Child Development

Cognitive Development–Piaget

Cognitive Development is how children think, process, and reason. It includes memory, problem-solving skills, thinking skills, and reasoning.

The below stages are the linear model of how most children grow up in their thinking abilities, though some children develop asynchronously. Parents should not hyper-fixate on development being slower or faster in some categories for children, but if abilities lag significantly (in length or severity), additional assessments and support may be helpful.

SensoriMotor Stage (0-2 years)

Children at this age are learning about their world through their senses. They are learning about their body, and tend to put everything in their mouth or do repetitive motions to figure out how to impact their world. Between 18-24 months, children are growing in their language skills rapidly, which will help them as they progress to the preoperational stage.

Pre-Operational Stage (2-7 years)

Children demonstrate more robust and fluid language development. They can recall things and talk about things not immediately in their sight (ie: memory). Logical abilities and understanding how things work become an area of focus between 4-7 years of age. Children at this age can play simple games with rules.

Children do tend to oscillate between fantasy and reality during this stage of development. Magical Thinking and Egocentrism are present.
Magical thinking is putting things together that don't go together (ie: thinking parents divorced because they spilled cake at their brother's birthday party, or thinking they got cancer from the deep end of the pool).
Egocentrism–thinking you are the center of the universe and that all things that happen are the result of you (not just selfishness–this is more of an ability in childhood–or lack thereof due to development).

Concrete Operations (7-12 years)

Children understand logical patterns and use them in day-to-day life/interactions. Children can label things, understand how things work more robustly, and categorize things (see connections). Children can solve problems logically and correctly. Competency is highly important to children at this age/stage.

Formal Operations (12+)

Able to understand and think about abstract concepts (ie: future planning, they don't have to have experienced something to imagine it). This gives room for increased empathy, perspective-taking, and ideation. Logical and deductive reasoning is understandable. Complex logical and abstract sequences become easier to think about and apply problem-solving. Can hold more than one thought in their mind at the same time.
***Of note, not all people reach abstract thinking or operate from this vantage point consistently.

Psychosocial Development–Erikson

Trust vs. Mistrust (0-18 months)

Trust is developed through consistent caregiving. Children can believe that the world is safe because they are getting their needs met consistently by a loving, attuned caregiver.
Disruptions to trust can include; postpartum depression, prenatal challenges, hospitalization/chronic health problems, and separation from primary caregivers.

Autonomy vs. Shame & Doubt (18-36 months)

Autonomy develops in children when they realize they have thoughts that are different from their caregivers/siblings. Typically this is when children discover the word 'no' and realize they cannot be controlled fully. Autonomy develops when children can have developmentally appropriate agency/choices coupled with limits for their protection. Learning to receive limits will be a primary task for them to develop both autonomy and obedience.
Developmental tasks that are common at this age/stage: potty training, healthy eating/sleep patterns.

Parents will do well to find a healthy balance of choice giving, which promotes control and practice in making child-size decisions; this is coupled well with limits that protect and support children who do not have the capacity to make big decisions.

Initiative vs Guilt (3-5 years old)

Children at this age and stage are learning how to initiate and move towards things on their own (ie: self-hygiene, beginning to make friends, and engaging in cooperative play). Scaffolding is a big part of this age (teaching 1 step ahead of where a child is and then offering support as they achieve gradual independence). Tasks that could support this: brushing teeth, putting on clothes, picking out clothes, putting on shoes, choosing a snack, etc. Literacy skills are typically introduced younger, but becoming more refined at this age and stage. Reading books is a good way to begin preparing for school.

A helpful mantra for parents during this age/stage is "*Don't do for a child what he/she is capable of doing for themselves."* We want children to be supported towards courage to take risks and try and develop skills that will support their growth and development. Gauging when a child needs help and when they need support/encouragement is tricky, but valuable to consider.

Industry vs. Inferiority (6-13 years old)

Children at this age and stage are taking in information EVERYWHERE! They are learning at a rate of drinking through a fire hydrant. They desire to know things and know how to do things in growing measure (competency). When children struggle academically or socially, sometimes they can develop a sense of inferiority or insecurity that requires support to help them with skill development, and encouragement of their values and abilities (and appreciation for weaknesses that draw them closer to the Lord). Children view competency in terms of school and academics, extracurricular activities, and socially–they want to fit in, they want to be like others and they may feel anxious or insecure when they are not. Curiosity about differences and comparisons is common.

For children at this age, they need encouragement. They need to know that you see them and it is a far better tool to encourage their effort than always praising outcomes. Children are not guaranteed to always make straight A's, be the MVP on the soccer team or be in the friend group they prefer. But the effort they demonstrate as they study, practice and demonstrate kindness towards others is the character development we hope to see children grow in. Encouragement in the effort allows children to be proud of how they do things versus the end product always being what they want it to be.

