Possible Topics for Research Papers

This list represents only a very few of the almost endless possibilities for research topics. You may want to pursue a topic of particular interest to you, in which case you will need to set out the questions you intend to answer (your instructor can help you), as is done for each topic listed below.

Abuse
Cross-cultural analysis of child abuse Are some cultures more abusive than others? If so, why? What are the cultural variations in the modes of discipline? Is research based on the abuse and neglect of North American middle-class children valid for children from other groups?

Biosocial Development

Brain, eye, and hand specialization What is the usual developmental sequence of brain, eye, and hand specialization? What recent evidence is there concerning the relationship among these three body parts, especially with regard to left-right coordination? What conclusions can be drawn from studies of brain, eye, or hand injuries?

Dementia Identify the causes and symptoms of severe cognitive impairment in the elderly. How are different disorders distinguished? What is Alzheimer’s disease, and what does the latest research suggest about it? What methods are used to treat dementias?

Drug use What are the trends in adolescent drug use? To what extent do these patterns constitute a distinct subcultural pattern, and to what extent are they simply a reflection of the larger culture? What kinds of drug education programs should there be for adolescents?

Eating disorders What are some of the causes of or theories about anorexia and bulimia? the consequences of these disorders? Why are adolescent females particularly susceptible? What methods are being used to treat people with anorexia and those with bulimia, and how successful are they?

Health What are some common health problems for adults? What steps can be taken to prevent them? What do health clubs recommend for adults? Cite evidence for the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of their programs.

Perceptual development What are the interrelationships in the development of the various senses? How do they relate to motor-skill development? to cognitive skills? Does recent evidence allow you to reach a more complex conclusion than the generality that “maturation and learning interact”?

Puberty What psychological issues accompany puberty in adolescents? Are there sexual or cultural differences in the way puberty is viewed? What are the consequences of early or late maturation for the adolescent?

Cognition

Achievement in later life Find examples of individuals who produced great art or literature, or made a scientific discovery, late in life. Characterize their earlier productivity, and compare it to their later works. Is there evidence for a new wisdom or creativity in later life?

Children’s art What are the theories that attempt to explain the sequence of children’s art? Which aspects of children’s art seem universal and developmental, and which seem bound by culture and personality? What function does art play in children’s lives, as development of motor skills and development of emotional expression increase?

IQ Does intelligence decline during adulthood? Examine the arguments for and against this claim. Compare research on both sides of the controversy, including subjects and the research method used. Are standard IQ tests “age-biased”?

Language acquisition What are the universal similarities and individual differences in language acquisition? What light does research on Motherese shed on this question? How does language acquisition relate to later intellectual development?

Measuring intelligence What are the assumptions and theories underlying various tests of intelligence? Consider how tests change with the age of the individual and with the theories of the test makers. Can tests be culture-free? culture-fair?

Cultural and Socioeconomic Factors

Ageism What are some causes of ageism in our society? Which characterizations of the elderly are factual, and which are myths? How does ageism affect the elderly? How can ageist attitudes be changed?

Delinquency To what extent do the laws of your community treat juveniles differently from adults? Do these differences seem appropriate, given your knowledge of development? Would other differences be recommended?
What is being done to prevent delinquency? 
What should be done? Be sure to consider research studies on this topic, especially large-group longitudinal research.

**The generation gap** Are there great differences between adolescents and their parents in values, ideals, political beliefs, or morals? What may cause the appearance of a gap? What do researchers think might help close the gap? Consider various theories and the evidence that supports them.

**Minority-group children** Pick one minority group—racial, religious, or cultural—and trace the development of children from that group. Which aspects of development are affected by minority status? What are the advantages and disadvantages of growing up as a member of that minority group? Are problems that occur caused by the majority culture, by the minority group itself, or simply by human nature?

**Political attitudes** How do political attitudes develop? What are the factors that influence the social values, voting patterns, and political protests of young people? What are the similarities and differences between the political attitudes of today’s young people and those of earlier generations?

