

A young girl with long dark hair, wearing a bright green jacket and a pink hair tie, is shown in profile, reaching out with both hands towards a large, iridescent bubble. The background is a soft-focus green field with trees. The overall mood is joyful and curious.

# Psychology 172

## Developmental Psychology

**Life Span Development**  
**By Lumen Learning**  
Edited for College of the Canyons

*Photo Taken by [Leo Rivas-Micoud](#)*



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# Chapter Six: Middle Childhood

**Objectives: At the end of this lesson, you will be able to**

1. Describe physical growth during middle childhood.
2. Prepare recommendations to avoid health risks in school-aged children.
3. Describe recognized examples of concrete operational intelligence.
4. Define conservation, reversibility, and identity in concrete operational intelligence.
5. Explain information processing theory of memory.
6. Characterize language development in middle childhood.
7. Compare pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional moral development.
8. Define learning disability and describe dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
9. Evaluate the impact of labeling on children's self-concept and social relationships.
10. Explain the rationale for identifying childhood conditions as spectrum disorders.
11. Explain the controversy over the use of standardized testing in schools.
12. Compare Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences and Sternberg's triarchic theory of intelligence.
13. Compare aptitude and achievement tests.
14. Apply the ecological systems model to explore children's experiences in schools.
15. Examine social relationships in middle childhood.
16. Characterize the incidence and impact of sexual abuse in middle childhood.
17. Analyze the impact of family structure on children's development.
18. Describe the developmental stages of stepfamilies.

## Introduction

Middle childhood is the period of life that begins when children enter school and lasts until they reach adolescence. Think for a moment about children this age that you may know. What are their lives like? What kinds of concerns do they express and with what kinds of activities are their days filled? If it were possible, would you want to return to this period of life? Why or why not? Early childhood and adolescence seem to get much more attention than middle childhood. Perhaps this is because growth patterns slow at this time, the Id becomes hidden during the latent stage, according to Freud, and children spend much more time in schools, with friends, and in structured activities. It may be easy for parents to lose track of their children's development unless they stay directly involved in these worlds. I think it is important to stop and give full attention to middle childhood to stay in touch with these children and to take notice of the varied influences on their lives in a larger world.

## Physical Development: A Healthy Time (Ob 1)

### Growth Rates and Motor Skills

Rates of growth generally slow during these years. Typically, a child will gain about five to seven pounds a year and grow about two inches per year. They also tend to slim down and gain muscle strength and lung capacity making it possible to engage in strenuous physical activity for long periods of time. The brain reaches its adult size at about age seven. The school-aged child is better able to plan and coordinate activity using both left and right hemispheres of the brain, and to control emotional outbursts. Paying attention is also improved as the prefrontal cortex matures. And as myelin continues to develop, the child's reaction time improves as well. One result of the slower rate of growth is an improvement in motor skills. Children of this age tend to sharpen their abilities to perform both gross motor skills such as riding a bike and fine motor skills such as cutting their fingernails.

### Organized Sports: Pros and Cons

Middle childhood seems to be a great time to introduce children to organized sports. And in fact, many parents do. Nearly three million children play soccer in the United States (NPR "Youth Soccer Coaches Encouraged to Ease Regimen" story 5/24/06). This activity promises to help children build social skills, improve athletically and learn a sense of competition. It has been suggested, however, that the emphasis on competition and athletic skill can be counterproductive and lead children to grow tired of the game and want to quit. In many respects, it appears that children's activities are no longer children's activities once adults become involved and approach the games as adults rather than children. The U. S. Soccer Federation recently advised coaches to reduce the amount of drilling engaged in during practice and to allow children to play more freely and to choose their own positions. The hope is that this will build on their love of the game and foster their natural talents.

## New Concerns (Ob2)

### Childhood Obesity

**Rates:** About sixteen to thirty three percent of American children are obese (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005g; [http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts\\_for\\_families/obesity\\_in\\_children\\_and\\_teens](http://www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/obesity_in_children_and_teens)). This is defined as being at least twenty percent over their ideal weight. The percentage of obesity in school aged children has increased substantially since the 1960s and has in fact doubled since the 1980s.

**Reasons:** This is true in part because of the introduction of a steady diet of television and other sedentary activities. In addition, we have come to emphasize high fat, fast foods as a culture. Pizza, hamburgers, chicken nuggets and "lunchables" with soda have replaced more nutritious foods as staples.

**Consequences:** Children who are overweight tend to be ridiculed and teased by others. This can certainly be damaging to their self-image and popularity. In addition, obese children run the risk of suffering orthopedic problems such as knee injuries, and an increased risk of heart disease and stroke in adulthood. It's hard for a child who is obese to become a non-obese adult. In addition, the number of cases of pediatric diabetes has risen dramatically in recent years.

**Recommendations:** Dieting is not really the answer. If you diet, your basal metabolic rate tends to decrease, thereby making the body burn even fewer calories in order to maintain the weight. Increased activity is much more effective in lowering the weight and improving the child's health and psychological well-being. Exercise reduces stress and being an overweight child subjected to the ridicule of others can certainly be stressful. Parents should take caution against emphasizing diet alone to avoid the development of any obsession about dieting that can lead to eating disorders as teens. Again, increasing a child's activity level is most helpful.

**A Look at School Lunches:** Many children in the United States buy their lunches in the school cafeteria, so it might be worthwhile to look at the nutritional content of school lunches. You can obtain this information through your local school district's website. An example of a school menu and nutritional analysis from a school district in north central Texas is a meal consisting of pasta Alfredo, a bread stick, a peach cup, tomato soup, a brownie, and 2% milk and is in compliance with Federal Nutritional Guidelines of 1008 calories, 24 % protein, 55 % carbohydrates, 27% fat, and 8% saturated fats, according to the website. Students may also purchase chips, cookies, or ice cream along with their meals. Many school districts rely on the sale of desert and other items in the lunchrooms to make additional revenues. Many children purchase these additional items and so our look at their nutritional intake should also take this into consideration.

Consider another menu from an elementary school in the state of Washington. This sample meal consists of chicken burger, tater tots, fruit and veggies and 1% or nonfat milk. This meal is also in compliance with Federal Nutrition Guidelines but has about 300 fewer calories. And, children are not allowed to purchase additional deserts such as cookies or ice cream.

Of course, children eat away from school as well. Go to <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4818154> and listen to a story about how advertising and fast food restaurant locations may influence children's diets.

### **Cognitive Development**

Recall from our last lesson on early childhood that preschool children are in the preoperational stage, according to Piaget, and during this stage children are learning to think symbolically about the world.



## Concrete Operational Thought (Ob3; Ob4)

From ages seven to eleven, the school-aged child is in what Piaget referred to as the concrete operational stage of cognitive development. This involves mastering the use of logic in concrete ways. The child can use logic to solve problems tied to their own direct experience but has trouble solving hypothetical problems or considering more abstract problems. The child uses **inductive reasoning** which means thinking that the world reflects one's own personal experience. For example, a child has one friend who is rude, another friend who is also rude, and the same is true for a third friend. The child may conclude that friends are rude. (We will see that this way of thinking tends to change during adolescence, being replaced with deductive reasoning.)

