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Theories of Childhood  
SECOND EDITION

An Introduction to

Dewey

Montessori

Erikson

Piaget &

Vygotsky

Carol Garhart Mooney

# *Theories of Childhood*

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An Introduction to Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget, and Vygotsky

***Second Edition***

*Carol Garhart Mooney*

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*For Jeannette Stone, mentor and friend*

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## **Acknowledgments**

## **Introduction to the Second Edition**

## **Introduction to the First Edition**

Joining Theory to Practice

About This Book

## **Chapter 1: John Dewey**

Biography

Dewey's Theories

Dewey in the Twenty-First Century

Discussion Questions

Suggestions for Further Reading

## **Chapter 2: Maria Montessori**

Biography

Montessori's Theories

Montessori in the Twenty-First Century

Discussion Questions

Suggestions for Further Reading

## **Chapter 3: Erik Erikson**

Biography

Erikson's Theories

Erikson in the Twenty-First Century

Discussion Questions

Suggestions for Further Reading

## **Chapter 4: Jean Piaget**

Biography

Piaget's Theories

Piaget in the Twenty-First Century

Discussion Questions

---

Suggestions for Further Reading

## **Chapter 5: Lev Vygotsky**

Biography

Vygotsky's Theories

Vygotsky in the Twenty-First Century

Discussion Questions

Suggestions for Further Reading

## **Glossary**

## **References**

## **Index**

## **About the Author**

THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN LATE at night and on weekends, sandwiched between family and work life. It bears my name only, but, as I'm sure it is with most books, this one was a group effort.

To begin with, the thinking and framework for this review of early childhood theory was a collaborative effort with my friend and colleague Jeannette Stone. It was always "our" project!

The manuscript was refined thanks to the computer skills and energy of Marguerite Shanelaris. I am grateful to so many colleagues at New Hampshire Head Start and the New Hampshire Child Care Association for sharing their stories and classrooms with me. When I grew weary, I was forced back on track by the special friendship and support of Jay Munson, Sue Cloutier, and Pat Meattley. I am grateful to my many students at the [Granite State College](#) and the [New Hampshire Community Technical Colleges](#) who convinced me of the need for the book.

I appreciate the opportunity [Redleaf Press](#) has given me to bring the seed of this book to fruition. My editor, Beth Wallace, convinced me I could get it done and offered humor and support along the way.

Finally, I thank my children:

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Brian, for offering humor when I needed it and for forcing me to enter the computer age.

Tom, for downloading the research and late-night computer assistance.

Erin, for accepting a preoccupied mom and loving me anyway.

We're done!

Carol Garhart Mooney  
Manchester, New Hampshire June  
2000, updated July 2012

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO WHEN I BEGAN WORK on the first edition of *Theories of Childhood*, I knew it was a good idea. I had been a practitioner and college instructor for many years and knew that parents, child care teachers, providers, and students all increasingly struggled with what to do with the children.

I never expected the response to the book that I have enjoyed in the past decade. At conferences and training sessions, I am frequently approached by students who say they never “got” theory until they were forced to read my book in college. I have appreciated feedback from the many community college, university, and graduate school instructors who thank me for creating a usable text for beginners.

It is interesting that I have received comments and letters from many readers for whom English is not their native language. These practitioners have thanked me for helping them transition to caregiving in the United States. It is both humbling and gratifying to think that my own theory and practice struggles have helped colleagues to frame both for their daily work with children.

It is also interesting to me that there was some question at the time about using the Margaret Mead quote in the introduction. Objections were twofold. The editor did not like that the quote was from 1963 (still relevant?). And the source (*Redbook* magazine), we would mostly agree, is not a credible research tool for writing a textbook. I was new to the world of writing textbooks, and to me, Margaret Mead was credible wherever and whenever she made comments about the human condition.

Today, with over 75,000 copies in circulation, I am more confident about Mead’s words and my insistence that we use them. The teacher who most affected me in my undergraduate years made a similar comment to Mead’s in his existential philosophy course. “This course,” he was known to say, “attracts those who want a podium. If you have something to say . . . it best be said in a way that my great-aunt Gertrude, who has only a third-grade education, can read it and understand it.” A good rule of thumb for sharing important information is to use simple, direct language.

The mistake I made was assuming that the piece of my contract that said I would be willing to update as needed would ever be “called in.” It is a source of some humor both at Redleaf and my house that I had quite intentionally chosen theorists who were quite dead. I figured if I was able to state the theorists’ perspective in a clear, straightforward manner, offering classroom examples . . . what more could be done? It’s not like there would be additional work to discuss.

Today this seems extraordinarily naive to me. The 1990 National Teacher of the Year, Janis T. Gabay, told audiences, “I offer my students as many ideas as I can by showing them through literature that there is nothing that has not already been felt, experienced, or thought, but much to be discovered in a new way” (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], accessed 2012).

