

**E102\_1**

**Introduction to child psychology**

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## Introduction

Within this free course, you will be introduced briefly to the discipline of child psychology and to theories and approaches that have been developed to help us understand and support children’s lives. Psychologists are interested in understanding changes in children and their abilities over time – their physical growth, thinking, learning, emotions, relationships and more. Psychologists work to describe how development is shaped through internal and external influences, such as the role of children’s immediate environments and the role of culture in influencing and shaping development. You will also learn about the role of child psychologists in applied settings and how they can work with other professionals to support the lives of children and young people.

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## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

* understand the discipline of child psychology as an area of study
* understand how theories try to explain children’s development
* discuss important questions that are central to child psychology
* understand how child psychologists work in different applied settings.

## 1 What is child psychology?

How are children’s lives changing and what role do child psychologists have in supporting children? Child psychology is a broad area, covering how people change as they grow up from birth through to adolescence and trying to explain how these important changes occur – are 3-year-olds, 7-year-olds and teenagers different just because of their experiences of the world, or what role is played by biological changes within the individual?

Because child psychology is so vast and tries to answer so many questions, researchers and practitioners often separate development into specific areas. Broadly, these tend to map onto children’s physical, cognitive (thinking, learning, memory, etc.) and social/emotional development. Child psychologists attempt to make sense of every aspect of child development, including how children learn, think, interact and respond emotionally to those around them, make friends, understand emotions and their own developing personalities, temperaments and skills.

Children typically reach developmental ‘milestones’. These milestones reflect abilities, such as walking and talking, that are achieved by most children at similar ages. Among other things, we are interested in trying to explain how children reach these milestones and how individual, social and cultural factors may influence how we develop.

Start of Figure



**Figure 1** Multiracial group of children

[View description - Figure 1 Multiracial group of children](" \l "Session1_Description1)

End of Figure

Psychologists also specialise in different areas of interest: while some focus on supporting children in school settings (educational psychologists) others focus on supporting children with atypical development (clinical psychologists).

Start of Activity

**Activity 1  What do child psychologists do?**

Start of Question

In this audio sequence Nathalia Gjersoe, a lecturer in developmental psychology at The Open University, looks at the roles and work of three developmental psychologists, all of whom are concerned with children. Duncan Gillard (an educational psychologist), Silvana Mengoni (a researcher) and Catriona Havard (a forensic psychologist) all give their views about child psychology. Listen to the audio and think about the questions that follow.

Start of Media Content

Audio content is not available in this format.

Views on child psychology

[View transcript - Views on child psychology](" \l "Session1_Transcript1)

End of Media Content

* How important are developmental milestones in understanding development?
* How can psychologists support children’s lives?

End of Question

End of Activity

## 2 Using theories to understand development

Like all fields of scientific research, child psychology is characterised by different perspectives and theories, which have shaped how our understanding of development has changed over time. There are many different theories to describe children’s development, but here we focus on just two. Some theories argue that development occurs primarily through factors internal to the child that are biologically generated. In contrast, other theories consider environmental factors, such as the child’s social environment, to be more important in stimulating and supporting development.

We will look at the theories of two influential child psychologists who sought to understand how children learn, and who represent these different perspectives :

* development is primarily internal: Jean Piaget
* development is determined by environmental factors: Lev Vygotsky.

Start of Figure



**Figure 2** The nature–nurture debate focuses on whether differences between individuals and groups are better explained by genetic or environmental factors

[View description - Figure 2 The nature–nurture debate focuses on whether differences between individuals ...](" \l "Session2_Description1)

End of Figure

## 2.1 Development is primarily internal: Piaget

Shortly after the First World War a Swiss biologist and teacher named Jean Piaget (1896–1980) became interested in a new method for testing children’s intelligence. Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests were originally developed by psychologists to identify children in France who were considered to be at risk of learning delays. The test involved presenting children with a series of questions and comparing each child’s individual performance with group averages for the child’s age. Piaget noticed that children of the same age often made the same sorts of errors in consistent ways. This led him to think that children might think about the world in a substantially different way from adults that could not be explained simply through having less experience of the world. Piaget was a prolific researcher and eventually directed one of the world’s first research institutes specialising in examining child development. On the basis of his lifelong work he developed a theory that the thinking of typically developing children matures in distinct stages, meaning that older children are biologically capable of understanding things that those in earlier stages cannot. He believed that children moved through these stages as a result of the accumulated physical experience of interacting with objects in the world – so that their growing abilities are the result of brain maturation as well as encountering experience in their environments.

