

Perspective Taking Stages

Caitlin F. Herman, Psy.D., Lisa Lashley, Psy.D., Charles J. Golden, Ph.D.

Nova Southeastern University

Perspective taking is the ability to gain an understanding of how another person is thinking or feeling about an event based on the information which is available. Learning to understand the perspective of another person is an ability that develops over childhood through many stages. Typically, this concept is first grasped by school age, or around 6 to 7 years of age. There are multiple types of perspectives that can be taken as well, including physical or visual perspective, affective perspective, cognitive perspective, or perspective of communication. Each of these types is important for social behaviors and the ability to interact with and connect with other people. Perspective taking allows an individual to differentiate his or her own thoughts and feelings about an event from other people's, which in turn, allows for an understanding of the presence of multiple opinions of events and topics. This differentiation also requires the understanding of first-person versus third-person perspective.

Perspectives are appreciated from different viewpoints, and throughout the development of the perspective taking stages, children learn why perspectives can differ for various reasons. The first understanding, and the one that is most concrete to young children, is that perspectives change solely based on the information provided; if someone has different information, they will have a unique perspective. Another way to reconcile the differences of perspective or opinion is that of the category of person, or social standing, such that, even if the same information is available, children will have differing perspectives from parents or other adults. This type of classification provides a structure or rule by which children can begin to grasp why people have different viewpoints on the same information. Finally, as children grow older, they begin to learn

the concept of weighing provided information, indicating that given the same information, people may come to different conclusions based on how they assess the event. As this is a more abstract concept, it comes later in the development of perspective taking. Each of these pieces of perspective taking is thought to be developed through five stages, as described by Selman. These five stages show the advancement of skills and understanding of other people as children grow, to the point where they ultimately have an understanding of interactions with others that leads to successful relationships and bonding.

The initial stage, or stage 0, is termed Undifferentiated. At this point in their development, children recognize that there is a difference between themselves and other people but are not yet skilled in distinguishing perspectives and where they come from. Not only do they have trouble comprehending other people's perspectives, but they have a low ability to reflect upon their own thoughts and feelings in a situation. The next stage, or stage 1, also called Social Informational, begins with an understanding that individuals each have their own, differentiated perspective. At this stage, however, this understanding is limited to the belief that these differences must develop from having different information. This limitation suggests that at this stage, children cannot yet grasp the idea that two or more distinct perspectives can be held of the identical experience. In stage 2, or the Self-Reflective stage, children are able to conceptualize how someone else might think about them, and they are able to take the point of view of the other person. In this stage, there may still be some conflict and inability to reconcile one's own perspective with that of the other person.

In the third stage, called Third-Person, children begin to be able to understand that how they view themselves may differ from how someone else views them, and how they view another person may differ from that person's perspective of themselves. At this time, children can see

both, or multiple, perspectives simultaneously, and are able to accept the differences even when the same information or experience was provided. The final stage, or the Societal stage, is when children understand that perspectives can be influenced by society in general, and that perspectives can change under this influence. Understanding the fluidity of some perspectives is another layer of development that passes beyond the concrete belief that perspectives are simply black and white.

The importance of this development comes from how it allows children to interact differently as they grow older. Being able to recognize the differing perspectives of others possibly leads children to act in a pro-social manner such that they can understand the views and needs of another person more readily. When children are younger, pro-social behavior is often motivated by the desire to avoid getting in trouble or by the request of others (such as parents); so, when they begin to understand the value of these behaviors from an internally motivated position, the behaviors become more voluntary. The development through the perspective taking stages shows how children develop rules and patterns for constructs before being able to understand the complexities of intricacies of human interaction. Overall, the progression to appropriate perspective taking allows individuals to learn about the development of unique perspectives and how they impact the relationships and connections they make with people as they grow older.

Further Readings:

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