Psychologists study children for two main reasons. First, they want to find out how a helpless, naïve and totally dependent baby manages in due course to become a competent, knowledgeable adult. They are interested therefore in studying the process of development. The second reason stems from the many social problems associated with childhood. Should we protect children from viewing violence on television? Are children of mothers who go out to work more likely to become delinquent? Does hospitalization in the early years produce later difficulties? How can one mitigate the effects of divorce on children? Why do some parents become baby batterers? Increasingly the psychologist is asked to examine such problems and produce answers useful to society. It is primarily to this aspect of child psychology that we pay attention here.

The child's socialization

How children develop depends very much on the people around them. From them the child learns the skills and values needed for social living, from the use of knives and forks to knowing the difference between right and wrong. Other people are always around the child, being of influence by means of example and command, and none more so at first than the members of the immediate family. On them depend the initial stages of socialization.

Disadvantaged children and their families

It is, of course, only too apparent that not every family carries out its socializing task with equal effectiveness. By way of illustration, let us look at the way in which intellectual development is shaped by the child's social environment.

At one time it was thought that intelligence is entirely determined by an individual's inborn endowment. There are few who now believe this: it seems rather that the environment in which a child is reared can have a powerful effect on development.

The issue has been much debated in relation to the poor educational achievement of 'disadvantaged' children. These are children who come from the economically and socially most deprived sectors of the community and who so often appear to be at a severe disadvantage when first starting
Social development in early childhood

school, because (as it has been put) 'they have learnt not to learn'. Their failure in the education system, in other words, is ascribed not so much to some genetic inferiority as to factors operating in the home, which result in an inability to make use of whatever intellectual capacities they have.

A great many schemes have been launched to counter this situation, especially in the USA. Some of the earlier efforts, designed to give children some extra training in basic cognitive skills before school entry, were clearly inadequate and produced no lasting benefits. This is partly because the schemes were too brief, partly because they came too late in the child's life, but partly also because they left untouched the home situation. Given a conflict of values about education between home and school it is highly likely that the home will always win. It is there that the child has already lived and learnt for several years before ever starting school, and it is therefore significant that more recent efforts have attempted to involve the parents as well as the child or even to work solely through the parents.

There is now little doubt that parents can enhance or suppress the child's educational potential. One way in which they apparently do this is by the extent to which they foster the development of language: a function so necessary for the expression of intelligence. There are pronounced social class differences in the style of language mothers use to communicate with their children; in addition, however, it has also been shown that mothers from disadvantaged homes engage in face-to-face talking with their infants less frequently than middle-class mothers. The poorer child often lives in much noisier surroundings than the middle-class child in a quiet suburban home, but to profit from stimulation the young child must be exposed to it under the personalized conditions that only the to-and-fro reciprocity of a face-to-face situation provides. It is in this respect that many lower-class 'socially deprived children' are at a disadvantage.

**Child effects on adults**

Let us not now jump to the conclusion that children's development is totally a matter of what parents do to them. A child is never just a passive being that one can mould into whatever shape the adult desires. Even the youngest babies can already exert an influence on their caretakers and so help to determine how they behave towards them.

Take an obvious example: babies cry and thereby draw attention to themselves. It is a sound that can have a most compelling effect on the adult: we have all heard of the mother who can sleep through a thunderstorm, but is immediately awoken by her child's whimper in the next room. Babies, by this powerful signal, can initiate the interaction: they can thereby influence both the amount and the timing of attention which others provide.