Start of Figure



**Figure 3** Jean Piaget, Swiss psychologist

End of Figure

Piaget was especially interested in how children became able to form mental representations of the world and felt that cognitive development proceeds through a series of predefined biological steps that are stimulated through physical interaction with the world. This theory, because it partially focuses on biological maturation, predicts that all children across the world should go through these stages in the same order and around the same time, regardless of differences in the environment that they are growing up in.

## 2.2 Development is determined by environmental factors: Vygotsky

Piaget set the tone for many decades of research but his theory has also received a great deal of criticism. Many believe that Piaget ignored the huge influence that society and culture have in shaping a child’s development. At a similar time, another researcher named Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) had come to similar conclusions as Piaget about children’s development, in thinking that children learned about the world through interaction with it. However, where Piaget felt that children moved naturally through different stages of development, based on biological predispositions and their own individual interactions with the world, Vygotsky claimed that adult or peer intervention was a much more important contributor to the developmental process. Vygotsky concentrated more on children’s immediate social and cultural environment and their interactions with adults and peers. He argued that cognitive development occurred first through children’s immediate social interactions, and then moved to the individual level as they began to internalise their learning. While Piaget saw the child as actively discovering the world through individual interactions with it, Vygotsky saw the child as more of an apprentice, learning through a social environment of others who had more experience and were sensitive to the child’s needs and abilities.

Start of Figure



**Figure 4** Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky, Soviet psychologist; Vygotsky was the founder of cultural-historical psychology

End of Figure

## 3 Asking questions about children’s development

All theories about development are guided by key questions. There are a number of questions that have persisted since the beginning of child psychological research. Child psychologists are interested in understanding how development occurs and what influences this development. For example, how do young children learn about emotions? Do they simply learn to show emotions from other people in their environment? Here we offer two important questions involved in trying to understand the lives of children and young people:

* How does socio-cultural context influence development?
* How do children shape their own development?

Start of Figure



**Figure 5** A child can express a range of different basic human emotions as well as recognising the emotional states of other individuals

[View description - Figure 5 A child can express a range of different basic human emotions as well as ...](" \l "Session3_Description1)

End of Figure

## 3.1 How does socio-cultural context influence development?

Children grow up in specific physical, social, cultural, economic and historical circumstances (their socio-cultural context), all of which will influence their childhood. Research has shown that children’s socio-cultural context can have a large influence on their development. We know that culture influences how children develop; across different cultures, children can develop in quite different ways (Montgomery, 2008). And we know that children who are deprived of care from a primary caregiver can often experience difficulties in later childhood because their early attachment experiences were affected by this (Bowlby, 1980). Development of course involves a process of learning and improvement, and children can only learn when others are there to support them, like parents, teachers and siblings. This does not conflict with Piaget’s stage theory but does extend it to explain how some of the environmental experiences that children receive can allow them to move from one stage to another, in line with Vygotsky’s socio-cultural approach.

## 3.2 How do children shape their own development?

A lot of research focuses on the external influences that shape children’s development and treats them as relatively powerless. But of course children have a role in their own development and in selecting the sorts of environmental influences they are exposed to. Even newborns select what to pay attention to by where they look and how they orient themselves (usually towards familiar sounds, things that are new or surprising to them, or to the smell of milk!). Infants will often try to elicit certain behaviours from adults by giving them cues, such as covering their eyes to play peek-a-boo. Indeed, infants’ sensitivity to very subtle communicative cues and their role in social interaction is surprisingly sophisticated. Aspects specific to the child such as their temperament can also greatly influence how adults and other children interact with them. Once children begin to speak they often drive conversations – expecting responses from adults or asking questions. And when children begin to engage in imaginary play from around 2 years of age they often take on new personas and roles that help them make sense of different aspects of their world or deal with things that they are frightened of (Howes and Matheson, 1992), for instance by pretending to be a superhero fighting off monsters. By the time children reach school age they have begun to make many decisions about their environment, such as who to be friends with and what interests to pursue.

