

# The role of social influences on childrens learning



This essay aims to discuss the role of social influences on children's learning that psychological research has identified. It will concentrate on two specific theories of learning, the social learning theory and behaviourism. Firstly it will discuss the origins of developmental psychology and go on to describe the two specific theories in some detail. The essay will then attempt to compare and contrast these theories and use them to help explain the influences of children's everyday learning experiences. It will then evaluate each theory in turn and discuss how they relate and impact on everyday learning.

Developmental psychology is a discipline dedicated to explaining and understanding how children's behaviour develops right throughout their lifetime (Oates, Sheehy & Wood 2005). It has helped to do this by the creation of theories which have been tested through scientific research and observation (Oates et al, 2005). These theories have been used to facilitate learning in mainstream classrooms and for children with learning difficulties. Anderson (1995) has described learning as ' the process by which relatively permanent changes occur in behavioural potential as a result of experience'.

Although there are many developmental theories, there are four in particular, often referred to as the ' grand theories' which have been the most influential (Oates et al. 2005). These theories consist of Piaget's stage theory also known as constructivism, social constructivism, behaviourism and social learning theory.

This essay will only concentrate on the social learning theory and behaviourism. The Social Learning theory is based on the idea that people

learn from one another by observation, imitation, and modelling (Oates et al. 2005). According to Bandura as cited in Oates et al (2005) people learn from watching and imitating the behaviour and attitudes they see in others and the outcomes of those behaviours. “ Most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling, from observing others, one forms an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action.” (Bandura 1977).

Examples of children imitating what they have observed can be seen everyday, such as a child imitating their parent’s household chores or activities, i. e. children playing with toy kitchens, ironing boards and prams. They are imitating what they have seen their parents’ doing and are learning new skills. In order for a child to imitate someone Bandura recognised four factors, attention, retention, ability and motivation (Oates et al. 2005). Attention must be paid to the model, and the more interesting the child finds the model and the task they are doing the more attention they will give to the subject (Bernstein, Clarke-Stewart, Roy, Srull & Wickens 1994). Retention is essential, if the child is to be able to imitate what they have previously observed they must be able to recall the information (Bernstein et al. 1994). The child must have the physical ability and the motivation to act out their observational learning (Bernstein et al. 1994).

Bandura supported his claims of observational learning in his Bobo doll studies (Bernstein et al. 1994). The studies consisted of children observing a model demonstrating violent behaviour towards a Bobo doll. The children were then permitted to play in the room with the dolls where it was found they imitated the aggressive behaviour they had observed (Bernstein et al. <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-social-influences-on-childrens-learning/>

1994). Bandura believed the results to be profound especially with regards to children watching violence on television.

According to behaviourists, all behaviour is learned and preserved by its effects (Oates et al. 2009). Pavlov as cited in Bernstein et al (1994) developed his theory of classical conditioning while studying dogs' digestion. He knew dogs naturally salivate when food is presented but discovered that this natural reflex occurred when the dog saw the attendant who normally brought the food. The dogs had reassigned the reflex to the promise of food and not just food itself (Schwartz & Lacy 1982). Therefore, when the dogs heard or saw the attendants coming they started to salivate. Pavlov started to study the dogs to see if using a sound to indicate food was coming would have the same results and it did. When a sound was matched with the promise of food, the sound alone stimulated salivation (Schwartz & Lacy 1982).

The process of classical conditioning causes a neutral stimulus such as a sound to be associated with an unconditional stimulus such as food. Salivation which is an unconditioned response becomes a conditioned response to the recently conditioned stimulus of the sound (Beecroft 1966).

Building on the work of Pavlov, reinforcement is the key element in Skinner's operant conditioning theory (Bernstein et al 1994). Operant conditioning is a process of learning that occurs through rewards and punishments for behaviour. By means of operant conditioning, an association is made between behaviour and an outcome of that behaviour (Oates et al 2005). Examples of operant conditioning can be found everywhere. Children sitting

quietly in class to get a gold star, or eating all their vegetables so they can have desert are examples of operant conditioning. These examples show that the possibility of gaining a treat can promote good behaviour. Operant conditioning is also used to decrease bad behaviour. Punishment has been used to decrease bad behaviour for centuries. A child may be told they will have to wait late after class if they do not stop talking.

Reinforcement reinforces the behaviour it follows (Oates et al. 2005). There are two types of reinforcement, positive, which would be a treat to reward good behaviour and negative which concerns the increase of a behaviour after the removal of something unpleasant such as the child being quiet in class after the teacher's disapproval with them diminishes. In both cases of reinforcement, the behaviour increases (Oates et al 2005).

