

Four Lenses on the Same Child

The big theories are not rivals: each illuminates a different decision you make daily. Use the lens the moment needs.

STAGES

Piaget: readiness and construction

Children build understanding through action, and some ideas need cognitive furniture that arrives with development.

In class: Concrete apparatus before abstract notation: the counters are not babyish, they are the bridge.

SOCIAL

Vygotsky: development through support

What a child does with help today becomes solo capability tomorrow. Teaching leads development.

In class: The writing frame this term is the inner voice next term.

BONDS

Attachment: safety before learning

A regulated, connected child can explore and learn; a threatened one cannot. Relationships are infrastructure.

In class: Ten minutes of genuine connection with a dysregulated child buys the afternoon's learning.

CONTEXT

Bronfenbrenner: the child in systems

Home, school, community and policy interact through the child. Behaviour often imports from another system.

In class: The Monday-morning storm may be about the weekend, not your seating plan.

Which Lens for This Moment?

Development theory as a triage tool. Match the puzzle to the lens before choosing a response.

They cannot grasp the concept

Piaget lens: is the representation too abstract for where they are?

Say: "Can I show this with objects, pictures or stories before symbols?"

They can almost do it

Vygotsky lens: this is the zone. Add support, plan its removal.

Say: "What is the smallest scaffold that gets them moving, and when does it fade?"

They are not available for learning

Attachment lens: regulate and connect before any task talk.

Say: "What does this child need to feel safe in the next five minutes?"

The pattern follows a timetable

Systems lens: Mondays, after lunch, before contact visits. Look outside the lesson.

Say: "When does this happen, and what else is true at those times?"

Development Headlines by Phase

Broad tendencies, not deadlines: variation within any class is enormous. Plan for the spread, not the average.

EYFS

Early years (3-5)

Language explosion, play as the engine of learning, regulation borrowed from adults.

In class: Pretend play IS the curriculum: negotiating roles is executive function in training.

KS1-2

Primary (5-11)

Concrete reasoning strengthens; friendship and fairness loom large; self-concept as a learner forms NOW.

In class: The label a child accepts at eight ('I'm rubbish at maths') is the one you fight at fourteen.

KS3

Early adolescence (11-14)

Peer regard temporarily outranks adult approval; abstract reasoning grows; sensitivity to status and fairness peaks.

In class: Public correction costs triple at thirteen. Correct privately, praise specifically.

KS4+

Adolescence (14+)

Identity work intensifies; planning and impulse control still maturing; autonomy support beats control.

In class: Offer structured choices: the brain demanding independence still benefits from rails.

A Development-Informed Classroom

The theories as habits. Tick what is true most weeks.

Cognitive

- New abstract ideas arrive through concrete or visual routes first.
- Support is pitched at with-help-today, alone-soon: and it fades.
- Tasks requiring still-maturing skills (planning, organisation) come with external structure.

Social-emotional

- Every child has at least one adult in school who knows them beyond data.
- Regulation is taught and co-regulated, not just demanded.
- Adolescent status sensitivity shapes how correction happens.

Systems

- Recurring behaviour patterns get checked against timetable and home context.
- Families hear about strengths before they are needed for problems.

Child Development: A 5-Minute Evidence Briefing

What modern evidence keeps from the classic theories, and what it quietly retired.

■ The theories converge on practice

Across lenses, the same classroom implications recur: concrete before abstract, support that fades, safety before challenge, context behind behaviour. The convergence is more useful than any single theory.

■ Self-regulation is the through-line

Childhood self-regulation predicts achievement, relationships and mental health across 150 studies, and it grows through co-regulation with adults: development you participate in daily.

■ Relationships are developmental infrastructure

Teacher-child relationships associate with every outcome cluster measured, across 2.64 million learners. The relational work IS developmental work.

■ The honest caveat

Piaget's strict stages and ages have not survived scrutiny (children show abilities earlier, development is domain-specific), and much developmental evidence is correlational. Use phases as planning heuristics, never as ceilings for individual children.

Evidence base

Robson, D.A., Allen, M.S. and Howard, S.J. (2020). Self-regulation in childhood as a predictor of future outcomes: a meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*.

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Emslander, V. et al. (2025). Teacher-student relationships and student outcomes: a systematic second-order meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*.

Margolis, A.A. (2020). Zone of proximal development, scaffolding and teaching practice. *Cultural-Historical Psychology*.