The technological changes alone to our daily lives in the past decade are astounding. Then there are changes in science, medicine, educational psychology, women’s studies, and family studies. Over the past thirty years, children have been driven from the natural world by the advances of technology (for example, “stranger danger,” natural disasters), and even classroom messages meant to raise their concerns about the world’s future (for example, global warming). This phenomenon has been termed “nature-deficit disorder.” In his book *Last Child in the Woods*, author Richard Louv writes, “Nature-deficit disorder describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses” (2008,

36). Additionally, if children are not given opportunities to explore and embrace the natural world, who will take care of it in the future? And a decade ago, most of us didn't pay much attention to the ethnocentric (characterized by or based on the attitude that one's own group is superior) nature of many of our considerations regarding children and families in the United States. We interpret all learning with a much broader lens as we consider culture, changing times, the importance of time in nature, and practices we didn't know existed even a decade ago.

It is this spirit of "discovering in a new way" and interpreting through a broader lens and application to a new generation of young children that I offer this second edition of *Theories of Childhood*. I hope to maintain the simplicity and directness readers have appreciated while taking a fresh look at our theoretical foundations in an increasingly rapidly changing world.

*Raising healthy children is a labor-intensive operation. Contrary to the news from the broader culture, most of what children need, money cannot buy. Children need time and space, attention, affection, guidance, and conversation. They need sheltered places where they can be safe as they learn what they need to know to survive.*

—Mary Pipher

IT ISN'T ANYONE'S IMAGINATION THAT WORKING with American children is getting harder and harder. Despite our attempts at optimism and the old lyrics “Why can't they be like we were, perfect in every way—what's the matter with kids today?” every experienced educator knows that the job was easier three decades ago. There are so many theories about why this is so that the topic could fill volumes. At a conference of educators at Harvard University, Jerome Kagan (1998) pointed out that in addition to the impact of both *heredity* (genes inherited from our birth parents) and the *environment* (people and places affecting our experiences after birth), psychologists are seeing more and more how society and culture at large affect growth and development.

What factors in American society affect the growth and development of our children? We live in one of the more violent countries of the developed world. Many Americans feel it is not safe to walk alone in their own neighborhood at night. This concern is well-founded. According to the [Sentencing Project](#), a nonprofit agency devoted to improving the justice system, the crime rate in the United States exceeds that of most other nations (Siegel 1998).

Media influences and consumerism are often not in the best interest of our children. In the past forty years, more than a thousand studies on the effects of media and film violence have been conducted. In the past decade, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), the [American Medical Association](#), the [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#), and the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) have separately reviewed many of these studies. Each of these reviews has reached the same conclusion: television violence leads to real-world violence (New Hampshire Pediatric Society Newsletter, n.d.).

Family and community life have changed dramatically in the last fifty years. Much of the public discussion of these changes has focused on the negative. People express fear that the family is endangered. Campaign slogans call for a return to family values. In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz points out that trying to solve today's challenges to family life through a return to “traditional” family forms is pointless (1992). Americans, she writes, cherish a myth of stable, happy families that exist primarily in the minds of those who indulge in nostalgia. Families in every era have dealt with poverty, stress, death, illness, and emotional misunderstandings between family members. Child abuse, racism, and the inequities of class and gender are constants throughout our nation's history. Nostalgia for “the good old days” is not an answer, but addressing the changes of our times is necessary. Our challenge is to find adequate and creative ways to adapt to these changes.

Workplaces and community organizations have not kept pace with the changes. For example, numerous community organizations for children continue to hold events such as “father/daughter dances” or “father/son campouts,” ignoring the fact that fewer than half of all American families resemble the stereotypical family of two opposite-gender married parents with children living in a single household. Similarly, many schools have not creatively adapted their parent involvement

components to match the lives of dual-career or single-parent families. Failure to adapt to these social changes stresses our children.

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Fifty years ago, projections were made that filling our leisure hours would be the challenge for most Americans in the 1990s. This has not proven to be true. Adults work more hours than ever. The Harris Poll reports that since 1973, free time has fallen nearly 40 percent, from a median figure of twenty-six hours a week to slightly under seventeen hours. At the same time, research shows that employed hours have risen for Americans in all income categories (Schor 1991). We spend less time with family and friends. The debates of the 1980s over quality time versus quantity time have disappeared. Today, for many, it is a stretch to find *any* time together!

By now, I'm sure the reader is asking, "What does all of this have to do with Piaget and Erikson?" Teachers in early childhood programs spend many hours discussing child and family struggles. Many of the teachers I talk with are discouraged. "The behavior problems are too much to handle," they tell me. Some of them blame parents. Some even make statements like, "If parents don't want to care for their kids, then why do they have them?" This attitude usually comes from the frustration of having daily interactions with children in pain. When we can't make it better, we want someone to blame, and parents are an easy target. Many parents are stressed too. They know their long hours are taking a toll on family life. Like teachers, they often don't know what to do to make it better.

This is where Erikson, Piaget, and the other theorists come in. When I ask teachers what they learned in college that might help them respond to children under stress, many of them just laugh. Some make comments such as "I could never keep all of those theorists straight" or "That textbook approach doesn't work once you're in a real classroom." Teachers will say, "Now, which one was he?" or "Wasn't Piaget the cognitive theory?" but rarely pause to reflect on how understanding child development theory might benefit their day-to-day classroom practices. The purpose of this small text is to look for those benefits.

