CHAPTER 12

Middle Childhood—Social and Emotional Development

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. Emotional development in middle childhood
   A. Knowledge about emotions
      Children’s knowledge of emotions permits them to respond appropriately in many social situations, such as how to react to the emotional expressions of peers; this knowledge has implications for their social development. Display rules are the cultural guidelines for when, how, and to what degree to express emotions, such as appearing happy to receive a gift. Knowledge about emotions benefits social development, perhaps because children are more likely to respond appropriately to the emotions of others. Emotional development appears closely tied to advancing cognitive skills that allow children to think in more abstract and complex terms. Knowledge about emotions is also gained from parents, especially when parents discuss and explain positive emotions. Children who do not have parents who explain emotional rules, such as children who are abused or neglected by their parents, have noticeable deficits in their ability to identify emotions.

   B. Regulating emotions
      A further developmental accomplishment is the increasing ability to regulate one’s emotions. The socialization techniques that parents employ play an important role in how successfully the child comes to regulate his or her emotions. However, all of these findings need to be considered within the context of the child’s temperament style. Some children tend to be more impulsive, while others are more likely to hide their emotions. Brain development is tied to the ability to regulate behaviors and emotions.

   C. Cultural differences in emotions
      The tendency of children to express and detect emotions differs as a function of culture. Parental behaviors likely serve to elaborate and refine children’s early emotional tendencies in ways considered culturally appropriate. For instance, shyness and inhibition are less likely to be valued in Euro-American society than in Chinese society.

II. The development of self
   To study the development of self, researchers find it useful to distinguish between the objective self (“me”) and the subjective self (“I”). Self as object, the self-concept, is a collection of traits and characteristics used to define oneself (a form of self-observation). A component of the subjective self is the sense of agency, the belief that one can influence and control one’s surroundings.

   A. The concept of self
      In preschoolers, self-concept consists of definitions involving the classification of oneself in terms of easily observable categories such as sex and age. By about seven years of age, self-descriptions shift from categorical activities (“I run fast”) to relational statements (comparisons of qualities with others). Thus, during the elementary school years, social comparison becomes an important factor in defining the self-concept. As children become older, they view self in terms of more abstract and increasingly differentiated qualities. Differences in self as a result of cultural influences are substantial.

      1. Social comparison
         As children develop, the process of social comparison, or using others to evaluate the self, becomes increasingly important. For instance, young
children often overestimate their abilities. As children increasingly compare themselves to others, their estimates of ability become more realistic.

2. **Self-determination** Children become increasingly sophisticated about how the world responds to their actions. Some children have the sense that what happens to them is under their direct control, which provides them with a strong *mastery orientation*. Other children believe that luck, fate, or other people primarily determine what happens to them, which may give rise to a sense of *learned helplessness*. These interpretations about the causes of success and failure are related to notions of possessing stable entities (that cannot be changed) or malleable traits. When focused on traits as entities, a child is likely to be concerned about performance on tasks; when focused on the malleability of traits, a child is more likely to be concerned with learning. Differing beliefs about the degree to which traits are fixed or modifiable and the causes of success or failure have a powerful effect on academic achievement, self-esteem, and social relationships.

### Research Applied to Parenting: Preventing Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness may arise in an environment where children have little opportunity to master controllable events and are not provided with appropriate feedback by parents, teachers, and others to attain mastery. Criticism or praise focused on the child rather than on the process of learning and problem solving is more likely to contribute to learned helplessness. Parents can take several steps to reduce the risk of learned helplessness, including avoiding frequent criticism and punishment of children, encouraging children to increase their efforts by identifying their positive approaches to problem solving, attributing poor performance to factors that are temporary rather than intrinsic to the children, and viewing difficult tasks as opportunities to learn rather than as tests of ability. Evidence suggests that attribution retraining programs can help children recognize that they can exert greater control over their own behavior.

