

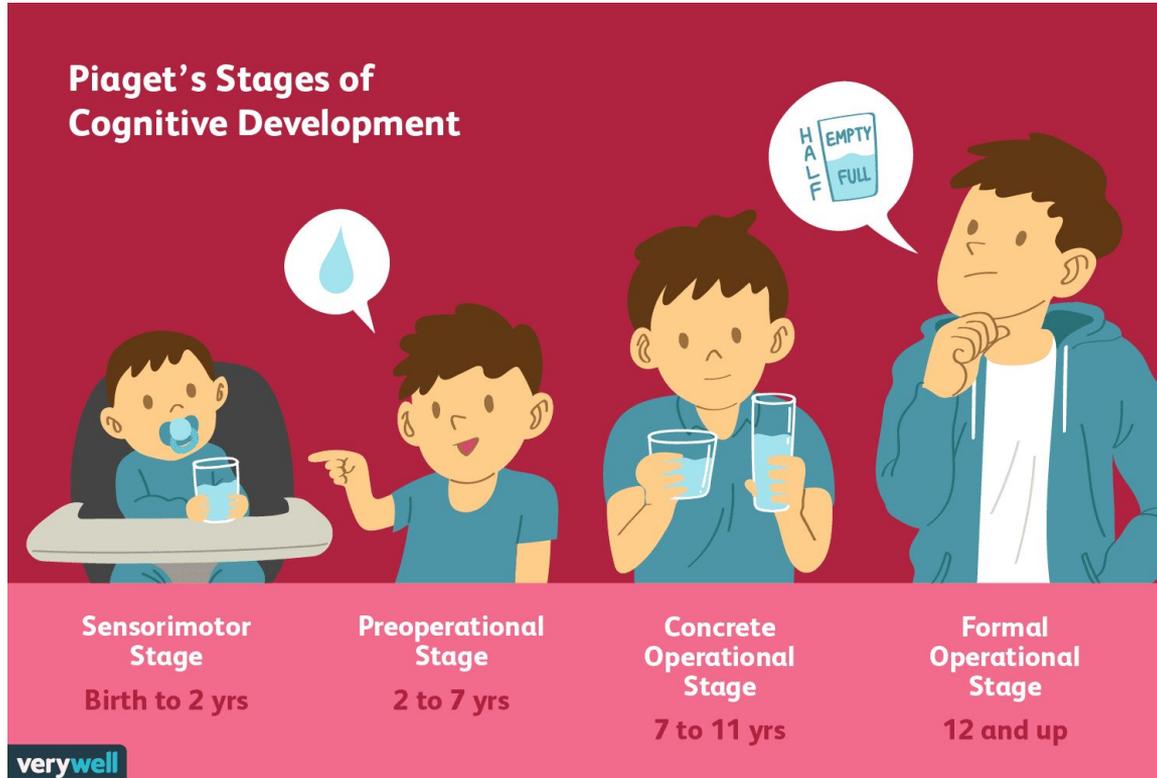
**Millers AMR
Behavior &
Development**

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How Children Conceptualize Illness at Different Ages

(and more!)

Piaget Stages



Sensorimotor Stage

Birth - 2 years

- Experiencing the world through the 5 senses and through actions (grasping, sucking, stepping)
 - Develop object permanence (understanding an object exists even when they cannot see or hear it)
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Preoperational Stage

2 - 7 years

- Symbolic thinking - representing things with words and images, pretend play, imagination
 - Egocentrism - view world from own perspective, difficult seeing viewpoint of others
 - Language development
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Concrete Operational Stage

7 - 11 years

- Able to think logically about concrete events, has objective and rational interpretations
 - Conservation - idea that mass/volume/weight stays the same even when manipulated to look different
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Formal Operational Stage

12 years - adulthood

- Capable of hypothetical and deductive reasoning
 - Abstract thought develops
 - Potential for mature moral reasoning
 - Metacognition - “thinking about thinking”
-

Bibace and Walsh

Children's Concepts of Illness Theory

(from way back in the '80s)

Category 0: Incomprehension

- Youngest of the 4 year olds....they just don't know

Prelogical Explanations (preoperational stage)

Phenomenism

- Cause of illness is an external concrete phenomenon, may co-occur with illness but is spatially/temporally remote
- Unable to explain the cause of the illness

How do people get colds? “From the sun.” How does the sun give you a cold? “It just does that’s all.”

