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The Social Situation of Child Development

In this chapter from Personality and Its Formation in Childhood (1968), L.I. Bozhovich elaborates two concepts proposed by Vygotsky: the concept of psychological age and the social situation of development. They are presented as mechanisms and moving forces of development in addition to the primary needs of the child. The second part of the chapter illustrates her elaboration of the concept of perezhivanie [experience] as an emotional mechanism in personality development.

Different approaches to characterizing ages and the concept of the social situation of development

Current accepted practice is to divide the development of schoolchildren into three consecutive stages: young, middle, and older school age. This division is not strictly scientific, but to a certain degree is based on empirical considerations.

Each of these stages is characterized by a particular set of conditions under which children’s lives and activity take place and by the structure of psychological features that take shape in them under the influence of these conditions. But the relationship between the conditions present in the lives of schoolchildren and their psychological features is governed by a complex dialectic. On the one hand, the transition to new life conditions has been prepared by the entire course of development up to that point and becomes possible only as
a result of what children attain over the course of that development. On the other hand, the demands that life makes of children during this new stage of their development condition their subsequent mental development. As a result, child mental development is a complex process that cannot be understood without analysis not only of those objective conditions influencing children but also the features that have already taken shape in their minds and through which the influence of these conditions is refracted. This deserves special attention, since attempts are still being made to remove both age-related and individual features from analysis of the external conditions of children’s lives and the influences that impact them. To put it another way, even now some psychologists and pedagogues forget the unquestionable tenet that child mental development has its own internal logic, its own laws, and is not a passive reflection of the reality within which this development takes place.¹

But even as we divide schoolchildren’s development into these three stages—young, middle, and older school age—we must point out that these stages have no precise boundaries; their boundaries are fluid and can change depending on the specific circumstances of life and activity and the demands placed on children by those around them. The most recent research in the area of child and pedagogical psychology shows, for example, that it is possible to achieve even in young school age the formation of certain psychological features of thought that have always been considered characteristic only of middle-school students (i.e., for adolescents) by organizing children’s learning activity in a particular way, by changing the method and content of the learning process (see the research of D.B. Elkonin and V.V. Davydov).²

However, the fluidity of boundaries between ages does not mean that there are no qualitatively distinctive stages in child development, which are never characterized by a simple aggregate of separate psychological features, but rather by the distinctiveness of a certain integrated structure of child personality and the presence of developmental tendencies specific to that particular stage. Furthermore, it can even be presumed that the artificial acceleration of a particular function’s development can undermine the harmonic structure of child development. To illustrate this thought, let us imagine the early development of abstract forms of thinking in children. Young schoolchildren can, of course, learn relatively complex forms of thinking that they will even put to spontaneous use. But literal thinking in children is no accident: it is associated with their overall directedness toward the surrounding world and with their need to familiarize themselves with the phenomena of reality as broadly and thoroughly as possible, to acquire sufficient factual knowledge and skills. If you take all this away from children, then you create conditions where abstract thinking becomes vapid and scholastic. If we accelerate the development of abstract thinking in an untimely and artificial way, we destroy
the orderly course of mental development and the qualitatively distinctive structure of children’s age-related features.

Therefore, each school age—young, middle, and older—is distinguished by a qualitatively distinctive structure of features, and transitioning from one age-related stage to another is not an evolutionary process, but a dialectical leap to a new quality. In his time, L.S. Vygotsky, wishing to underscore this idea, compared the process of child development to the metamorphosis that takes place when a caterpillar is transformed into a chrysalis and from a chrysalis into a butterfly. Child development, he emphasized, is not a matter of a simple quantitative increase in what the child already had, but a qualitative translation from one form to another.

There have been many attempts to characterize individual ages, however, it cannot be said that this question has been satisfactorily addressed by contemporary psychology. In this area, as in many others, associative psychology has exerted great influence, which has hindered both the integral study of children and the synthetic characterization of their age-specific psychological profile.

Typical along this vein are recent publications on developmental psychology: *The Psychology of the Young Schoolchild* [Psikhologiia mladshego shkol’nika], which came out in 1960 and was edited by E.I. Ignatiev, and *The Psychology of Preschool Age* [Psikhologiia doshkol’nogo vozrasta], which came out in 1964 and was edited by A.V. Zaporozhets and D.B. Elkonin. Both books describe age-specific features of individual mental processes and functions, but make no attempt to characterize their specific structure and their relationship to the personality features of children at those ages.

It should be borne in mind, of course, that the book edited by Zaporozhets and Elkonin is only the first part of a planned monograph and that its second part proposes to provide a characterization of different types of preschool activity, including play, which the authors see as constituting a feature of child personality for that age. Furthermore, it should be noted that in analyzing age-specific features of particular mental processes the authors strive to show the way in which these processes depend on the overall nature of the activity into which they are incorporated, as well as on the orienting function that they fulfill within that activity. This makes the book fundamentally different from traditional works on child psychology, including the one edited by Ignatiev. However this approach does nothing to radically alter the analysis and description of experimental material: the book leaves child personality on the outside and does not attempt to characterize the structure of consciousness in the preschooler. It also does not address the system of needs and motives, without which, in our opinion, age-specific features cannot be understood.

True, not all recent books on child and pedagogical psychology fail to characterize age-specific features of child personality. For example, N.D.
Levitov has made an attempt, together with his characterization of separate mental processes and functions, to characterize child personality at different ages. However this attempt appears to lack sufficient scientific validity. The characterization of age-related personality features offered in Levitov’s book does not rely on research data but is descriptive, without revealing the reasons governing the distinctiveness of each age, and without indicating the sources of this distinctiveness. From this it is clear that such a characterization does not feature analysis of the dynamics of child personality development and the regularities involved in the transition from one developmental stage to another.

Furthermore, Levitov’s age-specific characterization of personality (as is the case in all other books and textbooks) comes after characterization of age-specific features of separate psychological processes and functions, despite the fact that these processes and functions can be understood only after they have been considered in terms of the distinctive features of a given age. In Levitov’s characterization, as a result, personality winds up being broken down into its individual properties—directedness, interests, will, and so on.

Thus, even in those books that attempt to describe age-specific personality features in schoolchildren, the structure of child personality is not characterized, the central neoformation for a given age is not identified, and no analysis is given of the sources of this neoformation and the influence of the shift that has already occurred within a child’s personality on other psychological features of age.

When it comes to foreign psychology, age-related features are handled in a different (but not better) way.

Here, as a rule, we do not find the traditional description of age as the aggregate of separate mental processes and functions that have reached a certain developmental level. But in the course of characterizing an age as an integrated whole, there is often a completely conscious eclectic and pragmatic approach.

In contemporary foreign literature, the stages of mental development are most often examined from the perspective of those natural life phenomena that are typical of children at a particular age and that confront adults with educational problems that are specific to that age.

For example, early childhood often is examined in terms of children’s primary biological needs, their relationship with their mother, and the role of the mother in shaping their minds. The problem of learning in the broadest sense of that word is also examined: the formation of various skills, abilities, the habit of tidiness, learning to walk, language, and so on.