### B. Self-esteem

Individuals who evaluate themselves in terms of positive feelings are said to have high levels of *self-esteem*, or self-worth. Self-esteem depends on the success the child achieves in a highly regarded domain and the perceived evaluations of parents, peers, teachers, and others (*the generalized others*). Children with low self-esteem show greater discrepancies between their perceived competence and the importance of a domain. Whereas children with high self-esteem minimize the importance of those domains in which they are not particularly competent, children with low self-esteem continue to value the domains in which they lack skill. The young child’s overall sense of self-worth may be most heavily influenced by the child’s attitudes toward his or her physical appearance during elementary and middle school; as children get older, social acceptance appears to become more important.

### Controversy: Is Praise Always a Good Thing?

Many parents and professionals believe that praising children promotes competent and well-adjusted children. Praise can act as a motivator and positive reinforcer. However, praise is also a value judgment. Children may become so concerned with the judgment that they avoid risk and work only for the praise itself. When is praise beneficial to a child? Research suggests when the praise is sincere and appropriate, focuses on the type of effort the child makes, and is informative in providing feedback about realistic expectations for the task, then praise is a helpful tool in developing a child’s self-esteem and productivity.

### III. Moral development in middle childhood

Moral development is the study of the process by which an individual comes to understand what society accepts as right and wrong.

A. **Cognitive-developmental theories** examine children’s reasoning about moral problems
1. **Piaget** suggests that children progress through a series of stages of moral reasoning as a result of shifts in cognitive ability. Children’s understanding of rules progresses from comprehending at about age six that rules are sacred and cannot be violated to a final stage at about age ten when they understand that rules are the result of mutual consent among the participants in a game.

   In his research on how children reason about moral dilemmas, Piaget found that when children are in a stage of *moral realism*, or heteronomy, they judge an act by the objective and visible consequences rather than by the intentions of the actor. They also have a belief in *immanent justice*, the idea that some punishment must follow a transgression. After age ten, children enter a stage of *moral relativism*, or autonomy, which is evidenced by their ability to take into account the motives of the transgressor.

   Many of the general aspects of Piaget’s theory have been confirmed, but some particulars have been challenged. For example, not all children show internal consistency in their moral reasoning, and some very young children can be sensitive to the intentions of a given act.

2. **Kohlberg** hypothesized three levels of moral reasoning, with two substages at each level, that occur in a universal progression. At the *preconventional level*, the child’s behavior is motivated by external pressures, avoiding punishment (stage 1) and gaining rewards (stage 2). At the *conventional level*, the child is concerned with being good and avoiding the disapproval of others (stage 3) and not violating rules (stage 4). Finally, at the *postconventional level*, the child develops an understanding of the basis for laws and rules. The child is concerned with self-respect and maintaining the social contract (stage 5) and ultimately shows concerns for general moral principles whether or not they violate the laws of society (stage 6). Kohlberg emphasized changes in the child’s perspective-taking ability as the basis for stage changes in moral reasoning.

   While Kohlberg’s stage-like transitions have been found by other researchers, some specific aspects of Kohlberg’s theory have not been supported, such as the relationship between perspective-taking ability and advances in moral reasoning. In addition, Kohlberg’s theory may be biased by Western philosophies of moral principles; individuals from certain other cultures do not reason about some of the dilemmas as individuals from Western cultures do.

3. **Carol Gilligan** argues that females develop a *morality of care and responsibility* in contrast to the *morality of justice* that describes the more typical pattern of moral reasoning by males. Only a few studies have found reliable sex differences in the level at which males and females reason about morality.

4. **Morality as domain-specific knowledge** Elliot Turiel has proposed that moral development proceeds independently in several different domains. Turiel believes that the moral domain consists of rules that regulate the individual’s rights or welfare, whereas the societal domain consists of knowledge about *social conventions*. Turiel has found that children as young as three years make distinctions among transgressions in the moral domain and the societal domain.