Contagion

- Cause of illness is located in objects or people which are proximate to, but not touching, the child
- Link between cause and illness is accounted for by mere proximity or “magic”

How do people get colds? “From outside.” How do they get them from outside? “They just do that’s all. They come when someone else gets near you.” How? “I don’t know, by magic I think.”

Immanent justice

- The belief that negative consequences are punishment for misbehavior
- Children are more likely to endorse immanent justice explanations for illness than for misfortune

Concrete-Logical Explanations (concrete operational stage)

Contamination

- understands that illness can occur through physically engaging in a harmful action such as touching germs or people and therefore become contaminated
- cause is viewed as a person, object, or action external to the child which has an aspect or quality that is “bad” or “harmful”

What is a cold? “It’s like in the wintertime.” How do people get them? “You’re outside without a hat and you start sneezing. Your head would get cold-the cold would touch it-and then it would go all over your body.”

Internalization

- illness is now located inside the body, while its ultimate cause may be external
- understand causes of illness through internal effects such as swallowing or inhaling, but these explanations are vague because there is still confusion about internal organs and their functions

What is a cold? “You sneeze a lot, you talk funny, and your nose is clogged up” How do people get colds? “In winter, they breathe in too much air into their nose and it blocks up the nose.” How does this cause colds? “The bacteria gets in by breathing, Then the lungs get too soft, and it goes to the nose.” How does it get better? “Hot fresh air, it gets in the nose and pushes the cold air back.”

Formal-Logical Explanations (formal operational stage)

Physiologic

- source and nature of the illness lies in specific internal physiologic structures and functions
- nonfunctioning or malfunctioning organ or process, explained as a step-by-step internal sequence of events culminating in that illness

What is a cold? “It’s when you get all stuffed up inside, your sinuses get filled up with mucus. Sometimes your lungs do, too, and you get a cough.” How do people get colds? “They come from viruses I guess. Other people have the virus and it gets into your bloodstream and it causes a cold.”

Psychophysiological

- awareness of how our emotional states can affect our bodily functions

What is a heart attack? “It’s when your heart stops working right. Sometimes it’s pumping too slow or too fast.” How do people get a heart attack? “It can come from being all nerve wracked. You worry too much. The tension can affect your heart.”

How do children understand their anatomy?

How do children understand the arrangement of their bodies? Which internal organs do they know? How do they see them?

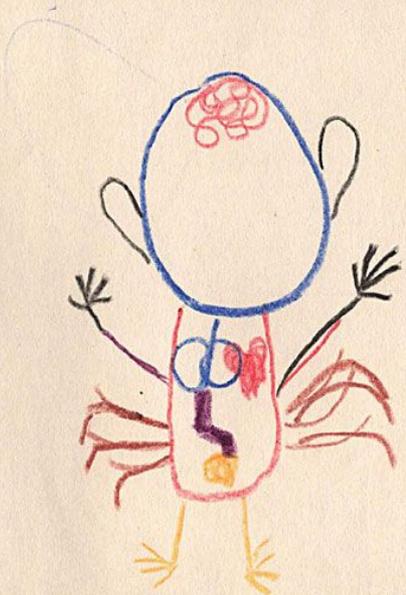
- First stage: 5-7 years old, draw the internal organs scattered throughout the body, and even outside the body. Believe that the heart is for loving, or the brain is for thinking. Confuse internal and external aspects of the body; their knowledge of the existence and position of different organs is rudimentary, and their knowledge of function seems to lag behind knowledge of position
- Second stage: 7-11 years old, some development in knowledge of a number of different organs, but the child does not tend to relate the various parts of the body together
- Third stage: adolescence, knowledge and understanding of the different organs making up an entire system

