| CHAPTER 6 |

Toddlerhood and Preschool Age: The Dynamics of Early Childhood Development

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of motor skills in early childhood, the child's perception, attention and memory improve, and preoperational thinking replaces thinking in action. The changes influence the child's logic, reasoning, and understanding of the world. Also, in early childhood, the child's theory of mind takes shape as the child tries to understand others' states of mind and feelings.

Toddlerhood and the preschool years involve the development of the child's individuality, autonomy, initiative, self-esteem and self-evaluation, as well as the formation of autobiographical memory and gender identity.

Increasing self-awareness, understanding of people's expectations and the emergence of a conscience let the child compare his or her behaviour against the established rules, prompting the birth of emotional states (shame, pride and guilt) and the ability to regulate them. The emerging awareness of norms and standards stimulates moral development. At its early stage (the pre-conventional level), the child makes judgments dictated by his or her practical interests and the need to avoid trouble, even if the child has a sense of the needs of others.

By around the age of three, children acquire the basics of their native language, leading to the development of their vocabulary, grammar and communication skills.

During the early years of life, children adopt behavioural patterns within the family (primary socialisation). These patterns are later applied outside the family and enriched through interactions with peers and teachers in kindergartens and other care settings (secondary socialisation). Peers and early friendships play a significant role in a child's socialisation, as does the evolving social organisation of play—from unoccupied play to cooperative play—and the development of prosocial behaviours.

The skills and abilities acquired during early childhood are essential for a child's successful adaptation to the school environment.

KEYWORDS

toddlerhood, preschool age, pre-operational thinking, personality development, moral judgment, emotional development, communication skills, primary and secondary socialisation

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1. Introduction

Early childhood is a complex period in human life. Improving motor skills makes a child independent of the 'here and now' and enable him or her to start exploring the world and develop an early understanding of the basic rules of social functioning, communicating with others and regulating emotions. Experiences gained in early childhood underlie the formation of defining values and ideas about life, expectations of it, and rules of acting, significantly influencing what person a child will grow into. New understandings and social situations bring variety to a child's life and stimulate the creation of new strategies for the world ahead.

2. Motor Skill Development: From the Child's Exploration Of the Environment to Independence

With the development of gross motor skills in early childhood, the child's physical activity increases (the child starts to walk, run, overcome obstacles, climb the stairs, etc.). The sensory function also improves, enabling the child to start explorations into his or her environment.

The fine motor skills also become more sophisticated, introducing a child to the structure and use of objects. As a result, a child becomes capable of:

- using tools for the first time (a teaspoon, scissors) and performing self-care activities (drink from a cup, wash the hands, dress, etc.);
- playing simple 'engineering' games (building block towers, making sand cakes);
- displaying graphomotor activity (linear scribbling turns into figurative scribbling and first drawings of real objects).

As the precision and automation of movements and eye-movement coordination improve, the operations the child has learned to perform become the basis for the development of his or her cognitive (imitation), social (understanding the purpose and use of objects) and personal (the beginning of self-reliance, sense of agency, and self-confidence) skills[1].

3. Child Cognition and Mental Processing

The rapid development of motor skills in early childhood occurs in close association with changes in perception, attention and memory[2].

1 Boyd and Bee, 2019; Brzezińska, Ziółkowska and Appelt, 2019.
2 Vasta, Haith and Miller, 2004.

3.1. Perception

With improved sensitivity of the senses, particularly sight and hearing, a child becomes capable of reacting to complex stimuli, i.e. distinguishing between and comparing shapes, colours and their shades, as well as pitch, tone and intensity of sounds. However, because 6-year-olds still perceive objects as a whole, analysing and synthesising sensory data is problematic for them.

3.2. Attention

A toddler's attention is predominantly involuntary and tends to concentrate on distinct objects and signals. It is not until the age of 6-7 years that the child's ability to control attention improves, partly due to curiosity and emotional engagement in tasks. Between the ages of 3 and 6 years, the time the child can concentrate on a task extends from 5-10 minutes to about 20 minutes, but the selectivity, sustainability, divisibility and shiftability of the child's attention are not yet fully formed, with the consequence that remembering things and contents exactly is still difficult for the child.

3.3. Memory

A toddler's memory is still essentially involuntary. A 2-3-year-old child is still incapable of indicating when exactly events happened, but the fact that they did can be stored in a child's memory for months or even years (e.g. this particularly applies to traumatic events involving strong emotions). Memories of past events are invoked by free associations with current ones and frequently blend with fairy tales and fictitious situations. Only at the age of 6 does the share of voluntary memory enabling a child to store experiences and apply them in various situations increase, and the ability to use memory strategies and metamemory (the knowledge of memory functioning) develops, following which a child becomes aware of his or her memory capabilities[3].

The pre-schooler's attention and memory are closely related to his or her cognitive and motor activity. Situations exposing the child to many diverse stimuli are remembered longer and more accurately.

4. A Child's Understanding of Physical and Social Reality

4.1. Symbolic Thinking: Pre-Operational Years (2-6/7)

Between 2 and 6-7 years of age, during the so-called pre-operational years[4], a child develops mental representations of real objects and activities, and mental processing precedes the execution of activities.

3 Kielar-Turska, 2015, pp. 202–233; Brzezińska, Ziółkowska and Appelt, 2019.
4 Piaget, 1952.

4.1.1. From Thinking in Action to Mental Representations of Events

By the end of the first year of life, a child uses patterns of action that have proven effective in achieving goals (e.g. climbs onto a chair to reach a toy). At around the age of 18 months, it can use a trial-and-error method to modify its actions if the established solutions fail. The ability marks the appearance of the semiotic function[5], i.e. the ability to engage in activities such as deferred imitation (i.e. imitating the model's behaviour when the model is not present), pretend play (using one object for another, e.g. a candy for a pill), drawing, psychological functions based on mental images (e.g. recall memory), and language.

Mental representations enable a child to step beyond 'the here and now' and broaden his or her temporal perspective, as a result of which a child can think about the past or imagine the future. Even so, toddlers still take things at face value, and do not understand how transformations change circumstances.