In the treatment of age-specific features of the young schoolchild, new problems are placed in the forefront—first, the problem of children’s behavior in school, their academic success, in a word, as they say overseas, the problems associated with their “school adaptation.”

Adolescence entails its own specific problems, the analysis and description
of which fill sections devoted to the characterization of this developmental period. These are primarily problems relating to the conflicts of adolescence, the sources of these conflicts, their content, how to overcome them; they include problems of adolescent sexual development, problems of relationships within a group, the formation of self-worth, and so on.

Such an approach is unquestionably more integral and true to life than the traditional associative approach. However it is not evidence that foreign psychology has reached a more advanced theoretical level. A purely pragmatic approach to psychological findings is exhibited. From among all the theories that have heretofore been developed to address a particular problem related to developmental stages, the authors select those that they feel can best explain a given phenomenon or the entire course of children’s mental development. For example, in order to explain the phenomenon of frustration, which is particularly characteristic of adolescence, or pathological character development, or a child’s “social nonadaptation,” in most cases psychoanalysis of all kinds and varieties is resorted to; to describe the process of acquiring skills and abilities, the process by which the child’s intellectual sphere develops, and so on, learning theories are used; and to understand the child’s social development, relationships within a group, the assimilation of norms and rules of social morality, social psychology is called in to do the job—sociometrics, role theory, and the like. Furthermore, the authors, as a rule, are not bothered by this eclecticism—quite the contrary, they acclaim it as the standard in scientific thinking, as a principle.

Very illustrative in this regard are the remarks with which P. Mussen, J. Conger, and J. Kagan preface their discussion of material related to developmental psychology. As they put it, there is currently no all-encompassing psychological theory capable of encompassing the entirety of information that has already been gathered by child psychology. From the perspective of these authors, psychoanalytic and learning theories are the most valuable in terms of the breadth of psychological findings to which they can be applied. The former provide a scientific explanation of problems associated with children’s emotional development, while the latter enable us to understand the process by which children are transformed from helpless and dependent beings into beings capable of independent behavior. They also note other narrower theories relating to particular problems of development (e.g., Piaget’s theory of children’s intellectual development) that, they feel, should nevertheless be used, since they also have something to offer in understanding children’s mental development.

The authors therefore believe that for the purposes of child psychology, which demands an understanding of the overall course of personality development and the problems of age, it is essential not to limit investigation to the confines of a single theory, but to turn to any theory that appears capable of giving a scientific explanation that corresponds to phenomena and findings.
Consequently, applicability and trueness to life is achieved by foreign child psychology not by creating a new theory of development that overcomes the flaws of old, associative psychology, but by rejecting the idea of a single psychological theory capable of absorbing the main psychological findings and providing an integral characterization of the age-related features of child personality.

In his time, Vygotsky made an attempt at characterizing the qualitative distinctiveness of the structure of children’s psychological features at different ages.6

He developed and provided evidence to support the idea that at each stage of children’s mental development there are not only distinctive separate mental processes and functions but also distinctive ways in which they are combined. In other words, from his perspective, during the transition from one age to another, not only separate mental functions grow and qualitatively change, but their relationships to one another and structure change as well. Furthermore, he indicates, the different mental functions do not grow and develop at an even pace. They each have their own period of optimal development, and during this period all of the other functions operate as if within this function, through it. This accounts for the distinctiveness of the structure of child consciousness at each developmental stage.7

For example, at an early age, from Vygotsky’s perspective, it is typical for the development of perception to predominate. All other mental processes and functions—memory, attention, thinking, emotion, and the like—are only carried out through perception: memory takes the form of recognition, that is, perception functions as an activity; thinking operates visually, in other words it is limited to what is perceived, and so on. Very young children are only able to be happy or upset about something that they perceive immediately: they cry loudly when their mother leaves, but if she leaves unnoticed, the negative emotion will not be provoked.

By the time children reach preschool age, as Vygotsky sees it, the role of memory becomes dominant to accommodate the intense accumulation of acquired personal experience that takes place during this period. At this age, all mental functions, their distinctiveness and development, are associated specifically with this fact. During school age, thinking gradually begins to come to the forefront, and memory itself, which is then carried out in association with and on the basis of thinking, begins to become logical. Vygotsky illustrates this changing of place between memory and thinking that takes place during child development through the following simple example. If, he says, we ask a preschooler to answer the question, “What should a person do if he is late for a train?” the child, as a rule solves this thought problem using simple memory. He will not ascertain all the circumstances, weigh them, and then devise a solu-
tion to the situation; he will reply: “You have to sit on the bench and wait for the next train,” or “You have to go home,” and so on. Either answer is possible depending on what particular instance the child remembers. But schoolchildren, especially middle or older ones, even in cases where the task at hand requires them to recall something, will begin to reason, so that sought-after memory will emerge as they think things through. While for the preschooler to remember is to think, for the schoolchild, to think is to remember.

According to Vygotsky’s views, each developmental period is characterized by a special structure of consciousness as a whole (a special structure of interfunctional connections and relationships), which in turn conditions the special nature and special role of each mental function that is incorporated into the structure of consciousness.

With this idea, Vygotsky dealt a powerful blow to the traditional understanding of development as constituting the development of separate mental functions. However, his untimely death did not allow him to sufficiently develop or argue his theories and did not permit him to complete a psychological characterization of developmental stages using them as a foundation.

Vygotsky made another valuable contribution to the problem of mental development. He attempted not only to uncover its internal logic but also to understand the connection between children’s mental development and the effects of the environment. In framing this question he started from the assumption that life conditions in and of themselves, that is, directly, immediately, are not capable of determining mental features in children, that one and the same set of conditions may form different mental features, and this will primarily depend on the interrelationship between children and their surroundings. In essence, this assumption concretizes within psychology the understanding of development that is well-known in dialectical materialism—that it represents interaction between an organism and its environment.

In lectures delivered to the students of the Moscow Medical Institute in 1934, he advanced the proposition that in order to correctly understand the role of the environment in child development, it must be approach not with an absolute but a relative yardstick. The environment, he stated, should be viewed not as the “developmental setting,” which, depending on what qualities it features, determines child development; the effects of the environment, according to Vygotsky’s thinking, themselves change depending on what emerging psychological properties refract them.

Vygotsky saw this proposition as important not only for understanding the process by which individual distinctive features emerged in children but also for discovering their age-related features. Any element of the environment, he said, can influence children in different ways depending on their developmental stage. For example, the speech of those surrounding a child may be abso-
lutely the same when the child is six months old and when he is three and a half, but the impact of this speech will be different in both cases, since babies and preschoolers are at different levels of understanding. Consequently, even in those cases where environmental influences remain objectively unchanged in terms of their content, these effects will have different impacts on children due to changes taking place within them. As a result, in order to understand the influence of the environment on the formation of age-related features in children, not only changes that have taken place in the environment must be borne in mind (e.g., the transition from kindergarten to first grade) but also the changes that have taken place within children themselves that condition the nature of environmental influences on their subsequent mental development.

