

Jean Piaget Goes to Church (Part 1): *The significance of the theories of Piaget for ministry with children and teens*

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April 2026

Many people are familiar with the name, 'Jean Piaget,' the great Swiss psychologist who developed a theory of cognitive development in 1972—more than 50 years ago—that continues to influence the educational systems of the western world to this day. Sadly, the church has often paid little attention to Piaget's theory when working with children and adolescents, with noticeable consequences.



Piaget noted that beyond simply gaining more knowledge with age, kids' thinking *processes* change over time. He presented four stages of intellectual development through childhood, each with its own specific characteristics that need to be taken into account when working with children and adolescents.

Four Stages of Cognitive Development

Age	Description of the Stage	Key Word
Birth – 2 years	Sensorimotor Stage: the child discovers the world through their senses and interaction.	Movement
2-7 years	Preoperational Stage: the child uses and understands images and language.	Symbols
7-11 years	Concrete Operational Stage: the child thinks logically about concrete events and analogies.	Logic
12 years & older	Formal Operational Stage: the teen understands abstract ideas and can consider hypothetical scenarios.	Abstractions

Here is a more detailed explanation of the four stages:

Stage One: Sensorimotor - from birth to age 2 (Movement)

The title is made of two words: 'sensory,' or involving the senses and 'motor,' or movement. Learning takes place through the senses and movement; through **physical** experience, the child learns about the world. One day, our newborn daughter cried out, and when we hurried to her crib we discovered she had grabbed hold of her own hair and was pulling on it. Already, she was exploring her environment. I remember our kids putting their toes into their mouths, as well as lots of other objects. These little ones use all five of their senses to explore, beginning with their own bodies, and then outward to the world around them.

It is impossible to verbally explain anything complex to an infant or a young toddler. They need to be shown; to feel, hear and touch. Words gradually will mean more to them as they move into the next stage.

Stage Two: Pre-Operational – ages 2–7 (Symbols)

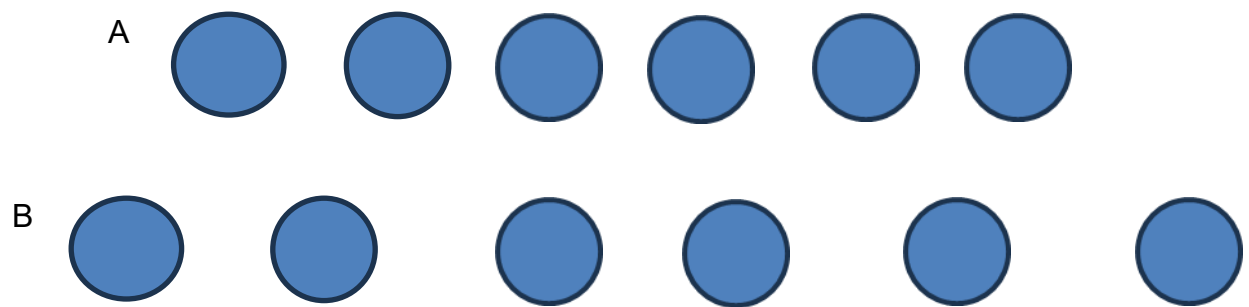
The second stage begins when the child begins to have a grasp on words and meanings. With language providing 'symbols' to their brain, they think more quickly and efficiently. Words now refer to ('symbolize') things that are not physically present with the child. For example, when we say the word 'car,' the child now has an image of a car in his memory. There's no need to show him a car on the street.

But there are also limits to their understanding. For example, kids this age don't yet think logically. It's hard for them to distinguish fantasy from reality. Our son at this stage had a great fear of clowns; he couldn't understand that a clown was just a man with a painted face. My wife once tried to help him by painting *his* face like a clown (which she felt was marginally successful). This group believes in Santa Claus, and believing in God and the miracles in Bible stories is easy at this stage.

Stage three: Concrete Operational – ages 7–11 (Logic)

Children acquire new skills between the ages of 7 and 11. This coincides with most of the elementary school years. Kids can reason and apply logic, but early in this stage they can have a problem called 'centration:' they focus on one factor to the exclusion of others.

An interesting experiment was conducted with 7-year-olds. They were shown two rows of buttons and asked which row had the most buttons, A or B?



If you said the number of buttons is the same in both rows, congratulations! You've developed logical thinking. Younger children would say there are more buttons in the second row because they focus on the length of the lines (one factor) but not the number of objects (a second factor).

As kids transition through the concrete operational stage, their logical thinking develops and improves. Nevertheless, they still haven't mastered one big hurdle: abstract thinking.

Stage Four: Formal Operational – ages 12-adulthood (Abstraction)

We have reached the teen years, and during this period, kids become capable of abstract and creative thinking. They can solve complex problems and consider multiple factors simultaneously. For instance, they understand sarcasm: if a person says something is 'very good' but their tone of voice and facial expressions indicate that they are being sarcastic, teens will be able to understand that these words mean something else.

With the dawning of abstract thinking, teens begin to understand deeper ideas in the Bible, such as parables with both physical and spiritual applications. For instance, the man who builds his house on a rock is the man who builds his life on Christ's teachings. Kids in stage 4 can now grasp the interrelationship of these two levels of meaning.

Piaget stopped at four stages, but other researchers have discovered one more level of growth in the ability to solve complex operational tasks, at about age 17 (Danner and Day 1977).

Numerous behavioral scientists have tested Piaget's theory of cognitive development, and his theory on how intelligence develops has been confirmed by thousands of studies. Most of his findings are correct, with a few caveats:

- Development is more gradual than Piaget believed, with a longer transition between stages rather than a sudden shift.
- Some children develop faster than he believed.
- There is some variation between cultures.

Next month, we'll look at what this information means for us in our ministries with children and youth in the local church.