Adolescence Essay, Research Paper

Abstract

The period of Adolescence is most clearly defined by Jean Piaget and his definition, the formal-Operations stage. One of Piaget’s four stages of Cognitive Development, it involves characteristics of advanced reasoning, creativity, grasping of external concepts and thinking more extensively. Criticisms of this theory, are it’s lack of flexibility in a child’s ability to attain Formal-Operations stage, and that children can attain these characteristics earlier or later than Piaget’s pre-determined age bracket. It is the expressing of these new found abilities in adolescence that puts children in conflict with parents. Argumentative behaviour, Self-Centredness and Hypocrisy are just some of the flaws within this group of characteristics that can lead to potential conflict. Children develop differently, and many factors are associated with this development, and as long as that is understood, adolescence may not prove so turbulent for both children and parents.

Adolescence is a period within the lifespan, that is turbulent for some and inanimate for others. Considering the approach of Jean Piaget, the period of adolescence can range between the ages of ten or eleven spanning up to the later teen years of seventeen or eighteen, and potentially later. Many people can confuse the pubescent stage to be the centre of an adolescents development. But as it is seen through Piaget’s work with children, adolescents and the developmental stages they encounter, there is a great deal more to adolescence than mere physical changes a growing person go through. The Cognitive Development is of equal importance, and could be considered to play a superior part in terms of overall continued development of a person throughout the lifespan.

Piaget theorised four important stages of Cognitive Development: the Sensorimotor stage, the Pre-Operational stage, the stage of Concrete Operations and finally the Formal Operations stage. Throughout these four stages, specific critical cognitive abilities are achieved, for the child to develop into the world and understand everything that goes with it. It is during Piaget’s final stage of development, Formal-Operations, covering adolescence, that children are able to think differently and hypothesise abstract problems. This involves abilities such as, looking for alternative solutions and eliminating those that are inappropriate, and thinking outside the realms of one’s self and the environment they are in. (Walker, et al, 1994 p 410). There are specific characteristics associated with the period of adolescence and the Formal-Operations stage, they include:

Advanced Reasoning

As already mentioned, the Formal-Operations stage of Cognitive Development, allows the child to reason with others logically, creatively and in abstract formats. This ability gives the child the chance to improve knowledge and understanding of problems and situations by asking more direct rather than general questions ( eg: The game “20 Questions” a funnelling of questions asked, Walker et al, 1994 p410) and solving problems at a more advanced level, such as mathematic narratives.

Advanced Concepts

Another characteristic of Piaget’s Formal-Operations stage, is the grasping of advanced concepts such as the pursuit of truth, beauty as something more than just appearances and the reality of the self and others everywhere (Jaffe, 1998 p125). The understanding and meaning of world concepts and concepts that seem usually oblivious allow children at this stage to give themselves an identity in terms of other people, objects throughout society.

Abstract Thinking

Similarly to reasoning, children attain widening abilities to think intuitively, abstractly and hypothetically. Some of the characteristics of this are: The ability to delve into probabilities and improbabilities and imagining other worlds. This is where a great deal of achievement and creativity can come from, which expands the cognitive boundaries and limitations of developing children. (Jaffe, 1998, p125)

There are many criticisms of Piagetian theory and much evidence to contradict Piagetian accounts of what children can and cannot do at different ages. (Gold, 1987, p147)Even though Piaget’s work has an influence on a lot of developmental Psychology, subsequent research has tended to undermine the concept of specific stages. (Durkin, 1996, p19) An example of the inconsistency in Piaget’s theory, is that this type of approach takes a problem and attempts to uncover qualitative differences of how children of different stages tackle or explain a situation. That sounds fine, in principle, but it neglects the key aspect of this type of developmental relationship, the context of what is being acquired. Piaget’s approach assures that all meaningful variation lies within the child. (Durkin, 1996, p19) This approach theory is good in terms of showing how adolescents may be able to reason in comparison to a child, but lacks the depth in recognition of the material being taken in by the subjects in question.

The abilities and understanding adolescents attain through Cognitive Development at the Formal-Operations stage is very much dependent on other factors as well. These characteristics may depend on the type of culture and environment children are socialised into. Alternatively, the level of intelligence a given child may possess will play an important part, in their efficiency with which each level of Piaget’s theory is attained. For example, some children of low level intelligence may never attain Formal – Operational thought, and conversely, an above average child may perform as well as or better than some adults. (Walker, 1994, p410)

If Children attain a new and advanced form of reasoning and thinking, it is conceivable for this to create conflict between peers, authorities and parents. Adolescence and the period of puberty, are stereotypically seen as turbulent and rebellious for the developing child, but it is clear to see the relationship that Piaget’s stage of Formal-Operations has with this type of unsettled behaviour. The adolescent’s new found reasoning and creative thinking skills opens the mind to a variety of new situations and opportunities to exercise these new skills. Some of the potential flaws in this stage of Cognitive Development, are self centredness and self consciousness, which promote conflict with parents in terms of the adolescent’s lack of awareness of others around them, providing parents, the main receivers of the conflict, considerable frustration. (Durkin, 1995, p128)

Another flaw adolescents overlook is the inability to judge correctly, even though they are thinking more extensively, adolescents, like adults, don’t always see the consequences of the judgements they make. This in turn can lead to another potential flaw, which is Argumentative Behaviour. In the context of adolescent – parent conflict it can be, this characteristic can be associated with the two positions on what is right and what is wrong. (Bryant & Colman, 1995, p67). For example if a 13 year old child wants to go out and socialise on a school night, the position of the parents is no, due to the following days schooling. In contrast, the adolescent would argue against this citing several different arguments regarding peers, school, and fairness, causing friction between the two parties.

The inconsistency here is that not everything an adolescent decides to do is right, and their attempt to logically justify it, proves a clear level of self centredness with no consideration for others. (Durkin, 1995, p128) Thus creating conflict with parents and unknowingly promoting the adolescent stereotype of rebellion. Other potential flaws of note include; Indecisiveness, Hypocrisy, finding fault with authority figures and drawing self-serving conclusions while maintaining the illusion of rationality. (Durkin, 1995, p21) These characteristics also contribute to the conflict parents endure from adolescents in the Formal-Operations stage of development.

In terms of the Cognitive Development of children through to adulthood, Psychology is not an exact science. This can be attributed to variations and uncertainties from child to child. Therefore it is important to be critical of Piaget’s Formal-Operations stage, and the characteristics associated with it. Criticisms allow others to examine, test and scrutinise these theories to better determine more definitive and accurate characteristics about the adolescent period of the lifespan in the future. The conflict an adolescent promotes with his or her parents is not due to pure rebellion against parents in general, but a canvas to try out the new found abilities they have attained through Piaget’s Formal-Operations stage. Similarly it is important to point out that all children develop differently, and that periods of conflict can vary as does the development of the child itself. The contextual, environmental and cultural factors play an integral part in this development, but as long as these factors are understood as well as the characteristics formulated by Jean Piaget, viewed critically, in a child’s development, the so-called rebellion and turbulence, that is adolescent Cognitive Development, may have greater meaning.