## 4 Child psychologists in applied settings

Child psychology is not just about developing theories to explain development, it also has a practical reason. It is about working with children and young people to support their lives. Child psychologists often work in practical settings such as schools and hospitals, to help support development. Here we offer two examples of work in practical settings.

## Educational settings

Educational psychologists work with children who find it difficult to learn, understand or communicate with others or may have behavioural difficulties. Educational psychologists work in schools with teachers, families and school administrators to help children who are struggling with specific educational issues.

Start of Activity

**Activity 2  What is the role of an educational psychologist?**

Start of Question

Click on the link to watch the following video and then answer the question below. At one point it uses the acronym SENCO, which stands for special educational needs coordinator.

* If you are reading this course as an ebook, you can access this video here: [What is the role of an educational psychologist?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VMCa2Kapek)
* How does the video suggest that educational psychologists can support the lives of children and young people?

Type your answer in the box, and then click ‘Save and reveal comment’ to compare it with our suggested answer.

End of Question

*Provide your answer...*

[View comment - Activity 2  What is the role of an educational psychologist?](" \l "Session4_Discussion1)

End of Activity

## Clinical settings

Clinical psychologists study, assess and treat a wide range of biological, psychological and social problems that children and young people may experience in their personal lives. This might involve the assessment of individuals to find out what they are struggling with, interventions that support individuals to cope with that difficulty or prevention programmes that stop them suffering. Clinical psychologists also consult with other professionals to offer as holistic a support structure for individuals as possible.

Similarly to educational psychologists, clinicians often use diagnostic tests to identify children who are experiencing mental health difficulties, who are at risk of having some kind of developmental disorder, such as autism or ADHD, or to assess the progress of children who have suffered physical or mental damage. By understanding how children of a certain age typically respond, clinical psychologists can identify symptoms of mental health difficulties, or developmental disorders with the goal of securing children appropriate support as early as possible.

## Conclusion

This course has briefly introduced you to some of the main ideas that are central to child psychology, with a particular focus on early development. Child psychology tries to describe and explain all aspects of child development, including changes in children’s cognitive, social and physical development, and to understand and support children experiencing delays in their development. Some of the dominant theories about children’s development have been introduced; competing explanations focus on development within the individual as against development influenced by the wider social and cultural environment. These theories often seek to answer a number of important psychological questions, which include explaining how change occurs, the role of the socio-cultural environment and how children shape their own individual development. These can often influence the kinds of applied work that psychologists carry out, such as in clinical or educational settings.

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Start of Box

**Childcare courses with the NEC**

Start of Figure



End of Figure

The first years of a child’s life, before they start school, are a crucial time in their development. Their experiences when they are very small play a big part in forming how they view the world as they grow up. That’s why childcare and early years offers some of the most varied and rewarding careers around. If you want to work with pre-school children, a course with the National Extension College (NEC) can set you on the right path.

All NEC childcare and early years courses are accredited by NCFE CACHE (the Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education), which is the leading awarding body in the UK for courses in early years care, childminding and playwork.

NEC offer childcare and early years courses at Level 1, 2 and 3.

[Find out more about Childcare courses here.](https://www.nec.ac.uk/course-categories/childcare-early-years/)

End of Box

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## Acknowledgements

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## Solutions

## Activity 2  What is the role of an educational psychologist?

#### Comment

As the video suggests, educational psychologists work closely with a child’s parents or carers as well as those offering support in schools, such as the special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), to help maximise the support that can be offered for children and young people in educational contexts. Educational psychologists must be aware of how changes in a child’s behaviour might indicate a more serious problem such as abuse or bullying, and are responsible for ensuring that appropriate action is taken. The psychologist can assess the child using standardised tests. A standardised test is one that is administered and scored in a consistent manner across all children. Using standardised scores, educational psychologists can assess how an individual child’s development is progressing compared to that of other children in their age group. Educational psychologists often use a range of measures to identify and diagnose specific learning difficulties and make suggestions for interventions in the classroom and school generally.