**B. Moral reasoning versus moral behavior** Knowing what is good is not always enough to motivate people to do what is good, and scores on moral reasoning tests do not always correlate with tendencies to avoid cheating, help others or to abide by the rules.

1. **Prosocial behavior and altruism** In contrast to research that focuses on justice and rules, prosocial and altruistic response have less obligatory quality about them. Although some children show greater empathy with age, others may actually help or share less. Psychologists have found few reliable sex differences in the development of altruism.
2. **The relationship between empathy and helping** A consistent relationship between empathy and helping behavior is seen when nonverbal measures of empathy are used. As children mature, they are learning about the social and emotional world, and are better able to interpret emotions. Children who show more prosocial behaviors are better able to take the perspective of another and feel more sympathy for that individual.

3. **Prosocial reasoning** Using a series of prosocial dilemmas, Nancy Eisenberg found that American children demonstrate a developmental progression in their prosocial reasoning. This progression moves from a self-centered concern about the consequences of prosocial behavior to a more internalized and principled foundation on which prosocial behavior is initiated. An approval and interpersonal orientation is more prevalent in middle childhood, as the child takes into consideration the reactions of others.

4. **Culture and altruism** In non-Western cultures where societal norms and values differ, variations in prosocial reasoning occur. For instance, on Israeli kibbutz, children voice concerns about the importance of internalized norms, as the goal of contributing to the good of the entire community is stressed. Cross-cultural differences are also seen in tendencies to behave prosocially related to prosocial reasoning.

5. **The role of socialization** The child’s socialization experiences also influence altruism. Parental reward, either material or social, and parents’ own behavior, which provides a model for the child’s behavior, are both major factors in the development of altruism. When parents use induction—that is, reason with children about the consequences of their prosocial behavior or lack thereof—children are encouraged to be empathic and show more helping behavior. Children whose parents use power assertion (forceful commands or physical punishment) to influence behavior are less empathic and less altruistic in their behavior.

6. **Additional factors in prosocial behavior** Little research has been conducted to evaluate the influence of religious education and other social programs on the development of values, even though parents often consider these programs to have a major impact on moral development. At an early age, children provided with religious training appear to be able to distinguish between issues of justice and human welfare and social conventions unrelated to their religious training.

7. **Prosocial behavior and other aspects of development** Recent research has shown a link between prosocial behavior and academic achievement. Children rating themselves as more likely to help others showed higher levels of academic achievement as adolescents.

IV. **Gender roles in middle childhood** Despite shifting cultural beliefs about gender, the world of middle childhood is still clearly “gendered.”

A. **Gender stereotypes** By 6–7 years old, children’s knowledge of gender stereotypes is well defined. Knowledge continues to develop as children get older when they begin to recognize that gender stereotypes are flexible. Children enact gender stereotypes quite a bit, and playing with same-sex peers or siblings reinforces gender-stereotyped behavior. Cross-cultural differences are also found in the degree to which gender-stereotyped behavior is engaged in.

B. **Gender identity**, or the ways in which children understand themselves as males or females, is established in preschool; however, further development does exist. Middle childhood sees the development of gender typicality, or the degree to which they conform to society’s expectations about boys and girls. They also make evaluative judgments about the extent to which they feel content with their own gender, and sexual identity questions may emerge in this time.
Controversy: Is Gender Identity Disorder Really a Disorder?

According to the DSM-IV, gender identity disorder occurs when children express a strong desire to be members of the opposite sex or claim to be unhappy as a boy or a girl. Controversy exists as to whether this is a true psychiatric disorder or if the problem lies in society’s intolerance for behaviors that violate gender boundaries.

C. **Sex segregation**, the clustering of individuals in same-sex groups, enhances the peer group’s influence on sex-typed behavior by fostering different social interactions in boys (aggressive play) and girls (cooperative play). Sex segregation becomes less pronounced by adolescence as children begin to engage in heterosexual interactions. The peer group has a major influence on children’s gender-role development, and those who spend more time in same-sex groups show higher conformity with gender-stereotyped behaviors.