Lesson 3: Developmental Psychology

Development Across Childhood: Foundations for Speech and Language Therapy

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this lecture, students will be able to:

- Define developmental psychology and explain its importance in speech and language therapy.
- Describe the major stages of human development.
- Explain the typical course of language acquisition from infancy through adolescence.
- Discuss the main theories of cognitive development.
- Describe key aspects of social development and their relationship to communication.
- Identify developmental milestones in language and cognition.

3.1 Introduction to Developmental Psychology

Developmental psychology is the branch of psychology that studies how people grow and change throughout their lifespan. It examines physical, cognitive, emotional, social, and language development from conception to old age.

For speech and language therapists, developmental psychology is essential because communication skills develop gradually through predictable stages. Understanding normal development allows clinicians to distinguish between typical developmental variations and communication disorders that require intervention.

Development is influenced by both **biological factors**, such as genetics and brain maturation, and **environmental factors**, including family interactions, education, culture, and social experiences.

3.2 Stages of Human Development

Human development is generally divided into several stages, each characterized by specific developmental milestones.

Stage	Age	Major Characteristics
Prenatal	Conception to birth	Rapid brain and body development
Infancy	Birth–2 years	Motor development, attachment, first words
Early Childhood	2–6 years	Rapid language growth, symbolic thinking, play
Middle Childhood	6–12 years	School learning, reasoning, vocabulary expansion
Adolescence	12–18 years	Abstract thinking, identity development, social independence

Although development follows a predictable sequence, the rate of development varies among children.

3.3 Language Acquisition

Language acquisition is the process through which children learn to understand and use language naturally through interaction with others.

Unlike formal learning, language acquisition occurs without explicit instruction during the early years of life.

Language development includes several components:

- Phonological development
- Vocabulary development
- Grammar (syntax and morphology)
- Pragmatics (social use of language)

Stages of Language Development

Birth to 6 Months

Infants communicate primarily through crying and reflexive vocalizations.

Typical milestones include:

- Crying
- Cooing
- Responding to familiar voices
- Smiling socially

6–12 Months

During this stage, infants begin experimenting with speech sounds.

Typical milestones include:

- Babbling (e.g., *bababa*, *dadada*)
- Responding to their name
- Understanding simple words
- Using gestures such as pointing and waving

12–18 Months

Children begin producing their first meaningful words.

Typical milestones include:

- Vocabulary of about 10–50 words
- Following simple commands
- Naming familiar people and objects

18–24 Months

Vocabulary expands rapidly.

Typical milestones include:

- Approximately 50–200 words
- Two-word combinations
- Simple requests

Example:

"Mommy come."

2–3 Years

Language develops rapidly.

Children begin:

- Using simple sentences
- Asking questions
- Following two-step instructions
- Naming common objects

Vocabulary may exceed 300 words.

3–5 Years

Children become increasingly fluent speakers.

Typical abilities include:

- Speaking in complete sentences

- Using correct grammar most of the time
- Telling simple stories
- Understanding basic concepts of time and space

School Age

Language becomes more sophisticated.

Children develop:

- Academic vocabulary
- Reading and writing skills
- Figurative language comprehension
- Complex grammar
- Conversational skills

3.4 Theories of Language Acquisition

Several theories explain how children acquire language.

Behaviorist Theory (B. F. Skinner)

Skinner proposed that children learn language through imitation, reinforcement, and repetition.

Parents reward correct language use, encouraging further learning.

Nativist Theory (Noam Chomsky)

Chomsky argued that humans are biologically prepared to learn language.

He proposed the existence of a **Language Acquisition Device (LAD)**, an innate mechanism that enables children to acquire language rapidly.

Social Interactionist Theory (Lev Vygotsky)

Vygotsky emphasized the importance of social interaction.

According to this theory, language develops through communication with parents, caregivers, teachers, and peers.

Speech develops within meaningful social contexts.

8.5 Cognitive Development

Cognitive development refers to changes in thinking, reasoning, memory, attention, and problem-solving abilities.

