The Importance of Sensory Experience for Learning: Jean Piaget’s Theory of Intellectual Development

Jean Piaget, an influential 20th century Swiss psychologist, has explained the learning process of babies and toddlers in this way:

- From the moment of birth onward, information comes into the brain through firsthand experiences with things, people, and feelings, depending entirely on the senses of vision, hearing, touch, smell, and taste. The brain adds the information to what it already knows. In Piaget’s words, the brain continually assimilates, or digests, information.

- Around 12-18 months of age, children’s brains become able to form mental pictures or symbols of things, people, and feelings. At this point, children begin to speak in their native languages, which are actually symbol systems.

- Children’s brains are now ready to change their existing knowledge to form new ideas. In Piaget’s words, the brain accommodates itself to the new idea. However, for several more years children continue to depend to a large degree on their senses and firsthand experiences for learning. Gradually they become able to picture the consequences of future events and actions with their minds in a more adult-like fashion.

- Thus, intellectual development during the rest of life, according to Piaget, is a constant simultaneous process of assimilation and accommodation through a series of stages and sub-stages, resulting in adaptation to the environment. Piaget pictured adaptation as a basically upward spiral through a series of stages and sub-stages, making possible higher and higher levels of learning.

- Human beings are programmed by nature to begin this adaptation process from birth onward, building on their genetic heritage. Intellectual potential therefore cannot be entirely predicted at birth. A stimulating, sensory environment is likely to make a significant difference in a person’s lifelong learning ability.