

Case Study:

Continuity vs. Change across Development

Developmental psychopathology is a multidisciplinary approach to understanding normal and abnormal development over the lifespan. It conceptualizes development in terms of risk and protective factors that place individuals on developmental pathways toward adaptation or maladaptation.

Developmental psychopathologists are interested in stability versus change in development. Almost a century ago, Sigmund Freud described the difficulty in predicting children's development:

So long as we trace development from its final outcome backwards, the chain of events appears continuous. . . . But if we proceed the reverse way, if we start from the premises and try to follow these up to the final result, we notice at once that there might have been another result and we might have been just as well able to understand and explain the latter. Hence the chain of causation can always be recognized with certainty if we follow the line of analysis backwards, whereas to predict it is impossible (from Sroufe & Rutter, 1984).

Read the scenarios below and answer each question. What principle of developmental psychopathology does each scenario illustrate?

1. Sebastian is a 14-year-old boy with a longstanding history of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). He began to show problems with hyperactivity and impulsivity as a preschooler. In early elementary school, he also began exhibiting poor attention and concentration. Now in the 8th grade, Sebastian continues to show problems with restlessness, talkativeness, and impulse control as well as inattention, forgetfulness, and distractibility. He manages these symptoms with medication and behavioral interventions administered by his parents and teachers. What principle of developmental psychopathology does Sebastian illustrate?
2. Haley is a 17-year-old high school student with a history of separation anxiety disorder. In early childhood, she followed her parents around the house and cried when they left her with a babysitter. Haley refused to attend preschool and was resistant to begin Kindergarten when she turned 6-years-old. In early elementary school, Haley's separation anxiety decreased, but she continued to worry about "bad things" happening to her parents when she was separated from them.

Now in high school, Haley reports no significant problems with separation anxiety. However, in the past 6 months, she has experienced several panic attacks – intense episodes of fear characterized by rapid heart rate, shallow breathing, and intense distress. Her pediatrician confirmed that these attacks are not caused by a medical problem. Her



mother has sought help from a psychologist who specializes in adolescent anxiety disorders. What principle of developmental psychopathology does Haley illustrate?

3. The Juvenile Court in one county hears cases for approximately 75 youths and families each month. Most cases involve older children and adolescents with conduct problems and substance use. Usually, there are multiple causes for these adolescents' problems. What principle of developmental psychopathology does this scenario illustrate?

4. You are a social worker for Children's Protective Services in your county. You are assigned a new case: an 11-year-old girl who experienced repeated sexual abuse by her step-father. Her foster mother wants to know how the girl's history of abuse might affect her long-term social and emotional functioning. Unfortunately, it's very difficult for you to predict the girl's long-term outcome. What principle of developmental psychopathology does she illustrate?

Reference:

Sroufe, L.A., & Rutter, M. (1984). The domain of developmental psychopathology. *Child Development*, 55, 17-29.

Weis, R. (2017). *Introduction to Abnormal Child and Adolescent Psychology, Third Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.