In one of Piaget's classical experiments[6], a child is shown two identical containers filled with water up to the same level and asked if the levels are identical. Then, a portion of water from one container is poured into a third one. It is narrower than the two original containers, so the water level is higher. Because children under the age of 6-7 years rely on visual information, they believe that it contains more water than the other two containers. This demonstrates that children at this age tend to perceive objects one-dimensionally (in this specific case, they see the height of a container and ignore its width).

Children between the ages of 2 and 6-7 years do not remember past events and are unable to visualise the states of objects before they were transformed (i.e. reverse an operation mentally). Their thinking is called pre-operational.

4.1.2. Characteristics of Pre-Operational Thinking

The dominant characteristics of pre-operational thinking are cognitive egocentrism, centration, syncretism and transductive reasoning, which are in a child's logic and understanding of the world[7].

Cognitive egocentrism refers to children's firm belief that their own perspective – what they see, think, or feel – is the only valid one. They assume that others share the same viewpoint, making it difficult for them to accept differing opinions. This concept differs from egoism, as cognitive egocentrism stems from an inability to consider other perspectives (cognitive decentration) or understand others' feelings and needs (interpersonal decentration), both of which emerge at later stages of development.

Centration is a tendency to focus on the most obvious or conspicuous aspect of an object, situation, or phenomenon while disregarding all others, which are also important.

5 Piaget, 1952; Vasta, Haith and Miller, 2004.
6 Piaget and Inhelder, 1962.
7 Piaget, 1952; Vasta, Haith and Miller, 2004.

Syncretism consists in interpreting successive and unrelated events as causally interlinked. For instance, a child whose mother has been in hospital and has returned home with a baby may think that she will bring another one after going to the hospital again.

Transductive reasoning is the tendency of the child to see relationships between occurrences which are logically unrelated to each other. For instance, a child who always gets cornflakes for breakfast at home may claim that he or she did not have breakfast if he or she was given a sandwich and tea elsewhere.

4.1.3. Children's Image of the World

The distinctiveness of young children's logic is reflected in their understanding about the world, which is characterised by:

- anthropomorphism – a tendency to refer to objects, phenomena and animals as if they had the same motivations and traits as humans have (*toys throw parties at night*);
- artificialism – a belief that all natural objects and phenomena have been created by and for people (*the night has been created for sleeping; someone has painted the sky blue);*
- animism – a tendency to ascribe the attributes of living beings to inanimate objects (*the sun is shining because it likes to shine; a broken twig feels pain);*
- realism – a belief that mental phenomena (thoughts, representations and dreams) are real and material *(thoughts live in the head, sleep lives under the pillow).*

Jean Piaget's theory is primarily based on the outcomes of experiments involving interactions between children and objects, like the one described below. Similar experiments with children having to solve real-life situations and drawing on their experiences (whose authors used juice instead of water and poured it into another child's glass) have shown the ability of younger children to come up with the correct answer[8].

4.2. Overcoming the Limitations of Pre-Operational Thinking: Role-Play

Children aged 3-4 years can distinguish the fictitious from the real. By the end of the preschool years, children begin to be able to reverse mental operations, which is particularly noticeable during role plays.

The ability to pretend to be someone else during a play is acquired through a several-stage process: it starts with the child pretending to perform a real activity (such as eating); then, an activity is performed on an object (feeding a doll); next, the child acts out a role (feeds a doll as if it were a daughter, in the same way as the child was fed by her mum); and, finally, the child assumes another person's identity (becomes a mother who feeds a child)[9].

8 Ibid.
9 Elkonin, 2005, pp. 11–21.

A child playing 'a mother' enters an imagined world, which requires overcoming cognitive egocentrism, adopting the mother's perspective, and integrating being a mother and a child at the same time. To be able to act out the play scenario (e.g. handle objects as if during cooking) or announce the execution of related activities (I have cooked dinner), a child has to coordinate its own and the character's perspective and smoothly switch between being a director and an actor in his or her play[10] and between reality and fiction.

4.3. Theory of Mind: Understanding Others' States of Mind and Feelings

Theory of mind (ToM), the ability to recognise the mental states, beliefs and desires of others and understand how they affect their behaviour, is crucial not only for children's cognitive but also social development[11].

Until they are 3 or 4 years old, children believe that others' thoughts, feelings and beliefs are the same as theirs. ToM is thought to start developing at the age of 4 years[12], when most children acquire the ability to attribute false beliefs to other people and begin understanding their consequences. To measure the level of ToM development, a range of picture stories have been created[13] around the 'Sally and Ann' test. In the test, two girls, Sally and Ann, are in the same room. Sally places a ball in her box and leaves the room. While she is gone, Ann removes the ball from Sally's box and places it in her own box. The tested child is asked to indicate where Sally will look for her ball after she returns to the room. A correct answer means that the child is able to attribute first-order beliefs, i.e. to deduce others' mental states from what they say or do; for this to be possible, the child must be able to separate what he or she knows is true from another person's belief[14]. The ability to attribute first-order beliefs is central to the development of other skills necessary for a child's theory of mind to expand.

After 4 years of age, the developing ToM enables children to consciously consider their thinking, which leads to understanding interpretations or others' beliefs. Marta Białecka-Pikul found this 'reflection on thinking' a new element of ToM. Over the next 2-3 years, children become capable of attributing second-order beliefs, i.e. form beliefs about others' beliefs[15]. For instance, they can predict others' intentions (know when someone is trying to cheat them) or skilfully lie (provide information that another person cannot verify)[16].

10 Rzechowska, 2004.
11 Premack and Woodruff, 1978, pp. 515–526.
12 Understanding of other mental states begins earlier, for example, understanding desires, as shown in the early findings by Repacholi and Gopnik, 1997, pp. 12-21.
13 Unexpected Transfer Task; Wimmer and Perner, 1983, pp. 103–128.
14 Wellman, Cross and Watson, 2001, pp. 655–684.
15 Białecka-Pikul, 2012.
16 Schaffer, 2004; Kielar-Turska, 2002, pp. 83–129.

