

PSYCHXXX: The Developing Mind: How humans learn, think, and communicate

Time and location:

Building 420, The Department of Psychology, Stanford University

Instructors

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Office hours: TBD

Course overview

How do humans, from infants to adolescents, learn to think, speak, and understand themselves and others? What makes human connection unique among species? This course explores learning, language/communication, and development as windows into the human mind.

Students will examine how we acquire words and ideas, how adolescents and adults learn new skills, how memory, social understanding, and empathy emerge, and how culture and neurodiversity shape thought.

Through discussions, data-driven activities, and a community-engaged project, students will connect psychological research to real-world contexts and to their own experiences as learners and thinkers. They will gain practical skills in critical analysis, research interpretation, and science presentation, while reflecting on what makes human understanding and interaction distinctive.

Contents: learning goals, class structure/assignments, course material, communication and office hours, policies, grading, joining the class late, and course schedule

Learning goals

This course introduces students to developmental and cognitive psychology by examining how humans learn and share meaning across the lifespan. Language serves as a central example, but topics span memory, theory of mind, social reasoning, identity and cultural variation, and neurodiversity. Students will explore the psychological mechanisms that enable humans to learn, adapt, and connect across contexts, and how studying development helps us understand what it means to be human.

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Explain key theories and empirical findings in cognitive development.
2. Compare and contrast how cultural and social contexts shape development.
3. Apply developmental psychology concepts to real-world educational and community settings.
4. Collaborate with peers and community partners to design interventions, resources, or recommendations.

5. Communicate psychological concepts effectively to both academic and general audiences.

Class Structure and Assignments

1. In-class Participation & Discussions (20%): Engagement in seminar discussions.
2. Problem Sets / Short Analyses (20%): Applying methods and concepts to sample datasets or case studies.
3. Community-engaged Project (40%): Collaborative design and presentation of an intervention, resource, or recommendation for the partner organization (e.g., the Children’s Discovery Museum in San Jose and the Palo Alto Junior Museum).
4. Final Reflection Essay (20%): Personal synthesis of course content, research, and community engagement.

Community-Engaged Project

Students will complete a group-based project in partnership with a local learning institution (e.g., the Children’s Discovery Museum of San Jose). The project is designed to help students apply concepts from cognitive and developmental psychology to real-world learning environments. Students will visit the partner site at least twice: once for a guided tour and orientation with staff, and once for structured observation and analysis. Drawing on course concepts, students will examine how learning, memory, social understanding, and communication are supported through exhibit design and interaction.

Final projects may take the form of:

- An observation-based analysis connecting psychological theory to museum design
- A reflective design critique with evidence-based recommendations
- A short science communication product explaining a developmental concept to a public audience

Course materials

This course does not have a textbook. Learning materials include online content (video lectures, readings, supplementary videos) and weekly in-person seminars.

Attendance:

At the end of each in-person class, you will be asked to submit an exit ticket.

Course schedule

Week	Topic	Focus / Example Questions	Activities
1	What Makes Us Human?	Why study development to understand the mind? Methods to study the minds	Problem set/short analyses
2	Memory, Learning, and the Brain	How do we remember, forget, and learn new things?	First visit: Guided museum tour with staff

			Deliverable: first draft of a memo (Focusing on how exhibits are designed for different ages? What assumptions designers make about attention, curiosity, and learning?)
3	Understanding Others	How do humans develop a theory of mind, empathy, morality, and social understanding?	Second visit: Deliverable: finalizing the observation memo
4	From Gestures to Words	How do babies communicate before speech? What does language learning reveal about human cognition?	Analysis of the observation memo, focusing on social aspects of the exhibitions
5	Language, Culture, and Thought	Do people who speak different languages think differently? How does culture shape communication?	Analysis of the observation memo: use of language, gesture, pointing, facial expression
6	Neurodiversity in Communication	What can we learn from atypical development (e.g., autism, deaf communication) about the mind?	TBD
7	Humans, Animals, and AI	Comparing communication across species and technologies, what makes human understanding unique?	TBD
8	Sharing What We've Learned	Student project presentations and reflections: what does psychology teach us about being human?	TBD