“Hey, ape man, what you got tied to your feet, boxing gloves?” So went the first day of school for Henry Viscardi (1952, p. 14), born with severely deformed legs. Experiences like Viscardi’s stun those of us who imagine young children free of the hatred and prejudice that plague adulthood, and who, like Rodgers and Hammerstein, assume that “you’ve got to be carefully taught,” presumably by prejudiced adults, in order to hate. When do children first show tendencies to stigmatize those who are different in some way? How do such tendencies evolve over the childhood years? Why do some children come to tolerate differences, whereas others hate with passion? What does the study of human development contribute to a multidisciplinary view of stigma? It is questions such as these that the present chapter addresses.

DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

Psychologists, sociologists, educators, and others within the multidisciplinary field of child development have long been con-
cerned with children’s reactions to various human differences. We believe that a developmental perspective offers something unique to the understanding of stigma. Developmental research cannot tell us about the historical and social forces that give root to stigmatization, but it can help tell us how we as individuals come to stigmatize others as a function of both our maturation as humans and our specific learning experiences.

Students of child development continually grapple with the classic nature–nurture, or maturation versus experience, issue. It would be one thing to view stigmatization primarily as the natural outgrowth of normal, genetically guided maturational processes, for then we would be implying that the fundamental processes involved in stigmatization are universal, even if the targets of stigma vary from society to society. It would be quite another thing to view stigmatization primarily as the product of specific learning experiences that only some children have, for then we would view stigma as an environment-specific phenomenon and see more possibilities for preventing and eliminating it. Researchers of child development have arrived at a consensus that both nature and nurture are important and interact to make us what we are. There is still room for debate, however, about the relative influences of maturation and learning on specific aspects of development. Although environmental influences should not be neglected, biology is a force to consider as well.

Developmental studies also attempt to understand the shape or form of development, some demonstrating distinct stages emerging in orderly sequence over childhood, others demonstrating gradual and continuous accumulations of capacities that might differ markedly from one child to the next. Could there be predictable stages in the development of stigmatization that make it quite a different phenomenon in early childhood from what it is in later childhood or adulthood? If such stages exist, a multidisciplinary understanding of stigma would have to include the recognition that the very meaning of stigma changes over the life span. Developmental research can help us understand how and when the components of stigma—thought (e.g., negative stereotypes), emotion (e.g., dislike), and behavior (e.g., discrimination against an out-group)—first take form and when they become intertwined to form a coherent response tendency.