**13 Lifespan development**

* Development is a lifelong process affected by multiple factors. Historically this perspective has been neglected by many developmental psychologists.

Prenatal development

* Development begins prenatally, with environmental factors like teratogens affecting foetal development.
* Some myths have grown up around prenatal development, most critically the myth of the ‘crack baby’.

Erikson’s theory of lifespan development

* Erik Erikson produced an influential overarching theory of lifespan development. He identified eight stages of development, each of which has a developmental task and, if successful, leads to the development of a positive personality characteristic.
* Erikson’s theory has been helpful in thinking about adolescent and adult development and some aspects are testable and have empirical support.
* Because Erikson focuses on subjective experiences like identity it has proved tricky to investigate his theory with scientific rigour.

Adolescence

* Adolescence is the stage of development between childhood and adulthood. It is characterized by rapid physical changes to the brain and body and in social role and personal identity.
* Mood swings, some conflict with parents, and increased risk-taking are characteristics of adolescence; however, the stereotype of adolescence as a time of storm and stress is generally exaggerated.
* Recent developments in neuroscience have cast light on the biological underpinnings of distinctive adolescent behaviours. Decision-making centres develop late and, in boys at least, have reduced blood flow during adolescence. This can help explain the poor impulse control and risk-taking that characterize adolescence.
* Peers assume greater and growing influence throughout adolescence, and one influential approach—group socialization theory—attributes adolescent peer relations as the biggest single influence on development.
* Group socialization theory is widely credited with challenging assumptions about development and identifying peers as an important influence; however, most psychologists do not accept it in its entirety.

Adulthood

* The timescales of adulthood vary culturally. Interestingly, some psychologists now identify a stage of early adulthood between adolescence and true adulthood.
* Traditionally adulthood has been seen as characterized by full-time work and an early and permanent heterosexual marriage and children. However, adult lifestyles have become increasingly diverse and many adults no longer fall into these stereotypes.
* Work conveys psychological benefits and most people continue to work even if they achieve permanent financial security although, paradoxically, most people report dissatisfaction with their working lives.
* Most adults engage in one or more long-term monogamous relationship involving marriage or cohabiting. Happy relationships convey considerable physical and psychological benefits.
* Most adults aspire to parenthood. How positive an experience this turns out to be depends on numerous factors.
* Middle adulthood is associated with a decline in strength and conventional attractiveness. This may impact on hobbies and on self-esteem. The current middle-aged generation report being less happy than at other life stages and compared with previous generations at their age.
* Although many middle-aged people report ‘senior moments’, actually cognitive decline usually begins much later and is less severe than many people believe unless the individual suffers from dementia.

Ageing

* The nature of individual ageing varies widely amongst individuals and is affected by many factors, including the physical and the psychological. Although active, stimulated adults age better, there is a problem of establishing direction of causality.
* A particularly unpleasant aspect of ageing for some people is dementia, the physical degeneration of the brain. However, counter to stereotypes most older people do not suffer from it.

Death and dying

* Unless we die suddenly and prematurely we all have a psychological experience of the dying process. Kübler-Ross’s influential stage model of adaptation to dying has not generally been supported by research.

There are wide cultural differences in perceptions of imminent death and dying, with people in Western cultures expressing anger and being more focused on isolation than experiences of pain.