Fact sheet 1.4 Testing Piaget's theories

Learning aim C: Cognitive development from birth up to eight years

Pre-operational stage (2–7 years): Egocentrism

During this stage, children develop their skills in using symbols, i.e. language. Many early years professionals will find that children in this stage are using a lot of imaginative play, for example, using objects in a representational way: sticks may become guns or cardboard boxes may become cars. Piaget did divide this stage into two further sub-stages – preconceptual and intuitive – but there are four main features that run through both of these sub-stages:

- egocentrism
- difficulty with conservation
- centration
- animism.

These sub-stages are particularly helpful in explaining children's thought processes and approach to problem-solving.

According to Piaget, children in the pre-operational stage tend to see things from their own perspective and thus their logic is different from that of adults. Piaget called this egocentrism and this is a strong feature of the whole of the intuitive stage. Piaget designed several tests that showed the way in which children were seeing problems, one of the most famous being the Swiss mountain scene test. In this test children were shown a model of a mountain range. A doll was put in the scene and the children were shown a series of photos and asked which of the views the doll would be able to see. Children under seven years consistently chose a photo that corresponded to the view they were seeing themselves. Piaget argued that this was because they could not 'decentre', i.e. take themselves out of their bodies and see something from another perspective. Egocentrism explains why children may not always take an overview when solving problems and instead focus on the detail. For example, they might be interested in finding their favourite parts in a construction set rather than thinking about what might be needed to build a tower.

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