

Middle Childhood and the Effect of Media on Development

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Abstract

This paper analyzes and reviews the middle years of childhood, which includes children the ages of 6 to 12 years old, as well as the challenges, opportunities and the effect of media on the development of children in their middle childhood. After an introduction into the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional aspects which develop through this part of childhood, the challenges and opportunities which arise during middle childhood are examined. Some of these challenges include obesity, learning disabilities as well as self esteem. Finally, this paper analyzes the effect that Disney princess movies have on the development of school aged children.

Introduction to the Development during Middle childhood

The middle childhood is the stage in a child's life after the preschool years and right before their adolescent years. Middle childhood, also known as "the school years", consists of children from the ages of 6 to 12. During this stage of childhood, physical growth is present, however is not as drastic as the preschool years. Children's motor skills start to improve and substantially develop throughout their middle childhood. During this period, cognitive development is explained by Piaget and Vygotsky. Children begin to form concrete operational thoughts and are able to participate in cooperative learning. During this part of their childhood, children are also developing socially and developing their sense of self.

Physical development and growth during middle childhood is not as prominent as physical development in the preschool years. During this stage of childhood, A child grows an average of two to three inches a year (Feldman, 2016). By the age of 11, girls average up to 4'10" while boys are 4'9.5". "This is the only time in the life span when girls are, on average, taller than boys" (Feldman, 2016, p. 303). Children's weight also increases as they get older. In their middle childhood, children gain up to five to seven pounds a year (Feldman, 2016). Besides genetics playing an important influence over physical growth, there are also some cultural factors which contribute to physical growth as well. Height and weight differences vary based on the socioeconomic status of the place that the children grow up in. For example, affluent children in North America have enough nutrients to grow to their full potential, however, children in third-world countries may not have the adequate nutrition that they need to grow properly, and many children are undernourished as they are in a lower socioeconomic class. Therefore, the accessibility to proper nutrition stunts their growth, and can affect their motor development as well. During this stage children master many of the skills that they could not do before, and even

perfect the skills which they had difficulty with before (Feldman, 2016). School age children learn to ride bikes, ice skate, swim and skip rope during their middle childhood (Feldman, 2016). Along with their motor skills, children in this stage of their life are also perfecting and developing their cognitive abilities.

During the middle childhood, children move on from pre-operational thought, and start to develop concrete operational thought. According to Piaget, the concrete operational stage is the period of cognitive development in middle childhood which is characterized by the active and appropriate use of logic (Feldman, 2016). This refers to the use of logical operations and solutions for concrete problems. This type of logical thinking happens gradually, and once concrete operational thought is fully engaged, children show cognitive advances (Feldman, 2016). During this stage of Piaget's theory, children obtain the ability of decentering, where they will take other aspects of a situation into consideration. They also begin to understand the concept of reversibility, speed, and time (Feldman, 2016). While Piaget goes on to explain how children develop cognitively on their own, Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development takes into account the sociocultural aspect of cognitive development. Vygotsky's theory goes on to explain how children develop cognitively by interacting with those around them. He focused on active learning through interactions that fall within each child's proximal development. His theory also explains how children in their middle childhood take part in cooperative learning. This is the concept that children work together in groups to achieve a common goal, helping each other to stay on the right track (Feldman, 2016). The social aspect of cognitive development plays an important role in a child's middle childhood development, however, it is also a vital part of a child's social development.

During this period of childhood, children are beginning to develop a sense of self, and in most cases how children see themselves change during middle childhood. Children view themselves less with their physical, external attributes and more in terms of their psychological traits (Feldman, 2016). As they grow older, children are also exploring and discovering the things that they are good at and the things which they might not be so good at and have difficulty with. Children divide their self concepts into personal and academic spheres (Feldman, 2016). When asked about their performance on something specific, children tend to compare their performance to the other children's performances who are around the same age. This is known as social comparison, the "desire to evaluate one's behavior and abilities by comparing them to those of others" (Feldman, 2016, p. 325). When children cannot objectively evaluate their abilities, children in their middle childhood look to others that are similar to themselves (Feldman, 2016). When thinking about school age children, who are in their middle childhood, they are going to school and coming to know and interact with many new people. They are starting to build new relationships with those around them. When making friends, a child goes through different stages of friendship. Through the ages of 4-7, children see the people that they spend the most time with as their friends. From ages 8-10, children begin to take others' personal qualities and traits into consideration. They also are looking for mutual trust. Finally at the ages of 11-15, friendship is characterized by a feeling of closeness (Feldman, 2016).

In their middle childhood, children go through many changes. Physically, they are growing in height and weight, as well as gaining and perfecting their motor skills. They are developing cognitively through more concrete operational thoughts as well as learning to work together with others and by actively learning. By interacting with others, they are also forming

relationships and are able to create a better view of self through these interactions. With every stage of a child's life, there are also many challenges and opportunities which arise.

Challenges and Opportunities in Middle Childhood

As children develop physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally in their middle childhood, there are some challenges which come along with each type of development. During this period of their lives, children are likely to experience obesity, if their physical development is not on the right track. Cognitively, a challenge that some children face are learning disabilities. In this part of their childhood, while children are developing socially, they fall under the industry vs inferiority stage of Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development which comes along with both challenges and opportunities for children in their middle childhood. Finally, during their emotional development, they are liable to either gain high self esteem or low self esteem.