## Joining Theory to Practice

Anthropologist and teacher Margaret Mead said in *Redbook* magazine in 1963, "If one cannot state a matter clearly enough so that an intelligent twelve-year-old can understand it, one should remain within the cloistered walls of the University and laboratory until one gets a better grasp of one's subject matter." The field of early childhood education needs to listen to this wisdom. "I need to drop this course," a student of mine told me recently. "I'm a full-time student, the single mother of a three-year-old, and I work at Pizza Hut on weekends. I don't have the time or patience to figure out what this means!" She thrust her child development textbook onto my desk and pointed to a highlighted passage in the introductory chapter. It read: "The improvement of research tends to increase divergence in the treatment of evidence and to multiply mystification in the interpretation of specific findings. As research on a problem matures, the angles of vision multiply."

I shared with her my memorized interpretation. "It means studying children is really complicated. The more we learn, the more there is to understand about a single topic."

The student looked annoyed. "Well, why can't they just say that?" she asked. Then, in a sad and quiet voice, she added, "When I see words that I've never even heard of, I get discouraged and think I'm crazy to be going to college. The director at my center told me all that theory won't help me once I'm working with kids anyway."

As a teacher of child development, I am always alarmed when students share these stories, which they do frequently. To leap from disregarding difficult texts that do a poor job of introducing the

subject to disregarding the importance of theory in shaping practice seems a huge mistake. Knowing the theoretical foundations of early childhood education is critical to providing quality early care and education.

Not everyone agrees with me. A few years ago a survey of child care directors was done in my state to guide the investment of training dollars. Many directors responded that they didn't care if teachers knew who Vygotsky or Erikson were, but that they wanted them to know what to do when the children were hitting or biting each other. The point these directors missed is that teachers who know what to do when children are hitting or biting are teachers who understand child development. Many of the directors interviewed said such things as "When I hire those college students, they are full of theory but don't know what to do in the classroom. I'd rather hire someone with no college but a true enjoyment of young children." We need teachers who have both a true enjoyment of children and a true understanding of how they grow and learn. It seems that we have not been successful at presenting child development as a usable tool for working with young children more effectively. Perhaps we need to take a different approach to introducing theory and its practice to the beginning student or teacher.

It is true that most of us chuckle when we say, "Well, in theory . . .," because we all expect gaps between any theory and the way we are able to apply that theory in real life. But these gaps are part of our growing understanding of the complexity of growth and development. They are inevitable. This is not a good enough reason for practitioners to dismiss theory as "irrelevant" to their day-to-day work with children.

Jargon does not help students to grasp the important ideas of Piaget or Erikson. Memorizing names and stages out of context does not build the bridge we need between child development and children. I know that too many classrooms offer this textbook approach to theory, because when I ask teachers what they remember about child development theories from their college classes, too many of them respond, "Very little!" Others will tell me that they could never remember whether Erikson was the one who talked about feelings and Piaget about thought or the other way around. I can picture these students chanting, "Piaget, Swiss psychologist, cognitive development theory," as one might memorize state capitals and major rivers. Given this kind of introduction to theory, it is no wonder so many directors say, "Just send me someone who has good sense about kids!"

As directors struggle with staffing shortages and inadequately prepared teachers, however, it is more important to them that teachers know basic development information, such as that babies always need to be held during feeding. Teachers may not need to know that Erik Erikson was born in Germany and brought us the psychosocial theory of development, but they will do their jobs better if they know that holding babies while they are being fed helps the children to develop trust in grown-ups. Theory needs to be real to the developing teacher. It needs to be tested in practice and adapted to the realities of individual children and classrooms. This ongoing process is what builds the bridge between theory and practice. When directors and teachers see how understanding child development theory makes their days with children smoother, their jobs easier, and their programs stronger, then they will value this knowledge.

## About This Book

*Theories of Childhood* is a practitioner's manual as well as a college textbook. It is designed for the person working with young children who wants to better understand how children think and act and how to be more effective with them. It begins with a discussion of the interactive nature of theory and

practice that is necessary to make either meaningful. It includes information about and reflection on the work of five of the major contributors to the body of knowledge upon which our best practices in early childhood education are based. It is a basic introduction and is not intended to be academic or scholarly. I'm hoping to whet the appetite of those interested in the relationship of theory to practice and its impact on real children, teachers, and classrooms. For this reason, each chapter concludes with discussion questions and suggestions for further reading.

The stories shared here are from real classrooms where I have either worked or observed others at work. Each chapter provides the reader with background information on the theorist's life and work. Classroom stories are used to illustrate the point of the original writings. This is not a comprehensive introduction to the field or even to the individual theorists included. I hope that this brief introduction to early childhood's theoretical foundations will give readers a foundation for understanding how child development affects how we work with children in early childhood programs and will encourage them to go on to the more in-depth readings.

