

Charlotte's web and childhood needs

[Literature](#)



Introduction

In the book, *Charlotte's Web*, the author E. B. White's purposely puts the characters through similar experiences that children go through while growing up. These life comparisons make the story relatable and meaningful to its young audience. The experiences that challenge the characters in the book intellectually, physically, emotionally, and morally, are also important aspects of a child's growth. Many of these experiences are closely related with the theories of child development that are explained in the second chapter of *Literature for Children* written by David Russell.

To Love and Be Loved

One of the childhood "needs" that is expressed in *Charlotte's Web* is the need to love and to be loved. The main character, Wilbur, experiences many ups and downs throughout the story. In the fourth chapter, Lurvy comes to bring Wilbur food, however, Wilbur doesn't have the expected excitement to eat. "Wilbur didn't want food, he wanted love. He wanted a friend -someone who would play with him (White, 27)". Wilbur is lonely without much to do on the farm and no one willing to play with him. The love of a friendship is an important part of growth for children. It teaches them respect, appreciation, and to value the people in their lives. At the end of the chapter Charlotte asks Wilbur to be friends, after all the other farm animals reject Wilbur's offer to play. This marks the beginning of a loving friendship between the two characters. Wilbur experiences the emotional and physical need to love and be loved because without friendship he is depressed. This stage of Wilbur's life correlates with Erik Erikson's theory on psychosocial development "Trust versus Mistrust" that occurs during the very early age

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of a child's life. This theory explains that at such a young age children are dependent on the security and reassurance of their parents. They find comfort in the familiarity of books because " these books become like old, reliable friends, providing stability and a sense of security" (Russell, 25). Wilbur is searching for a loving relationship that he can depend on, like what children have when hearing familiar books.

For Physical Well Being

The need for physical well being in a child's development stages is a crucial part for one's sense of security. In the very beginning of Charlotte's Web, Mr. Arable attempts to kill Wilbur for being the weakling of his litter, however Fern stops anything from happening.

" A minute later, Fern was seated on the floor in the corner of the kitchen with her infant between her knees, teaching it to suck from the bottle " (White, 7). Fern nurtures Wilbur in the same way a caregiver takes care of a child. Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory " Trust versus Mistrust" is categorized for newborns between birth and 18 months because they are in need of protection and reassurance (25). Wilbur, like infants, needs the security and comfort of a caregiver for their physical well being.

To Belong

When children are growing up, they move through stages of defining their place in society. Along the way, they experience the need to belong in order to fit in and be happy. When Wilbur is taken to the Zuckerman farm he is separated from Fern and is forced to find his place in a new community. At first, Wilbur is very lonely and describes himself as, " I'm less than two

months old and I'm tired of living" (White, 16). Wilbur does not feel like he belongs at Zuckerman farm mainly due to his lack of socialization and purpose. This stage of Wilbur's life can be compared to Erik Erikson's "industry Versus Inferiority" stage of psychosocial development in children (Russell, 26). Erikson believes that during the ages 7 to 11, children start to understand the need to be accepted by the people around him, which is similar to what Wilbur is going through.

To Achieve

Achievement is a developmental need for children as they begin to grow and find their place in society. In Charlotte's Web, Wilbur demonstrates the need to achieve when it comes to his task to bring Charlotte's eggs back to the barn so that her babies will live. Charlotte has already saved Wilbur's life, and it is now time for Wilbur to return the favor. "...he looked up at Charlotte and gave her a wink. She knew he was saying good-bye in the only way he could. And she knew her children were safe" (White, 171). Wilbur's determination to save Charlotte's babies for her is an example of a child's need to achieve. The theory of child development this relates to is Jean Piaget's "Period of Formal Operations" stage of cognitive development (Russell, 24). Piaget's theory is that at this period of a child's life they begin to mature and understand their role in society. Wilbur steps up at the end of the book to take care of Charlotte, which shows his moral growth and need to contribute to his society.

For Change

The need for change is something that occurs many times throughout a child's life and it is an essential part of one's intellectual growth. In the <https://assignbuster.com/charlottes-web-and-childhood-needs/>

seventh chapter of *Charlotte's Web*, Wilbur learns that Mr. Zuckerman has plans to kill him. His immediate reaction is to freak out, to which Charlotte complains that he is acting immature. "You're carrying on in a childish way. Stop your crying! I can't stand hysterics" (White, 51). At this point in the story, something must change in order for Wilbur to be saved. Wilbur's response to the news is comparable to Erik Erikson's "Autonomy Versus Doubt" stage of development (Russell, 25). Erikson explains that children at 18 months to 3 years start to experiment with their independence and responsibility, although they are not quite sure of their abilities. Wilbur during this crisis of life or death is in need of change and is starting to explore what his options are. However, Wilbur is still very immature and has not completely grasped his capabilities, which is why he panics.

For Knowledge

The need for knowledge is a functional part of growing up. Children are constantly learning from the people around them about the difference between right and wrong. At the very beginning of *Charlotte's Web*, Fern takes matters into her own hands when she sees that her father is about to kill Wilbur. She explains her reasoning as, "The pig couldn't help being born small, could it? If I had been very small at birth, would you have killed me?" (White, 3). At this stage of Fern's childhood development, she has learned the difference between what is right and wrong. Additionally, she is following Erikson's theory "Initiative Versus Guilt" by stepping up and taking responsibility (Russell, 25). Her strong initiative to do what is right shows that she has reached a higher level in her psychosocial development.

For Beauty and Order

During a child's development phases, the need for beauty and structure is something that children learn to appreciate as they grow. In *Charlotte's Web*, the change of season is consistent pattern throughout the story. The characters of the book value the change of seasons because it is a way to track time. Summer is described as a beautiful time of the year for the farm animals because children are out of school and nature is at its peak. "The early summer days on a farm are the happiest and fairest days of the year. Lilacs bloom and make the air sweet, and then fade. Apple blossoms come with the lilacs, and the bees visit around among the apple trees" (White, 43). The appreciation for the signs of the season changing is comparable to Piaget's theory on the "Period of Concrete Operations", which explains how children begin to understand logic as they are maturing (Russell, 24). As a part of a child's development stages they learn how to make sense of basic logical concepts, such as the beauty and order of the season changes.

Conclusion

In the book, *Charlotte's Web*, the characters go through experiences that challenge them in intellectual, physical, emotional, and moral ways. The theories of child development explored in *Literature of Children* are comparable to these childhood needs because they explain the stages of a child's development. These experiences, although sometimes difficult, are important for a child's growth because they help shape the person that they are becoming.