[Back to - Activity 2  What is the role of an educational psychologist?](" \l "Session4_Activity1)

# Figure 1 Multiracial group of children

## Description

A photo of 7 children from different ethnic backgrounds.

[Back to - Figure 1 Multiracial group of children](" \l "Session1_Figure1)

# Figure 2 The nature–nurture debate focuses on whether differences between individuals and groups are better explained by genetic or environmental factors

## Description

This is a picture of eight children aged around 6 to 8 years from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, all smiling whilst sitting on some stairs in two rows of four.

[Back to - Figure 2 The nature–nurture debate focuses on whether differences between individuals and groups are better explained by genetic or environmental factors](" \l "Session2_Figure1)

# Figure 5 A child can express a range of different basic human emotions as well as recognising the emotional states of other individuals

## Description

A series of images of the same boy making different facial expressions that show happiness, amusement, puzzlement, surprise, etc.

[Back to - Figure 5 A child can express a range of different basic human emotions as well as recognising the emotional states of other individuals](" \l "Session3_Figure1)

# Views on child psychology

## Transcript

Nathalia Gjersoe

Hello, I’m Nathalia Gjerso from the Faculty of Education and Language Studies at The Open University. In this audio, I’ll be looking at some examples of what developmental psychologists do to understand how children develop, why they develop that way, and how best to support them to reach their full potential.

Silvana Mengoni

I think, in order to support children, you have to understand development. And that’s where developmental psychology is key. We have to understand what development looks like, and how it happens and factors that may encourage it but also factors that may limit it. But, crucially development of psychology is all about understanding why, and, that’s really, really important, because if we understand what happens in development and why, we can develop interventions to not only help children that may be developing typically but children who also have delays.

Louisa Munton

Without that in-depth knowledge and expertise in a certain area, I actually think you wouldn’t be preparing children to be life-long learners or be productive citizens.

Nathalia Gjersoe

Developmental psychologists are interested in when and how changes occur in human psychology. As such, developmental psychologists are interested in changes that happen throughout the lifespan but a lot of their work focuses on changes in childhood as this is a period of intense development. Developmental psychologists can work in many different areas. Some focus on research in change in children. Others are trained in how to support children in school, or how to help children with developmental delays. Each of these roles requires a range of skills that developmental psychologists learn over many years of training. Duncan Gillard is an educational psychologist working with young children to support their educational needs and works closely with his local education authority, Avon and Somerset, and teams of other specialists to support children with special needs in several different schools.

Duncan Gillard

I link with 14 primary schools, one secondary school, and one special school, if you like. We support them with a range of different issues. We support them in terms of individual casework so individual young people that the school are having difficulty meeting the individual needs of, all of whom would have some kind of special educational need or special educational needs. And we also support them with a range of different systemic issues as well. I’ll give you a concrete example of a young person who has been on my caseload up until recently. It’s a young person in a mainstream school who has a diagnosis of Williams Syndrome. Young people with Williams Syndrome are usually very sociable and socially motivated. They can be lots and lots of fun to be around and they’re very driven to engage with people socially but quite often underpinning their understanding of social dynamics is an absence of that comprehension of what’s actually going on. This particular young person has learning difficulties that are commensurate with his diagnosis so he has particular difficulties learning across the board of the National Curriculum, that includes literacy difficulties, it includes numeracy difficulties, but he also has difficulties in terms of his development of social skills, his development of appropriate social and personal behaviour skills, of self-help skills. He had needs in terms of toileting. So, we put together what’s called a skills analysis. What kinds of skills would you need in order to be able to go to the toilet completely independently? And then, when you’ve got that skills analysis broken down, you can gradually start to build one skill at a time through a process called backward chaining, which is where you think about those skills as a linear sequence, start from the very last skill in that sequence, use different kinds of prompting and scaffolding processes to achieve mastery of that target and then work back through that chain until that young person can complete the whole sequence of skills. And making those learning processes very clear, very tight, very consistent, and repeated over and over again, eventually, that skill becomes mastered.

Nathalia Gjersoe

Could you explain to me who you work with within the school to support individual children?

Duncan Gillard

Usually, our main link is the school’s SENCO. SENCO is an acronym for special educational needs co-ordinator. Every school has one, they’re mandated to have one. And as the term implies, their role is to ensure that the additional support needs of all children with additional/special educational needs provisions are in place.

