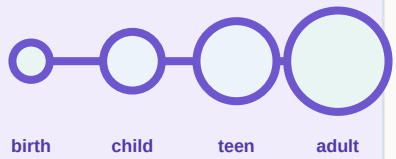
AP PSYCHOLOGY | UNIT 3

TOPIC 3.1

Themes and Methods in Developmental Psychology

Developmental psychology asks what changes, what stays stable, and how researchers can study growth across time.



change across the lifespan

THREE QUESTIONS, ONE LIFESPAN

STABILITY
what remains?

INFLUENCE
nature + nurture

PATTERN
gradual or stages?

BY THE END, YOU SHOULD BE ABLE TO...

1. Explain stability and change, nature and nurture, and developmental patterns.
2. Distinguish continuous development from stage-like development.
3. Compare cross-sectional and longitudinal research designs.

BIG IDEA

Development is not a simple march of age. Biology, experience, history, and the research design all shape what psychologists observe.

1 Three enduring developmental themes

The strongest explanations treat these as questions to investigate, not all-or-nothing choices.

STABILITY AND CHANGE

STABLE — CHANGE

A characteristic may show continuity while still changing with age, experience, or context.

NATURE AND NURTURE

NATURE

Genes, maturation, hormones, and other biological influences.

NURTURE

Learning, culture, relationships, resources, and lived experience.

INTERACTION

CONTINUOUS OR DISCONTINUOUS?

CONTINUOUS



gradual change

DISCONTINUOUS



stage-like shifts

AVOID FALSE EITHER/OR ANSWERS

A developmental process can reflect both heredity and environment, and it can contain both gradual growth and meaningful transitions.

2

Two ways to study age and change

Research design determines who is compared, how long the study takes, and which conclusions are strongest.

CROSS-SECTIONAL VS. LONGITUDINAL

CROSS-SECTIONAL

Different age groups are measured at one point in time.



FAST risk: cohort effects

LONGITUDINAL

The same people are measured repeatedly across time.



CHANGE WITHIN PEOPLE

LIMITATIONS TO WATCH

COHORT EFFECT

Groups may differ because of shared historical experiences, not age alone.

PARTICIPANT DROPOUT

People may leave a long study, making the final sample less representative.

CHOOSE THE DESIGN THAT FITS THE QUESTION

Need a quick age-group comparison? Use cross-sectional. Need evidence of how the same people change? Use longitudinal.

READ EVERY STUDY IN THIS ORDER

Who was measured? When? Was it the same people? Could history or dropout explain the pattern?