*The fundamental issue is not of new versus old education nor of progressive against traditional education but a question of what anything whatever must be to be worthy of the name education.*

—John Dewey

## Biography

JOHN DEWEY IS TRULY the American educator who has most influenced our thinking about education in the United States. He was born in Burlington, Vermont, in 1859. Dewey's family had farmed in Vermont for three generations. He attended the University of Vermont, where he studied philosophy. In 1884 he received a PhD at Johns Hopkins University, which led to a teaching position at the University of Michigan. While serving as a professor of philosophy there, he became friends with one of his students, Alice Chipman. They were married in 1886, and it was largely the influence of his wife that brought Dewey to the study of education. Chipman was interested in social problems and their relationship to education. Her interest was contagious, and soon she and Dewey were working together to determine the best ways to support the education of children in America.

In 1894 they moved to the University of Chicago, where Dewey took a position teaching philosophy. He found the position desirable because it was intended that he blend the teaching of philosophy with both psychology and educational theory. Within two years he had established the famous laboratory school that attracted attention around the world. Dewey's [Laboratory School](#) established the University of Chicago as the center of thought on [progressive education](#), the movement toward more democratic and child-centered education. Progressive education was a reaction to the rigid, more formal style of traditional education during the nineteenth century. It was considered genius by many and criticized as too radical by others. Dewey's involvement with the lab school was relatively short-lived but created, in a few years, a wealth of educational research and theory that continues to drive many of our best practices today.

In 1904, arguing with administrators over education budgets, Dewey resigned his position at the University of Chicago. He took a post at Columbia University in New York City where he continued to teach and write for another four decades. Dewey has contributed volumes of work to our knowledge base in educational psychology and theory. Much of his work is as relevant to the struggles of educators in the United States today as it was nearly a half century ago. His writings cover a broad range of topics relevant to teaching. Dewey continued writing and revising manuscripts until his death in 1952 at the age of ninety-three.

In 1899 John Dewey gave a talk to the parents of children in his school. The parents were worried about the changing times. On the edge of the industrial age, these parents of one hundred years ago were old enough to remember the "agricultural era" in the United States. They remembered when children were educated at home by watching their parents do meaningful work. They thought the new generation lacked character and values. Dewey agreed with parents that the home was no longer educating children in the way it had in the past, but he gave them good counsel. "We cannot overlook the factors of discipline and of character building involved . . . but it is useless to bemoan the

departure of the good old days of children's modesty, reverence, and implicit obedience, if we expect merely by bemoaning and by exhortation to bring them back" (Dewey 1899, 19, 21).

What Dewey was trying to get his parent group to understand was that change brings new problems but also new opportunities. He urged parents to think of new ways they could all find to help children learn to be socially responsible people, without trying to cling to times gone by.

At the end of the next century, teachers were struggling with the very same issues. In *Dewey's Laboratory School: Lessons for Today*, Laurel Tanner (1997) points out that a century ago Dewey asked the questions we still seek answers to in the twenty-first century: How do we best introduce children to subject matter? Should we have multiage classrooms? How can we best plan curriculum? How can supervisors support classroom teachers? How should thinking skills be taught? Significant answers to these and similar questions about teaching can be found in Dewey's many volumes. Dewey's work is echoed in the writing of many contemporary educational theorists. As we speak today of dispositions for learning, purposeful curricula, shaping experiences through well-planned environments, and many other theoretical and practical conditions of teaching, we are discussing the issues that interested Dewey and that he wrote and talked about.

Dewey played a central role in the development of—and is most associated with—the progressive education movement in the United States. In Europe, Maria Montessori and Jean Piaget were spreading the same message. These early theorists all agreed that children learn from doing and that education should involve real-life material and experiences and should encourage experimentation and independent thinking. These ideas, now quite common, were considered revolutionary in Dewey's day.

## Dewey's Theories

John Dewey wrote so many volumes on the philosophy and practice of education that an introductory text cannot begin to cover his contribution to our field. As a progressive educator, he shared with Lev Vygotsky, Montessori, and Piaget the central ideas of that movement: education should be child centered; education must be both active and interactive; and education must involve the social world of the child and the community. In 1897 Dewey published his philosophy of education in a document called *My Pedagogic Creed*. Here's what he said about education:

**“True education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself” (5).** Dewey believed that children learn best when they interact with other people, working side by side and cooperatively with peers and adults.

**“The child's own instincts and powers furnish the material and give the starting-point for all education” (6).** According to Dewey, children's interests form the basis for curriculum planning. He believed that the interests and background of each child and group must be considered when teachers plan [\*learning experiences\*](#).

**“I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living” (8).** Dewey believed that education is part of life. He believed that as long as people are alive, they are learning, and education should address what the person needs to know at the time, not prepare them for the future. Dewey thought that curriculum should grow out of real home, work, and other life situations.

**“The school life should grow gradually out of the home life. . . . It is the business of the school to deepen and extend his [the child’s] sense of the values bound up in his home life” (9).** Dewey thought teachers must be sensitive to the values and needs of families. The values and cultures of families and communities should be reflected in and deepened by what happens at school.

**“I believe, finally, that the teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life” (17).** Dewey believed that teachers do not only teach subject matter but also teach how to live in society. In addition, he thought that teachers do not only teach individual children but also shape the society.