A common challenge in physical development, especially in the United States, is obesity. Obesity is defined as "body weight that is more than 20 percent above the average for a person of a given age in height" (Feldamn, 2016, p. 284). Obesity in children can have long lasting consequences as they grow older. It can lead to the children being overweight as adults and having greater risks for diseases such as heart disease, cancer, and diabetes (Feldman, 2016). Most of the time, obesity may be due to poor diets and social factors. Many times poor nutrition is often due to not having access to nutritious foods. It is easier to give foods that may be high in fat and sugar, Besides the poor nutritional diets, obesity is associated with the failure to develop internal controls, overeating, overindulging in lazy activities, and a lack of exercise (Feldman, 2016).

Along with these physical challenges that children face in their middle childhood, there are many children who have special needs which become apparent in their middle childhood.

There are some children with sensory difficulties such as visual impairment, auditory impairment, and speech impairment. Other children also have some learning disabilities such as ADHD. School age children with these sensory difficulties and learning disabilities sometimes face challenges when they are in school, and their disability may hinder their ability to learn and develop properly. Their abilities to learn and develop play a part in Erikson's industry vs inferiority stage.

In Erikson's psychosocial development theory, the industry vs inferiority stage of development is when children are trying to attain competence in meeting challenges presented by parents and peers and the world around them (Feldman, 2016). A challenge would arise if a child would fall on the inferior side of the industry vs. inferiority stage of development. If a child is not encouraged or even restricted from trying new things, they may come to feel inferior and begin to doubt their abilities thus not reaching their full potential. On the other hand, if they are encouraged and reinforced for their initiative, then they will feel competent and confident in their abilities therefore making the child have more self confidence. A child's sense of self confidence can also play a major role in their self esteem.

Self esteem is "an individual's overall self evaluation, whether that be positive or negative" (Feldman, 2016, p. 327). A positive, high self esteem is a good thing for a child to have. This shows that they are comfortable with their abilities and that they believe that they are relatively good at these things. Children with high self esteem travel a more positive path and a cycle of success (Feldman, 2016). However, with low self esteem, children feel that they are inadequate at the things that they do, and most of the time this means that they are unhappy with their abilities. This leads to consequences as they get older as the child may fall into a cycle of

failure which becomes hard to break. Typically, a child's self esteem is overall high in the beginning of their middle childhood, but it begins to go down towards the end of this stage.

When looking at middle childhood, it is important to pay attention to the challenges and opportunities which arise in this stage of their lives. While many of these challenges and opportunities come along with the child's introduction into school and different people, there are also some challenges which arise within the media.

Effect of Media on Development In Middle Childhood

Media has become something which is unavoidable, especially today. Besides social media, children are growing up watching youtube, movies and tv shows. All of this media has an influence over the development of a child. Disney movies are something which is a part of popular culture, and especially important to a child. However, what is portrayed in these Disney movies can have a long lasting impact on the children, both positively and negatively. A positive outlook on Disney movies show that the characters help with moral development. However, the stereotypical gender roles and body images which are depicted in many of the older movies may have more of a negative impact on children.

During middle childhood, children are going through the conventional stage of Kohlberg's moral development theory, where people will behave in the way that will win the approval of others (Feldman, 2016). During this part of childhood, "children's moral development increases in concern for others and actual prosocial behavior towards others." (Leeuw & Laan, 2018) This type of behavior and values are depicted in a majority of Disney movies through their characters. "with their rich content of depictions of characters acting altruistically, Disney movies may function as such a source of inspiration." (Leeuw & Laan,

2018) However, this may be one of the very few depictions of Disney that have a positive effect on development during middle childhood.

Stereotypical images and gender roles are very prominent with many of the older Disney princess movies. Many of these older movies adhere to the traditional gender depictions (Bispo, 2012), where the woman, or the princess, is a weak and submissive individual who needs a man to come to her rescue. Disney portrays these women as very affectionate, nurturing and domestic. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the gender stereotype is clearly depicted when Gaston says “It’s not right for a woman to read. Soon she starts getting ideas, and thinking—” (*Beauty and the Beast*) (Bispo, 2012). Many of the movies also portray that the ideal women’s future lifestyle is marriage (Bispo, 2012). This portrayal of women can ultimately influence a child’s view of the world. It can be harmful for children because it influences their process in character building (Hasanah & Octaviyanti, 2018).

Along with these gender stereotypes, body image is something Disney does not portray in the best light. Many of the princesses can be seen as oversexualized with a very sensual body type: a small waist, big breasts and big eyes (Bispo, 2012). A majority of the time these body types are impossible to obtain, however, this is what is seen as acceptable by society. This can affect a young girl’s future actions regarding their physical appearance (Bispo, 2012) thus resulting in low self-esteem.

When watching movies and tv shows, people tend to invest themselves in the characters. “Children will easily take the character as their idol. What happens next is they tend to make their idol as their role model of everything in life.” (Hasanah & Octaviyanti, 2018). Children are easily influenced by what they see in the media. As they grow up watching Disney movies, they are influenced by both the character’s actions as well as how they are represented in the movie.

The altruistic characters encourage children to be that way as well, however the stereotypical gender roles portrayed in the movies may influence a child's self esteem. Something to take into consideration is also that many of these things are portrayed within older Disney princess movies, and the newer movies have changed their depiction of their female characters, making them more independent from a male dominated society. While Disney movies and the princesses are something that every child loves, it may have more negative influences over a child's development than positive influences.

Conclusion

As this paper has stated, middle childhood is an important stage of a child's life. They are growing physically as well as cognitively. They are learning more as they are going to school and creating new relationships with adults and other children alike. Everything around them in their environment, influences the development of children in their middle childhood, whether it be the people in their lives to the media that is available to them. The middle childhood is a time in a child's life where they are exploring the world and discovering their sense of self. It is important to encourage children to try new things so that they can discover their abilities and meet new people.

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