The word concrete refers to that which is tangible; that which can be seen or touched or experienced directly. The concrete operational child is able to make use of logical principles in solving problems involving the physical world. For example, the child can understand principles of cause and effect, as well as size and distance constancy.

**Classification:** As children's experiences and vocabularies grow, they build schema and are able to classify objects in many different ways.

**Identity:** One feature of concrete operational thought is the understanding that objects have an identity or qualities that do not change even if the object is altered in some way. For instance, the mass of an object does not change by rearranging it. A piece of chalk is still chalk even when the piece is broken in two.

**Reversibility:** The child learns that some things that have been changed can be returned to their original state. Water can be frozen and then thawed to become liquid again. But eggs cannot be unscrambled. Arithmetic operations are reversible as well:  $2 + 3 = 5$  and  $5 - 3 = 2$ . Many of these cognitive skills are incorporated into the school's curriculum through mathematical problems and in worksheets about which situations are reversible or irreversible. (If you have access to children's school papers, look for examples of these.)

**Reciprocity:** Remember the example in our last lesson of children thinking that a tall beaker filled with 8 ounces of water was "more" than a short, wide bowl filled with 8 ounces of water? Concrete operational children can understand the concept of reciprocity which means that changing one quality (in this example, height or water level) can be compensated for by changes in another quality (width). So there is the same amount of water in each container although one is taller and narrower and the other is shorter and wider.

These new cognitive skills increase the child's understanding of the physical world. Operational or logical thought about the abstract world comes later.

## Information Processing Theory (Ob5)

Information processing theory is a classic theory of memory that compares the way in which the mind works to a computer storing, processing and retrieving information.

There are three levels of memory:

**1) Sensory register:** Information first enters our sensory register. Stop reading and look around the room very quickly. (Yes, really. Do it!) Okay. What do you remember? Chances are, not much. Everything you saw and heard entered into your sensory register. And although you might have heard yourself sigh, caught a glimpse of your dog walking across the room, and smelled the soup on the stove, you did not register those sensations. Sensations are continuously coming into our brains, and yet most of these sensations are never really perceived or stored in our minds. They are lost after a few seconds because they were immediately filtered out as irrelevant, or replaced with newer sensory information. If the information is not perceived or stored, it is discarded quickly.

**2) Working memory** (short-term memory): If information is meaningful (either because it reminds us of something else or because we must remember it for something like a history test we will be taking in five minutes), it makes its way into our working memory. This consists of information of which we are immediately aware. All of the things on your mind at this moment are part of your working memory. There is a limited amount of information that can be kept in the working memory at any given time. So, if you are given too much information at a time, you may lose some of it. (Have you ever been writing down notes in a class and the instructor speaks too quickly for you to get it all in your notes? You are trying to get it down and out of your working memory to make room for new information and if you cannot "dump" that information onto your paper and out of your mind quickly enough, you lose what has been said.) Information in our working memory must be stored in an effective way in order to be accessible to us for later use. It is stored in our long-term memory or our knowledge base.

**3) Knowledge base** (long-term memory): This level of memory has an almost unlimited capacity and stores information for days, months or years. It consists of things that we know of or can remember if asked. This is where you want important information to ultimately be stored. The essential thing to remember about storage is that it must be done in a meaningful or effective way. In other words, if you simply try to repeat something several times (maintenance rehearsal) in order to remember it, you may only be able to remember the sound of the word rather than the meaning of the concept. So if you are asked to explain the meaning of the word or to apply a concept in some way, you will be lost. Studying involves organizing information in a meaningful way for later retrieval. Passively reading a text is usually inadequate and should be thought of as the first step in learning material. Writing key words, thinking of examples to illustrate their

meaning, and considering ways that concepts are related are all techniques helpful for organizing information for effective storage and later retrieval.

During middle childhood, children are able to learn and remember due to an improvement in the ways they attend to and store information. As children enter school and learn more about the world, they develop more categories for concepts and learn more efficient strategies for storing and retrieving information. One significant reason is that they continue to have more experiences on which to tie new information. New experiences are similar to old ones or remind the child of something else about which they know. This helps them file away new experiences more easily.

They also have a better understanding of how well they are performing on a task and the level of difficulty of a task. As they become more realistic about their abilities, they can adapt studying strategies to meet those needs. While preschoolers may spend as much time on an unimportant aspect of a problem as they do on the main point, school aged children start to learn to prioritize and gauge what is significant and what is not. They develop **metacognition** or the ability to understand the best way to figure out a problem. They gain more tools and strategies (such as "i before e except after c" so they know that "receive" is correct but "recieve" is not.)

## **Language Development (Ob6)**

### **Vocabulary**

One of the reasons that children can classify objects in so many ways is that they have acquired a vocabulary to do so. By 5th grade, a child's vocabulary has grown to forty thousand words. It grows at the rate of twenty words per day, a rate that exceeds that of preschoolers. This language explosion, however, differs from that of preschoolers because it is facilitated by being able to associate new words with those already known and because it is accompanied by a more sophisticated understanding of the meanings of a word.

### **New Understanding**

The child is also able to think of objects in less literal ways. For example, if asked for the first word that comes to mind when one hears the word "pizza", the preschooler is likely to say "eat" or some word that describes what is done with a pizza. However, the school-aged child is more likely to place pizza in the appropriate category and say "food" or "carbohydrate".

This sophistication of vocabulary is also evidenced in the fact that school-aged children are able to tell jokes and delight in doing so. They may use jokes that involve plays on words such as "knock-knock" jokes, or jokes with punch lines. Preschoolers do not understand plays on words and rely on telling "jokes" that are literal or slapstick such as "A man fell down in the mud! Isn't that funny?"



### **Grammar and Flexibility**

School-aged children are also able to learn new rules of grammar with more flexibility. While preschoolers are likely to be reluctant to give up saying "I goed there", school-aged children will learn this rather quickly along with other exceptions to the rules of grammar.

While the preschool years might be a good time to learn a second language (being able to understand and speak the language), the school years may be the best time to be taught a second language (the rules of grammar).

### **Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development (Ob7)**

Lawrence Kohlberg (1963) built on the work of Piaget and was interested in finding out how our moral reasoning changes as we get older. He wanted to find out how people decide what is right and what is wrong. In order to explore this area, he read a story containing a moral dilemma to boys of different age groups. In the story, a man is trying to obtain an expensive drug that his wife needs in order to treat her cancer. The man has no money and no one will loan him the money he requires. He begs the pharmacist to reduce the price, but the pharmacist refuses. So, the man decides to break into the pharmacy to steal the drug. Then Kohlberg asked the children to decide whether the man was right or wrong in his choice. Kohlberg was not interested in whether they said the man was right or wrong, he was interested in finding out how they arrived at such a decision. He wanted to know what they thought made something right or wrong.

