

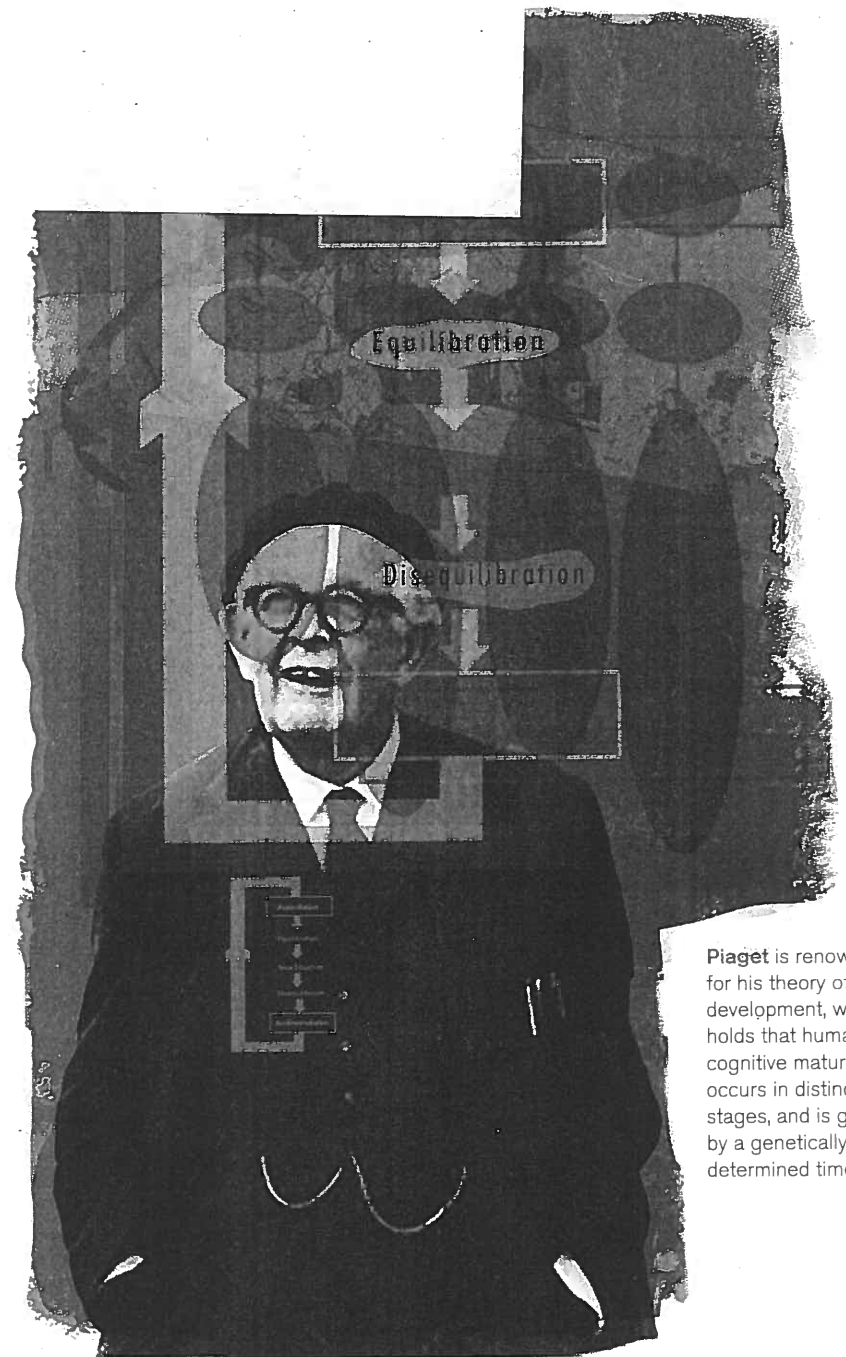
**Born**  
1896, Neuchâtel,  
Switzerland

**Died**  
1980, Geneva,  
Switzerland

There is no doubt that the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget is one of the discipline's standout figures. He is renowned for his work on cognitive development, and particularly for the idea that human intellectual abilities develop according to a genetically determined timetable. It was Piaget's view that children and adults understand and interact with their environment in qualitatively different ways.

Piaget identified four separate stages of development. The sensorimotor stage (0–2 years) is characterized by the achievement of object permanence, which is the awareness that objects have their own separate and independent existence. This is followed by the preoperational stage (2–7 years), during which the child develops the ability to use and manipulate symbols, including language. At this point, the ability to generalize beyond what is immediately given in experience has not yet developed, and the child cannot yet apply logical principles. These abilities begin to emerge during the third, concrete operational stage (7–11 years), during which the child also becomes less egocentric in orientation, in part because they gain an awareness that their viewpoint is only one among many. The final, formal operational stage, which normally starts between the ages of 11 and 15, is characterized by the ability to engage in decontextualized, abstract thought. According to Piaget, almost everybody will achieve this stage of development by the time they are 20 years old.

Piaget argued that intellectual development is driven specifically by a process of assimilation, disequilibrium, and accommodation. The idea here is that a child makes use of behavioral and mental schemas in order to make sense of the world. If a child comes across some genuinely new phenomenon, then they will not be able to assimilate the experience to the existing schema. This results in a state of disequilibrium. The way through this roadblock is to change the existing schema in order to accommodate the new experience, thereby reestablishing a state of equilibrium. It is by this general process of adaptation that intellectual progress occurs. The fact that so many outstanding psychologists, including Vygotsky and Kohlberg, have been influenced by Piaget's ideas is indicative of the extent of his importance to the discipline.



Piaget is renowned for his theory of development, which holds that human cognitive maturation occurs in distinct stages, and is governed by a genetically determined timetable.