Classical conditioning child development

Learning theories suggests behaviour is shaped by learning processes and children are shaped by the environment. There is less focus on a child's perception of an experience. Classical conditioning contributes to the study of child development as it plays a role in the development of emotions. For example, Watson's Little Albert was conditioned to fear all white, fluffy objects. It can be used to solve childhood emotional problems by a process of systematic desensitisation (Kauffman, 2005) where fears are unlearned through stimulus-response associations and can remove phobias in later life.

Skinner proposed the operant learning paradigm which explains sequential changes in behaviours of infants. Attention, memory, language, emotion, socialisation and the acquisition of new skills use operant conditioning, showing that stimuli from the environment affect behaviour. As it can produce quick behaviour changes it is the preferred method in child development studies. It results in the decrease/increase of behaviour due to consequences it produces. This has implications in parenting and school refusal. Children develop a cooperative attitude towards parental instructions due to consistent parental reaction to the infant's behaviours resulting in positive reinforcement of compliance. Therefore they are more likely to do as they are told.

Early family interactions have implications as social behaviour is modelled, affecting the development of social status, behaviour and knowledge. Operant conditioning has contributed to the study of child development of peer preference. Snyder, West, Stockemer, Gibbons and Almquist-Parks (1996) found peer choice had a positive correlation in positive consequences (reinforcers) and affiliation with a certain group of peers.

They are testable theories with heuristic and practical value. They explain development but reduce it to connections between stimuli and responses.

Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory would suggest the reaction the child receives from the carer due to attachment behaviour acts as a positive reinforcer and the child repeats the adaptive behaviour in the future to gain protection, resulting in the development of attachment type. This contributes to the study of child development in terms of parenting and future behaviour. If a parent positively reinforces a behaviour the child will increase the occurrence of the behaviour. Negative reinforcers can occur as a child cries to get attention. The parent will pick the child up to reduce crying, but next time the child wants attention it will continue to cry. Punishment is another way the infant learns by association. If a child misbehaves and gets punished for the action then it will likely stop that behaviour in the future. A longitudinal study conducted in Minnesota proposed that securely attached children are more sociable, more empathetic, less clingy and less aggressive with higher self esteem, suggesting long term consequences.

Contributing to the study of child development is strange situation studies (Ainsworth et al. 1978). Securely attached infants have parents who are responsive to their signals which act as a reinforcer, serving as models of appropriate social behaviour in later life. The internal working model determines attachment styles due to parenting styles, suggesting development of the infant’s IWM affects them later in life. Waters et al. (2000) suggests attachment security accounts for later experiences.

The theory ignores genetic influences. It is deterministic, simplistic and reduces us to the outcome of our parents' attitudes and behaviour towards us.

Bandura (1976) proposed a social-cognitive theory suggesting aggression is learnt through modelling and violent tendencies aren't innate. He argued " aggression in children is influenced by the reinforcement of family members, the media and the environment" and " aggression reinforced by family members was the most prominent source of behaviour modelling". This suggests aggressive tendencies are innate and if caught early delinquency could be prevented in later life. Turning to crime in adulthood and domestic violence, for example, would be prevented.

Children encoded the behaviour in LTM as the aggressive behaviour observed was imitated up to 8months later by 88% of participants. Children therefore must possess the ability physically imitate the behaviour and expect to receive positive reinforcement.

This theory ignores the individual biological state in line with biological theorists rejecting differences that could occur due to genetics. It could be argued that manipulating children to respond in certain ways by stopping them from playing with the toys was morally wrong and unethical.

There are cognitive elements in observational learning not explained wholly by learning theories. Through abstract modelling infants take from it a rule that might explain the behaviour they are observing and learn it.

Showing that development is not due to the basis of learning theory alone, Gelman (2009) suggested that children aren't only the by-product of what they experience in the environment but that active processes take place in order to learn. Meltzoff, (1995) states that children have an innate predisposition to imitate others to learn new information.

Although learning theory provides a substantial contribution to the study of child development it ignores factors such as the gene-environment interaction. A recent Time article wrote about the importance of the epigenome.

This suggested that what happens to the foetus and parents' early life experiences affect offspring and traits that are passed on. This is as a result of marks on our DNA being switched on or off resulting is the foetus receiving certain characteristics.

However, alternative theories have also contributed. Freud's psychoanalytic approach suggests child development occurs along a series of psychosexual stages where a particular crisis needs to be overcome. Later difficulties in child development are explained by fixation at a certain stage.

Vygotsky suggested the process of scaffolding. This could be in the form of structured learning from a teacher. The idea is children learn in a step-by-step process and complex thinking comes from interaction with others, acting as a model. The zone of proximal development suggests children can achieve tasks with help and later use this language to attempt tasks on their own.

Considerable progress has been made in learning theories since the 1960’s but the gene-environment interaction seems to be having an increasing influence. However, an eclectic approach is probably ideal in contributing to the study of child development.