4.4. The Beginning of Social Perception

Between the ages of 7 and 12 months, children start to distinguish familiar from unfamiliar people. As their perception of other people becomes more comprehensive and objective, and their knowledge of them consolidates, their understanding of others' needs and expectations progressively improves.

4.4.1. Improving Social Perception

Very young children evaluate others situationally and inconsistently, so they may consider a person good or bad depending on the person's readiness to satisfy their wishes. Initially, they do not notice that their opinions are contradictory, but gradually, they start to understand that people have different characteristics (they are sometimes good and sometimes they are bad) but do not yet interpret them. The developing knowledge of the situational and psychological determinants of human behaviour enables a child to integrate different behaviours of the same person (*my mum is smiling at me when I keep my toys tidy, but she is frowning at me when I clutter them around*). As a result, the child can create more detailed images of individuals and form opinions about people generally based on his or her experiences (girls are quarrelsome) or interactions with others (good children obey adults).

4.4.2. Objectivisation of Social Perception

Step by step, the child's images of other persons become increasingly objective. The way younger children see other people is emotionally determined and transactional (*My aunt is nice because she reads fairy tales to me; I don't like my uncle because he won't play with me*). This 'utility-based' approach to others continues until the pre-school years, when children become more and more aware that people also have their own objective characteristics (*X is a sailor and works on a ship*).

The development of children's social perception is stimulated by their interactions with other children and attempts to interpret what they see and hear. With time, their understanding of the needs and expectations of other people and their ability to effectively influence improve, as does their awareness of conditions that make cooperation with others possible[17].

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

Older infants intentionally pursue goals they set for themselves. They also become aware that they are autonomous beings capable of acting and changing their environment. Their emerging will and a sense of independence encourage them to walk away from the mother or demand their wishes to be met. The formation of a child's identity and ***its*** social relationships is explained by Margaret Mahler's separation-individuation

17 Włodarski and Matczak, 1998; Matczak, 2003.

theory on early childhood relationships[18]. and their role in the development of the 'structure of self' and the eight stages of Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory[19].

The child's deepening understanding of his or her separateness and individuality, leading to the emergence of self-awareness, and increasing autonomy create the basis for the formation of self-knowledge enabling self-evaluations and the construction of self-esteem.

5.1. Discovering Self: Between Separation and Individuation

Margaret Mahler' separation-individuation theory[20] holds that a child's personality is formed in interactions with the close caregiver (e.g. the mother) and gradually evolves from symbiotic integration (separation) with the mother to a stable individual identity (individuation). Separation considered in the context of the child's development involves differentiation, increasing the distance from the mother, setting limits, and becoming less dependent on the mother. Individuation is referred to by Mahler as the child's progressing internal autonomy, accompanied by attempts to test reality and deepening physical and psychological separation from the mother.

The separation-individuation process has four subphases: hatching, practicing and rapprochement (16-24 months), when the child's awareness of his or her separateness from the mother increases, resulting in the child's ambivalent behaviours towards her (due to a conflict between autonomy and dependence), and consolidation/ object constancy (24-36 months), during which the child's attachment to the mother is relatively independent of gratification or frustration due to his or her cognitive capacity to believe that the mother exists when she is out of sight and has positive attributes even when she is unsatisfying.

5.2. Erik Erikson's Crises of Toddlers and Pre-Schoolers: From Autonomy to Initiative

An attitude of trust developed during the first 12 months of life opens a child to the world, enabling the formation of autonomy and initiative at the next stages of stages of development[21].

5.2.1. Stage 2. Autonomy, Shame and Doubt (1-3 years of life)

Alongside increasing autonomy, the child acquires the ability to see him- or herself as separate from other people. Experiments with children aged 15-24 months have demonstrated that they can identify themselves in their mirror reflections[22]. The beginning of the sense of 'I' is associated with the child discovering his or /her mental individuality, leading to the birth of 'mental self'. At this stage, the child tests what can be touched, said and examined, demands his or her will to be respected, accentuates

18 Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975.
19 Erikson, 1963.
20 Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975.
21 Erikson, 1963, 1982.
22 Lewis and Brooks-Gunn, 1979, pp. 1–20.

independence, challenges adults (negativism) by demanding respect for his or her rights, and learns to be self-reliant. The child signals his or her growing independence by appropriating things belonging to others ('an urge to possess') and 'standing ground' against alleged rivals. Using the first-person pronouns (I, me, mine), the child communicates his or her will and sets boundaries, but strong dependence on others still makes the child accept their control.

Erik Erikson promoted the creation of safe environments for young children, which they could explore on their own and learn to be independent. In Erikson's opinion, excessive parental control prevented children from becoming self-efficacious and self-reliant individuals, and caused them to experience shame and doubt when they failed in their undertakings.

5.2.2. Stage 3. Initiative and Guilt (3-6 years)

With the autonomy and initiative developed at Stage 2, the range of interesting goals that can be pursued by a pre-schooler increases significantly. The activities, games, or fantasies that the child plays out strengthen his or her sense of agency, and consistency and focus in achieving goals are rewarded with satisfaction upon completing the task.

Stage 3 also marks the rapid development of the child's conscience, which is an inner voice making judgments for the child on whether his or her actions have followed social norms and standards.

To be able to act without feeling guilt or fear and consistently pursue goals despite obstacles and failures, a pre-schooler must know which ways of acting and areas of exploration are socially acceptable and will choose those that will not end up in a conflict. Misjudgments as to which activities are safe and which are risky lead to a sense of guilt and shame, which may dampen the child's initiative.

Exploratory children are inclined to undertake activities that may end up in failure, especially when they are too ambitious, or the child feels a strong urge to be successful. Such children need a caregiver who will support them in the safe exploration of their environment without discouraging their initiative or making them feel remorseful for wishing to have or do something that might harm others or fail their expectations. Controlling the child's behaviour when necessary and allowing him or her to express feelings is central to the child developing a permanent ability to take initiative.

5.3. The Emergence of Personality: An Early Sense Of Self, Self-Esteem and Self-Evaluation

The development of the child's self-awareness (18-24 months) and a sense of agency (around the age of 3 years) initiate the formation of self and self-knowledge, which in various concepts are referred to as the core of personality.