In association with this understanding of the role of the environment in children’s mental development, Vygotsky introduced a very important concept—the concept of the “social situation of development.” He used this term to denote the special combination of internal developmental processes and external conditions that are typical of each developmental stage and that condition both the dynamic of mental development for the duration of the corresponding developmental period and the new qualitatively distinct psychological formations that emerge toward its end.

Experience and its function in children’s mental development

True to the principle that analysis of complex phenomena should be conducted not in terms of elements but in terms of “units” that preserve in simplest form properties intrinsic to the whole, Vygotsky began to seek a corresponding “unit” to use in studying the “social situation of development.” He identified emotional experience (or the child’s “affective relationship” to the environment) as such a unit. Experience, from Vygotsky’s perspective, is a “unit” that, in indissoluble unity, represents, on the one hand, the environment, that is, what the child experiences, and, on the other, the subject, that is, what introduces the child into this experience and, in turn, is defined by the level of mental development the child has already achieved.

From this it can be concluded that in order to understand exactly what effect the environment has on children, and, consequently, how it affects the course of their development, the nature of children’s experience must be understood, the nature of their affective relationship to the environment.8

Vygotsky’s proposition and the concept of experience that he introduced appear to us to be very important and productive for child psychology. However, he did not fully develop the concept of experience. In fact, even taking analysis of children’s experience as our point of departure in understanding the causes that condition individual (or age-related) features of children’s minds,
we will still be forced to go back and examine all the circumstances of their
life and activity and all the currently existing features of their personality.
Only then will we be able to understand the nature of the experience itself
and its function within mental development.

So it could be said that the concept of experience introduced by Vygotsky
isolated and denoted an essential psychological reality, the study of which
must be the first step in analyzing the environment’s role in child development;
experience is like a node where the varied influences of different external and
internal circumstances come together. But this is exactly why experience must
not be viewed as a whole that will not be broken down any further, why it is
essential to address the problem of the subsequent deciphering of this concept
and, consequently, uncover the forces that underlie it and, in the final analysis,
condition the course of mental development.

Vygotsky himself was willing to accept the need to formulate and solve
this fundamental problem. He also attempted to find that decisive link within
the dynamics of mental development that determines the character of experi-
ence itself and, consequently, how the influence of the external environment is
refracted by its subject. However, in this, it seems to us, Vygotsky was taking
a step backward, retreating to a certain extent beyond old boundaries.

He felt that the nature of experience in the final analysis is determined by
how children understand the circumstances affecting them, that is, by how
developed their ability to generalize is. If, he said, children will understand
(perceive, conceptualize) one and the same event in different ways, it will have
absolutely different meanings for them and, consequently, they will experience
it differently. For example, a mother’s illness is usually very upsetting for
young school-aged children or adolescents, while for very young children it
does not generate negative emotions and may even be experienced as a cause
for happiness and joy, since they are unable to understand the situation and
grownups will permit them to do things they otherwise might not. Therefore,
this event can leave an indelible mark on the character of older children, but
be neutral in regard to the character of a very small child.

In this context, Vygotsky cites the experiential features that distinguish
mentally retarded children from normal ones. One and the same objective
situation, he said, leads to absolutely different outcomes if they center on a
mentally retarded child rather than a normal one. As an example, he told about
his clinical observations of one mentally retarded child whose appearance
was marked by deformities. The other children often teased this child, laughed at
him, did not allow him to play with them. For children with normal intellects,
this situation would have led to very difficult emotional experiences, and, in
turn, might have led to various psychogenic disorders and to the formation
of certain character traits. But this did not occur in this particular child. And
from Vygotsky’s perspective this made sense, since this mentally retarded child was not capable of understanding the meaning and significance of the situation for him. Of course, Vygotsky notes, every time the child was teased or demeaned it was unpleasant for him, but he was not able to generalize the emotions he experienced and therefore they did not leave the expected mark on the formation of his personality.

In this way, Vygotsky brought his reasoning full circle. He began by rejecting intellectualistic and atomistic understandings of the child mind, identified experience as an indissoluble whole, as the “unit” that makes it possible to understand the nature of environmental influences on the course of mental development, and then made this experience dependent on the level of children’s intellectual abilities. And if his concept of experience (the concept of the affective relationship between children and the environment) brought us closer to understanding the true causes of child development, then the subsequent search for the nexus that determines this development, which ended with the concept of generalization, again returned us to intellectualist positions.

Vygotsky’s proposition that experience is, in the final analysis, determined by how well generalization is developed, that is, by understanding, is factually incorrect as well. Everyday observation and analysis of countless pedagogical phenomena attest to the fact that given the same understanding, children often have different attitudes toward one and the same reality, experience it differently, and react to it differently.

This can be seen particularly clearly when, for example, children understand perfectly well the advisability and even necessity of a requirement with which they are confronted, but nevertheless refuse to submit to it simply because it comes into conflict with other needs and impulses that they are simultaneously experiencing.

Vygotsky’s proposition is also not supported by educational practice, which attests to the fact that explanations appealing to children’s conscience, as a rule, are not able to change children’s affective relationship to reality, to change their experience. Pedagogical experience sooner attests to quite the opposite: that understanding depends (like all other mental processes) on children’s affective attitude toward the circumstances affecting them. Psychological research that is being extensively conducted here and abroad, in turn, demonstrates that when children are in a particular affective state they are often unable to correctly perceive and comprehend those phenomena of reality that relate to their affective state and to react to them appropriately.

The attempt to assign the development of generalization primary importance is incorrect as well because the consistent realization of this perspective (and we have seen this in the example of Vygotsky’s own reasoning) inevitably confines psychological analysis to the realm of purely subjective processes and
leads to a vicious circle, where one mutually connected mental phenomenon is explained by another (in this case, experience is explained by the extent to which generalization has been developed). This divorces mental phenomena from the system of real-life relationships into which they are incorporated and only within which they can be explained.

For this reason, it seems to us that we must first correctly understand the psychological nature of experience before we analyze just how the features of experience are governed by the relationship between the internal and external forces that determines it.

The idea has been advanced more than once within psychology that feelings, emotions, affects—in short, subjects’ experiences—are reflections of actual, real needs. For example, W. McDougall believes that every instinctive action is accompanied by an experience specific to this instinct: when we run away, he says, we experience fear, when we attack, anger, when we spit, revulsion. L. Morgan reaches a similar conclusion. K. Koffka goes further than these authors in developing this thought, asserting that affects (e.g., “compassion” or “horror”) “are essentially forms that needs take in our awareness.”

According to these viewpoints, the nature of experience must testify to the nature and state of a subjects needs, and, evidently, the more vital these needs are, the stronger and deeper their experience will be.

Early on in his scientific career, Vygotsky also believed in a profound internal connection between people’s emotions and needs.

