

# How Engaging Are You? A Review of Teaching Methods to Engage Students in Child and Adolescent Psychology Courses

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Is student engagement really that important? According to Rumberger (2004), when students are disengaged, they have significantly higher rates of quitting school. Conversely, when students are engaged, they have higher retention rates, enjoy learning, transfer what they learn, and have a deeper conceptual understanding (Dowson & McInerney 2001; Hancock & Betts 2002; Lumsden 1994; Voke 2002). Despite the fact that research demonstrates the importance of engagement, professors continue to employ teaching strategies that lead students to become bored and disenchanted with the course.

Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to assist educators in improving classroom instruction by reviewing and synthesizing past research on ways to engage students in child and adolescent psychology courses.

We reviewed over 80 published pedagogical articles on child or adolescent psychology. From this list, we chose 16 exemplary articles to annotate. We provided a table summarizing these articles and an additional 10 other articles that we deemed noteworthy (see Table 1). Finally, we provided a critique of past research and suggestions for future research.

**Table 1. Summary of Articles on Engaging Students in Child and Adolescent Psychology Courses**

Activity Type & Article	Developmental Period	Developmental Area	Method Assessed	Materials Provided
<b>Observations</b>				
*Balch (1986)	Child	Cognitive	Inferential	Yes
*Clements (1995)	All	All	Inferential	Yes
McManus (1986a)	Adolescence	All	Inferential	Yes
*Ormrod & Carter (1985)	All	Cognitive	No	Yes
*Poole (1986)	Infancy	Language	No	Yes
Vacha-Haase (1996)	Infancy/Child	All	No	Yes
<b>Role-Playing</b>				
Dollinger & Brown (1979)	Child/Adolescence	Social/Emotional	Descriptive	Yes
Hamill & Hale (1996)	All	All	No	Yes
<b>Experiential Learning</b>				
Harper (1979)	Infancy/Child	Cognitive	No	Yes
Katz (1996)	Child/Adolescence	All	No	Yes
McManus (1986b)	Adolescence	All	No	Yes
*Neysmith-Roy (1994)	Infancy/Child	All	Descriptive	Yes
Nigro (1994)	Infancy/Child	All	No	Yes
<b>Films</b>				
*Desforges (1994)	Adolescence	All	No	No
Isbell et al.(2007)	All	Cognitive	Inferential	No
*Kirsh (1998)	Child/Adolescence	Social/Emotional	Descriptive	No
Shapiro (1995)	All	Cognitive/Social	No	Yes
Sy et al. (2005)	Infancy	Social/Emotional	Descriptive	No
Ward (1985)	Adolescence	Social/Emotional	No	Yes
<b>Discussion &amp; Debate</b>				
Bryan (1988)	All	All	Descriptive	Yes
Moeller (1985)	Infancy/Child	All	No	Yes
<b>Writing</b>				
Boyatzis (1992)	All	All	Descriptive	No
*Cabe et al. (2000)	All	All	Descriptive	No
Charlesworth & Slate (1986)	Adolescence	All	Inferential	Yes
*Junn (1989)	All	All	Descriptive	Yes
*Mayo (2004)	All	All	Inferential	Yes

Note. "All" in the category of developmental period denotes infancy, child, and adolescence. "All" in the category of developmental area denotes social/emotional, cognitive, physical/biological, and language development. (\*) denotes articles that were not fully annotated.

## Annotated Engagement Articles

As indicated previously, there are dozens of published examples of methods to engage students in child and adolescent psychology courses. For this review, we focused on the 16 most engaging and meaningful activities. These articles represent seven different general ways to engage students: observation, role-playing, experiential learning, films, discussions and debates, and writing assignments.

### **Engagement by Observing**

Course material is illuminated, clarified, and strengthened when students can observe children and adolescents demonstrating developmental concepts. For example, students can be brought into the classroom in the form of a panel (e.g., Vacha-Haase, 1996), or students can also be asked to make their observations outside of the classroom and document those experiences (see Balch, 1986; Clements, 1995; McManus, 1986a, 1986b; Ormrod & Carter, 1985; Poole, 1986). Below are two exemplary articles incorporating observation in a child or adolescent psychology class.