**Senior housing** What kinds of housing arrangements are available to the elderly today? Who seems to adjust to and like each type best? What are the advantages and disadvantages of age-segregated communities for the elderly? Evaluate your community’s response to the housing needs of the elderly.

**Death and Dying**

**Euthanasia and assisted suicide** What laws govern these practices in your state? What ethical issues are raised by these practices? What rational arguments can you provide for and against euthanasia? Who should decide whether euthanasia and assisted suicides are legal?

**Mourning rituals** What funeral, burial, and bereavement customs are practiced by people living in your community? How do they compare with rituals practiced by their forebears a century ago? What accounts for these historical differences? What are the consequences of the changes?

**Terminal illness** How do people cope with a terminal illness? How do the reactions of dying children compare to those of dying adults? How can the responses of family members help or hurt the dying person? How can supportive care, such as that given in a hospice, help both the dying person and family members and friends?

**Widowhood** What factors make adjustment to widowhood relatively easy or difficult? How is the position of widows in your community today different from that of widows in other cultures? Other centuries?

**Developmental Theory and Research**

**Behaviorism and current research** What recent attempts have there been to apply behaviorist theory to human development? To what extent is behaviorism too narrow in focus to be able to take an ecological approach? What direction do you see behaviorism taking in the next decade?

**Continuity and discontinuity** According to recent thinking, is development more continuous or discontinuous? What are the strongest arguments for each side and the unresolved issues? Be sure to consider both longitudinal and cross-sectional research.

**Eriksonian theory and current research** What recent attempts have there been to validate Eriksonian ideas? How much of it is subjective and how much relatively objective? Evaluate both critical and laudatory approaches to Eriksonian theory.

**Ethics and research** What are the most recent formulations of ethical principles that should be upheld in psychological research? Is there widespread agreement on these? Is there any recent research that violates these standards? Do these ethical standards restrict scientific progress? Can they be bent to suit the experimenter?

**Midlife crisis** What evidence exists for a midlife crisis? Characterize the midlife crisis. What other factors could account for upheaval in an adult’s life? Consider the various theories of adult development, both stage and continuity, in discussing the questions.

**Moral development** What evidence is there to support or refute the various theories of moral development? What is the relationship among moral attitude, gender, cognitive stage, and behavior? Consider cultural, familial, and personality factors in your answer.

**Piaget’s theory** What do contemporary developmentalists say about Piaget’s theory of cognitive development? Which aspects of the theory have withstood the test of time? Which have been modified, and how? What is the relationship among moral attitude, gender, cognitive stage, and behavior? Consider cultural, familial, and personality factors in your answer.

**Play** How does the play of children change as they develop? What are the various theories about the functions of play? What evidence is there to support each theory? What kinds of play patterns are ideal? Is play ever destructive to normal development?
Education

**Bilingual education** What are the various approaches to the education of children who speak a language different from that of the dominant culture? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each method for fostering the child’s intellectual, linguistic, and emotional development? Consider the experiences of at least two different ethnic groups, such as French-Canadians, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans living on the mainland, or Native Americans.

**Education—Piaget versus Skinner** Compare books for educators written by followers of Piaget and by followers of Skinner. What are the similarities and differences in their assumptions and suggestions? What critical comments do you consider valid or invalid for these two approaches? Is there any research that helps resolve the controversy?

Employment

**Career change** What factors are involved in the decision to change careers? What programs are available to help with midlife career changes? How do the new careers differ from the original career choices? Are the new careers generally more or less satisfying than first careers?

**Career selection** What are the factors involved in career selection? What programs are available to help with career decisions? What effect do these programs have on career decisions? What factors affect an individual’s satisfaction with a career? What factors are involved in the decision to change careers?

Families

**Alternative lifestyles** In terms of psychosocial development, what are the advantages and disadvantages for an adult who chooses to remain single? childless? who adopts a homosexual lifestyle? Be sure your paper reflects research findings as well as opinions.

**Family patterns** To what extent does the “traditional” family (father working, mother at home with the children) exist today? How are home-care responsibilities divided in families where the mother is employed? How do patterns in this country compare with patterns in other countries and/or earlier decades?