Nathalia Gjersoe

Do you go in and create learning modules for individual children or is that something that you work with teachers to produce?

Duncan Gillard

More often than not, we operate a consultation model of service delivery. So what that means is, we would go into a school, and this is about casework specifically, we would consult with key stakeholders, that would be class teacher, SENCO, any learning support assistants involved, that would take place within the context of a kind of problem solving conversation, what the young person’s strengths are, in relation to that area of difficulty. From there, we would try to look at what types of strategies have been used to get that young person to that point and with what effect. And that then would lead us into psychologically informed, or evidence-informed, next steps or additional strategies, for supporting, minimising the significance of that problem for the school in relation to that young person.

Nathalia Gjersoe

As well as generally working with schools and pupils to support special educational needs, Duncan also does research which helps to fill in the gaps in our understanding about how children develop. Duncan’s specific interest is in restorative justice, a rehabilitation system designed to stop bad behaviour and prevent it happening, which is overseen by adults but led by the children themselves. One of the schools Duncan works with where this process has proven specially effective, is Shirehampton Primary School in Bristol.

Louisa Munton

My name is Louisa Munton. I’m the head teacher at Shirehampton Primary School in Bristol. We serve a large catchment area where a significant proportion of our children come from deprived or disadvantaged backgrounds. We’ve worked really closely with the educational psychologist on restorative justice within the school and that’s because of the journey that we’ve been on…

Nathalia Gjersoe

Head teacher Louisa Munton came to Shirehampton Primary School in 2008. A year later, it was placed under special measures by Ofsted due to the bad behaviour of many of the children. With Duncan Gillard’s help, the school was able to implement a widespread regime of restorative justice with excellent outcomes.

Louisa Munton

So we embarked on a year-long project. All the staff received training from Duncan, and Duncan was very good at giving us lots of background, the research, how it might link and work with us, and then we had an opportunity to put our own sort of spin on it really, and how we could feel, as staff, it would work for our children. And we developed an action plan with Duncan’s guidance about how to put into place restorative justice so that it would, one, be embedded, but two, more importantly, work. We now have a whole-school process. Our behaviour management system is based on restorative justice. The impact is immeasurable in my eyes. I think, how you can quantify that is we were Ofsteded at the end of February this year and we came out good across the board and it was noted about our children’s good behaviour and their understanding of restorative justice and it’s just been really empowering for them. In turn, that’s made staff able to focus much more on learning and behaviour doesn’t disrupt learning, there is very, very little low-level disruption. And I firmly believe a lot of that is as a result of empowering the children to be part of the solution themselves.

Daniel

My name is Daniel and I’m 8 years old. There’s less, like, violence and rude words on the playground, and in lessons. When they’re naughty, you – they get sent to the restorative justice corner, in each classroom. Now, it’s actually safe for the little children to have fun and play.

Linda

My name is Linda... and we get, we have a list of questions which we all have to ask, and, so, for example, Why, is there a reason you are doing this? And if they, as we explain it to them, we also need the victim to tell us what happened too, so then we can make sure that it’s not a lie and it’s – and everything’s true. And, then we have to try and look around the playground and try to see if anyone’s injured or if they, if there are arguments and we have to try sort it out.

Daniel

I got a 3-year-old sister and I, like, use the system that we use in school. And I sit, and I sit her down and talk with her. And, like, if she, like, tries to attack me, I, like, tell her off and I sit her down on her bed and talk to her about it. She, like, says sorry and like, you just wind me up a little bit, by doing… [laughs]

Nathalia Gjersoe

As well as offering alternative strategies to help tackle issues within a school, developmental psychologists can also offer support to families of children with special educational needs and disabilities. Silvana Mengoni is a research fellow in the Child and Youth Studies Group in the Faculty for Education and Language Studies at The Open University. She’s been working on a project called Early Support, which collects together psychology research that sets out when certain developmental milestones are reached by children with different needs. This trajectory is then presented to parents and practitioners in a way that helps them appreciate and celebrate the progress that children are making.

