

PREOPERATIONAL STAGE

Piaget places preschoolers in the preoperational stage, meaning before mental actions. Piaget's theory states that three abilities or standards must be met before operations or mental activity can exist. The preschooler is working to master these tasks.

1. Mental actions must be dependent on mental ability instead of senses and/or motor skills.
2. Mental actions must be considered logical. To be logical, the child must be able to combine or add ideas, put things in order or sequence, and to engage in simple consequential or cause-and-effect thinking.
3. Mental actions have to be able to be reversed in the child's mind. For example, if a certain route or course is taken to grandpa and grandma's house from the child's own house, they should be able to reverse the course on the way home.

There are also five abilities that the preschool-age child characterizes in the pre-operational stage:

1. Deferred imitation: the child imitates, as closely as he/she can, actions he/she has seen before; e.g., a child feeding a doll the same way and doing and saying the same things that his/her mother did as she fed the baby the day before.
2. Symbolic play: This child uses symbols for the real world as he/she engages in make-believe play. This involves more than imagination, it involves aspects of how the child feels about his/her world.
3. Drawing: The child does not just scribble anymore. He/she draws recognizable pictures. He/She attempts to represent objects or people from his/her world in his/her drawing. However, the child's artwork is not visually accurate. It is how the child thinks.
4. Mental images: the child can pull images from his/her memory about past experiences.
5. Language: the child must be able to identify in his/her mind the object or person when it is named AND be able to identify an object or person by name when he/she sees it. Language is very abstract. For example, the word "cookie" doesn't smell like, look like, or sound like what a cookie is, but the word "cookie" represents a cookie.

Because children learn best by doing, this is how a parent or caregiver can best enhance cognitive development--allow the child to play with and actively interact with objects, games, books, and people. While the child is playing or even engaging in a common, everyday routine or activity, parents/caregivers should ask inquisitively about the questions and allow the child to formulate his/her own ideas. Help the child be aware of things around him/her. Point out new things, answer his/her questions, and encourage him/her to question you.