Title: Object Permanence

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References:

1. Baillargeon, R. (1994). How do infants learn about the physical world? Current Directions in Psychological Science, 3(5), 133–140. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.ep10770614
2. Piaget, J. (1954). The construction of reality in the child. New York: Basic Books.

Summary

Object permanence is a crucial milestone in a child's cognitive development, first identified by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. It refers to a child's understanding that objects continue to exist even when they are not visible or audible, such as when an infant throws a toy from their crib. This ability is important because it allows children to form and retain mental representations of objects, contributing to the development of their working memory. A strong working memory is essential for the development of literacy and mathematical skills. Therefore, recognising and fostering object permanence is vital for overall cognitive development in children.

The concept of object permanence encompasses three key abilities:

a) Recognising that objects persist in existence even when out of sight or hearing. For instance, if a toy is placed under a blanket, a child with object permanence will understand that the toy still exists and may actively search for it.

b) Understanding how objects behave in terms of their positions in time and space. For example, a child with object permanence realises that two objects cannot occupy the same space simultaneously.

c) Representing the presence and movement of hidden objects. For instance, if a toy rolls behind a cardboard barrier, a child with object permanence comprehends that the toy will continue moving along a predictable path until it encounters another object.

According to Jean Piaget, children typically begin to develop object permanence and display object permanence awareness at 8 months, and fully develop object permanence between the ages of 18 and 24 months. During this period, children begin to form mental representations of objects and can symbolically imagine things that are not immediately visible. Piaget's theory has been criticised for placing the age of object permanence attainment too late in the child development milestone.

Contrary to Piaget's timeline, researchers like Renée Baillargeon and her colleagues have presented evidence suggesting that infants as young as a few months old may demonstrate signs of object

permanence, thus challenging the traditional understanding of when object permanence emerges in children's cognitive development.

The understanding of object permanence in children progresses gradually over the first year and a half of life. Here are the key milestones which serve as signposts for caregivers to identify the development of object permanence in infants :

Birth to 6 months: Infants show some early awareness of object permanence. They exhibit cognitive behaviours such as looking at people, listening to sounds, and locating the source of sounds.

6 to 12 months: Infants begin searching for partially hidden objects and looking for items hidden in a second location. They also start participating in interactive games initiated by adults.

8 to 12 months: Infants develop a clearer understanding of object permanence. They actively look for things that have disappeared and demonstrate intentional behaviours like dropping toys and repeatedly looking in the direction of the fallen object. Additionally, they enjoy repetitive games such as Peek-A-Boo.

12 to 18 months: By this age, infants typically demonstrate a stable understanding of object permanence. They can effectively search for hidden objects and understand that objects continue to exist even when out of sight.

Mastery of object permanence is a gradual process that unfolds over time. While it's not possible to directly teach object permanence, caregivers can plan activities that naturally support its development in children. These activities should be designed to engage children in ways that encourage exploration, observation, and interaction with their environment, fostering the gradual acquisition of this cognitive skill.

Caregivers can engage in various activities to support the development of object permanence and other cognitive skills. One activity involves using a scarf, where caregivers fling it into the air and let it settle on the child’s head, encouraging the baby to observe and interact with the object. Another activity is Peek-a-boo, where caregivers hide behind their hands or a diaper, prompting the child to search for them, fostering object permanence and memory development. Additionally, caregivers can play Knock-knock games using surprise items hidden behind paper "doors," encouraging the child to explore and name objects, while also understanding cause and effect. These activities utilise simple materials like scarves, diapers, paper, and pictures to engage infants and support their cognitive growth.

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