It is the last piece of Dewey’s pedagogic creed that is the springboard for some of his most provocative ideas. He believed that teachers need to have confidence in their skills and abilities. He believed teachers need to trust their knowledge and experience and, using both, provide appropriate activities to nurture inquiry and dispositions for learning in the children they work with.

## **The Teacher’s Role**

In *Experience and Education* (1938), Dewey writes that teachers should have more confidence when planning children’s learning experiences. He writes that teachers are too afraid that instruction will infringe upon the freedom and creativity of their students. Dewey thought that children need assistance from teachers in making sense of their world.

What should this assistance look like? Dewey thought it was important for teachers to observe children and to determine from these observations what kinds of experiences the children are interested in and ready for. He thought that the educator has a serious responsibility to invest in planning and organizing for children’s learning activities. In other words, he believed that it is the teacher’s job to determine the curriculum based on knowledge of the children and the children’s abilities. He felt that suggestions and guidance coming from thoughtful teachers, who after all have more life experience and more general knowledge than children, could be more useful to children than the ideas they arrive at by accident.

When progressive education was criticized for allowing children too much freedom without appropriate guidance, Dewey agreed. “It is a ground for legitimate criticism, however, when the ongoing movement of progressive education fails to recognize that the problem of selection and organization of subject matter for study and learning is fundamental,” he responded (Dewey 1938, 78). Dewey was saying that children need teachers to decide what is safe and also developmentally and individually appropriate for them.

Dewey was concerned that many teachers of his time were claiming to be part of progressive education merely because they departed from more traditional approaches. He recognized the danger in moving away from one direction without clearly understanding the new direction one wanted to follow. He also thought this was a very common pattern among educators. He believed there were teachers who were drawn to progressive education because they thought it would be easier. He knew that some teachers used the new ideas as justification for improvising or allowing children to choose their experiences, uninhibited by teacher planning or direction.

Dewey believed that the path to quality education is to know the children well, to build their experiences on past learning, to be organized, and to plan well. He also believed that the demands of

this new method make observing, documenting, and keeping records of classroom events much more important than when traditional methods are used. Today these beliefs and many others articulated by Dewey are foundational pieces of developmentally appropriate practice and early childhood curriculum models such as emergent and constructivist.

Dewey believed that in order to provide educational experiences for children, teachers must

- have a strong base of general knowledge as well as knowledge of specific children;
- be willing to make sense of the world for children on the basis of their greater knowledge and experience; and
- invest in observation, planning, organization, and documentation.

How can Dewey's theory about the teacher's role in education guide teachers in early childhood programs? Teachers should observe children closely and plan curriculum from the children's interests and experience. And teachers shouldn't be afraid to use their knowledge of the children and the world to make sense of the world for children.

## Plan Purposeful Curriculum

When visiting a group of four-year-olds, I noticed a child who spent most of her free-play time crawling about the room. She would say "meow" to anyone she passed. She did not play with other children. She did not seek interaction from her teacher. She simply roamed around, meowing.

I asked the teacher about this child. "She likes to think she's a cat," the teacher said.

"Why is that?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," the teacher said.

"Does she have a cat at home?" I asked.

"I'm not sure," the teacher said again.

"Do you ever wonder what makes her do it?" I pushed.

"She really enjoys it . . . and that's enough for me," the teacher said, smiling confidently, and added, "Learning should be fun!"

This is not what Dewey meant by "teacher confidence." He said that confidence should spring from the base of knowledge that the teacher applies to classroom situations. The teacher's knowledge includes

- knowing the child (Does she have a cat?)
- individualizing curricula (Does she need to work through the death of a pet?)
- understanding the social nature of learning (How can the teacher or peers help or join her?)
- preparation for life (What is the point of this behavior? What is she learning from it that she can use as she goes through life?)

Dewey certainly believed that when children were engaged, learning was fun and exciting in and of itself. However, in this example, the teacher was content to accept "fun" as a justification for aimless activity, without trying to understand the meaning of the experience for the child. She did not build on the child's preoccupation with being a cat to extend the girl's knowledge of the world, to advance her skills, or to support her development. She did not connect the child's interest to her own broad knowledge of the world or to learning that had gone before. This is similar to the misconception among some early childhood educators today that a hands-on curriculum is enough. In *The Young Child as Scientist: A Constructivist Approach to Early Childhood Science Education*, authors Christine Chaillé and Lory Britain write, "The constructivist [teacher] sees the essential activity . . . what goes on in the child's head, not in his or her hands. With young children, physical activity and

manipulation is often a necessary part of mental activity, but not always. . . . Children need to be active . . . and they need opportunities to manipulate and experiment with real objects. But this itself is not the definition of a good activity” (17).

Here’s a very different example. In a classroom where five-year-olds were at work, I observed some children playing with glue. At first glance, this activity seemed aimless as well as wasteful. The children had taken empty thread spools from the art area. Placing a finger under the bottom hole, they filled the spool with glue. Quickly turning it sideways, the children blew the glue out of the hole. “Wow, you did it, just like yesterday!” one child shouted exuberantly as the glue spread across the art table.