One of the most influential theories was proposed by **Jean Piaget**.

Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development

Sensorimotor Stage (Birth–2 Years)

Children learn through sensory experiences and physical actions.

Major achievement:

- Object permanence

Preoperational Stage (2–7 Years)

Children begin using language and symbols.

Characteristics include:

- Symbolic play
- Egocentrism
- Limited logical thinking

Concrete Operational Stage (7–11 Years)

Children begin logical thinking about concrete objects.

They understand:

- Conservation
- Classification
- Seriation

Formal Operational Stage (11 Years and Older)

Adolescents develop abstract reasoning.

They can:

- Solve hypothetical problems
- Think scientifically
- Plan for the future

3.6 Social Development

Social development refers to learning how to interact effectively with others.

It includes:

- Forming relationships
- Understanding emotions
- Developing empathy

- Learning social rules
- Building communication skills

Social development begins during infancy and continues throughout life.

Attachment

Attachment is the emotional bond between a child and caregiver.

Secure attachment promotes:

- Emotional security
- Confidence
- Better communication
- Healthy social relationships

Children with insecure attachment may experience difficulties in emotional regulation and social communication.

Play and Social Learning

Play is one of the most important contexts for development.

Through play, children learn:

- Turn-taking
- Cooperation
- Sharing
- Problem solving
- Communication

Speech and language therapists often use play-based interventions to encourage communication.

3.7 Developmental Milestones

Developmental milestones are skills that most children achieve within a typical age range.

Examples include:

Age	Typical Language Milestone
6 months	Babbling
12 months	First meaningful words
18 months	Vocabulary of approximately 50 words
24 months	Two-word combinations
3 years	Simple conversations
5 years	Complete sentences with understandable speech

Milestones serve as guidelines rather than exact expectations. Some variation in the timing of development is normal.

3.8 Importance of Developmental Psychology in Speech and Language Therapy

Knowledge of developmental psychology enables speech-language therapists to:

- Identify typical and atypical language development.
- Detect developmental delays at an early stage.
- Select age-appropriate assessment tools.
- Design individualized intervention programs.
- Educate parents and teachers about normal developmental expectations.
- Monitor children's progress during therapy.

Key Points

- Developmental psychology studies changes in behavior, cognition, language, and social functioning across the lifespan.
- Children progress through predictable developmental stages, although the rate of development varies.
- Language acquisition begins at birth and develops rapidly during the first five years of life.
- Piaget described four stages of cognitive development that explain changes in children's thinking.
- Social interaction plays a crucial role in language and communication development.
- Developmental milestones help clinicians monitor children's progress and identify possible developmental delays.

Interactive Activities

Matching Developmental Milestones

Students match developmental milestones to the appropriate age group.

Example

Milestone	Age
First meaningful words	____
Babbling	____
Two-word combinations	____
Symbolic play	____
Abstract thinking	____

Assessment: Multiple-Choice Quiz

1. Developmental psychology primarily studies:

A. Mental illness only
B. Human growth and change across the lifespan ✔
C. Speech disorders only
D. Brain anatomy only

2. At approximately what age do most children produce their first meaningful words?

A. 3 months
B. 6 months
C. **12 months ✔**
D. 3 years

3. According to Piaget, object permanence develops during which stage?

A. Preoperational
B. Concrete Operational
C. Formal Operational
D. **Sensorimotor ✔**

4. Which theorist proposed the Language Acquisition Device (LAD)?

A. Jean Piaget
B. Lev Vygotsky
C. B. F. Skinner
D. **Noam Chomsky ✔**

5. Which activity best supports language and social development in young children?

A. Memorizing facts
B. Watching television alone
C. **Interactive play with caregivers and peers ✔**
D. Completing written examinations

Suggested Reading

- Berk, L. E. (2023). *Development Through the Lifespan* (8th ed.). Pearson.
- Owens, R. E. (2024). *Language Development: An Introduction* (11th ed.). Pearson.
- Santrock, J. W. (2024). *Life-Span Development* (19th ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). *Typical Speech and Language Development*.