**Pre-conventional moral development:** The youngest subjects seemed to answer based on what would happen to the man as a result of the act. For example, they might say the man should not break into the pharmacy because the pharmacist might find him and beat him. Or they might say that the man should break in and steal the drug and his wife will give him a big kiss. Right or wrong, both decisions were based on what would physically happen to the man as a result of the act. This is a self-centered approach to moral decision-making. He called this most superficial understanding of right and wrong **pre-conventional moral development**.

**Conventional moral development:** Middle childhood boys seemed to base their answers on what other people would think of the man as a result of his act. For instance, they might say he should break into the store, and then everyone would think he was a good husband. Or, he shouldn't because it is against the law. In either case, right and wrong is determined by what other people think. A good decision is one that gains the approval of others or one that complies with the law. This he called **conventional moral development**.

**Post-conventional moral development:** Older children were the only ones to appreciate the fact that this story has different levels of right and wrong. Right and wrong are based on social contracts established for the good of everyone or on universal principles

of right and wrong that transcend the self and social convention. For example, the man should break into the store because, even if it is against the law, the wife needs the drug and her life is more important than the consequences the man might face for breaking the law. Or, the man should not violate the principle of the right of property because this rule is essential for social order. In either case, the person's judgment goes beyond what happens to the self. It is based on a concern for others; for society as a whole or for an ethical standard rather than a legal standard. This level is called **post-conventional moral development** because it goes beyond convention or what other people think to a higher, universal ethical principle of conduct that may or may not be reflected in the law. Notice that such thinking (the kind Supreme Court justices do all day in deliberating whether a law is moral or ethical, etc.) requires being able to think abstractly. Often this is not accomplished until a person reaches adolescence or adulthood.

Consider your own decision-making processes. What guides your decisions? Are you primarily concerned with your personal well-being? Do you make choices based on what other people will think about your decision? Or are you guided by other principles? To what extent is this approach guided by your culture?

### **Developmental Problems (Ob8; Ob10)**

Children's cognitive and social skills are evaluated as they enter and progress through school. Sometimes this evaluation indicates that a child needs special assistance with language or in learning how to interact with others. Evaluation and diagnosis of a child can be the first step in helping to provide that child with the type of instruction and resources needed. But diagnosis and labeling also have **social implications**. It is important to consider that children can be misdiagnosed and that once a child has received a diagnostic label, the child, teachers, and family members may tend to interpret actions of the child through that label. The label can also influence the child's self-concept. Consider, for example, a child who is misdiagnosed as learning disabled. That child may expect to have difficulties in school, lack confidence, and out of these expectations, have trouble indeed. This **self-fulfilling prophecy** or tendency to act in such a way as to make what you predict will happen come true, calls our attention to the power that labels can have whether or not they are accurately applied. It is also important to consider that children's difficulties can change over time; a child who has problems in school, may improve later or may live under circumstances as an adult where the problem (such as a delay in math skills or reading skills) is no longer relevant. That person, however, will still have a label as learning disabled. It should be recognized that the distinction between abnormal and normal behavior is not always clear; some abnormal behavior in children is fairly common. Misdiagnosis may be more of a concern when evaluating learning difficulties than in cases of autism spectrum disorder where unusual behaviors are clear and consistent.

Keeping these cautionary considerations in mind, let's turn our attention to some developmental and learning difficulties.

## **Autism Spectrum Disorders**

The estimate published by the Center for Disease Control (2006) is that about one out of every one hundred sixty six children in the United States has an autism spectrum disorder. Autism spectrum disorders include autism, Asperger's syndrome, and pervasive developmental disabilities. Many of these children are not identified until they reach school age. In 2003, about 141,000 children received special education through the public schools (Center for Disease Control, 2006). These disorders are found in all racial and ethnic groups and are more common in boys than in girls. All of these disorders are marked by difficulty in social interactions, problems in various areas of communication, and in difficulty with altering patterns or daily routines. There is no single cause of ASDs and the causes of these disorders are to a large extent, unknown. In cases involving identical twins, if one twin has autism, the other is also autistic about seventy five percent of the time. Rubella, fragile X syndrome and PKU that has been untreated are some of the medical conditions associated with risks of autism.

None of these disorders are curable. Some individuals benefit from medications that alleviate some of the symptoms of ASDs. But the most effective treatments involve behavioral intervention and teaching techniques used to promote the development of language and social skills, and to structure learning environments that accommodate the needs of these children.

**Autism** is a developmental disorder more commonly known than Asperger's or Pervasive Developmental disorders. A person with autism has difficulty with, and a lack of interest in learning language. An autistic child may respond to a question by repeating the question or might rarely speak. Sometimes autistic children learn more difficult words before simple words or complicated tasks before easier ones. The child has difficulty reading social cues like the meanings of non-verbal gestures such as a wave of the hand or the emotion associated with a frown. Intense sensitivity to touch or visual stimulation may also be experienced. Autistic children generally have poor social skills and are unable to communicate with others or empathize with others emotionally. An autistic child views the world differently and learns differently than others. Autistic children tend to prefer routines and patterns and become upset when routines are altered. For example, moving the furniture or changing the daily schedule can be very upsetting.

**Asperger's syndrome** is considered by some to be the same as high functioning autism. Others suggest that Asperger's disorder is different from autism in that language development is generally not delayed (Medline Plus, 2006). A person with Asperger's syndrome does not experience cognitive developmental delays, but has difficulty in social interactions. This person may be identified as strange by others, may have difficulty reading or identifying with other people's emotions, and may prefer routine and become upset if routines are disrupted. Many people with Asperger's syndrome may have above average intelligence and may have an intense focus of interests in a

particular field. For example, a person may be extremely interested in and knowledgeable about cars. Another might be very interested in the smell of people's shoes.

**Pervasive developmental disorder** is a term used to refer to difficulties in socialization and delays in developing communicative skills. This is usually recognized before three years of age. A child with PDD may interact in unusual ways with toys, people, or situations, and may engage in repetitive movement.

### **Learning Disabilities (Ob8)**

**What is a learning disability?** The spectrum disorders just described impact many areas of the child's life. And if a child is intellectually challenged, that child is typically slow in all areas of learning. However, a child with a learning disability has problems in a specific area or with a specific task or type of activity related to education. A learning difficulty refers to a deficit in a child's ability to perform an expected academic skill (Berger, 2005). These difficulties are identified in school because this is when children's academic abilities are being tested, compared, and measured. Consequently, once academic testing is no longer essential in that person's life (as when they are working rather than going to school) these disabilities may no longer be noticed or relevant, depending on the person's job and the extent of the disability.

**Dyslexia** is one of the most commonly diagnosed disabilities and involves having difficulty in the area of reading. This diagnosis is used for a number of reading difficulties. For example, the child may reverse letters or have difficulty reading from left to right or may have problems associating letters with sounds. It appears to be rooted in some neurological problems involving the parts of the brain active in recognizing letters, verbally responding, or being able to manipulate sounds (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, 2006). Treatment typically involves altering teaching methods to accommodate the person's particular problematic area.

**Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder** is considered a neurological and behavioral disorder in which a person has difficulty staying on task, screening out distractions, and inhibiting behavioral outbursts. The most commonly recommended treatment involves the use of medication, structuring the classroom environment to keep distractions at a minimum, tutoring, and teaching parents how to set limits and encourage age-appropriate behavior (NINDS, 2006).

### **Schools and Testing (Ob11; Ob13)**

#### **The Controversy over Testing In Schools**

Children's academic performance is often measured with the use of standardized tests. Achievement tests are used to measure what a child has already learned. **Achievement tests** are often used as measures of teaching effectiveness within a school setting and as a method to make schools that receive tax dollars (such as public

schools, charter schools, and private schools that receive vouchers) accountable to the government for their performance. In 2001, President George W. Bush signed into effect the **No Child Left Behind Act** mandating that schools administer achievement tests to students and publish those results so that parents have an idea of their children's performance and the government has information on the gaps in educational achievement between children from various social class, racial, and ethnic groups. Schools that show significant gaps in these levels of performance are to work toward narrowing these gaps. Educators have criticized the policy for focusing too much on testing as the only indication of performance levels.

**Aptitude tests** are designed to measure a student's ability to learn or to determine if a person has potential in a particular program. These are often used at the beginning of a course of study or as part of college entrance requirements. The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) are perhaps the most familiar aptitude tests to students in grades 6 and above. Learning test taking skills and preparing for SATs has become part of the training that some students in these grades receive as part of their pre-college preparation. Other aptitude tests include the MCAT (Medical College Admission Test), the LSAT (Law School Admission Test), and the GRE (Graduate Record Examination). Intelligence tests are also a form of aptitude test designed to measure a person's potential to succeed in school.

### Theories of Intelligence (Ob12)

Intelligence tests and psychological definitions of intelligence have been heavily criticized since the 1970s for being biased in favor of Anglo-American, middle-class respondents and for being inadequate tools for measuring non-academic types of intelligence or talent. Intelligence changes with experience and intelligence quotients or scores do not reflect that ability to change. What is considered smart varies culturally as well, and most intelligence tests do not take this variation into account. For example, in the west, being smart is associated with being quick. A person who answers a question the fastest is seen as the smartest. But in some cultures, being smart is associated with considering an idea thoroughly before giving an answer. A well-thought out, contemplative answer is the best answer.

What do you think? As an adult, what kind of intellectual skills do you consider to be most important for your success? Consequently, how would you define intelligence?

### Multiple Intelligences

Gardner (1983, 1998, 1999) suggests that there are nine different domains of intelligence. The first three are skills that are measured by IQ tests:

- **Logical-mathematical:** the ability to solve mathematical problems; problems of logic, numerical patterns
- **Linguistic:** vocabulary, reading comprehension, function of language
- **Spatial:** visual accuracy, ability to read maps, understand space and distance



The next six represent skills that are not measured in standard IQ tests but are talents or abilities that can also be important for success in a variety of fields: These are:

- **Musical:** ability to understand patterns in music, hear pitches, recognize rhythms and melodies
- **Bodily-kinesthetic:** motor coordination, grace of movement, agility, strength
- **Naturalistic:** knowledge of plants, animals, minerals, climate, weather
- **Interpersonal:** understand the emotion, mood, motivation of others; able to communicate effectively
- **Intrapersonal:** understanding of the self, mood, motivation, temperament, realistic knowledge of strengths, weaknesses
- **Existential:** concern about and understanding of life's larger questions, meaning of life, or spiritual matters

Gardner contends that these are also forms of intelligence. A high IQ does not always ensure success in life or necessarily indicate that a person has common sense, good interpersonal skills or other abilities important for success.

### **Triarchic Theory of Intelligence**

Another alternative view of intelligence is presented by Sternberg (1997; 1999). Sternberg offers three types of intelligences. Sternberg provided background information about his view of intelligence in a conference I attended several years ago. He described his frustration as a committee member charged with selecting graduate students for a program in psychology. He was concerned that there was too much emphasis placed on aptitude test scores and believed that there were other, less easily measured qualities necessary for success in a graduate program and in the world of work. Aptitude test scores indicate the first type of intelligence-academic.

- **Academic (componential):** includes the ability to solve problems of logic, verbal comprehension, vocabulary, and spatial abilities.

Sternberg noted that students who have high academic abilities may still not have what is required to be a successful graduate student or a competent professional. To do well as a graduate student, he noted, the person needs to be creative. The second type of intelligence emphasizes this quality.

- **Creative (experiential):** the ability to apply newly found skills to novel situations.

A potential graduate student might be strong academically and have creative ideas, but still be lacking in the social skills required to work effectively with others or to practice good judgment in a variety of situations. This common sense is the third type of intelligence.

- **Practical (contextual):** the ability to use common sense and to know what is called for in a situation.

This type of intelligence helps a person know when problems need to be solved. Practical intelligence can help a person know how to act and what to wear for job interviews, when to get out of problematic relationships, how to get along with others at work, and when to make changes to reduce stress.

Let's apply these theories of intelligence to the world of children. To what extent are these types of intelligences cultivated at home and in the schools?

### **The World of School (Ob14)**

Remember the ecological systems model that we explored in Lesson 2? This model helps us understand an individual by examining the contexts in which the person lives and the direct and indirect influences on that person's life. School becomes a very important component of children's lives during middle childhood and one way to understand children is to look at the world of school. We have discussed educational policies that impact the curriculum in schools above. Now let's focus on the school experience from the standpoint of the student, the teacher and parent relationship, and the cultural messages or hidden curriculum taught in school in the United States.

**Parental Involvement in School:** Parents vary in their level of involvement with their children's schools. Teachers often complain that they have difficulty getting parents to participate in their child's education and devise a variety of techniques to keep parents in touch with daily and overall progress. For example, parents may be required to sign a behavior chart each evening to be returned to school or may be given information about the school's events through websites and newsletters. There are other factors that need to be considered when looking at parental involvement. To explore these, first ask yourself if all parents who enter the school with concerns about their child be received in the same way? If not, what would make a teacher or principal more likely to consider the parent's concerns? What would make this less likely? Lareau and Horvat (2004) found that teachers seek a particular type of involvement from particular types of parents. While teachers thought they were open and neutral in their responses to parental involvement, in reality teachers were most receptive to support, praise and agreement coming from parents who were most similar in race and social class with the teachers. Parents who criticized the school or its policies were less likely to be given voice. Parents who have higher levels of income, occupational status, and other qualities favored in society have **family capital**. This is a form of power that can be used to improve a child's education. Parents who do not have these qualities may find it more difficult to be effectively involved. Lareau and Horvat (2004) offer three cases of African-American parents who were each concerned about discrimination in the schools. Despite evidence that such discrimination existed, their children's white, middle-class teachers were reluctant to address the situation directly. Note the variation in approaches and outcomes for these three families:

**The Masons:** This working class, African-American couple, a minister and a beautician, voiced direct complaints about discrimination in the schools. Their claims were thought to undermine the authority of the school and as a result, their daughter was kept in a lower reading class. However, her grade was boosted to "avoid a scene" and the parents were not told of this grade change.