Fascinated, I was wondering what kind of curriculum the school followed when the teacher quickly intervened. “You must be showing our visitor what you did with eggs yesterday,” she said. She explained that the children had been looking at decorated eggs from around the world. The teacher had shown them how the artists prepare the eggshells by blowing out the raw egg inside. Now the children’s behavior made sense to me. Then the teacher said, “You really understood that process with the eggs. You have done the same thing with the spools and glue. We can’t use up all of our glue, though, so I want you to put that away now. Then we can go check on our eggs from yesterday and see if they are ready to decorate.”

This teacher knew her students well. She knew exactly what they were doing and why. She affirmed the connection between the eggs and the glue and then redirected the children to the original project. She wasn’t afraid to say, “I see what you are doing. It makes sense, but let’s not do it with glue. Let’s get back to our eggs.” Her guidance assured that the experimenting was turned from mere *experience to learning experience*. This is the confidence Dewey speaks of. It is based on knowledge of both specific children and the learning process.

## **Make Sense of the World for Children**

Dewey also said that beyond their knowledge of children, teachers must be willing to tap their general knowledge of the world to help children make sense of their surroundings and experiences. This is a challenge for many early childhood teachers who have often been discouraged from sharing their knowledge with children.

For example, I was at a statewide gathering of Head Start teachers who were working toward their Child Development Associate Credential. As part of the seminar, teachers were reflecting on the project work they were doing with children. One teacher, Kathy, talked about her class’s investigation of winter birds. The children had observed and commented on the V formation of birds flying above the play area. Their teachers explained that the birds were going south for the winter. The children knew that not all birds left New England, because there were birds coming daily to their bird feeder, and this launched the class into a project studying the birds that remained in the area during the winter.

Kathy showed the group some cardinals that the children had made. They were so realistic that at first no one guessed they were made from paper plates, painted and feathered. Several teachers also commented that they looked as if they had been made by older children.

Some of the teachers were disturbed by Kathy’s presentation. “Did you use a model?” one asked.

“No,” Kathy responded. “We had the children carefully observe the cardinals in the yard. We brought in lots of books with pictures and photographs, and when we set up the activity, we only set out materials and paint appropriate to making cardinals.”

The discussion got more heated. “You actually did this with five-year-olds? I can’t believe you would only set out red and brown paint! What if someone wanted theirs to be purple or green? Isn’t this whole thing infringing on the children’s creativity?” There was an explosion of questions and comments.

Kathy was tentative. Her head teacher had warned her that some of her peers might not understand or approve of the work they were doing with the class. Quietly she shared their approach. “We didn’t put green paint out because there aren’t green cardinals. There has been a lot of painting and drawing in other areas of the classroom, but we think of this project as scientific investigation, not creative arts. We are studying birds, what they look like, what they eat, where they live. We want the children to know more about some of the birds that live in their backyards, and we thought it was important to share accurate information. Restricting the colors they painted with for this project has actually made their study more interesting. Last week I overheard a child tell her classmate, as they stared out the window, ‘That must be a blue jay. It can’t be a cardinal, because they are all red!’”

This was followed by another burst of comments:

“Isn’t it inappropriate to tell children what color they should use on a project?”

“If children are painting, shouldn’t they use whatever color they want?”

“Well, but bird watching is different from easel painting.”

“Do we really want children pointing to a pigeon and saying, ‘There’s a cardinal?’”

“If a child brought you a picture of an octopus and it only had six tentacles, would you correct her? Would you say, ‘That’s wrong; go back and add two more tentacles?’”

Kathy responded slowly and thoughtfully. “We wouldn’t say ‘It’s wrong, go back and fix it!’ but we might say some other thought-provoking things. We would have many books about sea life with drawings and photographs. We might say something like, ‘Let’s look at your drawing of the octopus and the pictures in *National Geographic*.’ We might call attention to the fact that these creatures surely have more legs than we do! Many children would then begin counting and would realize that a real octopus has eight tentacles. This is the kind of discovery that learning is all about!”

The other teachers were not all convinced. There was a long discussion, with comments such as these:

“Process is what is important to young children.”

“Each child’s work should look the way she wants it to.”

“This whole approach seems manipulative.”

“We *never* tell children how to draw.” “This doesn’t seem very developmentally appropriate!”

Kathy explained to the group that the teachers at her center had visited the [Hundred Languages of Children](#) exhibit. They had been amazed at some of the work done by preschoolers in Reggio Emilia, Italy. After attending project seminars, the staff had reflected on their current work with the children. Their new learning convinced them that they had been underestimating what the children were capable of. “We decided that, as teachers, our responsibility includes making sense of the world to children even if it means having them take another look at the color of birds or their two-legged horses!” she concluded.

Kathy’s story is a good example of what Dewey meant by teachers using their greater knowledge to help the children make sense of their world. Children in her classroom have ample opportunity for unfettered creative expression, but in the study she described, children were using art as a tool for scientific investigation. By helping the children look closely at the birds they were studying and giving them the tools to make accurate representations of them, these teachers built on the children’s knowledge. They helped them learn more about the birds. They also gave them skills they could use

for future investigations. This, according to Dewey, is how teachers should use their knowledge of the world to expand children's knowledge.