- The organ drawn most frequently was the heart (65.5 %). It is also the only organ drawn correctly by 5-year-old children, and never drawn in the wrong place, perhaps because they can feel their heartbeat, children can feel it working for themselves
- Children generally (though not always) consider the heart to be the most important organ in the body and associate it with life. If the heart does not work properly, then the person dies or “works badly” – the person is ill
- Next most commonly drawn is the brain, one of the quietest organs – present in 49 % of cases. Its depiction increases with age. It is never placed anywhere else than in the head

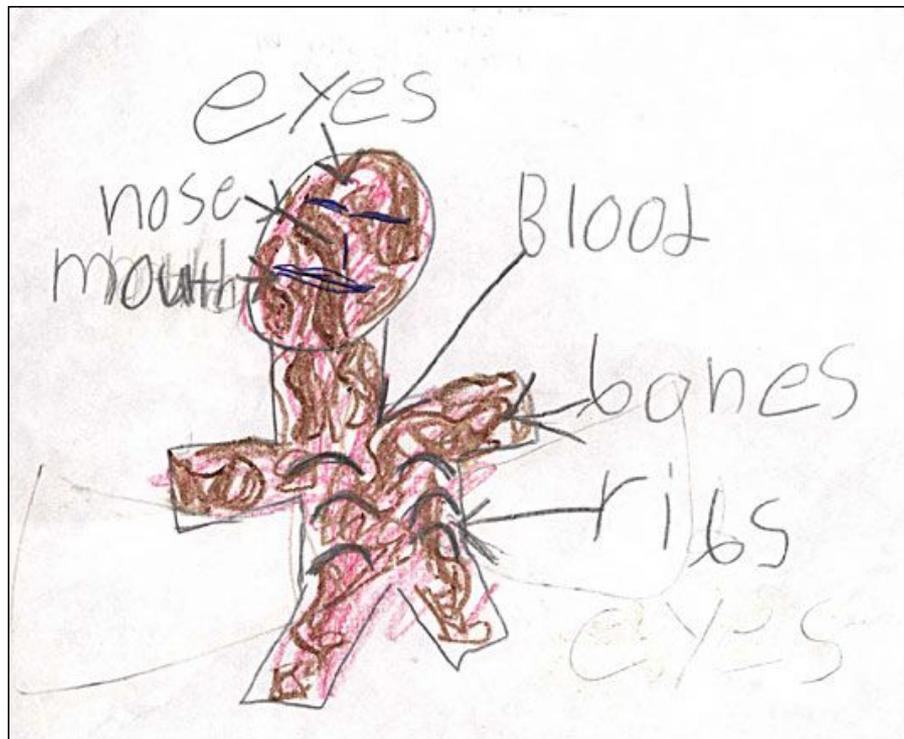
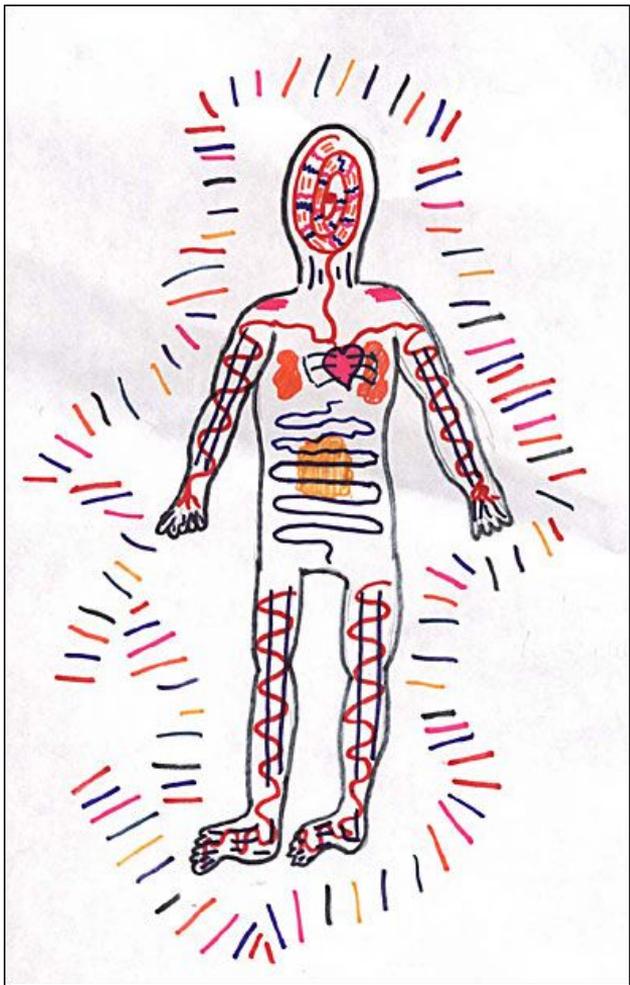