#### **Semester-long observation of adolescents.**

McManus (1986a) created an assignment that asked college students to develop a relationship with an adolescent through weekly out-of-class activities. The instructor recruited adolescent volunteers through local schools. Adolescents who wanted to volunteer filled out a card with their contact information. College students then called them and set up a time to meet the adolescents and their parents at their home. Students obtained written informed-consent from each adolescent's parents and from the adolescent during the first meeting. Throughout the semester, the college students kept a journal that described their observations and impressions of the adolescent and how the adolescent reflected developmental themes learned in the class. Qualitatively, students reported increased motivation for learning and that the exercise helped to make abstract course concepts more concrete.

- McManus, J. L. (1986a). "Live" case study/journal record in adolescent psychology. *Teaching of Psychology*, 13, 70-74.

**In-class child panel.** Four times during the semester, Vacha-Haase (1996) brought in four to five children from the age group discussed in class to give concrete examples of theoretical course concepts. Mothers and fathers of the children, if the children were young, or the children themselves, if the children were older, brought toys, drawings, or clothing to class, to demonstrate the particular stage of development the children were in. Vacha-Haase

gave examples of topics that parents of panel members could discuss for each age group and activities that the children could demonstrate for each age group. After each panel, students wrote a paper relating their classroom observations to information learned in class. Although not empirically assessed, the instructor anecdotally reported students were better able to relate course concepts to real life examples.

- Vacha-Haase, T. (1996). A child panel to facilitate the instruction of child development. *Teaching of Psychology*, 23, 170-171.

### **Engagement Through Role-Playing**

Finding children and adolescents to observe can sometimes be challenging. Some of the challenges include difficulty knowing and/or recruiting appropriately aged children and dealing with the social desirability effect; children in the classroom often behave differently when 20-75 strangers are looking at them than they might normally. One way to address this issue is to have students role-play in class as children. These two articles demonstrate different ways to role-play in a child and adolescent psychology course.

#### **Simulated parent/child interaction to teach discipline techniques.**

Dollinger and Brown's (1979) descriptive study demonstrated a parent/child interaction illustrating varying discipline techniques and goodness-of-fit between parent's style and children's temperament. The instructor put students into groups of three to role-play as parent, child, and observer. There were four different types of parent-child dyads: parent (tolerant)-child (good), parent (intolerant)-child (egocentric), parent (tolerant)-child (egocentric), parent (intolerant)-child (good). A 5-10 minute role-playing session ensued where the child asked for a toy and the parent had to say no. Depending on their directions, the "parents" then role-played as tolerant or not and then "children" were role-played as good or egocentric. The student observer then interviewed the "parent" and "child," and then independently presented the results during the next class period. Students found the activity to be engaging and fun and had very favorable ratings. On a Likert scale question, 45% of students rated this activity "very useful," and, an additional 23% rated the activity "mildly useful."

- Dollinger, S. J., & Brown, D. F. (1979). Simulated parent-child interaction in an undergraduate child psychology course. *Teaching of Psychology*, 6, 180-181.

**Role-playing as children.** In another role-playing activity, Hamill and Hale (1996) assigned students to a fictitious "lot in life" (e.g., "your 8-year-old son has been diagnosed with ADHD" p. 245).

Students randomly choose their “lot in life” by blindly choosing a “lot” out of a box with many possible options prepared by the instructor. The author of this article did not supply a list of “lots in life.” Students wrote a paper based on empirical research about the student’s “lot in life.” Students then contacted two agencies in the community that provided services which would assist the assigned “lot in life.” Afterward the students wrote a term paper and presented a poster on how the community services could assist the child in developing. The authors suggested that the “lot in life” activity promoted critical thinking and presentation skills; however, they did not support these claims empirically.

