

Social work engages with people across the life course, and practitioners often work with groups of people at different stages of life. Developing a thorough understanding of human growth and development (HGD) to encompass the whole life course is therefore a central element of social work education and practice.

Terminology

Terms such as 'life cycle' imply that HGD is staged around relatively fixed and linear normative life events. Use of the term 'life course' or 'life span' is a more flexible and appropriate frame of reference, highlighting that development is a life-long concept and that a person's life course is not always a straightforward, linear progression. A life course perspective also highlights the importance of diversity and that our lives are shaped by social, political, cultural, economic and environmental factors.

Key curriculum issues

The challenge is for students to gain an understanding of theories of human development, whilst also recognising the importance of diversity and difference. Understanding the developmental milestones that a baby or young person might normally expect to accomplish must be underpinned by a critical appreciation of the difference between individual variations and delayed growth or development. HGD offers an excellent opportunity to explore and challenge personal attitudes and assumptions about the life course (e.g. considering the notion of development in later life may encourage students to challenge assumptions that deterioration and decline are inevitable concomitants of ageing) and personal feelings (e.g. encouraging reflection on a time of life many find troubling or painful). Critically, students need opportunities to appreciate why an understanding of theories of HGD is central to their developing knowledge base and its application to practice.

Teaching may be approached thematically (where HGD is the focus of teaching and learning) or by service user group (where the focus is on children or adults), or indeed both (e.g. initial learning in HGD modules, supported by learning in modules about user groups later). Opportunities may also be found to include HGD within practice learning/skills development. Whatever the approach, students need to grasp the notion of a life course, rather than perceiving 'stages' of life as unconnected to what has gone before and what is yet to come. The study of HGD draws on theories and research from a range of disciplines, so learning opportunities should reflect the contributions of different disciplines.

Key content areas

1. Basic concepts and knowledge

- Explain how human development is a lifelong process from infancy to old age.
- Draw on knowledge from a range of disciplines.
- Understand how development is an interaction between heredity, environment and social determinants.
- Explain how studying human development is relevant to social work practice.
- Intervene to promote rights, justice and wellbeing and challenge inequalities within the life course.
- Recognise the diversity of life course and challenge assumptions and stereotypes about 'groups' of people, e.g. children and young people, older people.
- Introduce key concepts, e.g. key principles of life course development; critical periods, transition; change and continuity; strengths, resources and resilience; adversity, vulnerability, risk and accumulation of risk.

2. Specific areas of knowledge

Development of children; how children mature and develop; physical developmental milestones; cognitive development and developmental psychology (e.g. theories of learning); language acquisition; moral development; psycho-social theories of personality development, attachment and separation.

- Adolescent development: physical, cognitive, moral, sexual; identity development (including race/ethnicity); becoming independent.
- Critical perspectives on developmental psychology e.g. cross-cultural differences in attachment, cognition and communication; social constructions of childhood and adolescence and disability.
- Challenges to development: adversity; understanding the potential impact of social divisions and inequalities in children's and young people's lives; age-based discrimination; disability.
- The implications of impairment and disability on childhood, adolescence, adulthood and a critical perspective on normative models of development.
- Transitions to adulthood; physical, psychosocial and cognitive changes; identity development; lifestyles; social networks and relationships; partnerships and becoming a parent; mid-life issues/'crises'.
- Ageing and older age: physical ageing; common health problems associated with ageing and their impact (e.g. dementia); theories of ageing; life course perspectives on inequalities in later life; gender; ageism; social networks and relationships; grandparenting; continuities and change; managing transitions.
- End of life: diverse perspectives on end of life and dying (e.g. cultural norms and expectations); unequal dying; acceptance and denial and death; loss, grief and mourning.

3. Human growth and development and social work interventions

- The relationship between HGD and social work interventions, e.g. the way in which knowledge of children's social, physical and emotional development informs social work assessments of children's needs and risk.
- Linking communication methods and interventions with children with child development.
- Understanding the impact of adverse environments (e.g. domestic violence, marginalisation through poverty and custody) on children and young people's development to inform assessment.
- Appreciating the difference between 'normal' and 'abnormal' ageing; listening to older peoples' life stories.

Links to other curriculum areas (including curriculum guides ☒)

- Children and families: how children and young people might communicate at different developmental stages; factors which can impact on development that are pertinent to assessment of need; developing insight into parents'/caretakers' understanding about a child's developmental needs. ☒
- Social work with adults: for example, adult development; identity development; lifestyles and networks; managing transitions and coping with change.
- Health and disability: challenges to life course aspirations; critical perspectives on normative approaches to development.
- Mental health: transitions and change; life course perspectives on mental health/illness; identity development and maintenance; lifestyles and networks; managing transitions and coping with change. ☒
- Safeguarding: understanding developmental processes across the life course; understanding the impact of adversity on development; resilience and vulnerability across the life course. ☒

- Communication skills: challenging our assumptions about what an older person can or cannot do; ensuring our communication with children and young people takes account of likely development. ⊗

Key resources

1. Daniel, B., Wassell, S. and Gilligan, R. (2010) *Child Development for Child Care and Protection Workers*. (2nd ed) London Jessica Kingsley.
2. Fawcett, B., Weber, Z. and Wilson, S. (2011) *International Perspectives on Mental Health: Critical Issues across the Life Span*. Basingstoke, Palgrave, MacMillan.
3. Green, L. (2010) *Understanding the Life Course*. Bristol, Polity Press.
4. Beckett, C. and Taylor H. (2010) *Human Growth and Development* (2nd edition). London, Sage.
5. Howarth, J. (ed) (2010) *The Child's world: The comprehensive guide to assessing children in need* (2nd edition). London, Jessica Kingsley.
6. Howe, D. Attachment: implications for assessing children's needs and parent capacity, pp. 184–198.
7. Heller, T. and Harris, S. (2012) *Disability Through the Life Course, The Sage reference series on Disability: Key Issues and Future Directions*. London, Sage.
8. Hockey, J. (2003) *Social Identities across the life course*. Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan.
9. Hunt, S. (2005) *The Life Course: A Sociological Introduction*. Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan.
10. Lindon, J. (2010) *Understanding Child Development: Linking Theory and Practice*. London, Hodder Arnold.
11. Robinson, L. (2007) *Cross-cultural child development for social workers*. Basingstoke, Palgrave.
12. Sheridan, M.D. (2007) *From birth to five years: children's developmental progress*. London, Routledge.
13. SWAPBox: <http://www.swapbox.ac.uk> using search terms: human growth and development; life course development; life span.
14. www.bbc.co.uk/child in our time/ website following children from birth onwards – excellent resource for teaching and learning.