The initial sense of self is formed in early childhood. The child's elementary self-knowledge includes information about his or her appearance, physical characteristics, skills and favourite activities and objects. The information evolves from

purely descriptive (*I am Ann, I am a girl, I have a doll, I can sing*) to pre-schoolers' value judgments derived from their experiences or adopted from other people.

Self-esteem, the value that the child attributes to him- or herself, frequently based on judgments made by the caregivers[23], consists of the child's beliefs about self (I'm loved, I'm good) and emotional states (triumph, despair, pride, shame, etc.)[24]. Children tend to evaluate themselves in terms of *specific attributes* (*I sing nicely*) until the age of around 7 years, when the attributes are integrated into a global evaluation of self, and self-esteem becomes a permanent trait of a child's personality[25].

Young children's perception of themselves is usually positive because they cannot compare themselves to others socially[26] or compare what they can do now with what they could do some time ago[27].

5.4. Autobiographical Memory and the Development of Self

Central to the development of the initial sense of self and understanding of the world and social relations is autobiographical memory, which ensures the continuity and coherence of the child's memories[28]. Until the age of around 3 years, autobiographical memory helps the child understand the world and its workings, and the memories of past events are only stored until a child becomes capable of transforming repeating experiences into a general pattern ('a script'). The development of autobiographical memory is especially stimulated by the caregiver reminiscing about past events, which helps the child to organise his or her memories and better understand the world.

In western culture, mothers start reminiscing about past events when their children are around 2 years old; during such interactions, children's participation is limited to confirming or repeating what they hear. By the age of 3-4 years, children already understand their memories and can organise them and find new associations between them[29].

The content of the child's autobiographical memory essentially depends on how the parent(s) recount past events. Elaborative parents tell detail-rich stories, and add new information each time they retell them, even if the child does not remember them well. This narrative style helps form a bond with the child, gives a wider context to past events, and explains their meaning. Repetitive parents tend to ask the same question repeatedly to refresh the child's memories about past events without giving new information or retelling the whole story. This style has been found to stimulate the development of the child's memory skills. According to research, the children of elaborative parents have a more comprehensive autobiographical memory, and their

23 Shaffer and Kipp, 2013.
24 Hewitt, 2009, pp. 217–224.
25 Boyd and Bee, 2019.
26 Ruble et al., 1980, pp. 105–115.
27 Kemple, 1995, pp. 173–182.
28 Conway, Singer and Tagini, 2004, pp. 491–529.
29 Fivush and Reese, 1992, pp. 115–132; Fivush, Haden and Reese, 1996, pp. 341–359; Nelson and Fivush, 2000, pp. 283–296.

accounts of past events are more comprehensive and detailed, as a result of which they remember them better[30]. They also have a more differentiated and autonomous sense of self, and their memories define self and help define self in relation to others.

It has been demonstrated that parents adjust their narrative style to the child's gender. Stories told to girls are more detailed and more comprehensive, as a result of which they organise their experiences earlier than boys[31].

5.5. Basics of Gender Identity

Gender identity is the internal sense of belonging to a specific gender, identifying with it, behaving in a manner specific to it, and accepting the associated social roles[32]. Children's gender identity is usually established by the age of 3 and consists of primary identification (a child knows which children are of the same or different gender) and secondary identification (a child tries to look and behave like the model, e.g. girls put on mothers' clothes, play with their cosmetics).

5.5.1. Awareness of Own Gender

At around 1 year of life, the child can distinguish a male person from a female person, and almost all 3-year-olds know their gender (*I am a boy / I am a girl*). The awareness of gender constancy emerges in the fourth year of life, when the child understands that his or her gender will be the same in the future *(I will grow into a boy / a girl*), and the notion of gender permanence is internalised at around the age of 5-6 years, with the child beginning to understand that changes in external appearance does not influence one's gender (*I will always be a boy / a girl*)[33].

5.5.2. Learning Gender Roles

Gender identity is formed during the child-raising process by enhancing and modelling, for instance, by having girls and boys meet different expectations and using gender-determined patterns of interactions (exercising more control over daughters than sons, teaching them to be obedient, and encouraging sons to be independent and assertive). Different toys, activities and ways of communicating with boys and girls serve the same purpose of strengthening gender-typical behaviours.

5.6. First Complex Emotions: Awareness and Emotional Regulation

Toddlers and pre-schoolers intensely express their emotions[34], which are short-lived and changeable.

Following the development of self-awareness, moral disposition and social referencing by around the age of 2-3 years, children begin to understand what others expect of them and what rules and norms apply to them. The ability to tell right from

30 Niedźwieńska, 2003, pp. 55–60; Fivush, 2011, pp. 559–582.
31 Fivush, 1998, pp. 79–103.
32 Lips, 2018.
33 Slaby and Frey, 1975, pp. 849–856; Wojciechowska, 2003, pp. 13–27; Boyd and Bee, 2019.
34 Lewis, 2008, pp. 304–319.

wrong and an emerging conscience enable them to make judgments on their own and others' behaviour. They feel pride and satisfaction when they meet expectations and follow the rules, or guilt and shame when they fail to do so[35].

The anger caused by disconcerting situations is expressed by children through aggression. Young children's aggression is instrumental and uses hitting, pushing and kicking to force others into compliance or release tension. In older children, it is replaced by hostile aggression, intended to cause physical or mental pain by calling names, mocking, making threats and picking fights.

The preschool period involves the gradual development of the child's emotional self-awareness, encompassing emotional regulation, emotional understanding and emotional expressions[36].

Emotional regulation is the ability to recognise and name emotions and to express them in line with cultural norms. Unlike infants, whose emotional states are essentially regulated by adults, toddlers begin to acquire the skills needed to independently regulate emotions, with the process being greatly facilitated by their developing language.

Emotional understanding is the ability to share one's feelings with others; its first signs are observed around the age of 2, when children try to comfort others in the same way they have seen or experienced. The development of empathy requires the ability to read the emotional states of others, understanding that they are separate and independent beings, and share their perspective. At the age of 4 or 5 years, children begin to create their own theories about others' emotional states based on the causes and consequences of emotions and make predictions about others' experience and expression of emotions (they can assume, for instance, that a smiling child will be more willing to share his or her toys).