Like most psychologists and biologists of his time, he believed adaptation to be the main developmental principle of organic life, as well as the main principle of children’s mental development. No living thing can exist if its essential, vitally important needs are not met, and humans cannot exist if they are not capable of responding to the demands that the surrounding social environment places on them. From this it is clear that any violation of the equilibrium between the subject and the environment must activate corresponding needs on the part of the subject and prompt the development of the forms of behavior and activity, the properties and qualities that are essential to restoring this lost equilibrium.

In analyzing how emotions originate from instinctive needs in one of his early works, Vygotsky arrives at the thought that emotions “are the result of the organism’s own assessment of its relationship with the environment.” They arise at “critical and catastrophic moments of behavior,” at the moment when the equilibrium between the organism and the environment is somehow breaking down. Emotions, in Vygotsky’s understanding, are not an organism’s passive state, they stimulate activity, stimulate and regulate its relationship with the environment, and every time carry out a sort of “dictatorship of behavior.”

Such a view of emotions, their origins and function, helps us understand
why in his later research Vygotsky identified specifically “experience” as the central nexus in children’s mental development. However, it remains unclear why exactly, in constructing a theory of children’s mental development, in his later works he began to seek an explanation for the nature of experiences in the extent to which intellectual processes were developed. Following his own ideas about the origins and nature of emotions, the following conclusion might be drawn: if we want to understand exactly how the environment affects children and what influence it exerts on their mental development, then we must analyze the relationship between this environment and the child’s needs, the extent to which it is capable of satisfying them or, in some cases, hinders their satisfaction. And since experience reflects specifically this aspect of people’s relationship with the environment, then the most direct way to perform this analysis will be to look at their experiences. In other words, what underlies experience, as we see it, is the world of children’s needs—their impulses, desires, intentions, complexly intertwined with one another and interrelated with possibilities for meeting these needs. And this entire complex system of connections, the entire world of a child’s needs and impulses, must be deciphered so that we can understand the nature of the influence external circumstances exert on children’s mental development.

Understanding, the degree of generalization with which children perceive the environment is, of course, important as one of the factors conditioning environmental influences. Furthermore, a particular degree of understanding is unquestionably a necessary precondition for this influence; and one might add that an even more important precondition is children’s ability, for example, to perceive an stimulus that is impacting them. However, all these preconditions, while essential, are nevertheless insufficient for determining the nature of the influence the environment exerts on children. Consequently, however much we might study the level of children’s thinking, that will tell us neither the particular features of their experience nor the nature of the influence a particular life circumstance exerts on them.

With this in mind, let us return to the example Vygotsky used to illustrate his thinking about the leading role of understanding in child development. He said that a mother’s illness may not influence the development of small children since, due to their limited understanding, they will not deeply experience this event and that, on the other hand, older children may be deeply affected by such an illness; it may affect the entire course of their personality formation. While it truly could turn out as Vygotsky describes, it could also turn out otherwise. For example, older children may understand everything that a mother’s illness entails, but remain indifferent. Consequently, the degree of understanding here predictably determines neither the nature of experience nor the nature of the child’s development. In order to learn exactly what
influence a mother’s serious illness would have on the subsequent course of personality formation, one would evidently have to find out what a child is deprived of by this illness, or, to in other words, what system of needs will go unmet as a result of this event.

It would indeed be easy to imagine adolescents who, despite a thorough understanding of what was happening, would experience neither pain nor fear of loss if their mother represented to them someone who constantly limits their freedom, interferes in their realizing their urges and aspirations. And one might equally easily imagine little children who are incapable of understanding the threat of disease, their mother’s suffering, or the danger of loss, but would nevertheless keenly experience this illness as a sense of loneliness, abandonment, neglect, or defenselessness, which, in turn would be certain to impact their character formation.

One might counter that from this perspective, it is also impossible to predict with any degree of certainty what exact effect a mother’s illness would have on any given child. However, it seems to us that predicting what would happen in such a case is possible in principle, but for the time being difficult to carry out in practice, since it is difficult to analyze the entire complex system of a child’s motivational sphere. Such an analysis is made all the more difficult since it must take into account not only needs and motives themselves, but the potential for their being met and the possibility that some needs will be substituted with others, that they might change or be mastered. Despite this difficulty, this type of analysis has been rather successfully conducted and is still being conducted in our laboratory. For example, L.S. Slavina’s research, which focuses on the study of individual children with affective distress and aggressive forms of behavior, has not only succeeded in individual cases in unraveling the complex tangle of children’s distress and the causes of this distress, but also in influencing the children, eliminating the consequences of the adverse external and internal circumstances that were impacting the child’s development in each individual case.

Studying the affective sphere of children with aggressive behavior, juvenile offenders, unruly schoolchildren, or uncommunicative, stubborn, unsociable children, we found support for the idea that the nature of emotional experiences (their content and force) depends, first, on what specific needs (or combination of needs) this experience reflects and second, on the extent to which these needs are being satisfied. What underlies complex and diverse emotional experiences—internally conflicting or ambivalent emotions—is a complex structure of diverse needs and impulses, diverse motivational tendencies. Thus, based on the nature of what children are experiencing, it is possible to learn the structure of the child’s motivational sphere and, coming at it from the opposite direction, knowing children’s needs and impulses as well as the
likelihood that they will be satisfied, it is possible to predict the nature of the emotions they are experiencing with a high probability of accuracy.

We will illustrate this using the example of the relationship between the structure of the motivational sphere and emotional experience in juvenile offenders seen in psychological research devoted to this problem. We have in mind the research of P.G. Vel’skii (in collaboration with V.N. Nikol’skii), which focused on studying the emotional sphere of juvenile offenders whose behavior deviated from the norm, and, first and foremost, research into the motivational sphere of juvenile offenders conducted in our laboratory by G.G. Bochkareva.¹⁴

On the basis of very extensive and substantive research, Vel’skii arrives at the assertion that in each separate case there is a particular combination of diverse impulses that push subjects to commit a crime. What he emphasizes throughout is a nondifferentiated blur of emotions and impulses. Furthermore, the emotion itself is viewed by Vel’skii (following the example of L.I. Petrazhitskii) as a dual process that consists of both emotional experience and impulse.

In those cases where one emotion inhibits another, Vel’skii asserts—for example, when “utilitarian-practical” emotions inhibit “social-moral” ones, the former will not be immediately extinguished. They will die off gradually, but in the process they can inflict painful emotions on the subject in the form of shame, remorse, and pangs of conscience. As Vel’skii sees it, these emotional experiences are an expression of the fact that the energy of “legitimate” or “moral emotions” did not find an outlet or a way to discharge.

Generalizing Vel’skii’s proposition we could say that what he understands to be feelings and emotional experiences are in fact a reflection of the dynamic processes that comprise the essence of actual operative needs. From this perspective, for example, the triumph of “social-ethical” emotions should, it would seem, leave a person with a sense of satisfaction, an emotional boost, pride, while unresolved conflict among needs should be experienced as a painful internal struggle and should create feelings of confusion and vacillation.

Bochkareva’s research was designed based on preliminary assumptions of this sort. It was aimed at discovering the features of the motivational sphere among juvenile offenders.