Silvana Mengoni

What we have is a set of different items, or you might think of them as milestones, so things that children, most children can do by a certain point of development. And what we do is we split those up into four areas. So we’ve got personal, social and emotional development. We’ve got communication. We’ve got physical development and we’ve got thinking, or cognition. And what you sometimes find with children with different developmental disorders is that they have strengths and weaknesses across these, so, they might have delays in communication but their physical development may be age-appropriate. And, by using our resources, the developmental journals, you can kind of look at those domains separately so you’re finding out what the child’s strengths and weaknesses are, but you’re also looking them as a whole as well.

Nathalia Gjersoe

Could you tell me what the developmental journal is?

Silvana Mengoni

The developmental journal is a resource primarily aimed at parents and families of children with special educational needs and disabilities. And it’s aimed to help them to observe, record, celebrate and support the development of their child. And it’s also designed to help them communicate with the different practitioners who work with their child. For some children, they’ll be seeing lots and lots of different practitioners, so it’s really helpful for parents to have one set of information that they can use and show to different practitioners. So they might be working with physiotherapists, with speech and language therapists and sometimes these services use quite different words and different language, and they might also have jargon-type words that they use, and using the developmental journal where it’s presented in a parent-friendly way, and with less of the technical term, actually helps everyone who’s working with the child to use the same language and the same set of resources. The journal’s based on trajectory of typical development so you can kind of see, and even children with developmental disorders will pass through those stages, in the same order, they just may do it at a different rate.

Nathalia Gjersoe

Could you talk about how the work that you’re doing might change the experience of a child who’s experiencing developmental difficulties or delays?

Silvana Mengoni

I think this really relates to one of our resources which is for children with multiple or very complex needs, and parents and practitioners find it quite difficult to find material that tracks progress in really small steps. So these children might make quite slow development but to their families and people that are working with them, those small steps are really, really important. And so, what our journal does is break development down into those really small steps and also gives advice on parents, so if their child is kind of developing or emerging in a certain skill or behaviour, it gives tips on how they might like to develop that and how they could help their child progress it. So, we’re really focusing both on the parents and practitioners in terms of focusing them on what their child can do, but also, ultimately should be helping the child because of encouraging and supporting their development.

Nathalia Gjersoe

Many developmental psychologists research when, how and why developmental changes take place and how children differ from adults in the way that they think about and respond to the world. Sometimes this research has direct applications such as in education and supporting children with developmental delays. Sometimes developmental psychologists conduct research simply to better understand how development occurs. And it’s only later that applications for this research become evident. Catriona Havard is a member of the forensic cognition group at The Open University. For many years, she has been conducting research into how accurate children are as witnesses in court trials. And how they can be supported to improve their reliability. Her research has been instrumental in developing ways that improve children’s identification of criminals from video line-ups. Her findings are now being implemented in recommendations regarding the way that police deal with child witnesses.

Catriona Havard

The findings were that children can be as accurate as adults when it comes to correctly identifying somebody from a line-up. So in our research, we generally show people a staged event of a crime, and then after a delay, they see either a line-up that contains the person that they’ve seen previously, and obviously we’re then interested in how accurate they are at correctly identifying that culprit, but we also show some of our witnesses a line-up that doesn’t contain the person they’ve seen previously. So obviously, they’re being presented with a line-up where the person they’ve seen previously isn’t there. And what we found is that children are much more likely to choose somebody from a line-up as compared to adults.

Nathalia Gjersoe

So they’re more likely to choose someone, just someone randomly, because they feel like they have to choose someone rather than the actual culprit?

Catriona Havard

Yes. Yeah. So that’s it, I mean, when it comes to saying No, and saying the person’s not there, children seem to be unable to do this. They seem compelled to choose somebody. And this research then started off my next line of research, which was to look at methods to improve that reliability and allow children to actually not pick somebody from a line-up. So, using the same paradigm where we present children with a film of a staged crime and then a line-up, what we’ve done is we’ve placed a silhouette in the line-up and we’ve called this the mystery man, and we’ve said to children, if you don’t recognise anybody from the line-up, then you can choose the mystery man, if you want. And what we found is that this really reduces this false choosing, or false identification rate, because it allows children to choose somebody from a line-up but they’re not making a false identification.

