



Discoveries of Infancy

Part of the excitement of caring for infants and toddlers is watching them become more and more competent. So many lessons are being learned during infancy, and in such subtle ways, they are often missed by adults. It may be helpful for caregivers to cluster what is being learned into categories so that the child's learning activities can be more easily understood. What follows is a clustering based on the films of J. McVicker Hunt and Ina Uzguris. They grouped learning activities that took place during the sensory/motor period as described by Jean Piaget into categories and ordered them according to level of complexity and then placed examples of these activities on six films. To learn more about their system, a viewing of the films *Ordinal Scales of Infant Psychological Development*, which may be rented from Visual Aids Service. University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois would be helpful.

Discovery One: Learning Schemes

During the first two years of life, the child begins to put things in groups. Infants begin to develop familiarity with hard things, soft things, sticky things, light things, things that bounce, things that make noise, and so on. As they get older, they also learn to act differently with different kinds of things. The older infant treats different objects in different ways. He will not try to make aluminum foil stick to a block without scotch tape. The child will also combine objects, put blocks in a container, or use a spoon to take sand from a sandbox. Learning different properties of items continues into the preschool years. A good deal of the touching, mouthing, banging, patting, and throwing of infancy is done to discover the function and properties of objects. The infant tests the environment to see how it operates and learns new ways of acting in the process.

Discovery Two: Learning That Events Are Caused

Young infants do not know the connection between cause and effect. Often you will see young infants bite themselves and yelp in puzzlement and disbelief at the pain. They do not make a connection between the action and the pain. Cause and effect lessons develop in the same way as the use of tools. Infants start to learn through their own body activity, and by fifteen months they are actively searching for such causes as what makes a light go on or what makes a sound happen. For example, they are increasingly experimenting with cause and effect by seizing upon opportunities to play with light switches, radio dials, doorbells, "pop up" toys, and so forth.

Discovery Three: Use of Tools

During infancy, infants learn to extend themselves through the use of tools. At first, the infant takes in information through sight, smell, touch and so forth. The infant uses sense tools. Then, infants start to act on things with the body. They grasp a bottle, bring it to their mouth, and suck. The infant also learns to use adults - - for example, by putting something into the hand of a caregiver that the infant wants opened or rewound. The infant uses the adult as a tool for getting food, toys, and comfort. Finally, the infant uses objects to help to get, hold onto, or explore things of interest. The infant stands on a box to reach the sink, pulls a leash to get a toy dog from under a table or chair.

Discovery Four: Object Permanence

From birth to about five months, the young infant does not realize that an object removed from sight and returned to sight is the same object. Repeated contact with familiar objects - - a mother's face, a particular rattle - helps the infant to learn this lesson. To know that things still exist when they are not in reach of the child's senses gives the world a greater sense of permanence, and it deepens the child's relationship with loved ones. During the first year of life, the infant learns that things are permanent. This understanding deepens and becomes more complex throughout childhood.

Discovery Five: Learning how Objects Fill Space

A good deal of infant learning has to do with issues of space, density, distance, movement, and perspective. Infants bump into walls, crawl into corners, get stuck under tables, and reach for things beyond their grasp. They also do not understand distance and size, and they often have false impressions about how big an object is and how much space it will fill. It is difficult for infants to understand that objects can change shape and that objects can be manipulated into different spaces.

Discovery Six: Imitation

During the first two years of life, the infant becomes increasingly skillful at imitation. Imitation is a powerful learning skill. Early in life, infants imitate their own behaviors. Gradually, they mimic what they see, starting with general body activity, and they become increasingly selective and precise with their imitation. Much of how the infant learns is through imitating caregivers. The infant learns to imitate sounds and actions. As infants move into the second year of life, they begin to imitate sequences of behavior. The eighteen-month-old infant puts sounds together or imitates adults by using a cup, saucer, and spoon in pretending to drink coffee. Imitation is a powerful tool in learning socially appropriate behavior.