The research results indicate that the emotional experiences of juvenile offenders really can help us understand their system of needs and motives.

For example, there are children who steal very easily, without any negative emotions. They take other people’s money, use it to buy sweets, go to the movies, and so on, without any pangs of conscience or even strong fear of being caught. In such cases, analysis of research uncovers the following internal factors: rather strong motives of an immediate nature associated with the desire to derive pleasure and the absence not only of conscious moral underpinnings but also of those inner moral inhibitions that emerge in many children under
the influence of immediate real-life experience and that inhibit the commission of amoral acts. Thus, the calm demeanor of children who break the law attests to the absence of moral tendencies capable of competing with those immediate needs that are satisfied by breaking the law. The absence of moral tendencies, in turn, attests to the fact that these children lack experience with behavior that shapes an immediate moral protest against amoral impulses. Often there has even been the opposite behavioral experience: the biographies of such children in many cases feature the practice of committing amoral deeds beginning at preschool age that did not meet with the condemnation of adults and were perhaps even encouraged by family members.

But there are also children (especially adolescents) characterized by a “positive” system of emotional experiences associated with the commission of crimes. They not only do not feel ashamed of their amoral behavior, but they experience it as heroism, take pride in it, and in various ways emphasize their superiority over children who adhere to generally accepted moral norms of behavior. Such children are, if we can put it this way, “principled” offenders, offenders “by conviction,” who see their deeds as manifestations of courage, cunning, and daredevilry. In such cases, the motives for breaking the law revolve around an antisocial, amoral worldview that somehow takes shape in adolescents and impels them to break the law even in those cases where they have no strongly developed need associated with an immediate desire to derive satisfaction.

Finally, there are such children for whom breaking the law is associated with rather severe emotional distress. They steal money and use it for pleasure, but they feel no joy or satisfaction in doing so. They are constantly in an oppressed state of mind, they feel remorse, cry, swear that they will stop engaging in this behavior, but after some time they resume criminal activity.

Research analysis shows that such children have very strong immediate needs that can inhibit their moral tendencies but cannot completely destroy their influence. Therefore, as soon as such children’s immediate needs have been satisfied and their tension has thereby been alleviated, the conditions emerge for the moral impulses of personality to break free and become activated, which is expressed in contrition, the making of corresponding moral decisions, and so on. But time passes and the forbidden needs again build up force—and the process starts all over again: misconduct, emotional distress in the form of contrition, a sense of guilt, vows, and a return to lawbreaking.

As research by Bochkareva and other investigators from our laboratory shows, the same type of analysis can be carried out in relation to many other emotional experiences.

For example, when children are exceptionally easily offended, negative, or aggressive in relation to those around them, in the vast majority of cases they turn out to have some very essential communicative needs that are not
being met or they have had an experience where adults have interfered with
the realization of aspirations that are important to them. In studies of children
marked by strongly expressed affective experiences (research by Slavina), it
was always possible for investigators to find the system of vital relationships
in which particular children had experienced misfortune or to uncover a failure
to achieve something desired. Of course, everything we have introduced here
to illustrate our thinking has been simplified and roughly sketched. Reality is
much more subtle and complex, and in order to untangle individual (or even
typical) features of the experiences and motivational sphere of juvenile offenders
or children who have suffered some impingement of their needs, a much more
multifaceted and detailed analysis is needed. However, even in those simplified
examples it is possible to see a distinct internal connection between the nature
of emotional experience, its content and power, on the one hand, and the system
of needs and motives that this emotional experience reflects on the other.

At the same time, these examples attest as well to the fact that starting with
emotional experiences, we can unravel the entire tangle of needs and impulses
that define this experience and, consequently, the entire tangle of internal and
external circumstances that determines the formation of personality.

As we see, research supports the idea that emotional experience really
does reflect how satisfied a subject is in relation to the surrounding social
environment and thus fulfills an extremely important function: it “informs”
people what their relationship to the environment is and correspondingly
orient their behavior, impelling them to act in such a way as to minimize or
eliminate any discord that may emerge.

Such an understanding of the nature and function of experience can also
be justified theoretically. For Soviet psychology the proposition that the mind
emerged in the process of phylogenetic development as an apparatus that
orients people within their surrounding reality is axiomatic. But if an image,
an idea, a concept is a reflection of the objective world that surrounds us, then
experiences are products of the reflection of our relationship with surrounding
reality. Such a reflection is no less important for preserving human life than
the reflection of reality itself, since specifically this reflection impels people to
act in such a way so as to regulate these interrelationships. It is not by chance,
therefore, that any reflection of objective reality, even the most elementary
sensation, is always colored in a particular sensory tone that determines a
person’s relationship to that reality. Of course, such was the genetically ear-
liest and most elementary function of experience. It must be borne in mind
that experiences, once they have taken place and formed a complex system of
feelings, affects, and moods, begin to take on significance for people in and
of themselves. Children may therefore strive to once again relive something
they experienced previously that became appealing to them. In this case,
experience is transformed from being a means of orientation into a goal in
and of itself and leads to the emergence of new needs—needs for experiences
themselves. But in this regard as well experiences are not the exception. In the
process of development the entire human mind ceases to be a mere apparatus
of orientation and adaptation. Gradually, it takes on independent importance
and is transformed into a special form of its subject’s life.

As we have already stated, any attempt to understand the features of
emotional experiences characteristic of children of a particular age (or of a
particular child) leads to the necessity of analyzing their needs and impulses in
combination with the objective possibilities for satisfying them. However, in
order to carry out such an analysis, it is necessary to turn to certain additional
concepts, without which such psychological analysis cannot be carried out
either on a practical or theoretical level. We refer to the concept of the place
that children occupy within the system of social relationships available to
them and their own internal position in life.

In essence, both these concepts are merely the expression within psychology
of the Marxist tenet that people’s social existence defines their consciousness.

We were required to introduce the concept of children’s place among those
around them and of their internal position in the process of studying individual
children, where we were faced with the task of studying individual features
of their affective relation to reality and determine the conditions influencing
the formation of these features. General philosophical knowledge was not
sufficiently concrete to achieve such a task, and, using this knowledge as a
theoretical basis, it was necessary to develop psychological propositions and
concepts that could be used to discover just how children’s individual existence
conditioned the emergence of individual features of needs and impulses, or,
more broadly speaking, features of their relationship toward reality.

For example, while studying failing schoolchildren it was discovered that
the vast majority of them were performing below their intellectual ability,
since they had developed a negative affective relationship toward learning
and school. In some, this was an aversion to learning itself, in others it was
indifference to their own successes, while for a third group it was a lack of
confidence in themselves and fear of being proved incapable. The nature of
these emotions determined both the behavior of children in school and even
the formation in them of a whole number of personality features that are not
directly tied to learning and school.

