evolution of family and social life models create ample opportunities for children to expand their potentials, but one has to be aware that they also involve risks for children, e.g. a risk of violence, from which they should be protected[49].

8.1. Safe Educational Environment: Schools Without Bullying

Bullying refers to a form of peer violence characterised by the repeated and prolonged exposure of an individual to harmful actions by one or more others. These negative actions are intentional and aimed at causing physical, emotional, or psychological harm. They can manifest through direct physical contact, verbal abuse, or other forms of aggressive behaviour intended to inflict discomfort or injury[50]. There are different types of bullying, including verbal bullying, which is saying or writing nasty things, teasing and name calling, taunting, threatening, or making inappropriate sexual comments. Social bullying, also referred to as relational bullying, involves spreading rumours, purposefully excluding someone from a group, or embarrassing someone on purpose. Physical bullying involves hurting a person's body or possessions. A type of bullying that deserves special attention is covert bullying, consisting of repeated

48 Swanson, Harris and Graham, 2014.
49 Turner and Helms, 1995.
50 Olweus and Limber, 2010, pp. 124–134; Olweus, 2013, pp. 751–780.

hand gestures, weird or threatening looks, whispering, excluding people or turning back on them, or restricting where they can sit and to whom they can talk. Covert bullying is more difficult to counteract because it is less conspicuous and, therefore, harder for children to prove[51].

The development of digital technologies creates more possibilities for children to interact and communicate with their peers. Unfortunately, digital means of communication are also increasingly used by cyberbullies for distributing malicious content, creating fake profiles, posting embarrassing pictures and videos, or texting and emailing vile rumours. Cyberbullying is more 'effective' and, therefore, more harmful and dangerous than 'traditional' bullying because victims can be targeted round-the-clock without having to be physically present, and messages and images can be distributed anonymously, so they are hard to track back to the source and delete[52]. Cyberbullying increases the risk of its victims experiencing physical bullying, skipping school, and having poor grades. They are also more likely to consume alcohol and drugs to de-stress and have health issues. Physical bullying frequently turns into cyberbullying or vice versa, or both forms of harassment occur alternately or simultaneously – ridicule at school moves online[53].

Each type of bullying is incredibly hurtful and painful for the victim, which should be kept in mind especially in the context of indirect violence, which is much more difficult for adults to notice and for the child to prove. Bullying significantly lowers a child's self-esteem, destroys his or her sense of self-worth, takes away a sense of security and confidence; instils a strong sense of loneliness in the child, makes the child anxious, tense and stressed; negatively affects academic performance; can lead to school phobia, the development of depression or anxiety disorders, and in extreme cases can even lead to suicide.

Developed by Dan Olweus, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is a comprehensive, school-wide initiative designed to reduce bullying and improve peer relations among students in elementary, middle and junior high school grades. The program operates at the individual, classroom, school and community levels, offering a comprehensive approach to addressing the issue. OBPP includes the identification and support of both victims and perpetrators of bullying, the implementation of intervention strategies and the promotion of positive behaviours within the school environment. The program also introduces staff training, clear anti-bullying policies and regular monitoring of bullying incidents. Collaboration with parents and the community reinforces the actions taken within the school. Research has shown OBPP's significant effectiveness in reducing bullying, improving peer relationships and enhancing the overall school climate, making it one of the leading bullying prevention programs.

51 van Geel, Vedder and Tanilon, 2014, pp. 435–442.
52 Pyżalski, 2012.
53 Halliday et al., 2022, pp. 110–123; Salmivalli, Sainio and Hodges, 2013, pp. 442–453.

8.2. Talent Management

Today, there is an increasing tendency to depart from the long-lived concepts of talents and educational concepts sorting children out into 'talented' and 'less talented' to ensure that each group is optimally supported[54]. One reason for this is the observation that some children have natural abilities well above average for their peers, others are gifted in any area of ability, in more than one area, or at different levels, and still others have talents as well as disabilities (e.g. autism or hearing loss).

Another reason for redefining the approach to seeking talented children is the results of neurobiological research and socio-technological changes in the environment in which they develop. Residing in the world of computers, video games, and smartphones, today's school children tend to consume or merely process contents delivered by others, rarely being active contributors or creative authors.

Contemporary education still focuses on imparting knowledge and measuring teaching effectiveness based on standard scales, tests and grade systems. The emphasis of schooling is not on developing pupils' potential, talents and interests but on fitting their activities into the framework of institutional requirements. Gerald Hüther and Uli Hauser called this approach in their *Jedes Kind ist hoch begabt*[55]*. Die angeborenen Talente unserer Kinder und was wir aus ihnen Machen* (2012) 'mind formatting and a waste of talents'. They proposed replacing the traditional attitude to identifying above-average children with the belief that all children are talented and gifted, and emphasised the importance of thorough examination of their talents. They also indicated that children should be provided with conditions supporting their creativity, curiosity and ingenuity and enabling them to explore the world on their terms.

9. Summary

Middle childhood is a complex period in human life in which children take on new roles and engage in new social relationships. Their good start in school is determined by school maturity and readiness for reading and writing (psychomotor, vocabulary, conceptual and emotional-motivational readiness).

In the younger school years, children's cognitive abilities develop at a fast pace. As their attention, perception, memory, and learning processes become increasingly conscious, controlled, and purposeful, they become more effective in achieving their individual or team goals set by the teacher, caregiver, or mates.

The age of around 6-7 years marks the beginning of a new stage of cognitive development called concrete operational thinking. The ability to reverse operations and decentrate that children acquire in this period allows them to grasp the concept of conservation of quantity, perform operations on classes and relationships, and

54 Piirto, 2021.
55 Hüther and Hauser, 2012.

develop logical reasoning skills (inductive reasoning and transitive inference). These new powers are important for children's social functioning, as they allow them to take others' perspectives and thus understand that their states and those of other people are not the same, perceive motivations behind human behaviour, and integrate and objectivise their knowledge about the world and people.

These changes are associated with the development of children's identities and the formation and enhancement of their relationships with others. In middle childhood, children engage in various explorations resulting from the sublimation of their sexual energy, accompanied by defence mechanisms that play a positive role at this stage of their development (Freud's latency period). They also learn to be productive and accept others' judgments on their performance (Erikson's industry vs. inferiority). Comparisons of their own and others' expectations, achievements, states, and experiences become a basis for them to build their self-image, and their self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy are shaped by what others think of them. Their wider perspective on the world and people is reflected in their moral judgment-making, in which they consider social norms or external expectations (Kohlberg's conventional phase of moral development, stages 3 and 4).

In the early school years, children transition from a life focused on the family to a life concerned with peer relationships and school life, and separate more from the parents but still perceive them as their safety net. They feel a strong need to be part of a group of peers, the interactions with whom enable them to develop social skills and the capacity for self-identification. A special type of a relationship with peers is friendship, which can manifest itself in various forms (Selman's transient playmates, one-way assistance, two-way, fair weather cooperation and intimate, mutually-shared relationships).

The school follows the family home as the children's primary developmental environment. The quality of teacher-pupil relationships and the informal class structure, etc., form children's self-perception and self-evaluation as well as their attitude to school and pupil responsibilities. Caregivers and teachers can significantly contribute to the creation of an environment supportive of children's development (Shanker's SELF-REG method).

Among various problems faced by school-age children, the most frequent are those associated with emotional and behavioural disorders (internalising and externalising disorders, ADHD, etc.) and learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography, dyscalculia).

For a school environment to be safe and educationally stimulating for children, measures preventing or protecting them from peer harassment (bullying, cyberbullying) and effective identification and support of talented children are important.

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