

Innate and learned behaviour

Psychology



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There are two types of behaviour: innate and learned. On one hand Nativists believe that a child's behaviour is innate. Innate behaviour is defined as natural and instinctive. Swallowing, coughing and blinking are considered fixed and unchanging. These reflexes are involuntary responses to specific stimulation. The body naturally incorporates these reflexes to help the baby survive, for example without the ability to cough when food is stuck in the windpipe, the baby would choke. And without the ability to suck and swallow, the baby would be unable to feed.

However Cohen's research in 1967 showed that babies who were unsettled and crying for a feed were quicker at recognising the nipple and feeding. In effect this could be labelled as a learned behaviour. One Mother, with whom I spoke found that her first child took eight weeks to latch on properly, whereas her second baby knew instantly what to do. This is where the Rooting Reflex comes in, by touching the corner of a newborn's mouth and pulling your finger gently toward their cheek, the baby will most likely turn his/her entire head towards the encouraged side and try to suck your finger.

However some unco-operative babies are unwilling to show their reflexes at the time they are stimulated. On the other hand Empiricists believe that a child's behaviour is influenced by their experiences and their surroundings. Jean Piaget found that " children learn by actively constructing knowledge through hands-on experience". A baby using the toilet/potty and talking are examples of learned behaviour. One Mother I spoke to described how she would sometimes listen to her older son telling off his younger sister in a tone of voice that was very much like that of his Father.

However should a child pick up on bad habits, such as swearing, then these are easily remedied by the parents. Because a behaviour is classed as “learned” it can be changed, but not always simply. Another Mother told that her son decided one day that he wanted to “use the toilet like Daddy” and that was the extent of his potty training. There are theories to support both Nativists and Empiricists and defining each behaviour would be extremely difficult, as there are no specific right or wrong answers. Today, psychologists seldom take such views with regard to a child’s development.

Moreover they investigate the relationship between innate and learned behaviours. Nature and Nurture work together to shape a child’s development. Some may argue that bad behaviour is in the genes. However I believe that infants learn about themselves and their world during interaction with others. Providing a positive and social learning environment will help a child’s curiosity, creativity and self confidence. Research shows that early exposure to violence can result in overly aggressive behaviour in a young child.