

# Biological and environmental influences



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It is over two thousand years since Socrates complaint that even if we understand human anatomy, we still do not know the causes of human behaviour (Leslie 1996, p. 1). The area of children's behaviour in particular is increasingly becoming a debated topic amongst parents, the media, doctors, teachers and other professionals and agencies within the United Kingdom and the global community. Recent news reports state that nearly half of England's teachers think pupil behaviour has deteriorated in their school in the past five years alone (BBC 2008). The government's school secretary goes so far in the behaviour debate to state that " behaviour experts will be sent in to a quarter of all schools to tackle discipline problems" (Balls 2009 cited in Sugden 2009) as on average, teachers in primary schools reported that " every day 30 minutes of available teaching time is lost as a consequence of pupil misconduct" (NASUWT 2009).

The majority of behavioural research and theory throughout the twentieth century mainly focused on children's early development and how children actually learn. Theorists such as Piaget, Skinner and Bandura particularly influenced thinking regarding children's development and learning, many of whose work we recognise and draw upon today. With children's behaviour being such a current focus for study and research, it is apparent that there can be many differing reasons for certain types of behaviour amongst children and young people. These include biological and environmental influences which impact upon how a child acts and behaves. Throughout this assignment I will be discussing the key biological and environmental influences which impact on children and young people's behaviour and

exploring the relationships between these influences and behavioural patterns shown drawing on relevant research and theory.

Early research and theory surrounding children's behaviour and its development tended to stem from a 'nature versus nurture' view and how internal and external factors affect and influence development throughout childhood. Current thought is that some of children's behaviours are related to biological factors and some to environmental factors (Stephens 2004, p. 1).

Biological influences involve a child's inherited traits, genetic make-up, thinking and brain development. There is evidence to suggest that a child's genetic inheritance affects how a young child's brain develops and through computer imaging technology it has been found that a child's brain is poised to develop at an impressive rate of growth (Lindon 2005, p. 11) allowing potential for learning at a fast pace.

In relation to this Norton (2007) states that "there may be no 'argument' gene, but genes do influence personality traits, including those that make people more or less prone to confrontation". Isanski's (2009) research goes further to suggest that children's temperament may be due in part to a combination of a certain gene and a specific pattern of brain activity. Therefore where parents believed that they lacked adequate skills of managing their child's behaviour, research shows that this is not necessarily at fault.

Combined with a child's genetic make-up as an influence on behaviour, Freud (1964) studied the child's psychological influences and how they affect

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their development and learning. His psychoanalytic theory included personality structure, suggesting that a wholly unconscious mental structure called the 'id' contains a person's inborn, inherited drives and instinctual forces and is closely identified with his basic psychological energy. For example they simply have the desire to gratify their desire which could explain why a child finds it difficult to share toys in early years. However, although psychoanalytic theory has been criticised by many, Coren (1997) describes how this theory can be attributed to many educational issues today including behaviour.

Without discounting biological influences on behaviour, environmentalists suggest that " human behaviour, development and learning are thought of as reactions to the environment" (NCREL 2004). There is a wealth of research into how a child's environment influences their behaviour. While some traits are innate, the available research does not suggest that children are " fixed from birth; there is plenty of scope for the impact of experience" (Lindon 2005, p. 195). This is recognised as social learning theory where a child learns from the behaviour and actions of those around them (Bandura 1986). An investigation by Bandura, Ross and Ross (1963) of behaviour learned from observation revealed that children, who had observed a person being aggressive, were more likely to show aggressive behaviour themselves. Research into television programmes and how children are affected by watching aggression shows that they can be susceptible to aggressive tendencies (Huesman 1986; Josephson 1987) although there is contrasting research which shows little affect in children (Charlton & O'bey

1997). This research showed different outcomes in children from different backgrounds.

Concerning how a child's home life and situation influences their behaviour and attitudes, Long (2000, p102) states that a child's home background and experiences have a major impact on their cognitive and educational development and these are largely beyond the influence of the school.

Delegates at the Association of Teachers and Lecturers annual conference have also said that chaotic home lives and poverty made children unable to learn (Eason 2008) with the most deprived areas having more exclusions from schools than those in the least deprived areas (BBC 2009) due to extreme negative behaviour. Social scientists and genetic researchers have identified many cycles that loop from one generation to the next (Stephens 2004, p. 1) including anti-social, abusive and aggressive behaviour. For example, research shows that nurturing during early brain development or early exposure to violence, then affect how a child manages impulse control. Buchanan (2009) recognises that children learn from their parents and ultimately this is where they learn values of respect and positive behaviour. Piaget's theory of cognitive development recognises this in that children's learning can only take place by active involvement and direct experience (Piaget 1951).

A further influence upon a child's behaviour could be their levels of self-esteem and self-concept. Maslow (1954) recognises a number of needs which every child will have including esteem needs. Adler (cited in Lindon 2005) in particular, focused his research on a child's feelings of inferiority within the family unit and especially the impact of birth order on the

experiences of childhood. He believed that children's behaviour and later life as adults, was shaped by their interpretations of what happened in their social interactions. Zajonc's (1976) study found that the eldest child in a family had higher abilities than successive children as they received more parental attention. A key idea surrounding this discussion is that we learn about ourselves from other people. People such as parents and teachers are recognised as particularly influential to a child's development of self-concept (Roberts 2002, p. 11). This is where the child's attitudes towards themselves and their perceptions of others come from.

A powerful environmental influence for children's learning about how to behave is also through play. It is vital that children are encouraged to learn through play as by pretending to be someone else, they behave like that person (Long 2000, p125) using what they know about how people behave. This is such an important cognitive developmental stage for children as Roberts in particular recognises that self-concept profoundly influences behaviour in every area including their family, school and wider world (2002, p. 16). A low self-concept and esteem is believed to also directly affect self-efficacy which results in the child having diminished self belief and motivation for success (Bandura 1968). This results in the child becoming withdrawn and reluctant to attempt tasks in fear of failure.

When the child is in the school learning context for example Skinner (1938) suggested that the concepts and principles involved in learning apply when an individual acts on his or her environment to achieve a desired outcome. Therefore a system of reinforcers and punishers manage and develop behaviour, encourage positive outcomes through repeated occurrence,  
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known as operant conditioning. Wragg (1984) suggests further that children learn from seeing these consequences happening to others. Behaviours such as lack of concentration, attention to tasks, distracting others are effectively monitored and dealt with in this manner (Cockburn 2006, p. 122) through use of praise to encourage positive behaviour patterns of children. This method of reward and sanction is used within schools by teachers particularly to positively dissuade children from behaving in a negative manner (Dreikurs 1968). This is such an important area as it encourages more positive relationships between children and staff enabling a positive ethos and environment for all (Docking 2002, p. 2).

From research and theory it is possible to see how biological and environmental influences affect one another when considering a child or young person's behaviour.

Throughout this assignment I have been considering how both biological and environmental influences affect children's and young people's behaviour and patterns of behaviour which result from them. The range of evidence surrounding the area of children's behaviour development is vast. Although a child's inherited genetic structure and characteristics are innate and unchangeable there is a great deal that we as educators can do to encourage children in their behaviours and attitudes. It is vital that as parents, teachers and role models, we are providing children with the appropriate environments to develop the skills and abilities of mature, responsible citizens to show respect for themselves and others in all areas of their lives.