Emotional expression involves the ability to express emotions in a way that matches, or does not match situations, which the child starts to acquire at about the age of 4 years. As a result, a child can mask his or her true emotions (put on a smile when receiving a gift that he or she does not like, to protect the feelings of another person or avoid annoyance), pretend not to feel fear (stroke a dog to show how brave he or she is and to save face), and overcome frustration (carry on despite obstacles making them feel anger to avoid being teased by peers)[37].

Caregivers are essential in helping children learn to regulate their emotions. At the early stage of the child's development, they must control the child's emotional states and process them into a simpler form so that the child can cope with them[38]. By teaching, modelling, verbal reasoning and explaining, they can help the child to confront negative emotions and initiate transition towards autonomous regulation of emotions.

35 Kielar-Turska, 2015, pp. 202–233; Boyd and Bee, 2019.
36 Tangney and Tracy, 2012, pp. 446–478.
37 Tracy, Robins and Tangney, 2007; Saarni, 1999.
38 See: Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975.

5.7. Discovery of Social Standards and the Genesis of Conscience. Kohlberg's Pre-Conventional Phase of Moral Development

Moral development is a process through which individuals' concepts of right and wrong, conscience, social standards and moral judgements are gradually formed.

The ability to obey rules expressed by gestures (e.g. hushing the child by touching the index finger to one's lips) or words (do not touch) can be already observed among 1-year-old infants[39]. Younger children (2-3 years old) understand requests and commands literally ("*do not take a doll away*" means that they must not take this specific doll) and must be repeatedly reminded not to do the same thing again. Older children can remember the rules of behaviour for extended periods and transform them into general principles (one may not take other children's toys) that they consistently follow.

Children are taught by parents to distinguish right from wrong (moral norms) from an early age. The emergence of conscience initiates moral development in the course of which children formulate internal standards of conduct and apply them consistently[40]. They begin to represent moral values and think of themselves as moral beings. By the end of the preschool years, children develop a 'moral self' that makes them want to do what is right and causes them to feel badly when they misbehave and react with uneasiness when they see others misbehave[41].

The foundation of the pre-schoolers' morality is obedience towards adults and yielding to their requests and demands. Understanding reality literally, they are unable to accept any departure from the established rules and believe that breaching them does not go without consequences (Piaget's moral realism)[42].

Lawrence Kohlberg[43] studied how people distinguish right from wrong by having his subjects make a moral judgment upon a hypothetical 'dilemma', the best known of which requires the tested person to decide whether one Heinz, a man whose wife is dying of cancer, has the right to steal an exorbitantly priced new drug that can save her life when his efforts to raise the money to buy it have proven unsuccessful.

As a result of his research, Kohlberg proposed six stages of moral reasoning that he grouped into major levels. The first level, called a pre-conventional level, is associated with a concrete, individual perspective, and involves a lack of understanding of social norms, rules, and expectations, which are treated as belonging to the external world.

Judgments made at the pre-conventional level tend to consider the physical consequences of an act for a person rather than what is right and what is wrong. As a result, a child representing the level's stage 1 (punishment and obedience orientation) formulates judgments to stay clear of trouble, e.g. yields to commands to avoid punishment. At stage 2 (naive instrumental hedonism), children are already aware of

39 Siudak, and Bielenda-Mazur, 2020, pp. 171–186.
40 Kochanska, 2002, pp. 339–351.
41 Thompson, 2012, pp. 423–429.
42 Kielar-Turska, 2015, pp. 202–233.
43 Kohlberg 1963, pp. 277–332; Kohlberg, Levine and Hewer, 1983.

others' needs, but their judgments are still guided by practical interests (instrumental orientation). While they begin to understand that social interactions are about reciprocity and exchanges, their moral judgements on actions are still formed based on how significant they are for them (thus, a child may decide to share candy to get some ice cream in return).

5.8. Speech and Communication as Factors Organising The Child's Activities and Social Relationships

Language acquisition is a natural process accompanying the child's social interactions. Toddlerhood is the period during which children assimilate basic vocabulary and grammar of their native tongue.

5.8.1. Early Language Skills

Young children's speech, which is referred to as autonomous because it does not respect the rules of syntax, can take the following forms:

Single-word sentences represented by words used by children to describe an entire concept or idea. These can be onomatopoeia, i.e. sounds specific to things or actions, e.g. buzz, hiss, or holophrases, i.e. single words substituting simple sentences; for instance, 'ball' may mean 'this is my ball' or 'let us look for my ball'.

Two-word sentences are combinations of words that children use at the stage of acquiring basic grammar rules, e.g. 'me go' or 'more juice'.

Telegraphic speech consists of sentences made up of three or more words that convey ungrammatical messages, like those used in telegrams.

By the end of toddlerhood, children know the basics of their native tongue and all parts of speech, can distinguish among basic grammatical forms (although still have problem using them correctly), and can produce all types of sentences, including subordinate sentences. Their pronunciation becomes more intelligible, making their speech more understandable for others[44].

5.8.2. Expansion of Lexical and Grammatical Resources

Toddlers' speech is focused on objects and phenomena they have seen or imagined. Three-year-old children know about 1,000 words (approximately 3,000 by the age of 6-7 years) and the basic grammar of their native tongue.

5.8.3. Knowledge of the World and Lexical Categories

The toddler's vocabulary contains various lexical categories that describe objects (nouns) and their qualities (adjectives), represent activities and their characteristics (verbs and adverbs), and indicate relationships (conjunctions). As the child's knowledge about the world expands, the proportion of nouns and verbs decreases in relation to other parts of speech. Each lexical category undergoes diversification, resulting,

44 Vasta, Haith and Miller, 2004; Kielar-Turska, 2015, pp. 202–233; Brzezińska et al., 2019; Boyd and Bee, 2019.

for instance, in the increasing replacement of verbs representing specific activities and movements with verbs describing activities transforming the appearance or structure of objects or mental processes and interactions.

