

Using Developmental Theories When Choosing Children's Books

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Young children are constantly encountering new information and situations, which affect their malleable minds. Young children must learn about human relationships, judgment, guilt, and understanding others' feelings, as well as their own. Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Lawrence



Kohlberg, and Lev Vygotsky all developed theories dealing with the various types of development in children—theories which educators of young children can utilize to help them make appropriate book choices for children. When choosing books for young children, it is



important for teachers to be aware of these modern theories of child development.



Jean Piaget developed the “Cognitive Theory of Development” (Russell, 2009, p. 31) to describe the stages of mental development of children from birth to young adulthood. During the *Intuitive Stage* of Piaget's theory, that is, ages four through seven, children are learning how to think and make decisions on matters outside of themselves and their immediate situation. Therefore author David Russell (2009) suggests while selecting books, the teacher should choose stories which reflect this stage of development and help children to fully develop this part of their character. This would include realistic stories that involve decision-making and emotion. These types of books will, in theory, help children to further understand various relationships and how to approach them realistically.



Erik Erikson took the same approach as Piaget when creating his “Psychological Development Theory” (p. 33); he theorized that children develop in stages. However, rather than focus on mental development as did Piaget, Erikson focused on the social aspect of child development. During the *Initiative Versus Guilt* stage of his theory (ages three through six) children want to make their own choices about what actions to take; however in turn, they have

to suffer remorse for the poor decisions they make. Russell suggests teachers choose books for children at this stage in which children are depicted making poor choices, discovering they made the wrong choice, and then have a change in attitude. Essentially, the character learns she or he is incorrect. By choosing a book like this, children can see that not everything they elect to say or do is correct, and they can change their mind and make a better decision.



Lawrence Kohlberg, much like the first two theorists, created a theory based on stages and levels, called the “Theory of the Development of Moral Judgment” (p. 35). However, Kohlberg’s theory was about “the development of moral reasoning and moral judgment” (p. 35), rather than the intellectual or social development of children. During the second stage of the first level, called the *Instrumental/Relativist Orientation*, children will do what they are told if they are promised some sort of compensation for their compliance to rules or if they perform a requested task. Russell (2009) suggests children read books that depict characters with the same type of behavior in order to show the children what their action looks like from a different point of view. Allowing children to hear about others who behave in the manner they may be displaying, gives them the opportunity to judge whether this is a good trait to have or not.



Lev Vygotsky theorized much the opposite of these three child development theorists. He argued that the phases of development were much more indefinite and that people continue to change over a lifetime. Many individual educators and schools have utilized Vygotsky’s theory and shaped their classroom exercises around his idea. Under Vygotsky’s theory, modern classrooms are much less structured and more collaborative between the students and the teacher. Also under the model of this theory, all books would be acceptable, as all aspects of human intelligence and character development at indeterminate times, and in indistinct stages, rather than solid ones.

When choosing children's literature, it is important to be mindful of these theories. Each, save Vygotsky's, focuses on the various areas of the mental development of children. Although psychologists may not be certain of the exact moments each child begins a new stage, all of the areas mentioned in the stages eventually does develop. Therefore, it is important to consider the new ideas and feelings young children are having and choose literature, which will help them to more fully develop their cognitive abilities.



Reference

Russell, D. L. (2009). *Literature for children: A short introduction*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.