**The Irvings:** This middle class, African-American couple was concerned that the school was discriminating against black students. They fought against it without using direct confrontation by staying actively involved in their daughter's schooling and making frequent visits to the school so make sure that discrimination could not occur. They also talked with other African-American teachers and parents about their concerns.

**Ms. Caldron:** This poor, single-parent was concerned about discrimination in the school. She was a recovering drug addict receiving welfare. She did not discuss her concerns with other parents because she did not know the other parents and did not monitor her child's progress or get involved with the school. She felt that her concerns would not receive attention. She requested spelling lists from the teacher on several occasions but did not receive them. The teacher complained that Ms. Caldron did not sign forms that were sent home for her signature.

Working within the system without direct confrontation seemed to yield better results for the Irvings, although the issue of discrimination in the school was not completely addressed. Ms. Caldron was the least involved and felt powerless in the school setting. Her lack of family capital and lack of knowledge and confidence keep her from addressing her concerns with the teachers. What do you think would happen if she directly addressed the teachers and complained about discrimination? Chances are, she would be dismissed as undermining the authority of the school, just as the Masons, and might be thought to lack credibility because of her poverty and drug addiction. The authors of this study suggest that teachers closely examine their biases against parents. Schools may also need to examine their ability to dialogue with parents about school policies in more open ways. What happens when parents have concerns over school policy or view student problems as arising from flaws in the educational system? How are parents who are critical of the school treated? And are their children treated fairly even when the school is being criticized? Certainly, any efforts to improve effective parental involvement should address these concerns.

### **Student Perspectives**

Imagine being a third grader for one day in public school. What would the daily routine involve? To what extent would the institution dictate the activities of the day and how much of the day would you spend on those activities? Would you always be 'on task'? What would you say if someone asked you how your day went? Or "What happened in school today?" Chances are, you would be more inclined to talk about

whom you sat at lunch with or who brought a puppy to class than to describe how fractions are added. Ethnographer and Professor of Education Peter McLaren (1999) describes the student's typical day as filled with constrictive and unnecessary ritual that has a damaging effect on the desire to learn. Students move between various states as they negotiate the demands of the school system and their own personal interests. The majority of the day (298 minutes) takes place in the **student state**. This state is one in which the student focuses on a task or tries to stay focused on a task, is passive, compliant, and often frustrated. Long pauses before getting out the next book or finding materials sometimes indicate that frustration. The **street corner** state is one in which the child is playful, energetic, excited, and expresses personal opinions, feelings, and beliefs. About 66 minutes a day take place in this state. Children try to maximize this by going slowly to assemblies or when getting a hall pass-always eager to say 'hello' to a friend or to wave if one of their classmates who is in another room. This is the state in which friends talk and play. In fact, teachers sometimes reward students with opportunities to move freely or to talk or to be themselves. But when students initiate the street corner state on their own, they risk losing recess time, getting extra homework, or being ridiculed in front of their peers. The **home state** occurs when parents or siblings visit the school. Children in this state may enjoy special privileges such as going home early or being exempt from certain school rules in the mother's presence. Or it can be difficult if the parent is there to discuss trouble at school with a staff member. The **sanctity state** is a time in which the child is contemplative, quiet, or prayerful and is a very brief part of the day.

Since students seem to have so much enthusiasm and energy in street corner states, what would happen if the student state and street corner state could be combined? Would it be possible? Many educators feel concern about the level of stress children experience in school. Some stress can be attributed to problems in friendship. And some can be a result of the emphasis on testing and grades, as reflected in a Newsweek article entitled "The New First Grade: Are Kids Getting Pushed Too Fast Too Soon?" (Tyre, 2006). This article reports concerns of a principal who worries that students begin to burn out as early as third grade. In the book, *The Homework Myth: Why Our Kids Get Too Much of a Bad Thing*, Kohn (2006) argues that neither research nor experience support claims that homework reinforces learning and builds responsibility. Why do schools assign homework so frequently? A look at cultural influences on education may provide some answers.

### **Cultural Influences**

Another way to examine the world of school is to look at the cultural values, concepts, behaviors and roles that are part of the school experience but are not part of the formal curriculum. These are part of the **hidden curriculum** but are nevertheless very powerful messages. The hidden curriculum includes ideas of patriotism, gender roles, the ranking of occupations and classes, competition, and other values. Teachers, counselors, and other students specify and make known what is considered appropriate for girls and boys. The gender curriculum continues into high school, college, and professional

school. Students learn a ranking system of occupations and social classes as well. Students in gifted programs or those moving toward college preparation classes may be viewed as superior to those who are receiving tutoring.

Gracy (2004) suggests that cultural training occurs early. Kindergarten is an "academic boot camp" in which students are prepared for their future student role—that of complying with an adult imposed structure and routine designed to produce docile, obedient, children who do not question meaningless tasks that will become so much of their future lives as students. A typical day is filled with structure, ritual, and routine that allows for little creativity or direct, hands-on contact. "Kindergarten, therefore, can be seen as preparing children not only for participation in the bureaucratic organization of large modern school systems, but also for the large-scale occupational bureaucracies of modern society." (Gracy, 2004, p. 148)

What do you think? Let's examine a kindergarten class schedule taken from a website found by going to Google and typing in "kindergarten schedule". You can find more of these on your own. Most look similar to this one:

7:55 to 8:20 [Math tubs \(manipulatives\) and small group math lessons](#)

8:20 to 8:35 [Class meeting](#)/restroom and drinks

8:35 to 8:55 [Math board/calendar](#)

8:55 to 9:10 [Whole class math lesson](#)

9:10 to 9:20 [Daily news chart](#)

9:20 to 9:50 [Shared reading \(big books/poem and song charts\)](#)

9:50 to 10:15 [Language Arts Centers](#)

10:15 to 10:30 Morning recess

10:30 to 10:50 [Alphabet/phonics lesson and paper](#)

10:50 to 11:10 [Reading Workshop \(more centers\)](#)

11:10 to 11:20 [Picture and word chart](#)

11:20 to 11:40 [Writing workshop \(journals\)](#)

11:40 to 12:20 Lunch and recess

12:20 to 12:50 [Rainbow Reading Lab](#) (sequenced file folder activities) or [computer lab](#) or [internet computers](#). Children are divided into two groups and do one of these activities each day, title 1 teacher is in my room at this time.

12:50 to 1:20 Theme related activity or art class one day per week

1:20 to 1:35 Afternoon recess (or still in art one day per week)

1:35 to 2:10 [Nap/rest time](#)

2:10 to 2:50 Special classes (music, counseling, pe, or library)

2:50 to 3:05 Show and Tell and get ready to go home

(Source: [http://users.stargate.net/~cokids/Classroom\\_Schedules.html](http://users.stargate.net/~cokids/Classroom_Schedules.html)).

