How the Overall Environment Affects a Child’s Psychosocial Development

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Nurture versus nature has always been a topic of interest in psychological study. I believe that a person is born like a piece of clay, and their environment molds them into the person they grow up to be. For my study, I interviewed three children who were siblings to one another. Matthew is a six-year-old boy, Ashley is a ten-year-old girl, and Kayla is a fourteen-year-old girl. I chose my subjects because I babysit for them during the summer. They are active children whose parents regularly influence their lives. I conducted my interviews at the home of the children at their kitchen table. I interviewed each child individually, and made sure to focus solely on him or her. Their parents were in the other room, and were able to hear the questions asked as well as the answers given by their children. I took detailed notes on the children’s answers. Again, I hope to find the social development of the siblings. I want to see how the children’s family and friends affect the overall development of each child. Also, how the parenting styles of the parents affects their lives. I believe by analyzing each sibling, I can then relate to each subject and examine how each has grown up as well as how their parents treat them based on age. Overall, I will show how nurture is the leading factor in what a person eventually becomes when they are older.

**Interviews**

**Question One**

The first question I asked was, “Who are your best friends and what do you like to do when you are playing together/hanging out together? What makes these friends so special?” My first subject, Matthew told me he likes to play sports videos games and jumping on the trampoline with his friends. These sports video games consisted of baseball, basketball, and football. He told me that, “you pick a pro team to be, and then my friend picks another team to be.” However after explaining the activities he does with his friends, Matthew couldn’t tell me why his friends are so special. He specifically said, “I don’t know.” My next subject, Ashley answered the question a little more detailed than Matthew did. She told me that her friends and her dance together. They make up dance routines and each has their own solo to a song of their choosing. She told me her friends were special because they enjoyed the same activities and were like sisters to one another. Lastly, Kayla said she enjoys watching movies with her friends. She stated her friends were special because they are “loyal.” All of these siblings follow William Damon’s three friendship stages. Matthew is in the Stage 1, which is called Basing Friendship on Others’ Behaviors. This stage is about friendship based on sharing of toys and these kids don’t take personal qualities into consideration. Ashley is within the second stage of Basing Friendship on Trust. She chooses her friends based on personal qualities that she likes and she trusts her friends. Stage three is where Kayla is and it is all about Psychological Closeness. The main idea is loyalty that Kayla believes is important in her friendships (Feldman, 2012, p. 334). These children are a great example of Damon’s theory on friendship and show what each child looks for in their relationships with people.

**Question Two**

Second, I asked, “How do you feel when you get something wrong or right? Do your friends look up to you or do you need help from them? Are they usually willing to help you (are you usually willing to help them)? Do your parents help with your homework?” Matthew said, “he doesn’t care when he gets something wrong or right.” Also, he said that he doesn’t really acknowledge whether his friends need him or not nor does he need their help with things. Matthew said that his parents help with homework sometimes, but sometimes he doesn’t need them, however his parents always check over his homework. Ashley stated that when she gets answers or something wrong she feels bad and wishes she could have gotten it right. In the other scenario of getting something right, then she is excited and “feels awesome.” She says her friends and her always look to one another for help when they think that they may need it. Her parents will help her understand questions that she has gotten wrong by explaining why and allowing Ashley to try again. Lastly, Kayla said she feels bad when she gets something wrong and good when she gets something correct. She is willing to help her friends and they are willing to help her, but only to ask for help when she really needs it. As with her siblings, her parents will help when asked to look over homework. According to Erik Erikson’s social stages of development; Matthew is within the initiative-versus-guilt stage. This stage is all about becoming more assertive in life and wanting to have as much responsibility as possible (“Summary Chart,” n.d.). For example, I asked Matt if he needed help with homework and he eagerly said “nope.” He doesn’t need their help but sometimes has his parents look over it showing that he is guilty about not wanting or needing their help with things. Ashley is in a different stage of Erikson’s theory called industry-versus-inferiority. This stage is about balancing all the aspects of the child’s life including school, friends, and extracurricular activities (“Summary Chart,”n.d.). Also, it’s about succeeding in these aspects in order to feel competent in the child’s life (Feldman, 2012, p. 409). Ashley specifically stated that she “feels awesome” when she gets something right and this idea is very important during this part of her life. Kayla is in the fifth stage that is identity-versus-identity-confusion. This fifth stage is about understanding oneself and knowing your own strengths and weaknesses (Feldman, 2012, p. 409). I believe Kayla knows who she is because she said she only wants help when she really needs it. She knows what she can and cannot do.