My Internak Body

My Internal Body



My Internal Body



A Child's Concept of Death

Four Primary Concepts:

- Universality (all living things die)
 - Irreversibility (once dead, dead forever)
 - Nonfunctionality (all functions of the body stop)
 - Causality (what causes death)
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Concepts of Death by Age

3-5 years old:

- Seen as reversible, as sleep and awakening
- Fear of death is fear of separation from parents
- May think that their thoughts and actions have caused the death or sadness of those around; a form of punishment
- Up to the age of 5, children perceive death as life under different conditions

6-8 years old:

- Capable of understanding death as something final
- Death may be personified as an angel, skeleton, ghost
- Very curious about the physical process of death, what happens after a person dies
- Fear of the unknown, loss of control, separation from family and friends

9-12 years old:

- Death is understood as universal, final and unavoidable
- Death becomes more abstract and gradually loses its association with people, animals or a specific image

Concepts of Death by Age

Teens:

- A main theme is feeling immortal or being exempt from death
- Denial and defiant attitudes
- Feelings of no longer belonging or fitting in with peers, unable to communicate with parents
- Self-image is important, may feel alone in their struggle, scared, and angry

Discussing Death with Children

The goal in discussing death with a dying child is to improve his or her comfort and ease any fears. The most helpful step is to wait until they are ready

- When discussing death, always use language the the child will understand:
 - Toddlers and young children - use concrete language, no misleading terms like “sleep” or “passed away.” A young child may be afraid to go to sleep if it is linked with death
 - Young children may ask very direct questions. Be honest and consistent; it’s ok to say you don’t know, children can sense falseness in an answer
 - Teens may want to talk with a friend or someone other than a parent. Encourage communication in any manner that will help the child express fears and concerns

Unexpressed Fears

- Feelings of guilt or shame
 - Reassure the child that bad thoughts can't cause death; he or she did nothing wrong to cause the death or illness
- Fear that pain is linked with death
 - Explain use of medicines to control pain; remind them that death itself is painless
- Fear of separation
 - Can be addressed by using specific religious or cultural beliefs; reassure the child that he or she will not be alone at the time of death
- Written communication
 - pay attention to drawings and discuss them; some may write letters to parents or loved ones to say goodbye or indirectly ask questions. Some adults and children communicate best through writing back and forth
- Spiritual and cultural beliefs
 - Can play an important role in discussing and explaining death; consistency is important

Implications

- Teaching children the details of their illness and its management has been shown to be contributory to improved compliance, control, and coping, so it is important to find ways to explain the illness and its management in language and concepts appropriate to the child's level of conceptual understanding
- Children's ideas regarding illness frequently involve punishment, guilt, and self-blame. In an early survey, 90% of children hospitalized with cardiac defects and diabetes answered the question, "Why do children get sick?" with "Because they are bad."
- Empower yourself! This knowledge is extremely valuable to pediatricians in communication with child patients, and also for educators in strategies in health education
 - health professionals may be better able to reassure the child, by directly providing explanations that are more consistent with the child's understanding
 - health educators can utilize such information about the development of concepts of health and illness to design meaningful educational strategies and materials consistent with the child's developmental status