Analysis of the conditions under which such an attitude arises revealed that
both the presence of such an attitude and its nature depend first and foremost
on two circumstances: on the extent to which learning actually determines
children’s position among those who surround them and their relationship with
them and the extent to which children are capable of meeting the demands that
learning places on them. For example, if children’s position within the family and in school, the attitude of other children within the family, and children’s own personalities are assessed by those around them based on academic success, and due to insufficient readiness for classroom learning or due to some other reason children are not able to achieve this success, as our laboratory’s research demonstrates, they may have a strong affective reaction to these circumstances and may have a negative attitude toward learning, and sometimes even toward school. If, on the other hand, children enjoy the goodwill and attention of those around them independent of their academic success, due instead to some other quality they may possess, they will often not even strive to do better in school and be perfectly satisfied with the status of mediocre or even poor pupil. Some specific data confirming this proposition are introduced in the study by Slavina, which is specially devoted to the question of the role of the family in forming children’s attitude toward learning and school. This work describes, in particular, a case where in the very same family—that is, in one and the same set of external circumstances—two children formed different attitudes toward learning due to different meanings that the parents assigned academic success for each of them. The same study describes another case where a child who lacked a high level of intellectual development and did not possess sufficiently expressed cognitive interests nevertheless was successful academically, putting tremendous effort into this simply because, living without a father, with a mother and little brother, he occupied a senior position within the family of someone who would have to, with the help of education, support and provide for the family. The work also demonstrates that those children for whom schoolwork was difficult and who had succeeded in occupying a certain position within the family as the result of some other type of activity (e.g., by helping with household chores, looking after younger siblings, etc.), often gave up worrying about their academic success completely and calmly endured the classroom status of poor performer.

All of these analogous facts are easier to understand if we consider that starting school inaugurates a breaking point in children’s lives, characterized first and foremost by the fact that, by becoming schoolchildren, they receive new rights and responsibilities and for the first time enter into a serious, socially significant activity, their level of achievement in which will determine their place among and their relationships with those around them.

Data from our research show that the vast majority of children by the end of preschool age begin to strive toward the new (for them) social position of schoolchild and toward performing the new socially significant activity of learning. In light of these findings it becomes clear why schoolchildren’s attitude toward learning depends primarily on the degree to which learning turns out to be a means for them to realize their striving toward this new social position. It
becomes clear, for example, that in those cases where children who have entered school do not immediately sense a change in their position, that is, if their academic success does not change their relationship with their parents, then in the eyes of these children the position of schoolchild gradually loses value and at the same time the duties of a schoolchild also begin to lose their appeal and the difficult aspects of learning come to the fore. In such cases, many of these children begin to form an indifferent or even negative attitude toward learning. The specific nature of such an attitude depends on how hard it is to achieve academic success, on overall development, on the presence or absence of cognitive interests and, finally and most important, on whether or not children find the embodiment of their strivings toward a new sort of life in some other type of activity.

The system of affective emotional experiences associated with learning and school in some children also becomes clear. After all, learning and those relationships that are built on its foundation are the main content of life and activity at this age. When certain children are for some reason unable to achieve a place for themselves within the system of relationships with those around them through the learning process, the result can be conflict with them and even internal conflict within the child.

Research on undisciplined schoolchildren fully supports the propositions and facts obtained in the study of failing schoolchildren. It has shown that bad behavior very often arises as a form of protest against the attitudes taking shape toward the children exhibiting this behavior, as a reaction to lack of success, and as a means for children to validate themselves among those around them, and sometimes, at older ages, as a means of validating themselves in their own eyes. In our research we often observed that children who are unable to use learning to occupy the position within the collective to which they internally pretend began to “validate” themselves by playing the role of “incorrigible” or a “clown,” and so on. Especially often among undisciplined schoolchildren we encountered pupils who had, for one reason or another, lost the position of good or excellent pupil they had previously attained. For example, in research by T.V. Dragunova, we encounter one adolescent girl who displayed an entire complex of socially negative traits—stubbornness, negativism, a hostile attitude toward others, a know-it-all attitude, and a total disinclination to submit to rules of behavior in school. Analysis of this girl’s life showed that during elementary school she had undeservedly (due to an incorrect attitude toward her on the part of the teacher) held the status of good pupil in the class, but in fifth grade she had lost this status and the entire complex of above traits appeared as a reaction to this loss.

Analysis of our studies of failing and undisciplined schoolchildren reveal that not all environmental effects are equal from the perspective of their influence on development. They comprise a certain system, the center of which is occupied
by effects associated with the position children occupy among the people surrounding them, or rather among those people on whom their emotional well-being immediately depends. In turn, children’s positions are determined by two conditions: first, by the demands of the social environment that have developed historically and are placed on children of a particular age (from this perspective we can talk about the position of the preschooler, the schoolchild, the working adolescent, the dependent, etc.); second, by the demands the people around them place on children based on the individual developmental features of a particular child and on the specific circumstances of the family. Examples include the position of a very young or preschool-aged only child or abandoned child or the position of a gifted schoolchild considered by the family to have a promising future, or, finally, the position of an adolescent who turns out to be the only provider in a family, and so on.

Here complex contradictions might emerge in the objective demands placed on a child. For example, teachers, even in kindergarten, as a rule, see any child first and foremost as a pupil, a schoolchild. Parents might see children first and foremost as a household helper and consider education as something secondary and optional. Finally, there might be a third force at work—the child collective, if it confronts its members with special demands that do not correspond to the demands of teachers and parents. It is worth mentioning here that this third force can be decisive, especially for adolescents, for whom their place within the collective, their relationship with their colleagues, is often of primary importance. All of this creates a very complex situation that must be carefully analyzed and considered in examining the objective circumstances influencing the formation of child personality. And although it becomes difficult to determine a child’s place within the system of objective relationships in cases where there are such conflicting demands, since this position is expressed less clearly, this approach to investigating the child development situation is still just as important.

Vygotsky also essentially considered the place that children occupy within the system of their vitally important relationships when he attempted to understand the specific developmental conditions affecting particular children or to determine the nature of their experience. In the lectures referred to above, he introduces an example from clinical practice that clearly demonstrates the relationship between children’s position within the family, their experience of the family situation, and the significance all this has for the formation of their personality. This case was as follows: there were three children in a family with no father and a mother who suffered periodic episodes of mental illness. Their difficult life situation had completely different effects on each of the children. In particular, while the youngest child experienced delays in mental development, was shy, passive, and timid, the oldest, on the other hand,
manifested signs of early mental maturity, was active, level-headed, caring, and, according to the people around him, was someone you could count on.

Noting these differences, Vygotsky goes on to analyze the specific development situation that has taken shape for each of the children and has given rise to these differences. The youngest child, as Vygotsky indicates, was not able to respond to this situation in any other way than by developing so-called defensive neurotic symptoms, since due to his age-related helplessness he wound up in the position of being forced to passively accept all the negative effects stemming from the difficult circumstances around him. In contrast, the older boy, who was ten when his mother became ill, was thrust into the position of an adult on whom the entire family relied, and he truly did, to the extent possible, care for the younger children during his mother’s illness, and organize the family’s life and household. As Vygotsky put it, a special role was thrust on him and it conditioned the type of development that would be characteristic for this child.

