



Exploring babies' and young children's development and learning

Early relationships

Narrator:

Rudolph Schaffer was Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. This interview was recorded a few years before his death in 2008. Professor Schaffer was one of the most eminent British child psychologists of the twentieth century. He was the author of numerous articles and books on child development and was particularly celebrated for the work that he carried out on the importance of early relationships for later development. Here he talks about recent changes in the field.

Professor Schaffer:

The interesting thing about recent developments and social development is that it's become much more difficult to differentiate social development from other aspects. Other aspects are cognitive development and emotional development and traditionally those three areas were kept very separate and different people would work in different areas. What you now have is a growing realisation that you can't draw those hard and fast boundaries. You have topics like social cognition; you have the growing realisation that emotion comes into everything that we do to some extent and so social development is really very much related to things that traditionally at least, fell into the cognitive and emotional areas.

Narr:

Rudolph Schaffer's approach to social development isn't just about the development of the social but about the sense in which all development is social.

Professor Schaffer:

We have to appreciate that everything that happens during childhood and for that matter during adulthood occurs in a particular kind of context. And it's the growing realisation that you can't isolate things and that you have to relate everything to the social context. That is one of the most striking features of what's been happening in social development recently.

Professor Schaffer

Take something like learning. Learning traditionally is very much a cognitive topic and has been handled in that way. And if anything has been related to what animals do in all sorts of artificial situations like laboratory, mazes ... etc, etc. In fact thanks to people like Vygotsky we now are very much aware of the fact that not only the content of learning but also the processes of learning are very much influenced by the culture in which the child grows up; by the particular immediate situation in which the child is in at the moment. Is it with peers, is it with teachers, is it with parents and so on.

Narr:

One of Rudolph Schaffer's research interests was the significance of relationships as part of early infant development.

Professor Schaffer:

In a sense the infant doesn't exist apart from relationships. It's perhaps obvious from a purely physical point of view. The infant has to be fed, kept warm and so on. It can't do that by itself. It relies on other people. And yet at the same time, psychologically speaking it acquires a sense of identity, a sense of self through relationships with other people. And the interesting thing there is that those relationships apparently begin before the child is born, in the womb. If one asks what is the most neglected phase of development which is likely to attract a lot interesting work in the future, I would say it's the prenatal phase. There's been some very interesting work which suggests that prenatal learning is already possible from let us say the sixth month or so of conception and that has already certain implications for subsequent development, once the child is born.

It's been shown that the moment a child is born and as soon as one can possibly test it, it is already capable of differentiating the mother's voice from the voice of another female stranger. And there's simply no other explanation than the child has acquired this knowledge in the womb. It is after all known that the auditory apparatus is functioning from about six or seven months post conception and it is also known that babies are capable of hearing voices from outside the womb. And of course the voice they are most likely to hear is the mother's voice. So that becomes familiar before the child is born.

Narr:

Professor Schaffer saw the development of early infant relationships as a process of construction on the part of the child.

Professor Schaffer:

This is perhaps the most far reaching change that has taken place in let us say the last twenty thirty years in developmental psychology generally, that the child is no longer seen as a passive recipient of outside stimulation but that it is appreciated that the child can construct it's own world to a considerable extent. The parent child relationship was seen at one time as something that parents do to children. The child simply receives whatever it is that parents have to offer in the way of healing practices, training etc, etc and you end with a child that is very much the product of his parents therefore. And if something has gone wrong with that development then right, you blame the parents. This is a view that simply can't uphold because there are no simple straightforward correlations between parental practices and child personality outcomes. The reason being that children, from the beginning, contribute to their own development. They do so because of their inborn individuality, even at the very earliest stage, even in the first few days of life, the child is already an individual. All right – the way in which he determines what the mother does is not a self-conscious thought out business because the child as yet isn't capable of planning. The child cries a lot for example. Well he doesn't do so in order to get his mother's attention. That's something that appears later on and once the child of course becomes capable of talking and walking and so on the child also becomes capable of much more planning, much more purposive behaviour and therefore a much more active contributor to his development.

Narr:

What about the concept of attachment? Where does that sit in current thinking about early child development?

Professor Schaffer:

The concept of attachment has really been put on the map by John Bowlby and his theories. And he thought of it very much in dynamic terms with the child, again, contributing to the formation of that bond between mother or whoever and child. The concept of attachment in the last twenty years or so has been very much bound up with a particular measure, namely the Strange Situation as perfected by Ainsworth. And I must say some of us have become a little disillusioned with that word because it was so rigidly tied to that one measure which is only applicable to one particular age, namely somewhere around twelve months. But fortunately of late this situation has changed and well, attachment has grown up. There are now measures that one can use for much older children, even for adults. After all adults have attachments. Adults are still according to many writers influenced by the attachments that they formed in early childhood and attachment as a dynamic concept is therefore very much alive now.