**Siblings** What effect do siblings have on development? Consider research on family size, birth order, and sex of siblings in connection with this topic. Is there an ideal family size and composition?

Learning Disabilities

**Development of disabled children** Pick one disability, such as blindness, deafness, mental retardation, or hyperactivity, and trace the development of children with that disability from birth to young adulthood. What periods of development, or aspects of development, are especially crucial? What can be done to minimize the impact of that disability?

**Learning disabilities** What recent evidence is there concerning the causes and treatment of learning disabilities? Which lines of research seem most promising? most popular? If children are diagnosed as having a learning disability during childhood, what predictions can be made about their later development?

**Mainstreaming and special education** What evidence is there that mainstreaming helps children? What evidence is there that it does not? What seem to be the crucial factors that should be considered in planning the education of a disabled child? Consider cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Marriage

**Divorce** What are the factors implicated in divorce and what are the factors that determine adjustment afterward? Consider the impact of divorce on children, adults, and grandparents.

Parenting and Caregiving

**Alternatives to home care** What evidence do we have concerning the differences and similarities between child care provided by the parents in the home and care provided by others outside the home? How do the advantages and disadvantages of alternative care change with the age of the child? with the type of family? with the type of alternative care? What can be learned from day-care experiences in other cultures?

**Divorced and single parents** How has the incidence of divorced and single-parent families changed over the last twenty years? How have these changes affected the experiences of children from these families? Which factors correlate with good adjustment and development in children from such families? Which factors correlate with poor adjustment? Are there periods of development when divorce is particularly difficult for children to cope with?

**Fathers and mothers** What are the differences between father–child and mother–child interactions? What are the similarities? Does this pattern change as the infant becomes a toddler? a preschooler? a schoolage child? Does the sex of the child affect these differences? To what extent are these similarities and differences
possible topics for research papers, developmental psychological science, dr. rosalyn m. king, professor

Peers and parents In what ways do peers have more influence with adolescents than parents do, and in what ways are parents more influential? Does the answer to this question depend on the subculture, the sex, and the familial pattern of the young person, or are there broad generalizations that can be made? Consider various theories, and the evidence that supports them.

Prenatal Development and Birth

Birth customs and traditions What are the variations in the birth process throughout the world? throughout North America? What are the reasons for the differences you find? Which traditions seem most beneficial for the baby? the mother? the father? other family members? the attending doctors, nurses, midwives? Consider psychological as well as biological advantages and disadvantages.

Medical procedures used during the birth process Fetal monitoring, cesarean sections, forceps deliveries, and especially drugs given to women during labor have both critics and champions. What recent evidence can you find that is relevant to the controversy over these procedures, and what are the possible interpretations of that evidence? Why do views diverge so widely on this issue?

Prevention of congenital problems Describe recent evidence concerning the cause and prevention of congenital problems. Consider topics such as genetic counseling, nutrition, education, drug use, and air and water pollution. What are the most recent developments in prenatal diagnosis and treatment?

Sex Differences

Female self-concept How has the women’s movement affected the psychosocial development of adolescent girls? Compare research on this topic published within the last five years with research published a decade or more ago.

Gender roles What are the similarities and differences between male and female development in adulthood? Consider all three domains, but specialize in one area, such as sexuality, moral development, or employment.

Sex differences What are the sex differences in behavior, ability, and attitudes that emerge during childhood? Which theories explain these differences? What evidence supports the various theories? Since this is a broad subject, you might want to focus on a single aspect, such as the differences in motor skills, verbal ability, or rate of psychological disturbance.

Sexual-Reproductive System

Adult sexuality What does the most accurate and recent research say about sexual behavior after age 20? What are the difficulties in obtaining accurate information on this topic? What research do you think is most carefully done?

Family planning What predictions can you make about family planning in the year 2011? What cultural and socioeconomic variations will there be? Remember that predictions should be based on evaluation and interpretation of past data and history, and that family planning is a cognitive and psychosocial issue as well as a biosocial one.