

## **Introduction**

Lifespan development examines the patterns of growth including changes, constancy or stability that occur in the entire lifecycle. This means that lifespan development concentrates on human development from conception to old age (Baltes et al. 1999). Sugarman (2001) explains that lifespan development is described in terms of the stages in human life. A clear understanding of the different life stages helps social care workers to understand the needs of each individual depending on the life stage the person is at (Crawford & Walker 2003). This is, because there are different influences and factors that are fundamental at each stage of life; which are experienced differently by every individual even though everyone goes through the same stages of life. Lifespan development has five main stages; with five main strands of development that manifest differently at every stage.

## **Lifespan Development: Stages and Strands**

There are various stages of development that a human being undergoes right from conception to death. Tennant and Pogson (1995, p. 69) explain that different philosophers have proposed different models for the division of the different phases of life. It is stated that Aristotle proposed three life stages, while Confucius classified the stages into six. Shakespeare identified seven stages while Solon proposed nine stages of seven years each. The Freudian theory advanced by Viennese philosopher, Freud, suggests that life stages can be divided into psychosexual phases which include oral, anal, latency, phallic and genital. Another philosopher, Kohlberg, thought that life stages should be divided according to moral development. All these were psychoanalytic perspectives advanced to explain the stages of life. Piaget's cognitive development theory identified four stages of lifespan development. These include sensorimotor stage which is from birth to two years; the pre-operational stage which is between 2 and 7 years; the concrete operational stage which is between 7 and 11 years and the formal operational stage which is above 11 years (Sugarman 2001). Some of these classifications are however not universal. Regardless of the classification, the main stages can be identified as conception,

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birth and infancy; childhood; adolescence, adulthood and old age. Each stage is characterised by a change in behaviour as well as life events. For example an adult of 45 is expected to have made certain achievements such as getting an education and probably a first job. At the different life stages, apart from genetic and environmental influences, there are also psychological and social factors that affect the development of the person. Different people have different life experiences at different stages as characterised by varying new demands and opportunities that present themselves at each stage of life. These experiences are shaped around physical; psychological; intellectual or cognitive; emotional and social development. These strands of development present themselves at each stage, are not distinct and have common characteristics. It is argued that these developmental strands are not distinctive because they appear in a holistic manner (Berk 2007). This means that these issues are usually experienced at the same time.

At the pre-natal or conception stage, there is no much development apart from physical. This is because of the fact that the foetus is only growing in the mother's womb where there are no environmental influences of the outside world. The physical development of the baby can be witnessed as the pregnancy grows or through ultrasounds. Following the conception stage is infancy; which is basically the period between birth and three years – also the average school going age. Bee (2002) explains that at infancy, the child is able to develop in other ways other than physically. An infant, for example is able to develop cognitive as well as social skills. An infant is also able to develop emotionally. This means that they are able to show and recognise different emotions. For instance a baby is able to know that when he or she is hurt, they can cry to show displeasure. A baby is also able to know when an adult is angry with them especially if they have done something wrong. A three year old for example can distinguish between right and wrong and can be able to arrange their toys after they are done playing with them. A three year old can also be punished by making them sit on a naughty step. Cognitive development is also shown through arrangement of things like blocks. Language development can also be seen from age two where a normal baby is able to communicate his or her needs (Sugarman 2001). A child can also be potty trained in preparation for their going to school. At the infancy stage, the child develops the ability to remember things. They develop attention, creativity and imagination.