- Hamill, S. B., & Hale, C. (1996). Your lot in life. *Teaching of Psychology, 23*, 245- 246.

### **Engaging Experiential Learning Activities**

Experiential learning activities can make difficult developmental concepts more concrete and promote conceptual understanding. These three annotated articles reveal different ways to personally involve students in course material through experiential learning activities.

#### **Experiencing assimilation & accommodation.**

Harper (1979) used familiar and novel examples to teach the Piagetian concepts of assimilation and accommodation. Students were given a lollipop and encouraged to demonstrate differing methods of eating it and how they may transfer those eating methods to other foods (i.e., assimilation). Then, students learned about a *gloquex* which was an invisible object that they have never seen before (i.e., accommodation). They were allowed to ask several questions about the *gloquex* in an attempt to define the object. Following the two experiences, students completed a test to assess their understanding. Without empirical evidence, the author reports that students remembered far more about the lollipop than the *gloquex* — demonstrating that it is much easier to assimilate knowledge than accommodate it.

- Harper, G. F. (1979). Introducing Piagetian concepts through the use of familiar and novel illustrations. *Teaching of Psychology, 6*, 58-59.

**Essay exchange with children to illuminate developmental topics.** Katz (1996) had students in a child development class exchange letters with a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class to illustrate different developmental concepts. The students first developed questions in class through group discussion (e.g., “When you get angry, what do you do?” p. 113). Next, students predicted the possible responses the children would have to their questions. The questions were then sent to a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class and read out loud. The 4<sup>th</sup> graders then brainstormed on how to answer the questions

and wrote back to the child development class. After receiving responses from the 4<sup>th</sup> graders, the college students discussed the 4<sup>th</sup> graders’ answers and wrote essays about how the activity helped them to understand the corresponding developmental concepts. A qualitative assessment found students reported this activity as enjoyable, fun, and interesting.

- Katz, L. (1996). Essay exchange with children: An exercise for the child development class. *Teaching of Psychology, 23*, 112-115.

#### **Students create case studies in adolescent psychology.**

McManus (1986b) described how to use a modified case study to teach theoretical concepts in adolescent psychology. During class time, small groups created a hypothetical case study that presented a common dilemma in adolescence (e.g., drug use). They generated potential solutions to the dilemma and ranked solutions from most to least effective. Each group then identified a target group to interview individuals about the dilemma. Out of class, each group interviewed 1-2 participants from the target group, described the case study (i.e., dilemma), and asked adolescents to rate the group’s solutions to the dilemma. Number of students interviewed and method of rating solutions was not specified by the instructor. During the next class period each group discussed their findings and wrote an out-of-class summary accordingly. Finally, each group presented their case study and results to the entire class. A qualitative assessment revealed that students enjoyed the activity and that it helped illuminate concepts in adolescent development.

- McManus, J. L. (1986b). Student composed case study in adolescent psychology. *Teaching of Psychology, 13*, 92-93.

#### **Creating games to experience development.**

Nigro (1994) created an assignment that asked students to create an original game for children. The assignment required students to write a paper that described the rules of the game, the target age group of the game, and why the game was developmentally appropriate for the given age group. The author provided examples of games students created and suggestions on how to modify the assignment to engage students even more. Anecdotally, the author reported that students were enthusiastic about the assignment.

- Nigro, G. N. (1994). Create-a-children's game: An exercise for developmental psychology classes. *Teaching of Psychology, 21*, 243-245.

### **Engagement through Films**

Using films in class can act as a springboard for engaging students in higher-level thinking of course material (e.g., Desforges, 1994; Kirsh, 1998). We

identified four articles that best demonstrate ways to encourage class engagement via film.

**Video use to experience schematic processing.**

In this experimental study, Isbell, Tyler, and Burns (2007) investigated the effects of priming and the use of a video to demonstrate schematic processing. Isbell et al. informed half of the students that the baby in the video was a boy and the other half that it was a girl. They then watched a 30 second video of the baby and rated the degree to which the baby would grow up to possess certain stereotypical gender traits. In the following class period, students discussed the results of the experiment and how their gender schema influenced their rating of the baby. Isbell et al. found that students who engaged in the video activity had significantly greater schematic knowledge than the control group and rated the activity as useful, interesting, helpful, and enjoyable.