Identity vs Identity Confusion (13-21 years old)

Teenagers are emerging from a season of abundant learning with now developing a sense of how God made them. Each of us is unique–made with purpose and specificity, and it is within this age group that

teens are beginning to discover their own design. While we tend to view teenage years as 'scary' and a time of angst and rebellion, this is also a beautiful time of discovery where we get to continually usher teens to the feet of Jesus and allow them to see how wonderful He is, and encourage them towards faith to believe the goodness He has placed in them. Aspects of identity include: belief/faith, gender, sexuality, skills/gifts (athlete, musician, artist, academic), leader or follower,

As teens reflect on how God has made them, they naturally will have big questions. Where younger children tend to view information shared by parents as fact, teens need to *mull it over* and *think deeply about* the things they have shared. This individuation can create a distance or even, at times, you may feel like teens are rejecting you. But this is a necessary step that allows teens to launch into young adulthood more prepared to understand and articulate their thoughts and beliefs and more confidence in who they are.
Parents need wisdom from the Lord on how to offer room for teens to question things, demonstrate independence and initiative, and also have enough limits/boundaries to protect them. Teens may wrestle with beliefs, and desire a shift in how they engage with parents–they tend to appreciate dialogue versus directives conversationally (as a parent you get to start teaching them less about ***what*** to think/believe, and more about ***how*** you think or believe). Sharing stories about how you came to faith or how you have learned to trust and believe that God's way is better. Or sharing stories about conflict with peers or how to make decisions such as which sport to play or where to go to college will give them a window into your humanity and teach more about how to weigh out information, preferences, and hopefully seek the Lord in decision making as they wrestle with what He has for them. There are a host of things that can go wrong in adolescents, but there are so many things that can be beautiful and anchoring. Pray for your teens as the Lord shapes them into the person He has designed them to be and grows them up.

Spiritual Development

Infant-Toddler-Preschool

So much of a child's faith when they are young is modeled and introduced to them by you, their parents, along with their church family. God and Jesus and the many characters of scripture are introduced through stories you share. You also image God to your children–you are an imperfect model, but you reflect the heart of God in the way you care, nurture, are generous with, and correct your children. Ask for guidance, wisdom, strength, and patience as you seek to love your children the way God loves you. Ask for help from God to do this.

School Age

During school age years, children are learning a ton (at school, in soccer, with friends). The same is true for their faith. They are learning a lot of facts about Jesus and faith. They may or may not have a saving faith, but they are gathering data as they go to church, small groups and hear from you as you read scripture to them.

Children in school age years are usually seeking competency in faith–they want to know the right answer. They want to do things well. They often equate how good a believer they are with how many times they sinned/didn't sin. Children need encouragement to understand the depth of grace that is offered to them in faith and Jesus.

Kids at this age also tend to be very pharisaical–they usually see the flaw in others but defend away the sin in themselves. In many ways, this makes sense, especially for a non-believer. Sin and realizing your faults requires us to see our need for someone bigger than ourselves. And it gives us a dose/taste of the weight of our sin, which we cannot handle. Jesus covered it on our behalf, but they are usually just beginning to understand the depth of their sin and what that cost the Lord.

In these years, continually pointing out the good, beautiful, foundational aspects of faith is key to helping a child come to saving faith. In addition, when children mess up and fail, it gives opportunity over and over again to help them see their need for rescue and to point them to their rescuer.

Adolescence

In teen years, adolescents are developing their own identity, separate from you. They begin to question things, and this can include aspects of their faith. By adolescence, teens have also often begun to experience suffering (some in small doses, some in big). Their confrontation with the brokenness of the world can also make them ask big questions. Though challenging to see them struggle or not 'feel solid' in their faith, these questions can often strengthen and deepen their faith–making it more theirs and producing more intimacy with Jesus.

As we think about children launching into adulthood, this sharpening season of life can often help strengthen them to be able to lean into the Lord more faithfully as they leave the nest, live life more independently from you, but hopefully remain tightly anchored to the Lord.

Young Adulthood

As children launch into adulthood, the hope is that they would be able to develop in maturity of faith–being active members of the body of believers, growing in their gifting, developing discipline in study of the word, prayer and service.

Young adults tend to build their life rhythms around work and relationships. Some wander away from the Church community and struggle to integrate faith into their day-to-day lives; while others press in more deeply, integrating more fully. Your role as parent shifts from one of authority to one of coach/friend. In this stage, you have an opportunity to continue to disciple them by asking thoughtful questions, praying for them, and nudging them back to what is good and beautiful and true about their Savior as they learn to apply their faith in new ways. Given that you no longer *tell them what to do,* there can be a sweet shift as you care for them as a friend, seeking their flourishing by continuing to remind them of God's truth and praying for the Lord to remain the center of their lives or to become more so.