

**Movie Analysis Paper**  
Forrest Gump and Child Development

Middle childhood and adolescence are marked by increased responsibilities during the start of formal schooling, often referred to as the “school years.” “Children in this period are guided by mature members of society toward real-world tasks that increasingly resemble those they will perform as adults” (Berk, 2008, pg. 225). When this stage of an individuals’ life is broken down into physical, emotional, social, and cognitive aspects of development and analyzed accordingly, much can be learned about a child’s disposition and how they interact with their environment. If you were to ask Forrest Gump to delve into his autobiographical memory, he would impart upon you a plethora of memories from over the years, spanning from his first recollections of physical development with his “magic shoes”, to the cognitive, social, and emotional events that have shaped his life.

From early childhood through young adulthood, an individual will experience a number of physical changes and developments that contribute to their daily activities as well their social interactions with peers.

“Physical growth during the school years continues at the slow, regular pace of early childhood. [Also], the bones of the body lengthen and broaden. But ligaments are not yet firmly attached to bones and this, combined with increasing muscle strength, gives children the unusual flexibility needed to turn cartwheels and perform handstands” (Berk, 2008, pg.225).

Forrest’s first steps into his school age years are hindered by a set of leg braces given to him by his physician in attempt to straighten his back, which was “as crooked as a politician” (Forrest Gump). One can assume that Forrest is plagued with a disorder such as scoliosis, which would produce the unusual curvature of his back, thus inhibiting the physical activity of his youth. However the braces don’t seem to bother him very much. Coupled with the encouragement of

his mother who constantly tells him he is no different than anyone else, Forrest makes the most of his situation and rationalizes the condition whenever prompted by another. At times Forrest actually uses his braces to bolster his physical activities. Forrest teaches Jenny, his first friend, how to swing and dangle from a large tree that they climb together and play under often, teaching each other new activities and skills. This constant activity helps children like Forrest to avoid dire conditions like obesity and early onset diabetes. Physical activity paired with a well-balanced, nutritional diet lead to healthy developing children. Forrest's mother, who owns a large plantation and rents out the rooms to travelers, makes a large family meal every night; therefore ensuring that Forrest is adequately fed and provided for.

In addition to climbing trees, Forrest discovers one day while being bullied by other boys from school, that he loves to run. Jenny advises Forrest to run away from the bullies as well as any other danger, with the famous line, "Run Forrest, Run!" A command that prompts Forrest to speed away, breaking out of his leg braces and realizing his natural ability for running. As said by his physician, he has very strong legs, but it is his back that poses the problem. Evidently neither were problems, because once Forrest started running, he couldn't stop. He runs from bullies on more than one occasion, causing him to be discovered by a college football recruiting coach who offers him a scholarship to a nearby Alabama college. On the team, Forrest is given the ball and told to run; and he does just that.

One could argue that Forrest develops physically in a very different fashion than typical children of his age, sex, socioeconomic status (SES), or ethnicity. Even though his leg braces initially hold him back, Forrest eventually overcomes his handicap through his passion for running. Forrest may not have joined any sports teams as a child, but his skill and love of

running allow him to further his physical development through participation on a college sports team.

Physical development is just one aspect of a child's progress in becoming a healthy, happy adult. Other factors such as cognitive development need to be analyzed as well. At the beginning of the film, Forrest is entering "Piaget's concrete operational stage, which extends from about 7 to 11 years and marks a major turning point in cognitive development. Thought is far more logical, flexible, and organized than it was earlier" (Berk, 2008, pg. 231). Forrest's cognitive skills are characterized as below normal during a visit with the principal of the public school. Forrest has an IQ or intelligence quotient, "a score that permits an individual's performance on an intelligence test to be compared to the performances of other individuals of the same age" (Berk, 2008, pg. G-7), of 75, which is below the normal distribution for children entering public school. The principal refers to Forrest as "special" and believes that he would be better suited for a special school where he can get individual attention. An individual's IQ can be affected by many factors, such as their socioeconomic status, cultural influences, and whether they were nurtured to succeed cognitively as a child.

"Recent research has shown that human brain circuitry is not mature until the early 20's (some would add, "if ever"). Among the last connections to be fully established are the links between the prefrontal cortex, seat of judgment and problem-solving, and the emotional centers in the limbic system, especially the amygdala. These links are critical for emotional learning and high-level self-regulation" (CP #11, Odell, pg. 63).

Forrest has been raised in an environment relatively well suited for his cognitive development. He lives in a middle class SES, which allows him the ability to attend a high-

quality school; furthermore he is encouraged by his mother and best friend Jenny to strive to reach his full potential. Forrest's learning disabilities deter his capacity to fully develop socially, emotionally and cognitively, but the resilience he displays throughout his life has proven to be strong. According to Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Successful Intelligence, Forrest's analytical, creative, and practical intelligences, the three broad aspects that make up general intelligence, lag behind those expected of children his age. This is demonstrated in his explanations for events such as Elvis' death, where he believes that he had a heart attack because he sang too many songs, or his descriptions of the many presidential assassinations that took place in his lifetime. These aspects of Forrest's reasoning seem odd or abnormal but can be attributed to delays in normal brain development. Forrest may have unfinished lateralization of the two brain hemispheres, not as much brain plasticity, or fewer increases in synaptic connections and pruning.

As Forrest passes 11 years in age, he enters "Piaget's formal operational stage, in which [he] develops the capacity for abstract, systematic, [and] scientific thinking" (Berk, 2008, pg. 300). He becomes capable of hypothetico-deductive reasoning, in which, when faced with a problem, children will hypothesize and predict variables affecting the outcome and then deduce logical, testable inferences for the hypothesis. Forrest seems to continue his odd reasoning of certain events in life, forming his own opinions and rationalizations. Through this seemingly fantastical world Forrest creates for himself, his social interactions and emotional experiences differ quite drastically from those of demographic groups similar to his age, sex, SES, and ethnicity.