5.8.4. Diversification of Vocabulary

In the preschool period, the child's lexical knowledge undergoes rapid development. The range of words describing objects in general terms is enriched with specific names (a rose as a type of a flower), homonyms, synonyms and metaphors.

Language acquisition by children is accompanied by various errors, such as neologisms, overextensions, underextensions and overregulations[45]. Neologisms are combinations of words that children create spontaneously to convey meanings they need (they may say, for instance, lightning catch instead of lightning rod). Overextensions and underextensions occur, respectively, when the meaning of a word is stretched beyond its established content (all animals are doggies) or when it is limited to one object only (only the family pet Fido is a doggie). Overregulations take place when grammar rules are bent to give regular forms to otherwise irregular words (resulting in 'breaked' instead of 'broken').

5.8.5. Communication Skills

Language acquisition starts with the child recognising others' intentions and interpreting them correctly. At the next stage of language development, the child becomes capable of intentionally imitating what others do and how they communicate, even when they are not involved directly in communication. The preschool years are marked by significant progress in language skills, i.e. sociolinguistic competence, interactional competence and situational competence, largely improving the child's ability to communicate. Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge and ability to use norms, customs, phrases and non-verbal behaviours in a manner appropriate to the character of social interactions. Interactional competence comprises the ability to appropriately respond to a conversation partner and the knowledge of phrases opening and ending conversations, effectively delivering one's point, or helpful in convincing the partner. Situational competence is the ability to accommodate one's speaking style to the occasion, including the place, topic and circumstances of the conversation, including the size of the audience.

For communication to be effective, the ability to share another person's perspective, listen carefully, direct and sustain a conversation and establish a common language is necessary. The awareness of the conversation partners' mental states is also important, as it enables their needs to be predicted (see child's theories of mind).

By the age of 6-7 years, most children have good knowledge of colloquial language and easily communicate their thoughts, desires and emotions.

45 Vasta, Haith and Miller, 2004.

6. The Child and Social Relation – Primary and Secondary Socialisation

Socialisation is the process through which individuals acquire the social skills, beliefs, values, and behaviours needed to function effectively in society or within a specific group. It occurs in two stages: primary socialisation and secondary socialisation. Primary socialisation takes place in the family environment and teaches the child to distinguish acceptable from unacceptable behaviour, values, social norms and cultural patterns prevalent in society. It also enables the child to form bonds and relationships with other people and to understand the notions of love, trust and togetherness. Secondary socialisation builds on the behavioural patterns that the child has acquired during primary socialisation. During this process, the child learns to behave in public and home situations appropriately to the circumstances, and takes in values, beliefs and attitudes that the teachers, friends and the media share with him or her, which will have an enduring effect on his or her life[46].

6.1. The Role of Parents in a Child's Socialisation

The care that children are given during early childhood and primary socialisation is of crucial importance for their development and future functioning. Its character is significantly determined by the parents' parenting style, their predominant attitude to the child and the structure of the family.

6.1.1. Primary Socialisation: Goal-Corrected Partnership and Social Learning

The fourth stage of the attachment process[47] (goal-corrected partnership) starts with the child reaching the age of about 2.5 years. Children at this age begin to take into consideration parents' behaviour, plans and intentions, and are ready to engage in setting goals with the parent. They can function consistently even when the parent, who makes them feel safe during their explorations, is absent, and they increasingly understand social rules and their complexities[48]. At this stage, the parent needs to reconcile the child's urge for autonomy and self-assertion with safety by setting limits on his or her endeavours.

The experiences gained by the child in the course of his or her first interactions with the parents provide a basis for the evolution of the child's internal working models. According to Bowlby, an internal working model is the child's mental representation of his or her relationship with the primary caregiver. It functions as a framework wherein the child will build his or her relationships in the future, and as an instrument for predicting, controlling and manipulating the environment. Most

46 Matyjas, 2017, pp. 41–54.
47 For the first three stages of the attachment process, See: Rzechowska, 2025, pp. 137–157.
48 Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, Bell and Stayton, 1971, pp. 17–58.

5-year-olds are observed to have well-formed internal models of the mother, themselves and interpersonal relations[49].

The bond that young children have with the caregiver is central to their ability to learn by:

- imitating other people's behaviour;
- modelling (observing other people's actions and their consequences);
- identifying oneself with other another person (trying to look the same, sharing the person's beliefs and attitudes).

6.1.2. Parenting Styles

After studying what parents expect of their children and how they fulfil their needs, Diana Baumrind presented three main parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative and permissive[50]. In 1983, Eleanor Maccoby and John Martin proposed a fourth parenting style: neglectful.

Authoritarian parents set rigid rules, have high expectations towards their children, and do not allow them to decide for themselves. Breaching the rules is punished swiftly and severely.

Authoritative parents also impose limitations and want to guide their children. At the same time, however, they give them some freedom to make decisions and allow them to learn from failures.

Permissive parents are relatively lax in their expectations towards their children, with whom they interact more like peers than traditional parents. They are also usually ready to respond to the children's needs and wishes.

Neglectful parents rarely interact with their children. They not only lack expectations for their behaviour, but they also neglect their needs.

Much of today's research into childhood development concerns these four parenting styles which represent a broad spectrum of parents' behaviours and explain how most parents care for their children.

The range of parenting styles has recently been extended to include respectful parenting as more and more parents show preference for this parenting style.

Parenting styles significantly influence a child's development, shaping their social, emotional, and cognitive growth. For example, authoritative parenting tends to promote independence, self-regulation and educational success in children. On the other hand, permissive parenting often leads to impulsiveness and difficulties with self-control, while authoritarian parenting can result in lower self-esteem and social competence. Additionally, neglectful parenting may hinder a child's overall development, leading to issues such as emotional insecurity and poor school performance.

However, the limitations of parenting styles lie in their generalisation. Each child is unique, and what works for one, may not work for another. Parenting styles are also influenced by cultural, socioeconomic and environmental factors, meaning they do

49 Boyd and Bee, 2019.
50 Baumrind, 1966, pp. 887–907.

not always account for the diversity of experiences[51]. Furthermore, external influences such as peers, media, and education also play a crucial role in development, which may limit the impact of parenting alone.