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The next life stage after infancy is childhood. Childhood is between 4 and 10 years. At this stage there is still physical development. During childhood a child is able to attend school and this increases his or her intellectual development. The child can learn different subjects in school and can also learn new languages as well as new skills such as acting, singing, dancing, among others (Baltes et al. 1999). This represents cognitive development. At the childhood stage children are also able to imitate a lot of behaviour from their parents or friends at school. This was well elaborated in Albert Bandura's social learning theory. In this theory it was stipulated that a child will develop cognitive skills through modelling or imitating. For instance a child may emulate the angry or aggressive behaviour he or she witnesses at home. The social learning theory also advances that as we progress into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, children are becoming more selective in the kind of behaviour they imitate (Berk 2007). There is also psychological development in childhood such that a child is able to connect with his or her emotions. It is very important at this stage for a child to get the proper attention and environment as a lot of children get psychologically affected if this part of their life is troubled. For example, a child in the childhood stage is able to recognise such things as abuse or divorce or other negative environments. A child is also able to recognise love and affection in addition to developing socially (Crawford & Walker 2003). In school, the child can learn how to interact with other children and this forms the child's primary social learning experience.

Adolescence is the next stage after childhood and is basically the period between 11 and 18 years. During this stage, there is immense physical development in a child. Girls and boys develop different traits such as hips for girls and facial hair for boys. There are also puberty changes that also lead to other developments, for example psychological development. Girls for example start their menstrual cycle which brings different hormonal changes. Teenagers get into a lot of trouble and they also experience various hormonal changes that make them moody and unpredictable. These developments if not well checked by parents could lead to unforeseeable problems such as teenage pregnancy or use of drugs (Sugarman 2001). At this point it is important for parents to be vigilant of any drastic changes in their children's behaviour. Freud's psychosexual theory stipulates that for healthy personal development of children, parents have to monitor and manage their children's sexual and destructive drives at an early age. Serious psychological problems could also

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lead to violence and even on the extreme, suicide. There is also intellectual or cognitive development at this adolescence stage (Tennant & Pogson 1995). This is because by the end of this stage most children have already finished their high school. There is also social development as children usually like to experiment with different things at this stage. This is the time most of them also join chatrooms and social sites such as Facebook.

The next stage of life after adolescence is adulthood; which is the period between 19 and 65 years. At this stage, most people acquire higher education like university level education. Some even proceed to do a master's degree or a doctorate program. By the age of nineteen most people are considered adults and they make most of the decisions alone. The parents or guardians no longer play a huge role. There is not much physical development at this stage. Physical developments at this stage are minimal and easily altered. Alterations can either be done by choice for example someone can decide to lose weight, dye or cut their hair. Physical changes could also be occasioned by bad habits such as excessive drinking or smoking (Tennant & Pogson 1995). There is also intellectual and cognitive development depending on one's environment. This is because this is the time most people begin their careers. There is acquiring of new practical knowledge and also new work experiences. Social developments are also experienced because most people get married during this time and get into intimate relationships; some also get children. There is moral reasoning at this stage showing social development. At this stage, people develop careers and family and they also build a life that can be enjoyed in old age (Sugarman 2001). Most people acquire homes and others may even immigrate to different countries.

The final stage in the lifecycle is old age, which starts from the age of 65 years. At this stage, there is no physical development with ill health often being a big factor which usually affects their physical appearance. Most elderly people cannot walk or stand straight because of a weak back. Older people also have a problem with sight and hearing as these senses deteriorates with age. The elderly also lose their cognitive development as some become senile with such diseases as Alzheimer's diseases (Baltes et al. 1999). Their psychological development is also affected because older people spend most of their time reflecting on their lives. Some even get depressed due to the fact that they are no longer active and they feel alienated

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by society. Some also reflect on the loss of their partners, which can be depressing. The theory of disengagement advanced in 1961 by Henry and Cumming (Berk 2007) also explains that as people get older, they disengage from society because they are viewed as useless and burdensome. This means there is minimal social development and participation. In general, old age brings with it negative physical, intellectual, social, psychological and emotional development. Most die due to deteriorating health and others simply die of old age.

### **Conclusion**

Lifespan development shows the different changes that are experienced throughout the lifecycle of humans. This means that at every stage in life there are different needs that should be addressed. This is more so important for a social care worker. It can also be surmised that the different stages and strands of life though common to everyone, influence individuals differently. For example, all adolescents undergo major changes but these changes are different for every individual. One person may for example get an attack of acne while another may not.

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