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## Education versus Mis-education

Dewey avoided the either/or discussions so common to educational philosophy. He believed that the real issue is not a matter of new versus old approaches to education but rather what conditions make any experience worthy of being called "educational." Dewey insisted that education and experience are related but not equal, and that some experiences are not educational at all. He called these *mis-educative* experiences. Dewey believed that an activity is not a learning activity if it lacks purpose and organization. He criticized the more traditional formal teaching environments of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in which children learned information by rote and spent days reciting facts out of context. He also criticized situations in which teachers set up the learning environment and then turn children loose to explore without offering any guidance or suggestions, or randomly set up experiences without providing any unifying theme, continuity, or purpose. The situation described earlier of the teacher who thought the child pretending to be a cat was having fun and therefore learning is an example of a mis-educative experience. Dewey thought that rather than saying, "The children will enjoy this," teachers need to ask the following questions when they plan activities for children:

- How does this expand on what these children already know?
- How will this activity help this child grow?
- What skills are being developed?
- How will this activity help these children know more about their world?
- How does this activity prepare these children to live more fully?

From Dewey's perspective, an experience can only be called educational if it meets these criteria:

- It is based on the children's interests and grows out of their existing knowledge and experience.
- It supports the children's development.
- It helps the children develop new skills.
- It adds to the children's understanding of their world.
- It prepares the children to live more fully.

How can early childhood teachers be guided by Dewey's criteria for educational experiences? Do not accept "It's fun" as a justification for curriculum, but ask how an activity will support children's development and learning. Again, it is not enough for an activity to be "hands on"; it must be "mind on" as well. And teachers must invest in organization and documentation.

## "It's Fun" Is Not Enough

Dewey believed that when people are engaged in learning something that interests them and is related to their experience, the process of learning is enjoyable. However, he also said that enjoyment on its own is not enough to make an experience educational. Teachers can use Dewey's criteria to make sure the experiences they plan for children are not only fun but also build children's learning.

For example, I once visited a classroom where children were having a make-your-own-sundae celebration. There was much excitement in the room. Children told me they could choose frozen

yogurt or ice cream, sprinkles or M&Ms, and chocolate syrup or strawberries. The teacher did a survey at the end of the day asking children which flavor was their favorite. She had carefully prepared a poster. It said “Our Favorite Ice Cream!” She had cut out ice-cream cones in brown, white, and pink. The children chose cones and put their names on them. When the teacher called their names, they placed their cones next to the word *chocolate*, *vanilla*, or *strawberry*. As Zachary taped his brown cone to the chart, he smiled and said, “My favorite is Cherry Garcia.”

Later I asked the teacher how she thought the activity had gone. Like so many teachers I speak with, she said, “The children really seemed to enjoy it.” When I asked why she had planned this particular activity, she smiled and said, “I knew they would love it!”

Dewey would say this teacher had not done enough planning for this activity. It’s unclear whether the children had expressed an interest in ice cream or how the activity built on any prior information they had. What did they already know about ice cream? What were they curious about? It’s also hard to see how the activity supported children’s development or helped them learn new skills. The documentation of the activity was limited to the chart, which was inaccurate—the only choices were chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry, which didn’t reflect Zachary’s favorite, Cherry Garcia, and his choice of a brown cone required no association of colors with flavors. In addition, by concluding an activity with a “My favorite . . .” chart, the teacher had not left the children wondering or searching for more.

## Invest in Organization and Documentation

Now read about a different teacher who turned the same subject, ice cream, into a lesson Dewey would probably have identified as a learning experience. A kindergarten teacher had invited a parent to come in and share an old family recipe for peach ice cream. In preparing the children for this visit, she discovered that none of the children had ever tasted peach ice cream before. The teacher asked the children why they thought no one had ever tasted it, and she documented their answers. Here are some of them:

- “It’s not at the store.”
- “It’s a fruit, not an ice cream.”
- “I’m allergic!”
- “Chocolate is best.”

The teacher asked the children to talk to their families about ice cream. “Do you eat much ice cream? Does your brother or sister have a favorite flavor? Have you ever made ice cream at home?” she asked. The next day the list of information was much longer: Anthony’s dad liked Rocky Road; Alexa had gone to the Ben & Jerry’s factory to watch them make ice cream; Nina’s grandmother liked orange sherbet, which is sort of like ice cream but not exactly!

When the parent came in to help the children make peach ice cream, she used an old-fashioned ice cream maker. It had been her grandmother’s. Children took turns mixing the ingredients and turning the crank. The teacher asked the children if they thought this was how the ice cream they got at the store was made, and she documented their responses. Here are some of the things they said:

- “No—it’s too slow.”
- “It’s not big enough to make all those ice creams.”
- “They have to use gigantic bowls.”
- “They don’t turn the handle like this; they use a huge mixer like when my mom makes cake.”

The teacher observed from these responses that the children had some ideas about how ice cream could be made in large quantities. She saw an opportunity to help them make connections between the ice cream they were making at school and the idea of an ice cream factory. She asked the children how they might find out how huge quantities of ice cream are made, and she wrote down what they said. Among their answers were:

- “Watch somebody do it.”
- “Call the supermarket and ask them!”
- “Ask the cook.”
- “Look on the Internet.”
- “Go to Ben & Jerry’s.”