6.1.3. Respectful Parenting – RIE's Basic Principles

In her *Resources for Infant Educarers* (RIE), Magda Gerber described a respectful parenting style which allows children to develop in an environment where they can feel secure, attached, independent and self-reliant[52]. For the environment to be created, the parents need:

- to accept that the child is a unique human being and deserves respect in every interaction;
- to understand that the child is authentic when he or she feels secure, autonomous, competent and connected, and that the feelings are central to the child being able to build self-esteem and develop;
- to understand that the child has natural competencies and will not engage in or perform activities for which he or she is not ready;
- to sensitively observe the child to comprehend his or her needs and true self;
- to let the child be an active participant of all care activities rather than a passive recipient;
- to create an environment that is free of physical risks, cognitively challenging, and emotionally nurturing for the child;
- to leave the child time for uninterrupted play and free exploration because play is more beneficial for the child than teaching him or her new skills;
- to be consistent: setting limits and defining expectations help children grow into disciplined persons.

Although the RIE focuses on the first three years of the child's development, its principles also apply to older children and those in institutional care[53].

6.2. Sibling Relationships

In addition to the parents' predominant attitude towards the child, the child's development is also significantly shaped by the structure of the family and relationships with the sibling(s)[54]. Siblings spend most of their time together, and their relationship is unique compared to relationships with same-age peers or adults. Interactions between younger and older siblings are crucial to the child's development. They provide younger children with an opportunity to observe and imitate older siblings and thus learn vital skills from them, while older siblings (aged over 2.5 years) learn to care about younger children and take responsibility for their well-being when the caregiver is

51 Kuppens and Ceulemans, 2019, pp. 168–181.
52 Gerber and Johnson, 2012; Hammond, 2021, pp. 1302–1315.
53 See: Rzechowska, 2025, p. 180.: 6.4. Out-of-family care and secondary socialisation.
54 Boyd and Bee, 2019.

not present[55]. Interactions between siblings at different ages also teach them empathy, sharing and cooperation[56] and stimulate the development of skills needed to negotiate and resolve conflicts arising from rivalry for parents' attention, etc.

Occasional conflicts between siblings are unavoidable, with some of them having the advantage of stimulating the development of their social and cognitive skills. The causes of conflicts tend to vary with children's ages. Dunn and Munn have estimated that more than half of confrontations between siblings in early childhood arise from disputes over 'what is whose'[57]. In middle childhood, they are more frequently related to decisions about control over interactions (who will choose a game, etc.), disputes over facts or opinions, or rude behaviour[58]. The conflict resolution strategies employed by children also evolve with their age and are influenced by the nature of the conflict. Abuhatoum and Howe[59] have found that disputes over property rights are usually resolved through coercive strategies (e.g. involving threats), whereas older siblings' preferred solution to confrontations concerning control over social situations is based on negotiation. However, younger children may also use reasoning when in conflict with an older sibling over decision-making (*you are not the boss*). This strategy is not infrequent among younger siblings and is probably used as an adaptive strategy, enabling them to assert their autonomy.

It is important to note that friendly relationships with siblings often translate into more positive interactions with peers.

6.3. Relationships With Peers

Peers are not a source of social stimulation for young infants. The 18-month-old child still does not see a difference between inanimate objects and children[60], and consequently tests them by touching, pushing them, or pulling hair. However, the child gradually begins to realise that children are a special type of object that reacts differently to physical contact (they start crying when pushed) and that they may make good playmates. The explorative attitude to peers is still observed in 2-3-year-olds, but it is shown much less frequently than attempts to interact socially with them (by exchanging toys, imitating their behaviour, using various strategies to grasp their attention). When interacting with peers, the child imitates the behaviour of adults with whom he or she has interacted before and who are much more interesting for him or her[61].

6.3.1. The Development of Relationships With Peers

Early childhood experiences provide a framework for the child to build and foster social relationships. They enable a 24-36-month-old toddler to invite a peer to

55 Dunn, 2004.
56 Pike et al., 2005.
57 Dunn and Munn, 1985, pp. 480–492.
58 Howe et al., 2002, pp. 1460–1473.
59 Abuhatoum and Howe, 2013, pp. 738–754.
60 Oakes and Madole, 2008, pp. 135–185.
61 Włodarski and Matczak, 1998.

interaction using a range of strategies (asking, teasing, coaxing, exchanging information, giving instructions, etc.). At the age of 36-48 months, a desire to play with other children appears and they become able to play out roles according to established rules while playing together[62]. Children increasingly often perceive peers as interesting playmates, and their interactions with them and adults undergo differentiation, with some types of interactions being undertaken more frequently or exclusively with peers[63]. Around the end of the pre-school years, in addition to adults' judgments, peers' opinions become important for children as a source of reward or punishment.

Interactions with peers are a learning experience for children, showing them how to build and foster relationships with other people. In the course of those interactions, children gradually adjust their behaviour, topics and language to the playmate's age. As a result, younger children tend to be treated with care or dominated, while older children are usually shown admiration and respect. The playmate's gender also influences pre-schoolers' behaviour, as children at this age prefer to spend time with peers of the same gender.

6.3.2. The Beginning of Child Friendships

Child friendships are focused on shared activities and objects[64]. Judy Dunn found the first short-lived relationships of 2-3-year-olds to have the defining attributes of friendship: cordiality and pleasure in spending time together[65]. Pre-schoolers' relationships are characterised by fondness, attachment, and care about the friend with whom children want to spend time and talk and whom they ask for favours more often than other children. Friends are treated in a special way: children avoid hurting their feelings and try to understand their point of view to the maximum extent. Compromise and reconciliation with a friend are more likely than with the child's siblings or other children. First interactions with peers are an opportunity for a child to learn to share feelings and thoughts with others and to understand what mental processes are reflected in their behaviour. Children interacting with friends and doing pretend play frequently function at a higher level than on other occasions.

