

Critical Periods or Sensitive Periods?

Critical period is defined as a window of time in which the brain is most receptive to learning certain kinds of information as well as dependent upon that information for normal development. Critical periods have been found for the development of sensory system in the brain such as vision. For example, if an infant is not exposed to a normal visual world within the first two years of life, normal vision may not develop.

The concern in the research community is that science has not proven the claims of critical periods for *all* types of learning. Some critics, such as John Bruer, believe it is being too broadly applied without sufficient proof. Researchers are in agreement that the window of opportunity never appears to shut completely. Thus, **sensitive periods** rather than critical periods is becoming a more popular term. It means that a particular experience needs to happen within a broad period of time for development to occur normally.

According to Nelson (1999), “One only needs to observe the behavioral changes that occur from 3 to 18 years to know, at least intuitively, that all is not over by age 3. Rather, the changes that appear after age 3 exist on a slower time frame, although they are every bit as dramatic and remarkable as those that occurred earlier” (p. 237).

Sources:

Barinaga, M. (2000). A critical issue for the brain. *Science*, 288, 2116-2120.

Nelson, C. A. (1999). How important are the first 3 years of life? *Applied Developmental Science*, 3, 235-238.