Consequently, although Vygotsky advanced a general thesis that children’s experience and the entire course of their mental development are determined by their level of understanding of the environment, essentially, in order to explain the case he described, he nevertheless analyzed the real position that each of the children occupied within their circumstances and that essentially defined both the experience of each of them and their behavior and the specific features of their development.

It is interesting to note that, in their analysis of particular cases of development, many other psychologists who are by no means theoretically inclined to share the views being expressed here also use as their starting point the examination of the place that children occupy within life and all the associated psychological repercussions. For example, in a work by A.G. Kovalev and V.N. Miasigtsev devoted to the study of character there is a particular example of how the characters of two girls—monozygotic twins—took shape simply because each of them was defined by different places within the family.22 One of the girls started to be considered older, and from early childhood she was called the older sister and was assigned to look after her “younger” sister, take responsibility for her behavior, and was the first to be assigned any sort of task.

“Consequently,” the authors conclude, “the parents different attitudes toward the children defined the difference in their characters even though they lived and were brought up under the same conditions and shared the same innate dispositions, as is the case with monozygotic twins.”23

Although, as can be seen from this conclusion, the authors did not resort to “the social situation of development,” “the child’s place within life” concepts, and so on, limiting themselves to the concept of “attitude,” they essentially examined not only this attitude but the entire situation of each child’s development, that special place that each of them occupied within the family due to the parents attitude
and the activity that they engaged in as a result. After all, it is entirely clear that no attitude in and of itself can define anything in the formation of children’s personality if it does not involve changes to their manner of life, their rights and obligations, the demands they are faced with from those around them, and together with this, their own aspirations, their own intentions and impulses. The authors of this work correctly describe the developmental situation of both children and essentially identified the key aspect—the different positions the sisters occupied within the family, which determined the girls different behavior and the different nature of their activity and relationship with those around them and each other. This is what determined the differences in the formation of their personalities.

A.L. Shnirman, who studied the collective as an essential condition in the formation of schoolchildren’s personality, also concluded that the influence of the collective on an individual personality depends not only on the features of that collective but also on the place the schoolchild occupies within the activity of the collective.24

Thus, both our own research and that of other psychologists attests to the fact that in order to understand the nature of the effect the environment has on children, first and foremost, the place that they occupy within that environment must be examined. Such an examination makes it possible to understand the effects from the environment not as a simple aggregate, but as a specific system.

But while this analysis of the factors in mental development must begin with analysis of the place children occupy within the environment, it must not end there. After all, children at each stage of their individual development already possess certain psychological features that emerged during the preceding developmental period. These features, once they have emerged under the influence of the environment, although they may be internal and intrinsic to their subject, are nevertheless completely real factors in that subject’s development. In fact, if, for example, a schoolchild enters fifth grade and has not mastered those forms of thinking and the elementary knowledge and skills that are essential for the successful mastery of the fifth-grade program, this fact is no less objective and significant for the future success of the child than the fact that he is a fifth grade student and is being confronted with all the demands this entails. Furthermore, research shows that specifically the relationship between external demands and the potential and needs of children themselves are key to determining their subsequent development.

However, internal factors, like external ones, are not equivalent in terms of the influence they exert on children’s behavior and on the subsequent course of their mental development. Like external factors, they represent a system that we denote using the concept “internal position” of the child. Internal position is formed based on how children—as determined by their preceding
experience, their opportunities, the needs and impulses that emerged in them in the past—feel about the objective position that they occupy in life at the present moment and the position they want to occupy. Specifically, this internal position conditions the structure of their attitude toward reality, toward those around them, and toward themselves. Additionally, every moment, the effects coming from the environment are refracted through this internal position.

Research into the individual features of development in individual children reveals that whatever influences the environment might exert on children, whatever demands it might place on them, until these demands enter the structure of children’s own needs, they will not serve as true factors in their development; the need to carry out a particular demand made by the environment emerges in children only if fulfilling it not only ensures the corresponding objective position among those around them but also provides an opportunity to occupy the position to which they themselves strive, that is, if it satisfies their internal position.

The discord between the demands being placed on children and their own needs and impulses was particularly pronounced in research we conducted on first-graders who were not ready for classroom learning. In these cases, the position that children occupied once they entered school objectively diverged from their own internal attitude toward things, from their behavior and the needs and impulses that had conditioned the history of their development up to that point. While objectively they were schoolchildren, such children internally remained preschoolers: they did not perceive learning as a serious socially significant business, and they continued to relate to it as if it were a game and casually ignored the demands of the teacher, failed to attribute particular significance to this, and violated the rules of classroom behavior. In these cases, the demands that life was placing on the children, which conflicted with their own impulses and needs, were not able to incite in them the necessary behavior and were not able, consequently, to steer their subsequent mental development in the right direction.

We observed an analogous contradiction, but in other children under different conditions, in a boarding school, where our attention was attracted by the fact that in some children we started to see a tendency to do many things surreptitiously, to conduct themselves differently in front of teachers than they did in their absence. After analyzing this phenomenon we became convinced that it was prompted by a certain relationship between the internal and external factors influencing children. These children had come to the boarding school from very difficult circumstances and therefore cared a great deal about the boarding school and their position within it. However the boarding school immediately placed stringent demands on them, as it did on the other children: demands for discipline, a neat appearance, assiduity, and so on. The children,
however, were unable to fulfill these demands since their previous family life had not prepared them for it. As a reaction to this situation, the children began to exhibit the aforementioned negative behaviors. Furthermore, the nature and content of these behaviors—hypocrisy, sycophancy, dishonesty, and the like—corresponded to the need for them to maintain their place within the boarding school, but not the demands being placed on them by the adults—the demand that they be hardworking, organized, neat, and so on. All this reveals that in order to understand just how particular new traits form in children, a distinction must be drawn between the objective position children occupy in life and their own “internal position,” that is, how they themselves—due to the history of their development, which has given them a particular experience and particular traits—feel about everything around them and, first and foremost, about their position and the demands that it makes of them. Analysis of children’s objective position gives us an opportunity to understand the system of demands that the environment makes of them, while study of “internal position” allows us to understand the system of their own needs and impulses. Our research showed that in those cases where it was possible to understand children’s internal position, not only their attitude toward any given phenomenon became clear, but the system of their attitudes toward reality was revealed. At the same time, an attempt during the research process to restructure children’s attitudes toward what was for them the central phenomenon of reality revealed the impossibility of doing so without changing their internal position. We became convinced that children’s entire system of emotional experiences and their subsequent mental development depend on the nature of this position and how it relates to their external position and their real opportunities.

In summary, we can draw the following conclusion: research by our laboratory has established that the formation of children’s personality is determined by the relationship between the place that they occupy within the system of human relationships available to them (and, consequently, the corresponding demands placed on them) and the psychological features that have formed in them as a result of their previous experience. It is out of this relationship that children’s internal position emerges, that is, the system of their needs and impulses (subjectively represented by the emotional experiences that correspond to them) that, refracting and mediating the effects of the environment, become the immediate force driving the development of new mental qualities in them.