To what extent do you think that students are being prepared for their future student role? What are the pros and cons of such preparation? Look at the curriculum for kindergarten and the first few grades in your own school district. Emphasizing math and reading in preschool and kindergarten classes is becoming more common in some



school districts. It is not without controversy, however. Some suggest that emphasis is warranted in order to help students learn math and reading skills that will be needed throughout school and in the world of work. This will also help school districts improve their accountability through test performance. Others argue that learning is becoming too structured to be enjoyable or effective and that students are being taught only to focus on performance and test taking. Students learn **student incivility** or lack of sincere concern for politeness and consideration of others in kindergarten through 12th grades through the "what is on the test" mentality modeled by teachers. Students are taught to accept routine and meaningless information in order to perform well on tests. And they are experiencing the stress felt by teachers and school districts focused on test scores and taught that their worth comes from their test scores. Genuine interest, an appreciation of the process of learning, and valuing others are important components of success in the workplace that are not part of the hidden curriculum in today's schools.

### ***Psychosocial Development***

Now let's turn our attention to concerns related to self-concept, the world of friendships, and family life.

#### **Self-Concept**

Children in middle childhood have a more realistic sense of self than do those in early childhood. That exaggerated sense of self as "biggest" or "smartest" or "tallest" gives way to an understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses. This can be attributed to greater experience in comparing one's own performance with that of others and to greater cognitive flexibility. A child's self-concept can be influenced by peers and family and the messages they send about a child's worth. Contemporary children also receive messages from the media about how they should look and act. Movies, music videos, the internet, and advertisers can all create cultural images of what is desirable or undesirable and this too can influence a child's self-concept.

#### **The Tweens**

Advertisers have created a new consumer group known as the "tweens". This group spends an estimated \$51 billion dollars annually and has another \$170 billion a year spent on them (Irvine, 2006). Tweens range in age from 8 to 12 years and are characterized as sophisticated, early-maturing teenagers concerned primarily with their appearance, weight, and sexuality ("The 'Tween Market'" Media Awareness Network, 2007). Tweens are primarily targeted as consumers of media, clothing, and products that make them look "cool" and feel independent. For example, attitude t-shirts have been very popular among female tweens for the past several years and the slogans on these shirts reflect what might be considered "cool". Here are a few found in a national retail clothing store that focuses on fashion for tweens.

Your boyfriend gave me this shirt.  
I live to shop  
It's all about me  
You wish

In general, toys are not marketed to this age group as they once were. However, some toys designed to appeal to slightly younger children tend to sexualize children (Harmanci, 2006). For an example of such sexy children's dolls, go to [www.bratz.com](http://www.bratz.com). Jean Kilbourne, a noted expert on the impact of advertising on self-image, responds to the promotion of such products as examples of how "marketers are hijacking our children's sexuality" at the expense of childhood (Squire, 2006).

### **Sexual Abuse in Middle Childhood (Ob16)**

Being sexually abused as a child can have a powerful impact on self-concept. Childhood **sexual abuse** is defined as any sexual contact between a child and an adult or a much older child. **Incest** refers to sexual contact between a child and family members. In each of these cases, the child is exploited by an older person without regard for the child's developmental immaturity and inability to understand the sexual behavior (Steele, 1986). The concept of **false self-training** (Davis, 1999) refers to holding a child to adult standards while denying the child's developmental needs. Sexual abuse is just one example of false self-training. Children are held to adult standards of desirableness and sexuality while their level of cognitive, psychological, and emotional immaturity is ignored. Consider how confusing it might be for a 9 year old girl who has physically matured early to be thought of as a potential sex partner. Her cognitive, psychological, and emotional state do not equip her to make decisions about sexuality or, perhaps, to know that she can say no to sexual advances. She may feel like a 9 year old in all ways and be embarrassed and ashamed of her physical development. Girls who mature early have problems with low self-esteem because of the failure of others (family members, teachers, ministers, peers, advertisers, and others) to recognize and respect their developmental needs. Overall, youth are more likely to be victimized because they do not have control over their contact with offenders (parents, babysitters, etc.) and have no means of escape (Finkelhor and Dzuiba-Leatherman, in Davis, 1999).

Researchers estimate that one out of four girls and one out of ten boys has been sexually abused (Valente, 2005). The median age for sexual abuse is eight or nine years for both boys and girls (Finkelhor et. al. 1990). Most boys and girls are sexually abused by a male. Although rates of sexual abuse are higher for girls than for boys, boys may be less likely to report abuse because of the cultural expectation that boys should be able to take care of themselves and because of the stigma attached to homosexual encounters (Finkelhor et. al. 1990). Girls are more likely to be abused by family member and boys by strangers. Sexual abuse can create feelings of self-blame, betrayal, and feelings of shame and guilt (Valente, 2005). Sexual abuse is particularly damaging when the perpetrator is someone the child trusts and may lead to depression, anxiety, problems with intimacy, and suicide (Valente, 2005). The topic of the sexualization of girls in media and society was of chief concern by the American Psychological Association in 2007 and their findings and recommendations to reduce this problem can be accessed at <http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html>.

### **Industry vs. Inferiority**

According to Erikson, children in middle childhood are very busy or industrious. They are constantly doing, planning, playing, getting together with friends, achieving. This is a very active time and a time when they are gaining a sense of how they measure up when compared with friends. Erikson believed that if these industrious children can be successful in their endeavors, they will get a sense of confidence for future challenges. If not, a sense of inferiority can be particularly haunting during middle childhood.

### **The Society of Children (Ob15)**

Friendships take on new importance as judges of one's worth, competence, and attractiveness. Friendships provide the opportunity for learning social skills such as how to communicate with others and how to negotiate differences. Children get ideas from one another about how to perform certain tasks, how to gain popularity, what to wear, say, and listen to, and how to act. This **society of children** marks a transition from a life focused on the family to a life concerned with peers. Peers play a key role in a child's self-esteem at this age as any parent who has tried to console a rejected child will tell you. No matter how complimentary and encouraging the parent may be, being rejected by friends can only be remedied by renewed acceptance.

**Peer Relationships:** Most children want to be liked and accepted by their friends. Some popular children are nice and have good social skills. These **popular-prosocial** children tend to do well in school and are cooperative and friendly. **Popular-antisocial** children may gain popularity by acting tough or spreading rumors about others (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Rejected children are sometimes excluded because they are shy and withdrawn. The **withdrawn-rejected** children are easy targets for bullies because they are unlikely to retaliate when belittled (Boulton, 1999). Other rejected children are ostracized because they are aggressive, loud, and confrontational. The **aggressive-rejected** children may be acting out of a feeling of insecurity. Unfortunately, their fear of rejection only leads to behavior that brings further rejection from other children. Children who are not accepted are more likely to experience conflict, lack confidence, and have trouble adjusting.

### **Family Life (Ob17)**

During middle childhood, children spend less time with parents and more time with peers. And parents may have to modify their approach to parenting to accommodate the child's growing independence. Using reason and engaging in joint decision-making whenever possible may be the most effective approach (Berk, 2007). However, Asian-American, African-American, and Mexican-American parents are more likely than European-Americans to use an authoritarian style of parenting. This authoritarian style of parenting that using strict discipline and focuses on obedience is also tempered with acceptance and warmth on the part of the parents. And children raised in this manner tend to be confident, successful and happy (Chao, 2001; Stewart and Bond, 2002).