Nathalia Gjersoe

What sort of age group are you working with?

Catriona Havard

From about 5 all the way up to about 12, 13, and the benefit seems to be throughout.

Nathalia Gjersoe

Could you tell us a little bit about the methods that you use in your research?

Catriona Havard

Yes. We use mainly experimental methods. In the first phase, which is a sort of study phase, our children will see a film of a staged crime, and then there’s a delay phase. And then, in the test phase, our children will see a line-up. And we also might ask a few questions, so sort of do, like a mini-survey, as well. We might ask about confidence. I’ve also asked whether children remember the instructions that they see prior to seeing a line-up. So one of the important instructions that all witnesses are told before they see a line-up is the person may or may not be present. And one of the issues we thought was that children perhaps are not paying attention to these instructions, but actually, our research shows that they do actually remember these instructions so this doesn’t seem to be the underlying reason for them choosing from line-ups.

Nathalia Gjersoe

The research that you are doing, do you feel that it’s relevant just for child witnesses or do you think that it may have implications for witness responses throughout the lifespan?

Catriona Havard

The work that we’ve been doing for child witnesses is also found to work with older adult witnesses. So, older adults, like child witnesses, will often feel compelled to choose somebody from a line-up, even if they don’t actually recognise anybody in the line-up. And what we’ve found is when we introduce the silhouette in the line-up, it actually will then reduce this false identification rate and make older adult witnesses’ evidence more reliable. So using the silhouette seems to be something that can work with witnesses of all ages, not just children.

Nathalia Gjersoe

Could you talk to me about what you see as the applications for this research that you’ve been doing?

Catriona Havard

We’re in the process of writing a White Paper, which will hopefully guide legislation. And the White Paper is a report that we give to the government and, from that, they can decide whether they want to change existing legislation. And we set out a number of points that we think could help to make eyewitness identification more accurate, and one of them is using this silhouette in a line-up, to increase the accuracy of children’s eyewitness evidence. The long-term aim is that it will reduce false identifications, which should reduce wrongful convictions and wrongful imprisonments. I would hope that my research, at the end of the day, will help child witnesses feel more at ease so for example, the fact that they’ve perhaps got this alternative option to choose when they don’t recognise anybody from a line-up, will make them feel more confident in their decisions and be less stressed when they’re actually faced with the situation of trying to make an identification from a line-up. I mean, the only way really that this research can help change the way police work with their witnesses is through legislation. Because the police will follow, for example, The Vulnerable Witness Act in Scotland, or in England, it’s The Police and Criminal Evidence Act, so, the hope is that by writing a White Paper to inform legislation, perhaps the legislation will be changed and this will eventually change the police guidance for working with child witnesses.

Nathalia Gjersoe

This audio should give you a flavour of the range of work that developmental psychologists do, and how important it is for understanding and supporting children. Careful research methods have enabled developmental psychologists to reveal much important regularity in the way that children differ from adults and how individuals differ from each other. This research then shows that the support and provision made for children in real-world contexts such as schools, families and the legal system is as appropriate and effective as possible. For head teacher Louisa Munton, having the help of an educational psychologist has not only allowed the children in her school to flourish but given them an insight and greater understanding of what it means to be a more rounded and tolerant human being.

Louisa Munton

I think being an educational psychologist must be a very difficult job. And I think what educational psychologists do is keep schools grounded. They help them understand actually that they can tackle a huge range of issues, not in isolation, but as part of a team. And actually, that then just skills up the staff. It allows children to have opportunities that perhaps they might not have done, allows them in turn to potentially raise aspirations being with children that may have those high aspirations to start with, so without that avenue, I think schools could become quite stagnant really, and I think, inclusion is where educational psychologists come into their own. They provide so many practical suggestions, whereas teachers are always on that big hamster treadmill wanting to do the best, wanting to make sure that the children achieve to their maximum. And actually, for some children, their maximum is not within the age-related expectation but with the educational psychologist’s help, what they allow us to do, as staff, is find that child’s talent, whether that is leadership, whether that’s acting, it may not be academic, but without that support and guidance and those suggestions, I think some children would find school a very daunting place and wouldn’t succeed in a way that they would do further on in life.

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