6.3.3. The Social Organisation of Play

The child's interactions with other children evolve at a rapid pace during the first years of life, from just watching their faces and movements to trying to manipulate objects like they do and playing together. Based on how children behave when playing, several forms of play have been identified, i.e. unoccupied play (random play without a specific goal), solitary play (playing alone or differently than other children) and onlooker play (watching other children play and occasionally commenting on their activities without engaging in them) (Parten, 1932).

62 Krauze-Sikorska et al., 2016.
63 See: Rzechowska, 2025, p. 178.: 6.3.2. The beginning of child friendships.
64 Kielar-Turska, 2000, pp. 285–332; Boyd and Bee, 2019.
65 Dunn, 2004.

The earliest form of children 'playing together' involves watching each other and doing the same things but with a different purpose in mind (parallel play). Older children may play next to each other with the same or similar objects and in the same way, but, as before, pursuing their own goals (associative play). At around 3 years of age, children start to perform the same actions to achieve a common goal (stack building blocks on a toy truck to fill it up).

In the second half of the pre-school period, a qualitative change in playmates' behaviour can be observed: each child is assigned specific tasks to perform, with the division of tasks first taking place during play and then prior to it. As the planning process becomes more detailed, the coordination of children's activities and mutual control of their performance improve (co-operative or organised supplementary play).

6.3.4. Prosocial and Antisocial Behaviour

Both prosocial behaviour and antisocial behaviour are learned by children during interactions with others, which underscores the importance of children having appropriate models of behaviour.

The first signs of prosocial behaviour, such as sharing and cooperating, looking after and helping others, kindness and tolerance, etc., are observed in children at the age of 2-3 years[66]. Their common characteristic is that they are to benefit others and address their needs. Central to the development of prosocial behaviour is empathy, without which understanding the situation of other people and sharing their perspectives and feelings is not possible.

The probability of conflicts between children increases with the number of times they interact. For younger children, understanding which behaviours may lead to confrontations is still difficult, and their skills at getting out of risky situations are not yet developed. They develop with age as the child becomes increasingly aware that his or her interests and those of another child may be in conflict, allowing him or her to find constructive solutions to conflicts, first with the adults' assistance.

Toddlers frequently display aggressive behaviour. Early on, instrumental aggression aimed at making others comply with their wishes predominates. It gradually disappears around the age of 4 years to be replaced by hostile aggression intended to inflict physical or emotional pain[67].

In children inclined to antisocial behaviours, highlighting other people's mental states stimulated their ability to decentrate, and making them aware of others' internal traits helped them understand differences between theirs and others' perspectives and, consequently, overcome their egocentrism.

Children's relationships with their peers may support or hinder their development[68]. Feeling accepted by peers is fundamental to developing self-affirmation and

66 Boyd and Bee, 2019.
67 Kielar-Turska, 2000, pp. 285–332.
68 Rubin et al., 2011, pp. 519–570.

self-esteem, whereas a feeling of rejection, especially due to aggressive behaviour, may lead to the emergence of behaviour problems.

6.4. Out-Of-Family Care and Secondary Socialisation

In early childhood, children spend most of their time and develop in the home and family environment, sometimes also in day-care establishments and nurseries. In the case of most children, it is during the pre-school period that new environments stimulating their development appear, initiating secondary socialisation[69].

The way young pre-schoolers establish relationships with others, seek their attention, ask for help, and interpret behaviours largely builds on their experiences from the first two years of interactions with their parents, which have been transformed into internal working models[70]. It undergoes modifications as the child gains new experiences outside the family environment, with good experiences being likely to make the child feel positive about other people and exhibit friendly behaviour towards them.

The increasing awareness that his or her point of view is not the only one enables the child to create a more comprehensive and objective image of the world and realise that other people have feelings and wishes that the child needs to take into consideration. With the child's deepening understanding that one may not harm *other people in the pursuit of one's goals, the child develops the ability to decide which behaviours are socially acceptable. In the pre-school years, the child's world expands, creating multiple opportunities for meeting children* from various backgrounds, observing their behaviour, exploring and experiencing new spaces and people, and learning to deal with new situations single-handed. Not only does this help the child develop a sense of agency and self-reliance, but it also makes him or her ready to face new challenges, first outside the home environment and then at school.

7. Summary

With the rapid development of motor skills in early childhood, the child's perception, attention and memory improve, and pre-operational thinking replaces thinking in action. The change is reflected in the child's logic (egocentrism, centration, syncretism), reasoning (transductive reasoning) and understanding of the world (anthropomorphism, artificialism, animism and realism). The child's growing independence from 'here and now' and the expansion of his or her temporal perspective lead to attempts to understand others' states of mind and feelings and the emergence of the child's theories of mind.

Toddlerhood and preschool years involve the development of the child's individuality, autonomy, initiative, self-esteem and self-evaluation, as well as formation of autobiographical memory and gender identity.

69 Matyjas, 2017, pp. 41–54; Krauze-Sikorska et al., 2016.
70 Bretherton and Munholland, 1999, pp. 89–111.

Increasing self-awareness, understanding of people's expectations and the emergence of a conscience make it possible for the child to compare his or her behaviours against the established rules, leading to the emergence of emotional states, such as shame, pride or guilt, and to the ability to regulate them. The emerging awareness of norms and standards stimulates moral development. At its early stage (the pre-conventional level), the child makes judgments dictated by his or her practical interests and the need to avoid trouble, even if the child has a sense of the needs of others.

The basics of the native tongue that the child acquires by around the age of 3 enable the development of the child's lexical and grammatical resources and communication skills. Despite errors in early word use (neologisms, overextensions, underextensions, and overregularisations), the child efficiently communicates with others and develops sociolinguistic competence, interactional competence and situational competence.

The behavioural patterns adopted by the child in the family environment during the first years of life (primary socialisation) are put into action outside the family and enriched through interactions with other children and teachers in kindergartens and other care institutions (secondary socialisation). A special role in the child's socialisation is played by peers and first friendships, the evolving social organisation of play (from unoccupied play to cooperative play) and prosocial behaviours.

The skills and abilities developed by the child in early childhood are prerequisites to the child's successful adaptation to the school environment.

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