- Isbell, L. M., Tyler, J. M., & Burns, K. C. (2007). An activity to teach students about schematic processing. *Teaching of Psychology, 34*, 241-244.

**C-SPAN and moral development.** Shapiro (1995) described an activity in which students categorized the stage of moral development politicians based their congressional debates as seen on C-SPAN. Suggested topics include debates on abortion rights, gun control, or military intervention. Students viewed short video clips that represented each of the six stages of moral development. Students then identified the stage of moral development each politician was in and discussed their answers with the entire class. Then, students defended their categorizations by citing specific examples of behavior that represent that stage of moral development. This activity could range from 15 minutes to a full class period. Although not empirically assessed, the author posited that students understanding of moral development increased from this activity.

- Shapiro, J. K. (1995). Dr. Kohlberg goes to Washington: Using congressional debates to teach moral development. *Teaching of Psychology, 22*, 245-247.

**Using videos to stimulate critical thinking on attachment parenting.** In this situated learning activity, Sy, Brown, Amsterlaw, and Myers (2005) focused on how to apply developmental concepts (e.g., attachment and parenting) and create a hypothetical research study. Students watched a 13 minute video on attachment parenting and then spent 10 minutes discussing attachment parenting as a class. As a result of their discussion, students (in small groups) designed a hypothetical research study that would help to empirically investigate some of

their questions about attachment parenting. Lastly, students gave a short presentation on their proposed study. Both qualitative and quantitative data indicated that students enjoyed the activity and deemed it to be useful and interesting and meaningful. One third of students reported the activity helped them conceptualize course material, and an additional 65% of them reported the activity helped them to develop testable research projects.

- Sy, S. Brown, E., Amsterlaw, J., & Myers, J. (2005). Attachment parenting: A media activity for developmental psychology research methods. *Psychology Learning and Teaching, 4*, 112-116.

**Analyzing media targeted toward adolescents.**

Ward (1985) assigned students to objectively analyze messages found in media targeted towards adolescents. Student groups picked a topic in adolescence that the media emphasizes (e.g., weight loss, beauty, sexuality), picked the type of media to be analyzed, and created a set of objective criteria to use to code data. The instructor met with each student (or group of students) to make sure that students were on track before collecting their data; some issues to look out for are the relevance of the media being examined and how the media will be operationally defined (Ward, 1985). Students then summarized their findings and presented them to the class. The authors did not assess this activity.

- Ward, T. B. (1985). The media project: Enhancing student interest in the psychology of adolescence. *Teaching of Psychology, 12*, 87-89.

**Engagement through Discussion and Debate**

Classroom discussions are a great way for students to apply theoretical course material to real life situations. Here we present two articles that provide good discussion and debate topics.

**Everyday discussion points about developmental psychology.** Bryan (1988) presented a detailed description of how to use seven different discussion topics that show practical applications of course material. Each discussion topic was an everyday situation (e.g., a working mother worries about the impact of returning to work on her daughter's attachment) and required students to apply course material to come up with possible solutions to the situation. In addition, discussion topics ran through the gamut of developmental periods (i.e., infancy through early adulthood). Bryan suggests that the discussions provide a basis for engagement. The author did not report any indicators of student enjoyment or learning outcomes.

- Bryan, A. J. (1988). Discussion topics for developmental psychology. *Teaching of Psychology, 15*, 42-44.

**Debates in developmental psychology.** Moeller (1985) suggests that debates can be an effective tool to engage students in developmental psychology courses. Moeller asked students to debate controversial issues in child and adolescent psychology (e.g., What causes sex differences, nature or nurture?). Moeller provided instructions on how to implement the formal debate and grading policies. Descriptive data suggested that students found the activity to be meaningful and valuable.