**Question Three**

Next I asked, “What happens when you get into trouble? Who is the disciplinarian (one who disciplines you)? What kinds of punishments do you get? Do your parents give in and let you off punishment? What’s the worst thing that ever happened to you?” Matthew says, “When he gets into trouble, either one of his parents sends him to his room. Usually it’s my dad who yells at me and sends me to my room.” Matt then explained that after he is sent to his room that he cannot come out until he knows what he did wrong. He has to explain what he did wrong to his mom or dad and apologize for his actions. His parents never let him off punishments, but he gets warnings before he is sent to his room. Ashley stated the same punishments of being sent to her room and if she is really bad she will get something taken away like her IPod. She always gets a warning before being punished. Kayla doesn’t usually get sent to her room, but does get her phone taken away as a punishment. Her answer differed slightly because she said, “sometimes my parents will give in when the problem isn’t that big.” This shows that these kids have parents that have an authoritative style to their parenting. Authoritative parenting is when parents are demanding of their children and the children are very responsive to their parents. The children know what is expected of them, and know the rules and abide by them because they know that if they don’t then it will lead to consequences (Feldman, 2012, p. 259). Also, children that are raised in the authoritative style of parenting tend to have “internalized moral standards, and higher levels of competence and self-esteem (Sailor, 2010).”

**Question Four**

Question four asked, “Does your brother/sister ever get to do things that you cannot do…like go down the street/hang out/play something new/go somewhere? How does it make you feel when you cannot do something you want to do?” Matthew answered very quickly that he is not allowed in Kayla’s room. Also, he cannot do a lot of the things his older sisters can like walking down the street alone or hanging out with his friends whenever he wants. When he cannot do this stuff is makes him mad. Ashley can do more things than Matthew can, but still has limitations on her independence like Kayla’s room being off-limits. Kayla can pretty much do anything she wants as long as she asks before. The parents of these kids recognize that their kids need to learn to be independent. This independence is inevitable in life, and these kids gain more and more as they get older. This idea allows for a good relationship in the future with their children (Feldman, 2012, p. 418). Matthew experiences the most frustration with not having as much independence because he is the youngest and is at the stage in child development where he is fighting for his freedom (“Summary Chart,” n.d.). This is also considered sibling rivalry because one has more freedom, which translates to favoring that sibling (Feldman, 2012, p. 341).

**Question Five**

The next question I asked, “What is your favorite holiday? What is your favorite tradition that you do on the day? What are the some of your family traditions? Which one is your favorite? Why do you like that one so much?” Matthew said his favorite holidays were Christmas and Halloween. He likes them because he likes the tradition of receiving presents and candy. His favorite tradition on Christmas is sneaking down really early in the morning and looking at the presents. He said he likes it so much because he gets to be sneaky and he likes seeing all of his family. Ashley said she liked the Fourth of July because her birthday party is always on this day. She likes the fireworks and watching them either at the beach or outside while having a camp-out. Kayla said she loved her birthday the best because of the restaurant they go to as a family. All of these kids like these holidays for the same reason of being with family. This family is very close and during big holidays or birthdays there are huge family get togethers. They like being with their family and experiencing the same traditions every year, but making them a little bit different than the previous year. This idea relates back to the idea of parenting style. The authoritative parent tends to have a very good relationship with their kids because they discipline them, but reason with them and explain the situation without being verbally aggressive toward their kids (Feldman, 2012, pp. 258, 416).