These propositions are helpful in understanding not only the conditions under which individual personality features form in children but also the force that drives children’s age-related development and the reasons for features typical of the psychological profile for a particular age. We will attempt to argue this proposition further by characterizing the psychological features of very young children.

The first attempt to explain the distinctiveness of age-related characteristics in children through the place that they objectively occupy within the system
of human relationships at different developmental stages was made by A.N Leontiev. In characterizing certain features of preschool children he wrote:

If we look closely at all the features possessed by preschoolers, it is not hard to discover the common foundation that links them. This is children’s real position from which the world of human relationships opens up before them, the position that is conditioned by the objective place they occupy within these relationships.26

According to Leontiev, the objective place that children of preschool age occupy is primarily determined by the fact that all their main needs in life are satisfied by adults. Leontiev goes on to say:

But if it should happen that the child restructures the main relationships in life, if, for example, he winds up with a little sister in his arms and his mother talks to him as her helper, a participant in adult life, then the entire world will open up before him in a new light. It will not be a problem that he still does not know much, does not understand much: he will all the sooner rethink that which he knows, all the sooner his general mental outlook will change.27

In stating these propositions and thereby repudiating the mechanistic and intellectualistic understanding of child development, Leontiev was nevertheless not entirely consistent in the subsequent development and concretization of these general propositions. He continues:

Thus a change in the place occupied by a child within the system of social relationships is that first thing that must be noted in any attempt to address the question of the forces driving his mental development. However, in and of itself this place will not, of course, determine development: it only characterizes the present, already attained stage. That which immediately determines the development of the child’s mind is his own life, the development of the child’s activity, both external and internal. And its development, in turn, depends on the life conditions that are present.

So in studying the development of the child’s mind, our starting point must be analysis of the development of his activity, since it comes together in the specific conditions of his life. Only given such an approach can the role both of the external conditions of the child’s life and of the disposition that he possesses be discovered.28

It seems to us that there is some haziness here in the main relationships that must be considered in order to understand the forces that drive children’s mental development. After all, the place that children occupy in life, the position from which, as Leontiev puts it, the surrounding activity and world of human relations open up before them, is that social situation of development in which the external and internal conditions are merged in a complex unity and on
the features of which will depend both children’s activity and their behavior and, consequently, the entire course of the formation of their personality. From this perspective it is difficult to understand Leontiev’s statement that the place occupied by the child in life only characterizes the present, already attained stage, and that child development is determined by “life itself,” that is, their real activity.

It seems to us that Leontiev is correct in underscoring the thought that the forces that drive development have a dynamic nature and are tied with subjects’ activity, that is, with the means by which they interact with the environment. But the concept of activity cannot be divorced from the concept of position, since activity itself determines children’s position within the environment and is only a means for satisfying the needs associated with this position.

It is significant that Leontiev identified play as a leading activity for preschool-age children and learning as a leading activity for school-age children. Both these activities are immediately associated with and determined by the position in life that is characteristic of children at these ages.

Furthermore, research conducted by our laboratory (which we will be discussing further) has established that different qualities, different mental properties, can form in the process of one and the same activity, since children assimilate from surrounding reality and from their own activity only what corresponds to their needs.

So we can agree with Leontiev that, of course, mental development is carried out in the process of children’s life and activity, but this is too general a proposition. The social situation of development specific to each developmental stage has to be understood, and this means determining the place within the system of social relationships that children of a given age occupy, the demands that society places on them in association with this, and the rights and responsibilities that are associated with this. But in order to understand the social situation of development, it is also necessary to keep in mind what children bring to this developmental stage, what possibilities and needs they bring to it from the preceding period that have relevance to this stage of development. Consequently, we must analyze both external and internal developmental factors in their unity and interdependence, since only by taking into account this unity can we understand the structure of children’s impulses and needs, a structure that must be understood because the process of satisfying these impulses and needs determines children’s development during a given developmental period.

It was in this context that Vygotsky identified the concept of “experience” as a “unit” of psychological analysis and Leontiev identified the concept of “position.” However it seems to us that Leontiev does himself a disservice when in his subsequent reasoning (and research) he discards the concept of “position”
and returns to the much more general and psychologically indistinct concept of “life itself,” “real processes of life,” and “child activity.”

Notes

1. See, for example, the collection Obuchenie i razvitie (Moscow: Prosveshchennie, 1966).


5. See, for example, the monograph on child and pedagogical psychology by American psychologists Mussen, Conger, and Kagan that is typical in this regard (P.H. Mussen, J.J. Conger, and J. Kagan, Child Development and Personality [New York: Harper & Row, 1974]). This book has been through six editions (the last of which was in 1964) and serves as the main textbook in U.S. colleges.

6. Vygotsky’s views on the age-related development of schoolchildren, like many of his other ideas concerning child development, are spelled out not only in his published works but also his unpublished lectures, which were delivered by him (and stenographically recorded) at MGU-2 in 1934.


8. The use of the word “affective” (“affective relationship,” “affective experience,” “affective behavior,” etc.) has a somewhat different meaning in our book than it does in the psychology textbook edited by A.A. Smirnov et al. (Psikhologiia: Uchebnik dlia pedagogicheskikh institutov [Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1956]) and in pedagogical, psychological, and criminological literature. In referring to an affective state, we have in mind not simply intense emotion triggered by some very strong external effect; in such cases affect is manifested in the form of strong emotional outbursts accompanied by clouded consciousness, weakened will, and the loss of control over one’s actions. We view affective states as long-term, profound emotional experiences that are directly associated with active needs and strivings that are of vital importance to the subject. In this sense, all people have more or less intense affective lives; otherwise, they would turn into passive and indifferent creatures. If conflicting, incompatible affective tendencies should arise within a subject simultaneously, one of them must be “suppressed,” which, as a rule, leads to inappropriate reactions by the subject (we follow M.S. Neimark’s example in denoting these affective states as “inappropriate affect”) or even to mental illness. In the contemporary literature, many psychologists—Vygotsky, Rubinshtein, Lewin, Kurt Koffka, and others—use the concept of affect in this sense.

9. U. Mak-Daugoll [W. McDougall], Osnovnye problemy sotsial’noi psikhologii (Moscow, 1916).

10. L. Morgan, Privychka i instinkt (St. Petersburg, 1899).
15. Slavina, *Deti s affektivnym povedeniem*.
16. It seems to us that this understanding of the psychological nature of emotional experience paves the way for psychological analysis of feelings and emotions themselves. After all, up to now, the psychological nature of emotions was treated, as a rule, descriptively, and the only thing that was studied was the dynamic aspect of emotions and those physiological and biochemical processes that underlie them. It strikes us that now the possibility of characterizing emotions more thoroughly presents itself, of uncovering their sources, the reasons they emerge, the psychological mechanisms that generate qualitative distinctions between emotional states, as well as individual features of particular emotions within different people.
27. Ibid., p. 499.