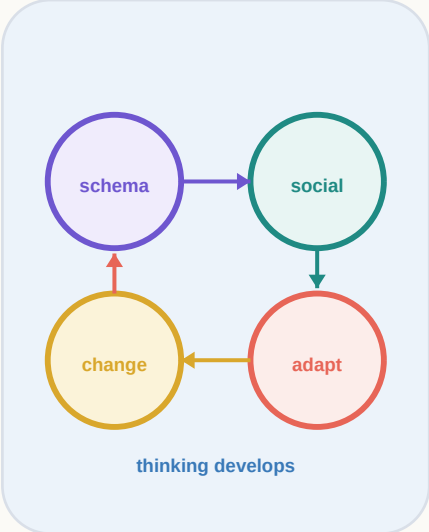
AP PSYCHOLOGY | UNIT 3

TOPIC 3.4

Cognitive Development Across the Lifespan

Thinking develops through changing mental structures, social support, experience, and age-related cognitive patterns.



THREE LENSES ON COGNITIVE CHANGE

PIAGET
schemas + stages

VYGOTSKY
culture + support

ADULTHOOD
abilities change

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

1. Explain schemas, assimilation, accommodation, and Piaget's stages.
2. Apply scaffolding and the zone of proximal development.
3. Compare fluid and crystallized intelligence in adulthood.

BIG IDEA

Developmental theories are tools for explaining patterns, not rigid labels that make every person develop identically.

1 Piaget: building and reorganizing thought

Children actively construct schemas, adapting them as new information and abilities emerge.

SCHEMA ADAPTATION

SCHEMA → **ASSIMILATION** → **ACCOMMODATION**

- SCHEMA: mental framework
- ASSIMILATION: fit information into it
- ACCOMMODATION: change it when needed

FOUR STAGES AND THEIR SIGNATURE TASKS

SENSORIMOTOR	PREOPERATIONAL	CONCRETE OPERATIONAL	FORMAL OPERATIONAL
Object permanence	**Symbols + pretend play**	**Logical concrete thought**	**Abstract reasoning**
objects exist when unseen	limits: conservation, reversibility, perspective	conservation and reversible operations	hypothetical and systematic thought

RELATED CONCEPTS Egocentrism: difficulty taking another perspective. Animism: attributing life to nonliving things. Theory of mind: understanding others have thoughts and beliefs.

USE STAGES CAREFULLY

A child may perform differently across tasks and contexts. Stage labels summarize patterns rather than exact clocks.

2 Vygotsky and cognition in adulthood

Cognitive growth continues through guided participation, accumulated knowledge, new problem-solving, and aging.

VYGOTSKY: LEARNING IS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL

ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

Tasks a learner cannot yet do alone but can complete with effective help.

SCAFFOLDING

Temporary hints, models, or prompts that are reduced as competence grows.

SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT Language, cultural tools, guidance, and social interaction shape what and how people learn.

ADULT COGNITIVE PATTERNS

CRYSTALLIZED INTELLIGENCE

Accumulated knowledge and practiced skills; often relatively stable.

FLUID INTELLIGENCE

Novel problem-solving and flexible reasoning; often declines with age.

DEMENTIA A disorder involving cognitive decline that interferes with functioning; it is not synonymous with typical aging.

COMPARE THE THEORIES

Piaget emphasizes changing cognitive structures and stages. Vygotsky emphasizes guided social learning and culture. Lifespan research shows abilities can follow different paths in adulthood.