**Question Six**

Next I asked, “Are you smart? What do you think of others who do not work as hard as you? What is your favorite subject and do you ever come up with new ideas that your peers don’t understand?” “No, I’m not smart, I hate school, and I hate homework! I like recess, and lunch!” Ashley said she is smart and works really hard in school, so she can do well. Also, she doesn’t really worry about people who don’t work as hard as her because “they can do what they want and live their own life.” Ashley’s favorite subject is math because she likes problem solving. Kayla thinks that she is smart and like her sister doesn’t worry about others who do not work hard and she said “it’s their loss.” Her favorite class is physical education because she prefers to be moving around rather than sitting. Matt doesn’t really look at others and compare himself to them yet. He has not reached the shift of self-understanding from physical to psychological because he doesn’t consider himself in that context (Feldman, 2012, p. 329). Also, he has an average self esteem because he knows what he likes and believes that he can do well in everything he does physically, but struggles in school causing him to cope by saying he hates it. Ashley and Kayla are older, so they understand the idea of psychological characteristics. They both don’t really worry about their peers and how hard they work. Lastly, their self-esteem is high because they recognize what they are good at like sports or math and don’t dwell on what they are bad at. Self esteem is influenced by parent-child relationships, efforts utilized to deal with a child’s undesirable emotions, self-acceptance, and social behavior (Hosogi, Okada, Fujii, Noguchi, & Watanabe, 2012, p. 11). This shows that these children have a good relationship with their parents, know how to deal with their emotions, understand who they are, and know where they stand in society.

**Question Seven**

Question seven asked, “At what age is a person an adult? Why do you think so?” Matthew believes that a person becomes an adult when they are forty. I asked why was that and he said because that’s how old his parents are and bases adulthood on his parents. Ashley believes that a person becomes an adult when they turn eighteen because she has heard people say that. Kayla knows that one becomes an adult when they turn “eighteen because that is when you get all your freedoms.” As children get older they begin to learn that not everything their parents say and do is correct. Children begin to question these ideas that they have been taught all their lives (Feldman, 2012, p. 416). Matt only thinks that his parents are the number one authority in his life, and tends to idolize them, while Kayla is at the age when she begins to question a little more. She is making judgments and decisions based on her own ideas and morals. Ashley is coming to the age of questioning, but has not made it there yet.

**Question Eight**

Question eight asked, “Are you a good friend? Why do you think so?” Matt doesn’t think that he is a good friend because he does not listen to his friends when they speak. Ashley is certain she is a good friend because she listens to her friend’s problems and is helpful. Kayla believes she is a good friend as well because she listens to her friends and can help them through any problem. Ashley and Kayla both understand that friendship is more than what that friend brings to the relationship and more about the personality and personal attributes (Feldman, 2012, p. 334). Matt understands that he is a bad listener, and is guilty for it, which correlates with Erikson’s stage of initiative-versus-guilt (Feldman, 2012, p. 409). Matt will soon reach the second stage of friendship and will understand his friends are more than a playmate.

**Question Nine**

My next question asked, “If you could change one rule that your family has, what would you change? Why would you change the rule? Why do you think your family has the rule?” Matt wants the rule of having a phone taken away because he doesn’t believe its fair that his sisters have phones and he does not. He doesn’t know why this is a rule and wants his sisters to not have phones like him. This shows that there is sibling rivalry among the children. Sigmond Freud describes the jealousy of siblings, “When children recognize that their parents love their siblings, too, and they are fearful of losing the parents’ love if they express hostility toward the siblings, the children defend against those harmful wishes, in part, by identifying with each other, which leads them to seek equal treatment for all. If one child cannot be the favorite, then no child shall be the favorite (Edward, 2013, p. 78).” Ashley would change the rule of eating in the family room because she wants to sit in a more comfortable chair when she eats. She thinks this rule is in place, so that the family room does not get too messy because that is where guests sit. I think that Ashley really wants to sit on the sofa while she eats, so that she can watch television. Kayla would prefer for her curfew to be later because she believes that she doesn’t need to go to bed that early. These are examples of Ashley and Kayla seeking autonomy. They want the freedom to make their own decisions that they believe are beneficial for themselves. This increase in autonomy with age leads to clashes with parents no matter how good or bad the relationship is with the parents (Feldman, 2012, p. 416).