Punishment is a stimulus which results in a decrease in a particular behaviour (Oates et al 2005). There are three kinds of punishment, positive punishment involves the presentation of unfavourable stimuli to result in the weakening of the response which follows such as a child getting a row after running out in front of a car and never doing it again. Response cost occurs when a favourable stimuli is removed after a behaviour occurs such as a child having their sweets taken away after bullying another child. The third form of punishment is time - out, this is where a child would be cut off from a reinforcing stimulus, such as completely ignoring their temper tantrum and eventually the child calming down when they see their behaviour is not inducing a response. In all these cases of punishment, the behaviour decreases (Oates et al. 2005).

Much research has been undertaken which demonstrates support of both classical and operant conditioning. Fagot (1978) conducted a natural observation study of the contact between parents and their two-year-old children and found that girls were rewarded when they helped around the house. They were also encouraged to play with dolls. Boys were rewarded for acting independently and energetically. Different behaviour was accepted by parents amongst the genders. Parents encouraged boys to climb but discouraged their daughters. These results show that the children within the study were learning appropriate gender activities through operant conditioning and we can see evidence of this throughout society. Society plays an important role in constructing gender by different types of operant conditioning (Bernstein et al. 1994).

But most of these experiments are based on animals and their behaviour. Boulding (1984) doubts the way Skinner applies the principles of animal behaviour on to multifaceted human behaviour. By using animals as replacements for humans in the study of human behaviour, Skinner is assuming that principles relating to the behaviour of animals can be used to explain complex human behaviour. Boulding (1984) believes more experiments carried out using human participants must be conducted to demonstrate the weight of this theory. Behaviourism has also been questioned by social scientists who believe that it over-simplifies the behaviour of humans and doesn't take the mental processes involved in the perception of, and response to, a stimulus into consideration (Gross 2007). The theory completely ignores all the characteristics of human behaviour which cannot easily be observed.

The main difference between the behaviourist theory and Bandura's social learning theory is that Bandura as cited in Bernstein et al. (1994) did not believe learning was just a reaction to environmental stimuli such as the behaviourists did, he thought this too simplistic. He believed learning could be cognitive as well. Although he shared the view of the behaviourists that environment causes behaviour, he also viewed behaviour as having an impact on the environment too. Bandura agreed with Skinner that reinforcement and punishment had an impact on behaviour but disagreed that it was the only method of learning (Oates et al. 2005).

But Bandura's Bobo study has come under its own criticism. According to Durkin (1995) Bandura neglected to make a distinction between aggression and play fighting, the way Bobo dolls spring back up after been hit may lead the children to believe that it was an innocent game. Also the children within the study may have thought they were expected to copy the adult.

Social influences have an impact on both theories, but behaviourism relies on it fully. According to behaviourists humans are shaped only by their environment and do not put any importance on internal factors (Oates et al. 2005).

Practical applications of operant conditioning include a successful treatment programme for autistic children called Applied behavioural analysis (ABA), (Oates et al 2005). It teaches social, language and educational skills through reinforcements such as playing a favourite game, food treats and verbal praise. It is very intensive and covers the simplest of tasks to demonstrating socially acceptable behaviour. The tasks are broken down and taught step by

step. When the child achieves the desired outcome they will receive a reward. It also includes behaviour modification, where the child is taught appropriate behaviour through punishment and reinforcement (Oates et al. 2005). The child learns that good behaviour is followed by a treat. The child is given lots of support from both family members and their teachers. According to Oates et al. (2005) if ABA is applied in early years it can create encouraging results in development.

The practical implications of the social learning theory, where children imitate what they observe are captured by Davidson (1996) as cited in Oates et al (2005) who reports that evidence has shown the quantity of violence an eight year old views is a more effective forecaster for future adult aggression than their social status or the economic state they grew up in. Bandura (1983) as cited in Bernstein et al (1994) states that televised violence may supply they type of models people are likely to imitate, as more often than not these models are attractive and sometimes described as being heroes. According to Cline, Croft & Courier (1973) as cited in Bernstein et al. (1994) exposure to constant televised violence may numb viewers and make them less sensitive to the suffering of others. Supporting this, The Associated press (1984) as cited in Bernstein et al (1994) found that after watching the television programme “ The three stooges” where they poked each others eyes out, children watching it did the same.

Both theories offer some explanations of learning. The behaviourist theory offers useful practical techniques to increase good behaviour and decrease bad behaviour by using reinforcement but doesn't take any cognitive ability into consideration. It is too simplistic and doesn't offer any explanation into <https://assignbuster.com/the-role-of-social-influences-on-childrens-learning/>



the more complicated areas such as language and social practices that children learn.

Bandura as cited in Oates et al. (2005) demonstrates that learning is not reliant on reinforcement and that children play an operational part in the learning activity but as with the behaviourists his theory concentrates on the importance of external forces. Greater importance on the cognitive factors in learning is required to fully understand the process of learning.