## Family Tasks

One of the ways to assess the quality of family life is to consider the tasks of families. Berger (2005) lists five family functions:

1. Providing food, clothing and shelter
2. Encouraging Learning
3. Developing self-esteem
4. Nurturing friendships with peers
5. Providing harmony and stability

Notice that in addition to providing food, shelter, and clothing, families are responsible for helping the child learn, relate to others, and have a confident sense of self. The family provides a harmonious and stable environment for living. A good home environment is one in which the child's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social needs are adequately met. Sometimes families emphasize physical needs, but ignore cognitive or emotional needs. Other times, families pay close attention to physical needs and academic requirements, but may fail to nurture the child's friendships with peers or guide the child towards developing healthy relationships. Parents might want to consider how it feels to live in the household. Is it stressful and conflict-ridden? Is it a place where family members enjoy being?

## Family Change

**Divorce:** A lot of attention has been given to the impact of divorce on the life of children. The assumption has been that divorce has a strong, negative impact on the child and that single-parent families are deficient in some way. However, seventy five to eighty percent of children and adults who experience divorce suffer no long term effects (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Children of divorce and children who have not experienced divorce are more similar than different (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). Mintz (2004) suggests that the alarmist view of divorce was due in part to the newness of divorce when rates in the United States began to climb in the late 1970s. Adults reacting to the change grew up in the 1950s when rates were low. As divorce has become more common and there is less stigma associated with divorce, this view has changed somewhat. Social scientists have operated from the **divorce as deficit model** emphasizing the problems of being from a "broken home" (Seccombe & Warner, 2004). But more recently, a more objective view of divorce, re-partnering, and remarriage indicates that divorce, remarriage and life in stepfamilies can have a variety of effects. The exaggeration of the negative consequences of divorce has left the majority of those who do well hidden and subjected them to unnecessary stigma and social disapproval (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

The tasks of families listed above are functions that can be fulfilled in a variety of family types-not just intact, two-parent households. Harmony and stability can be achieved in many family forms and when it is disrupted, either through divorce, or efforts to blend families, or any other circumstances, the child may suffer (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

## Factors Affecting the Impact of Divorce

As you look at the consequences (both pro and con) of divorce and remarriage on children, keep these family functions in mind. Some negative consequences are a result of financial hardship rather than divorce per se (Drexler, 2005). Some positive consequences reflect improvements in meeting these functions. For instance, we have learned that a positive self-esteem comes in part from a belief in the self and one's abilities rather than merely being complimented by others. In single-parent homes, children may be given more opportunity to discover their own abilities and gain independence that fosters self-esteem. If divorce leads to fighting between the parents and the child is included in these arguments, the self-esteem may suffer.

The impact of divorce on children depends on a number of factors. The *degree of conflict prior to the divorce* plays a role. If the divorce means a reduction in tensions, the child may feel relief. If the parents have kept their conflicts hidden, the announcement of a divorce can come as a shock and be met with enormous resentment. Another factor that has a great impact on the child concerns *financial hardships* they may suffer, especially if financial support is inadequate. Another difficult situation for children of divorce is the position they are put into if the *parents continue to argue* and fight—especially if they bring the children into those arguments.

**Short-term consequences:** In roughly the first year following divorce, children may exhibit some of these short-term effects:

1. Grief over losses suffered. The child will grieve the loss of the parent they no longer see as frequently. The child may also grieve about other family members that are no longer available. Grief sometimes comes in the form of sadness, but it can also be experienced as anger or withdrawal. Preschool-aged boys may act out aggressively while the same aged girls may become more quiet and withdrawn. Older children may feel depressed.
2. Reduced Standard of Living. Very often, divorce means a change in the amount of money coming into the household. Children experience new constraints on spending or entertainment. School-aged children, especially, may notice that they can no longer have toys, clothing or other items to which they've grown accustomed. Or it may mean that there is less eating out or being able to afford cable television, and so on. The custodial parent may experience stress at not being able to rely on child support payments or having the same level of income as before. This can affect decisions regarding healthcare, vacations, rents, mortgages and other expenditures. And the stress can result in less happiness and relaxation in the home. The parent who has to take on more work may also be less available to the children.
3. Adjusting to Transitions. Children may also have to adjust to other changes accompanying a divorce. The divorce might mean moving to a new home and changing schools or friends. It might mean leaving a neighborhood that has meant a lot to them as well.



**Long-Term consequences:** Here are some effects that are found after the first year.

1. **Economic/Occupational Status.** One of the most commonly cited long-term effects of divorce is that children of divorce may have lower levels of education or occupational status. This may be a consequence of lower income and resources for funding education rather than to divorce per se. In those households where economic hardship does not occur, there may be no impact on economic status (Drexler, 2005).
2. **Improved Relationships with the Custodial Parent (usually the mother):** In the United States and Canada, children reside with the mother in eighty eight percent of single-parent households (Berk, 2007). Children from single-parent families talk to their mothers more often than children of two-parent families (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Most children of divorce lead happy, well-adjusted lives and develop stronger, positive relationships with their custodial parent (Seccombe and Warner, 2004). In a study of college-age respondents, Arditti (1999) found that increasing closeness and a movement toward more democratic parenting styles was experienced. Others have also found that relationships between mothers and children become closer and stronger (Guttman, 1993) and suggest that greater equality and less rigid parenting is beneficial after divorce (Steward, Copeland, Chester, Malley, and Barenbaum, 1997).
3. **Greater emotional independence in sons.** Drexler (2005) notes that sons who are raised exclusively by mothers develop an emotional sensitivity to others that is beneficial in relationships.
4. **Feeling more anxious in their own love relationships.** Children of divorce may feel more anxious about their own relationships as adults. This may reflect a fear of divorce if things go wrong, or it may be a result of setting higher expectations for their own relationships.
5. **Adjustment of the custodial parent.** Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) believe that the primary factor influencing the way that children adjust to divorce is the way the custodial parent adjusts to the divorce. If that parent is adjusting well, the children will benefit. This may explain a good deal of the variation we find in children of divorce. Adults going through divorce should consider good self-care as beneficial to the children—not as self-indulgent.

Here are some tips for taking care of the self during divorce:

6. **Take care of your own mental health.** Don't be a martyr. Do what is necessary to heal.
7. **Allow children to grieve and express their feelings without becoming defensive.** Give the child the freedom to express feelings and be supportive and neutral as they voice their emotions over the loss.
8. **Try to have an amicable relationship with the ex-spouse and keep the children's best interests in mind.**
9. **Do not put-down or badmouth the ex-spouse.** This puts the child in a very uncomfortable position. You don't have to hide the truth from them either, but

they will uncover the truth on their own. Be neutral. Children want to love their parents, regardless of the circumstances.