- Moeller, T. G. (1985). Using classroom debates in teaching developmental psychology. *Teaching of Psychology, 12*, 207-209.

### **Engagement in Writing**

Students become engaged with course material through innovative and fun writing assignments that can be completed either in or out of class. Writing assignments vary from writing letters to children or parents (e.g., Junn, 1989; Charlesworth & Slate, 1986) to applying course material by analyzing a newspaper advice column or books (e.g., Boyatzis, 1992; Cabe, Walker, & Williams, 2000) or through the use of a repertory grid to compare developmental theories (e.g., Mayo, 2004).

**Writing about puberty: A letter to your future child.** Charlesworth and Slate (1986) discussed how to use an in-class letter writing task to elicit small group discussions on what pre-teens should know about puberty. Specifically, he asked graduate students and undergraduate students, in groups of four to six, to write one letter to their hypothetical son or daughter describing the physical and psychological changes that would happen to them during puberty. Students worked on this project during class for either 75 minutes (undergraduate class) or 105-minutes (graduate class). The anonymous letters were read aloud in class and then critiqued by peers and the instructor. Repeated Measures ANOVA found a significant difference between pre and post-test scores measuring knowledge of physical and psychological experiences during puberty.

- Charlesworth, J. R., Jr., & Slate, J. R. (1986). Teaching about puberty: Learning to talk about sensitive topics. *Teaching of Psychology, 13*, 215-217.

**Engaging writing analysis.** Boyatzis (1992) assigned students to read *I know why the caged bird sings* and used course material to analyze the book. This book follows Maya Angelou's development from a young girl to a young adult and echoes many developmental themes found in a child and adolescent psychology course (e.g., development of self-concept and self-esteem, parenting styles, and puberty). In a group setting, the students discussed

“how Angelou's childhood experiences exemplify two or three aspects of topics of development” (p. 221). Students used course material to support their paper. Boyatzis stated this assignment worked best as a final paper to help integrate material throughout the course. When asked how much educational value this assignment had, 90% of students rated this assignment as having either excellent or very good educational value.

- Boyatzis, C. J. (1992). Let the caged bird sing: Using literature to teach developmental psychology. *Teaching of Psychology, 19*, 221-222.

### **Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research**

When reviewing these articles, we found several improvements that could be made. First, over 60% of the articles contained no data to support the efficacy of the classroom activities. This is largely due to the period in which these articles were published. Nonetheless, we encourage future researchers to primarily conduct quantitative inferential studies and minimize the use of introspection and qualitative analysis. Second, we found that 70% of the articles focused on out-of-class activities rather than how to engage students in class. Third, over 85% of the articles were on cognitive and social developmental issues; more activities should focus on biological/motor/physical development. There is a growing need to teach brain research and other biological topics in child and adolescent development (Zambo & Zambo, 2009). Finally, there is an apparent lack of *current* research in this area. Forty-six percent of the articles reviewed were at least two decades old (which likely contributed to the lack of quantitative data); whereas only 15% of the articles were published in the last 10 years. Future research should continue to investigate activities that encourage student engagement.

To fully appreciate the development of children and adolescents, one needs to observe, interact, and analyze children and adolescent's behaviors and cognitions. One common challenge in teaching these courses is the difficulty in gaining access to children and adolescents to observe, considering the logistical and ethical constraints associated with this task. Throughout this chapter, we have tried to provide a number of different methods to achieve this goal. Specifically, students can observe children and adolescents through films, self-made videos, every day media, and in and out-of-class observations. Students can also simulate parent-child interactions, schematic processing of children, and other Piagetian

theoretical concepts. In addition to observing children and adolescents, students benefit greatly from engaging discussions and debates about current developmental issues.

As the esteemed Howard Gardner once said: "You learn at your best when you have something you care about and can get pleasure in being engaged in" (Hammonds, 2010, paragraph 10). It is our hope that these 16 annotated articles provide instructors some of the necessary tools to engage their students.

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