Arnold Lucius Gesell was an American psychologist and pediatrician who pioneered the use of film to study the physical and mental development of normal infants and children. His research influenced childrearing in the United States. Gesell was the first director of the Child Study Center. He applied the rigorous criteria of scientific research to the issue of growth and development in children and is widely considered the father of the field of child development. Gesell paved the way for contemporary research in motor development, fighting for the rights of physically and mentally handicapped children to receive special education that would enable them to find gainful employment. Additionally, he increased public awareness of and support for preschool education and better foster care and adoption. Gesell also gained fame and influence as a leader of the Child Hygiene Movement. His concerns focused on public health problems in slums, factories, schools, and at immigrant screening stations. In 1911, Gesell founded the Yale Clinic of Child Development. He served as the director from 1911 until 1948. Gesell, best known for research on normal child development and use of new approaches to research and observation, established developmental norms that are still the basis of most early assessments of behavioral functioning today.

Biography

Gesell was born in Alma, Wisconsin, on June 21, 1880. His father was a photographer with a strong interest in education and his mother was a successful elementary school teacher. Gesell was the eldest of five children. Watching his younger siblings learn and grow helped develop his interest in children. In his autobiography, Gesell discusses a number of traumatic incidents that he had witnessed growing up, such as funerals, sickness, accidents, drowning, quarantines, alcoholism, and seizures. These experiences, according to Gesell, possessed psychological significance for his clinical studies.

Gesell's hometown later became the focus of analysis in his work titled *The Village of a Thousand Souls*. Drawing on three decades of town news and gossip, he concluded that despite environmental advantages, many of the local families showed signs of insanity or feeblemindedness. Gesell then argued that social reform was needed. He supported the science of eugenics and attributed human vices to a combination of hereditary defect and the departure of “fitter” citizens to more challenging environments. Gesell realized the importance of nature and nurture.

While at the Los Angeles State Normal School, Gesell met and married fellow teacher Beatrice Chandler. They had two children. Gesell died on May 29, 1961, in New Haven, Connecticut.

Education and Work

With plans to become a teacher, Gesell attended Stevens Point Normal School after he graduated high school in 1896. Among the courses he took was a course in psychology under Professor Edgar James Swift, a man trained at Clark University. Gesell graduated from Stevens Point in 1899, and accepted a position in the Stevens Point High School as a teacher of U.S. history, ancient history, German, accounting, and commercial geography. However, this did not satisfy his intellectual drive. He resigned by the end of the year, and entered the University of Wisconsin–Madison, where he studied history with Frederick Jackson Turner and psychology with Joseph Jastrow, who had started a psychology laboratory at Wisconsin in 1888. After two years at Madison, Gesell received a B.Ph. degree in 1903.

Gesell served as a teacher and principal at a high school in Chippawa Falls, Wisconsin, for just one year.
He then decided to continue his education at Clark University, an early leader in psychology highly influenced by G. Stanley Hall, the founder of the child study movement. After receiving his Ph.D. from Clark in 1906, Gesell took a professorship at the Los Angeles State Normal School. There, he worked with Lewis Terman, a Clark colleague. They supported a genetic and psychometric approach to mental retardation and developmental change. Gesell decided that medical training was essential if he was to do research that was more thorough in the normative study of early development. Gesell studied at the University of Wisconsin Medical School and Yale University. He developed the Clinic of Child Development at Yale and received an M.D. in 1915. He accepted a full professorship at Yale and continued to work as a school psychologist for the State Board of Education of Connecticut, where he helped develop classes to aid children with disabilities.

Initially concerned with retarded development, Gesell came to the conclusion that an understanding of normal infant and child development was indispensable to understanding childhood abnormality. He then began his studies on the mental growth of babies. He founded new methods and used the latest technology for observing and measuring behavior by controlling the environment and stimuli. Gesell used one-way mirrors, photography, and film.

After he retired in 1948, the Gesell Institute of Human Development was founded by his colleagues in 1950.

**See Also:** Adolescence; Adoption, Open; Child Labor; Disability (Children); Evolutionary Theories; Hall, G. Stanley

**Further Readings**


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