10. Focus on establishing a comfortable, consistent healthy environment for the children as they adjust.

### **Re-partnering**

Re-partnering refers to forming new, intimate relationships after divorce. This includes dating, cohabitation and remarriage.

**Parental considerations about dating:** Dating as a single parent can pose certain challenges. Time and money are considerations. A single mother may not have time for dating and may not have the money needed for child-care while she is out. Children can also resent a parent taking time away to date. Parents may struggle with whether or not to introduce a date to the children or to demonstrate affection in front of the children. When a dating relationship becomes serious, a boyfriend or girlfriend might expect the parent to prove their concern for them above the children. This puts a parent in a very uncomfortable situation. Sometimes, this vying for attention does not occur until the couple begins to consider sharing a long-term relationship.

**Parental considerations about cohabitation:** Having time, money and resources to date can be difficult. And having privacy for a dating relationship can also be problematic. Divorced parents may cohabit as a result. **Cohabitation** involves living together in a sexually intimate relationship without being married. This can be difficult for children to adjust to because cohabiting relationships in the United States tend to be short-lived. About fifty percent last less than two years (Brown, 2000). The child who starts a relationship with the parent's live-in partner may have to sever this relationship later. And even in long-term cohabiting relationships, once it's over, continued contact with the child is rare.

**Is remarriage more difficult than divorce?** The remarriage of a parent may be a more difficult adjustment for a child than the divorce of a parent (Seccombe & Warner, 2004). Parents and children typically have different ideas of how the stepparent should act. Parents and stepparents are more likely to see the stepparent's role as that of parent. A more democratic style of parenting may become more authoritarian after a parent remarries. And biological parents are more likely to continue to be involved with their children jointly when neither parent has remarried. They are least likely to jointly be involved if the father has remarried and the mother has not.

### **Characteristics of Stepfamilies**

About sixty percent of divorced parents remarry within a few years (Berk, 2007). Largely due to high rates of divorce and remarriage, we have seen the number of stepfamilies in America grow considerably in the last twenty years although rates of remarriage are declining (Seccombe & Warner, 2004). Stepfamilies are not new. In the 1700-1800s there were many stepfamilies, but they were created because someone died and

remarried. Most stepfamilies today are a result of divorce and remarriage. And such origins lead to new considerations. Stepfamilies are different from intact families and more complex in a number of ways that can pose unique challenges to those who seek to form successful stepfamily relationships (Visher & Visher, 1985). Stepfamilies are also known as blended families and stepchildren as "bonus children" by social scientists interested in emphasizing the positive qualities of these families.

1. Stepfamilies have a biological parent outside the stepfamily and a same sex adult in the family as natural parent. This can lead to animosity on part of a rejecting child. This can also lead to confusion on part of stepparent as to what their role is within the family.
2. Children may be a part of two households, each with different rules.
3. Members may not be as sure that others care, and may require more demonstrations of affection for reassurance. For example, stepparents expect more gratitude and acknowledgment from the stepchild than they would with a biological child. Stepchildren experience more uncertainty/insecurity in their relationship with the parent and fear the parents will see them as sources of tension. And stepparents may feel guilty for a lack of feelings they may initially have toward their partner's children. Children who are required to respond to the parent's new mate as though they were the child's "real" parent often react with hostility, rebellion, or withdrawal. Especially if there has not been time for the relationship to develop.
4. Stepfamilies are born of loss. Members may have lost a home, a neighborhood, family members or at least their dream of how they thought life would be. These losses must be acknowledged and mourned. Remarriage quickly after a divorce makes expressing grief more difficult. Family members are looking for signs that all is well at the same time that members are experiencing grief over losses.
5. Stepfamilies are structurally more complex. There are lots of triangles and lots of ways to divide and conquer the new couple.
6. Sexual attractions are more common in stepfamilies. Members have not grown up together and sexual attractions need to be understood, and controlled. Also a new couple may need to tone down sexual displays when around the children (can bring on jealousy, etc.) until there is greater acceptance of the new partner.

Sociologist Andrew Cherlin suggests that one reason people remarry is because divorce is so socially awkward. There are no clear guidelines for family/friends, how to treat divorcees, etc. As a result, people remarry to avoid this "displacement." The problem is that remarriage is similarly ill-defined. This is reflected in the lack of language to support the institution of remarriage. What does one call their stepparent? Who is included when thinking of "the family"? For couples with joint custody, where is "home"? And there are few guidelines about how ex-spouses and new spouses or other kin should interact. This is especially an issue when children are involved.

In light of this incompleteness, here are some tips for those in stepfamilies. Most of these tips are focused on the stepparent. These five come from an article entitled "The Ten Commandments of Step parenting" by Turnbull and Turnbull.

1. Provide neutral territory. If there is a way to do so, relocate the new family in a new, more neutral home. Houses have histories and there are many memories attached to family homes. This territoriality can cause resentments.
2. Don't try to fit a preconceived role. Stepparents need to realize that they cannot just walk into a situation and expect to fill a role. They need to stay in tuned with what works in this new family rather than being dogmatic about their new role.
3. Set limits and enforce them. Don't allow children to take advantage of the parent's guilt or adjustment by trying to gain special privileges as a result of the change. Limits provide security, especially if they are reasonable limits.
4. Allow an outlet for feelings by the children for their natural parent. This tip is for the natural parent. Avoid the temptation to "encourage" the child to go against your ex-spouse. Instead, remain neutral when comments are made.
5. Expect ambivalence, not instant love. Stepparents need to realize that their acceptance has to be earned, and sometimes it is long in coming. The relationship has to be given time to grow. Trust has to be established. One day they may be loved, the next, hated. Adjustment takes time.

### **Developmental Stages of Stepfamilies (Ob18)**

Stepfamilies go through periods of adjustment and developmental stages that take about seven years for completion (Papernow, 1993). The early stages of stepfamily adjustment include periods of fantasy in which members may hope for immediate acceptance. This is followed by the immersion stage in which children have to adjust to their parent's date being transformed into a new stepfather or stepmother. This acceptance can be accompanied by a sense of betrayal toward the natural parent on the part of the children. The awareness stage involves members beginning to become aware of how they feel in the family and taking steps to map out their territory. Children may begin to feel as if they've been set aside for other family members and the couple may begin to focus their attention toward one another. Biological parents may feel resentful.

The middle stages include mobilization, in which family members begin to recognize their differences. Stepparents may be less interested in pleasing family members and more interested in taking a stand and being respected as family members. Children may start to voice their frustrations at being pulled in different directions by biological and stepparents. The next step is that of taking action. Now step-couples and stepparents begin to reorganize the family based on more realistic expectations and understandings of how members feel.

The later stages include contact between stepfamily members that is more intimate and genuine. A clearer role for the stepparent emerges. Finally, the stepfamily seems to have more security and stability than ever before.

## Conclusions

Middle childhood is a complex period of the life span. New understandings and social situations bring variety to children's lives as they form new strategies for the world ahead. We next turn our attention to adolescents.

**How many ways can you classify "ball"? It's a word, a round object, a toy, a shape, a rolling object, a piece of playground equipment, another word for "fun", etc.**

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