Forrest can be characterized as experiencing Erikson's psychosocial stages, industry vs. inferiority (ages 6-11), identity vs. role confusion (adolescence), and intimacy vs. isolation (early

adulthood). He develops a sense of inferiority from his negative experiences with peers and feels incompetent or inadequate from constant emotional abuse. This causes Forrest to fall under the category of a neglected child, one “who is seldom chosen, either positively or negatively, on self reported measures of peer acceptance” (Berk, 2008, pg. 265). People only acknowledge Forrest as “just a local idiot”, or “the stupidest son of a bitch alive” (Forrest Gump). His social status reflects some researchers conclusions for an only child as well. An only child is thought to have closer relationships with their parents, but often have trouble gaining acceptance from peers. Forrest also experiences role confusion while growing up. He is an extremely impressionable young man and feels that he needs to accomplish and experience all sorts of things in his life. Forrest’s experiences range from playing college football, joining the army, playing professional ping-pong, to manning a shrimp boat. Forrest will deal with isolation as he becomes a little older. His different social tendencies have caused him to lack the adequate intimacy skills and social abilities needed to form bonds with others.

Many of these theories and conclusions about social and emotional development are reflected in Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory. This theory “focuses on how culture-the values, beliefs, customs, and skills of a social group-is transmitted to the next generation” (Berk, 2008, pg.19), and in which social interactions are a large factor. Forrest has an abundance of environmental factors attributing to his social and emotional success. He lives in a small, rural town, in a large, plantation like house with his mother. Since the house is so large they rent out the rooms to travelers, which allows Forrest a diversity of constant company, one of which is Elvis Presley. This proves to an interesting social environment for Forrest, exposing him to different aspects of culture that he may normally not be allowed to see. Despite this intriguing living situation, the inevitable question of the whereabouts of his father arises. His mother’s

explanation is that his father is “on vacation”, which is a place where someone goes and doesn’t ever come back. There are many theories present regarding the influence of mono vs. bi-parent households and the degree to which the father figure is important. “It has long been known that childhood abuse and neglect and the loss of a parent are associated with adult psychiatric disorders, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic symptoms” (CP #6, Odell, pg. 30).

“Erikson implicitly includes paternal faith in his psychosocial theory with the development of trust which fathers can provide in terms of enhancing total security.” Others believe that fathers are “biologically necessary but a social accident” (CP #4, Curtis, pg. 20-21).

In Forrest’s case, the absence of his father doesn’t seem to bother him, nor does it seem to hurt his social or emotional development. His disposition in social situations would not necessarily be improved with the presence of a father figure. Forrest’s mother does a good job of being a single authoritative parent, encouraging his success, while teaching him the proper lessons and manners he needs to succeed. She positively encourages his morale by telling him “you’re no different than anyone else” or “don’t let anyone tell you they’re better than you” (Forrest Gump). When prompted by many individuals throughout his life about his stupidity, Forrest responds with “mama says stupid is as stupid does” (Forrest Gump). He does not let others opinions hurt or bother him because of the strong, positive enforcement he receives from his mother. She teaches him good manners as well and what is “not for children’s eyes” or what is unsafe. These characteristics of direct, warm parenting make Forrest a kind individual, with a prosocial or altruistic disposition to help others without any expected reward for himself.

In addition to his mother, Forrest forms a very strong bond with Jenny, who he describes as “[his] most special friend, [his] only friend” at that point (Forrest Gump). Jenny not only accepts Forrest for who he is as a person, but she helps teach him how to read and climb trees, as well as

certain ways to behave in social situations, enhancing his development in childhood. All of these external influences on Forrest's social and emotional behavior shape his development and help him grow into a kind, interesting adult.

Urie Bronfenbrenner put forth an Ecological Systems Theory, "which views the person as developing within a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment" (Berk, 2008, pg. 19). In this "biological model" a child's biologically influenced disposition is paired with certain environmental influences, that together shape development. The environmental structure includes a microsystem of interacting factors, such as Forrest's mother and the tenants of their house, Jenny, and his school; a mesosystem that connects each of these factors as they influence Forrest; an exosystem made up of social settings that aren't directly connected to Forrest, such as the neighbors or community; and a macrosystem of cultural values, laws, customs, and resources. Each of these levels has an effect on Forrest's development in an ever-changing fashion that can be controlled to an extent by the individual.

In Forrest's case, the diversity of his influences, biological, psychological, and social forces and pathways in development, have proven the lifespan perspective and its multidimensional effects. Forrest cannot be described as being special in a negative sense, but more accurately in a positive sense through his resilience, because he has taken the difficult situations presented to him in life and made the most of them, learning something from each and taking it with him on his next experience.

"Mama always said life was like a box on chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get" (Forrest Gump). The infamous line of the film *Forrest Gump* has taken on a whole new meaning if you look at it from a psychological standpoint. No one can predict what will happen in his or her life. There are so many aspects that affect an individual's disposition and



development, and it is impossible to predict which will occur and when they'll occur. Life for Forrest is about adapting to any situation and living life the way he was taught and knows is right. The accumulation of physical, cognitive, social and emotional influences on his life lead him to accomplish a great deal despite other's critiques and predictions that he would not succeed. He proves to be a strong willed, lovable individual, whose goal is to be happy and make everyone else happy as well.

“And that's all I have to say about that...” (Forrest Gump).

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