The teacher tried to follow up on the children’s suggestions. They visited an ice cream and yogurt factory. They talked to other people and each other about ice cream. The body of information kept growing. Grandparents shared stories of eating ice cream all day when they got their tonsils out as children. The children wrote stories, drew pictures, collected recipes, went on field trips, and took photographs to document all this learning.

This class also had a make-your-own-sundae party. Families were invited. The children served the peach ice cream. The room was decorated with their charts, graphs, stories, drawings, and photographs. This party was a celebration of weeks of learning about something familiar to everyone. Meanwhile, the children were already talking about their next project for study: refrigeration! During the ice cream study, Emily’s grandfather had told her about cutting ice from nearby lakes in winter to store and use for iceboxes in summer. Many of the children had never heard of pre-electricity refrigeration. They all swam in the lake where Emily’s grandfather had cut ice in the “old days.” They were fascinated by this story and curious about how food was kept fresh before electricity. Their learning was spiraling in new directions.

This story is an example of what Dewey would call an educational experience. The teacher observed and asked questions to find out what the children already knew. She set up experiences for them to discover things they didn’t already know. She used her knowledge of child development to plan curriculum that was age appropriate, and she documented the children’s learning to support her understanding of their thinking. The success of the project is measured by the fact that it led into the next area of study. The children were left curious, wanting more, and confident in their ability to dive in and satisfy their curiosity.

## **Dewey in the Twenty-First Century**

A colleague with whom many of the ideas in this book were discussed for months prior to its publication used to have long talks with me about teaching. We both found ourselves concerned by the extent to which many of the teachers we spoke with had strong notions about paid planning time and articulated that when they left the building their job should be done until they return.

We talked about the hours of preparation we had always put in on nights and weekends when we were young teachers. We were researching community field trip ideas, going to the library for additional books to support the children’s learning, looking in *National Geographic* and other magazines for photos that would authentically extend the subject matter we were involved in. It never occurred to us that when we walked out of our workplace our job was done. We are both passionate advocates of worthy wages for early childhood teachers and for expanded benefits and paid planning

time. We are also educators who believe teaching is a passionate calling involving hours of preparation and planning that cannot possibly be fit into the workday.

In his book *My Pedagogic Creed*, Dewey references the need for teachers to teach children how to live in society. He believed that teachers shape society as well as individual children by what they do. A fine example of how this is currently being done is Head Start's [I Am Moving, I Am Learning \(IMIL\)](#) program. The program meets the individual as well as general needs of young children to learn conceptual information like colors, shapes, letters, and numbers in an active and fun way. At the same time, it addresses a serious societal problem in the United States: childhood obesity. It conveys the importance of good health to children by getting them up and moving and talking about the vegetables referenced in the songs, as well as how much fun it is to dance around to good music while helping their bodies to become strong and fit. An example of extending IMIL to other integrated approaches would be using the [Early Sprouts](#) approach by Karrie Kalich, Dottie Bauer, and Deirdre McPartlin for cooking and gardening experiences, also connected to taking good care of our bodies.

John Dewey supported parents at a time when the United States was transitioning from an agricultural to an industrial age. Had someone mentioned “going green” to Dewey, he would have thought we were referencing learning activities for children about color. But as we ponder his important theory about shaping society as we teach young children, we can apply this to the fact that we are transitioning again as a culture. The importance of teaching young children to care for the planet is not only interesting and relevant to the twenty-first century but also absolutely essential to our survival. Why not extend those Earth Day celebrations to include using the [Go Green Rating Scale](#) by Phil Boise. All of these programs are relatively new, yet each addresses the real-life issues that Dewey, Piaget, and Montessori repeatedly stressed as critically connected to educating the next generation.

For contemporary educators to learn from and utilize Dewey's theories of education, we must be willing to change with the times. When Dewey appealed to parents and teachers in his day to adapt to current societal changes rather than fight them, he was offering sound advice. It does not help to mourn the past or dread new trends that might make us uncomfortable.

In Scott Nearing's analysis of progressive education (2007), he refers to the school as a servant, not a master. He writes, “In that fact lies its greatness—the greatness of its opportunity and of its responsibility” (198). Nearing believes our responsibility is to be open to increased knowledge, which may prove more effective than the old theories we employ. At such times we need to embrace change. He cautions that this doesn't need to be done hastily but that change is inevitable.

The early progressive educators frequently asked the question we continue to hear in current debates over school directions: Does education exist for children, or do children exist for education? Today, as a century ago, this question is worthy of our discussion. Dewey's theory remains a clear guide to this debate.

## Discussion Questions

1. Progressive education has been called many different things. What are some of the misconceptions about it? Give a brief explanation that summarizes Dewey's ideas about progressive education.
2. Today one common curriculum model is *emergent curriculum*, or planning curriculum around what *emerges* from the children's interests and experience. Is this consistent or inconsistent with Dewey's idea about education? Why?

3. Many families want an overtly structured environment for their children and feel anxious if they think that the children play too much. Using Dewey's ideas, prepare a response for families that illustrates the learning structure behind your program.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

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