

PERSONALITY AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Definition

Personality development can be defined as the development of the organized pattern of behaviours and attitudes that makes a person distinctive. Personality development occurs by the ongoing interaction of temperament, character, and environment.

Description

Personality is what makes a person a unique person, and it is recognizable soon after birth. A child's personality has several components: temperament, environment, and character. Temperament is the set of genetically determined traits that determine the child's approach to the world and how the child learns about the world. There are no genes that specify personality traits, but some genes do control the development of the nervous system, which in turn controls behaviour.

A second component of personality comes from adaptive patterns related to a child's specific environment. Most psychologists agree that these two factors—temperament and environment—influence the development of a person's personality the most. Temperament, with its dependence on genetic factors, is sometimes referred to as "nature," while the environmental factors are called "nurture."

While there is still controversy as to which factor ranks higher in affecting personality development, all experts agree that high-quality parenting plays a critical role in the development of a child's personality. When parents understand how their child responds to certain situations, they can anticipate issues that might be problematic for their child. They can prepare the child for the situation or in some cases they may avoid a potentially difficult situation altogether. Parents who know how to adapt their parenting approach to the particular temperament of their child can best provide guidance and ensure the successful development of their child's personality.

Finally, the third component of personality is character—the set of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural patterns learned from experience that determines how a person thinks, feels, and behaves. A person's character continues to evolve throughout life, although much depends on inborn traits and early experiences. Character is also dependent on a person's moral development.

In 1956, psychologist Erik Erikson provided an insightful description as to how personality develops based on his extensive experience in psychotherapy with children and adolescents from low, upper, and middle-class backgrounds. According to Erikson, the socialization process of an individual consists of eight phases, each one accompanied by a "psychosocial crisis" that must be solved if the person is to manage the next and subsequent phases satisfactorily. The stages significantly influence personality development, with five of them occurring during infancy, childhood, and adolescence.

Stages of Personality Development

Infancy

During the first two years of life, an infant goes through the first stage: Learning Basic Trust or Mistrust (Hope). Well-nurtured and loved, the infant develops trust and security and a basic optimism. Badly handled, the infant becomes insecure and learns "basic mistrust."

Toddlerhood

The second stage occurs during early childhood, between about 18 months to two years and three to four years of age. It deals with Learning Autonomy or Shame (Will) . Well-parented, the child emerges from this stage with self-confidence, elated with his or her newly found control. The early part of this stage can also include stormy tantrums, stubbornness, and negativism, depending on the child's temperament.

Preschool

The third stage occurs during the "play age," or the later preschool years from about three to entry into formal school. The developing child goes through Learning Initiative or Guilt (Purpose) . The child learns to use imagination; to broaden skills through active play and fantasy; to cooperate with others; and to lead as well as to follow. If unsuccessful, the child becomes fearful, is unable to join groups, and harbours guilty feelings. The child depends excessively on adults and is restricted both in the development of play skills and in imagination.

School age

The fourth stage, Learning Industry or Inferiority (Competence), occurs during school age, up to and possibly including junior high school. The child learns to master more formal skills such as:

relating with peers according to rules;

progressing from free play to play that is structured by rules and requires teamwork (team sports);

learning basic intellectual skills (reading, arithmetic).

At this stage, the need for self-discipline increases every year. The child who, because of his or her successful passage through earlier stages, is trusting, autonomous, and full of initiative, will quickly learn to be industrious. However, the mistrusting child will doubt the future and will feel inferior.

Adolescence

The fifth stage, Learning Identity or Identity Diffusion (Fidelity), occurs during adolescence from age 13 or 14. Maturity starts developing during this time; the young person acquires self-certainty as opposed to self-doubt and experiments with different constructive roles rather than adopting a negative identity, such as delinquency. The well-adjusted adolescent actually looks forward to achievement, and, in later adolescence, clear sexual identity is established. The adolescent seeks leadership (someone to inspire him or her), and gradually develops a set of ideals to live by.

