There are many theories in developmental psychology, but we will be focusing on four of them: Jean Piaget’s Cognitive Stages of Development, Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages of Development, Lev Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Stages of Development, and Lawrence Kohlberg’s Moral Stages of Development. These theories help us to understand how children develop and how we can help children who are developmentally delayed or disabled.

Jean Piaget focused on cognitive development and the ways that children learn. He divided development into four stages: Sensorimotor, Preoperational, Concrete Operational and Formal Operational.

The sensorimotor stage of development begins at birth and lasts until about age one and a half. During this stage the infant is learning to use their senses to understand the world. Have you ever noticed how an infant will put everything in their mouth? This is one way that the infant is seeking to understand the world through her senses.

The Preoperational stage of development is from age one and a half until age 7. The child in this stage is learning language skills and mental representations. At this point children are able to say the word “dog” while picturing a dog in their mind. The child during this stage is also egocentric, focusing primarily on the self. A child who wants to comfort a parent might bring that parent their own favorite toy or blanket, thinking egocentrically that because it calms and comforts them it will do the same for the parent.

During the Concrete Operational Stage from ages 7 to 11, children are learning to reason logically and to understand the characteristics of the physical and social world. Children are now able to argue “logic” with their parents and present alternative recommendations to their parents. For example, a child in this stage might be told “no” to ordering a pizza because the parent says it costs too much. The child in this stage might
then say that they could pay for the pizza from their birthday money or saved allowance.

The last stage, from age 11 through adulthood, is the Formal Operational Stage. During this stage the child is able to reason hypothetically and to understand abstract ideas such as justice and freedom. As an adolescent this is the first time they have been able to understand multiple possible scenarios to issues and to develop hypothetical arguments and weigh them against reality.

Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages of Development begin at birth and follow through to old age. Erikson focused on emotions and personality development with regards to natural conflicts and the resolution of those conflicts. This will become clear with a few examples.

Erikson coined the first stage, from birth to one year, as “Trust versus Mistrust.” During this stage infants learn from their caregivers a sense of trust that they will be cared for, or a sense of mistrust, that their needs will not be met. In other words, as caregivers respond to an infant and care for the infant’s needs, the infant learns that essential sense of trust in others, trust in the environment and trust that their needs will be met. They also learn that they have some control over their own environment, such as when they scream Mommy or Daddy will come running. This ability to affect their own care instills a sense of hope in them. A child who is neglected or abused from birth to age 1, according to Erikson, will learn a sense of mistrust about the world and believe that the world is inconsistent and unpredictable.

From ages 1 to 3 Erikson stated that children experience the conflict of autonomy versus shame and doubt. During this time period children are learning to feed themselves, they want to help dress themselves, and they are learning a very important word: “No!” Children are developing a sense of independence and control over their body (for example, walking) and feel a sense of self-esteem. Parents who are overbearing or do not let their
children begin to do things for themselves can cause children to feel shame, doubt their own abilities and result in lowered self-esteem for the child.

The hallmark of ages 3 to 6 is that children are really on the move. This age represents initiative versus guilt. Children are beginning to initiate their own activities. For example, instead of a parent saying “Let’s put together a puzzle.” the child will go and get their own puzzle or play toy. This is also the age when children learn the word “Why?” and use it often. In these ways children initiate activities and speech. Guilt is the result of inadequate resolve of this stage. If a child does not successfully experience initiative then the result can be feelings of guilt and a lack of initiative in the future.

Ages 6 to 12 are important for children to feel competent and attain a sense of achievement in education and extracurricular activities. This stage is called “Industry versus Inferiority.” Children become industrious and work to excel in activities. Children who do not successfully resolve this stage will develop an inferiority complex which could stay with them through adulthood.

The teenage years are very important for personality development. This stage is called “Identity versus Role Confusion” and it is defined by the teenager developing a sense of self and an individual identity. Our sense of who we are, what we believe and our philosophy about life are tested, developed, refined and finally decided. While teenagers will “try on” many different roles, they will define who they are by the end of adolescence. Teens who do not settle into an identity experience role confusion and may continue to struggle with this aspect of defining a sense of self into adulthood.

Erikson also developed stages into adulthood. They are “Intimacy versus Isolation,” “Generativity versus Stagnation” and “Integrity versus Despair.”
All of these stages represent individual stages of development which can result in successful resolve of a stage and secure personality development. Or an individual might not resolve a stage and may experience long-term difficulties as a result.

Lev Vygotsky studied how children learn and determined that children learn within a social and cultural environment. As children develop relationships they begin to learn and adopt the language and customs of the family. Thus, all learning is embedded in a cultural context and within a social environment. For example, as a parent reads to a child the child begins to learn language, social mores and acceptable behaviors. The child identifies with the parent or other caregiver and internalizes and adopts the language and behaviors unique to that culture.

Each theory gives us some insight into personality development and provides us with some information about development. We will look at how each of these theories gives us information about how we develop as we move through the rest of the class.