Narr:

One of the most distinctive features of development that every parent observes, is the way their child gradually acquires a sense of themselves as a separate being.

Professor Schaffer:

It is very much a gradual development. It's of course extremely difficult to pinpoint it empirically in studies. There have been some very interesting attempts to do so. I suppose as far as parents and others are concerned the fact that a child begins to use his own name is one of the earliest signs and children in their second year of life or so are certainly already

capable of doing so. It's a little difficult for an adult to appreciate a stage where a child could not have a sense of himself as being different from the rest of the world; that the child merges in his own thinking with the environment. According to Piaget that's something that does happen early on in life and according to Piaget it's towards the end of the first year, the beginning of the second year of life that the child gradually appreciates that things outside are in some sense different from the child himself.

Narr:

How is this emergence of children's sense of themselves as separate beings related to the emergence of their understanding of other people as separate beings each with their own sense of identity, feelings and beliefs?

Professor Schaffer:

It's generally thought that the two go hand in hand. Piaget was very insistent that for the first five or six years children are totally egocentric. And that although they may have a sense of self insofar as they know that other people are different from themselves nevertheless they project their own feelings and thoughts and wishes on to other people. It is astonishing what a grip the Piagetian concept of egocentrism has had on the thinking of child psychologists in the past. But gradually people have listened to voices like that of Harriet Reingold, an American psychologist who has said all along that we must listen to young children and the way they talk. We must observe them in all sorts of social situations with an open mind. And she pointed out no end of examples which illustrate very clearly that children are very much orientated to other people and their welfare and not just thinking of themselves all the time rather as the concept of egocentrism would suggest. And people have taken up that suggestion and yes we have no end of examples now.

Narr:

How is the idea of active construction supported by research on children's 'theory of mind'?

Professor Schaffer:

The theory of mind is basically a matter of children being able to appreciate that other people have intentions which may be quite different from their own intentions. Once again it is very much a departure from the notion of egocentrism and it is also very much a matter of now appreciating that the child is very active in interpreting the world around him. And I think that is one of the most basic themes that has now become clear; that children are active in trying to make sense of the world; that it is not just a matter of passively learning from other people what other people tell them about the world. They themselves are trying to understand it and are constructing the world in that sense.

Narr:

Another fundamental issue for studying social development is how far we are dealing with universal processes, whether the so-called text book descriptions of social development are in fact descriptions of a particular cultural form of western childhood.

Professor Schaffer:

In the past I suppose psychologists have basically been really rather lazy. If they wanted to study children they just popped round the corner and got hold of the nearest most available group of children and then there was the automatic assumption that what you saw there applied to children across the world. And the descriptions of children in other worlds well I mean that was just put aside as curiosities. We now realise as part of the appreciation of the importance of behaviour always taking place in certain contexts that the most important context is the cultural one. And that we really have to be awfully careful not to ascribe our particular values to other societies.

Narr:

Can the study of other cultural practices sometimes overturn traditional assumptions about the nature of development?

Professor Schaffer:

Let's take one example. There's been a lot of emphasis on the importance of early stimulation. If children from the very early weeks of life are not sung to, talked to, taken out for walks, shown objects, played with and so on, then it was believed you're going to keep their development back and if this is taken to an extreme then you are going to produce retarded children who will remain retarded all their lives possibly. In other words what happens in those first few months or years has implications for subsequent development. Work by people like Jerome Kegan in Guatemala has shown that there in certain Indian villages mothers customarily keep their babies for the first year or so in their own huts, leave them in the darkest corner there, never take them out, don't encourage visitors. In other words treat them as though they have to be prevented from getting hold of outside stimulation. They do this because there's a general belief that sunshine is bad and there's lots of germs in the nasty world outside but the point is that they treat them in a way that if this happened here we would really be concerned about they were maltreating them and that lack of stimulation would produce deprivation. Kegan showed that these children in fact develop into perfectly, normal, healthy, intelligent bright and active children. At the age of one or so they leave their huts once they start walking they start going outside. And what happens in that first year or so of life apparently has absolutely no implications for later development. I think there's an example of the extent to which cross culture work can be useful.

Professor Schaffer:

I mean obviously there are universals. Children have to be loved. Children have to have a certain minimum of stimulation yes of course. But one has to be very careful about the extent to which one does make the assumptions about everything that we see here under our own noses is necessarily universal. And we also have to remember that people in different cultures may actually have completely different conceptions of what childhood is all about and therefore what their own task is. It's generally said for instance that whereas in western world we see young infants as dependent and our job is to make them independent the traditional Japanese mother sees the child first as independent and it is her job to make the child dependent. In other words integrated into the family unit.