Psychologist Carl Rogers emphasized how childhood experiences affect personality development. Many psychologists believe that there are certain critical periods in personality development—periods when the child will be more sensitive to certain environmental factors. Most experts believe that a child's experiences in the family are important for his or her personality development, although not exactly as described by Erikson's stages, but in good agreement with the importance of how a child's needs should be met in the family environment. For example, children who are toilet trained too early or have their toilet training carried out too strictly may become rebellious. Another example is shown by children who learn appropriate behaviour to their sex lives when there is a good relationship with their same-sex parent.

Another environmental factor of importance is culture. Researchers comparing cultural groups for specific personality types have found some important differences. For example, Northern European countries and the United States have individualistic cultures that put more emphasis on individual needs and accomplishments. In contrast, Asian, African, Central American, and South American countries are characterized more by community-centred cultures that focus on belonging to a larger group, such as a family, or nation. In these cultures, cooperation is considered a more important value than competitiveness, which will necessarily affect personality development.

Common problems

Infants who are just a few weeks old display differences between each other in how active they are, how responsive they are to change, and how irritable they are. Some infants cry constantly while others seem happy and stay fairly quiet. Child development research conducted by the CDI has identified nine temperamental traits that may contribute to a child's personality development being challenging or difficult:

- activity level (how active the child is generally);

- distractibility (degree of concentration and paying attention when the child is not particularly interested);

- intensity (how loud the child is);

- regularity (the predictability of biological functions like appetite and sleep);

- sensory threshold (how sensitive the child is to physical stimuli: touch, taste, smell, sound, light);

- approach/withdrawal (characteristic responses of a child to a new situation or to strangers);

- adaptability (how easily the child adapts to transitions and changes such as switching to a new activity);

- persistence (stubbornness, inability to give up);

- mood (tendency to react to the world primarily in a positive or negative way).

Temperamental traits are enduring personality characteristics that are neither "good" nor "bad." Early on, parents can work with the child's temperamental traits rather than oppose

them. Later, as the child grows up, parents can help the child to adapt to his or her own world in spite of inborn temperament.

Parental concerns

Most children experience healthy personality development. However, some parents worry as to whether their infant, child, or teenager has a personality disorder. Parents are usually the first to recognize that their child has a problem with emotions or behaviours that may point to a personality disorder.

Children with personality disorders have great difficulty dealing with other people. They tend to be inflexible, rigid, and unable to respond to the changes and normal stresses of life and find it very difficult to participate in social activities. When these characteristics are present in a child to an extreme, when they are persistent and when they interfere with healthy development, a diagnostic evaluation with a licensed physician or mental health professional is recommended.

Role of parents / guardians

Parents who suspect that their child has a personality disorder should seek professional help. It is a very important first step in knowing for sure whether there is a disorder, and if so, what treatment can best help the child. Child and adolescent psychiatrists are trained to help parents sort out whether their child's personality development is normal.

Words to know

Behaviour —A stereotyped motor response to an internal or external stimulus.

Character —An individual's set of emotional, cognitive, and behavioural patterns learned and accumulated over time.

Cognition —The act or process of knowing or perceiving.

Cognitive —The ability (or lack of) to think, learn, and memorize.

Gene —A building block of inheritance, which contains the instructions for the production of a particular protein, and is made up of a molecular sequence found on a section of DNA. Each gene is found on a precise location on a chromosome.

Identity —The condition of being the same with, or possessing, a character that is well described, asserted, or defined.

Maturity —A state of full development or completed growth.

Personality —The organized pattern of behaviours and attitudes that makes a human being distinctive. Personality is formed by the ongoing interaction of temperament, character, and environment.

Socialization —The process by which new members of a social group are integrated in the group.

Temperament —A person's natural disposition or inborn combination of mental and emotional traits.

References and further reading

Web source : <http://www.healthofchildren.com/P/Personality-Development.html>

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