

# The Psychology of Preschool Children

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Among Soviet psychologists and educators this book is the standard reference on research in early child development. It is widely used as a text in intermediate courses in development psychology in universities and pedagogical institutes throughout the Soviet Union and East European countries. Urie Bronfenbrenner, Professor of Psychology and of Human Development and Family Studies at Cornell University, remarks that the book provides a double service: it gives Western psychologists access to the extensive work done in the Soviet Union, using an approach substantially different from our own, and it brings Soviet study into the perspective of Western theories of development – on which it comments extensively.

These studies of the perceptual processes of children from birth to age seven cover a number of important developments: sensation and perception, attention, memory, speech, thinking, imagination, movement, and formation of motor habits. The theoretical ideas that guide the experiments are those of L. S. Vygotsky and his former colleagues and students – now leading psychologists in the U.S.S.R. – Leontiev, Luria, Zaporozhets, and Elkonin. In discerning motivational causes, the Soviet approach differs sharply from that of Western European and American psychologists, who assert that either psychological development is the result of the realization or maturing of inborn abilities, or it moves along a path of adaptation to the surrounding environment. “The fact is,” note the editors, “that cognitive processes do not form and develop by themselves, but as individual exploratory acts comprising an indispensable organic part of an integral activity of the child... and fulfilling in it orienting and regulating functions.”

Theories rooted in the dialectic materialism of Marx and Engels assert that the child's physical and psychic development is shaped by his interaction with society. In this man-mediated environment, language becomes the principal means of interaction between child and adult, and preschool training is crucially important as the child begins to structure his own behavior. Experiments devised to focus the child's attention on differentiated aspects of his environment often succeed in enhancing his competence in diverse areas such as auditory discrimination, visual perception, language usage, thought processes, and imaginative play. The complex processes of mastering social experience require his participation in certain activities at each stage of development: for an infant, the manipulation of objects; for a preschool child, games; and for a school-age child, learning combined with various types of mutually useful tasks.

Throughout, authors of these studies examine the work of Piaget, Isaacs, Russell, Bühler, Lashley, the “Gestalt” psychologists, and others – criticizing in particular Piaget's failure to recognize the social basis for what he terms “egocentric speech.”

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