**Question Ten**

My last question asked, “Do you ever fight with your siblings? What do you usually argue about? Does the arguing ever get physical? What do your parents do when you fight? Do you get punished?” Matt stated right away that he fights with his sister constantly. I asked why was that and who usually starts the fights. The arguing starts when Matt enters Kayla’s room or Ashley’s room when he knows he is not allowed in them. He said that the arguing never really got physical, but at that moment Ashley had walked by and said, “No that’s not true, you always hit us.” Matt disagreed and ran over and tackled her to the ground. Next, Matt’s parents got involved and told him to stop because it wasn’t nice nor was it appropriate to put his hands on his sister. Ashley said she usually only fights with her brother because he will come into her room and take her things without asking. Also, her brother is always the one that turns arguments to physical ones. Kayla’s answer was the same as Ashley’s, but her and Ashley do argue when Ashley goes into Kayla’s room without permission. Matthew’s aggression comes from his environment because most aggression is “taught through social and environmental conditions (Feldman, 2012, p. 265).” Matthew must play video games or watch some shows that utilize fighting to solve problems. For example, I know that Matthew loves to watch “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles,” and this show is about solving crimes using their ninja fighting powers. This could be a possible lead to Matt’s aggression, but another option could be watching other shows, playing boxing video games, or even seeing aggression in a real life scenario. Matt’s parents are teaching him that being physically aggressive is bad by reinforcing the idea through explanation and punishment (Feldman, 2012, p. 265). Ashley and Kayla do not fight physically because that is not the norm for girls. “Boys resort to use of physical aggression more frequently than girls (De la Torre-Cruz, García-Linares, & Casanova-Arias, 2014, p. 160).” Usually girls use relational aggression as their way of fighting. This aggression is focused on hurting the feelings of another person (Feldman, 2012, p. 264).

**Discussion**

These children are very different even though they are all siblings and live in the same environment. Each child is at a different stage in their life, is learning, and evolving around situations. They are all developing well socially and follow the stages of Erik Erikson’s child development theory. Matt is in stage three of child development called initiative-versus-guilt, Ashley is in stage four called industry-versus-inferiority, and Kayla is in stage five called identity-versus-identity-confusion. They are growing up and every year they get older they gain so much more knowledge than they held the previous year. I believe that all of my observations coincide with the theories of Erikson, Freud, and Damon.

**Recommendation**

My recommendation is for Matt because he has the most maturing and growing up to do out of the three siblings. He really needs to work on keeping his hands to himself and not letting his aggression get the better of him. By reinforcing the idea of hitting anyone especially a girl is not acceptable. He needs to be punished by going to his room and thinking about what he did wrong. I believe that he can grow out of this habit by repeating the command and maturing with age. Also, he needs to realize that his sisters get more independence and advantages because they are older and have already been through everything that he is just now experiencing. This sibling rivalry is okay for now, but we need to look out for sibling discord. Matt needs to learn to have a “love hate” relationship with his sisters (Edward, 2012, p. 78). I think that it will take long to grow out of this because he has two older sisters who both have more independence than him, so it makes him feel left out. As he gets older and gains more moral reasoning, his cognitive ability will need to enhance before this problem is resolved.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I believe that these children live in a great environment because they have great parental support and are developing socially at a normal pace. These children are on the right path for recognizing the necessary requirements for a friendship to work. In addition, they are following Erikson’s child development theory and are experiencing different stages and adjusting to life with new ideas about life. My findings proved my idea that each child is treated differently based on their age, but I also found that each child is aware of this. Also, my findings showed that the parenting style of the children’s parents is effective because the kids know what is expected and what is not tolerated. If I had the opportunity to ask questions again, then I would ask more scenario based questions. This way I could find out how they would react to social situations. Being socially able in society is vital for succeeding in the future, and I believe that these siblings will succeed.

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