

Lifespan Development

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LIFESPAN DEVELOPMENT

Professor of Psychology Dr. Mark Christians ('85) has taught the Lifespan Development course more than 110 times since he began teaching at Dordt in 2000.

Does he ever get tired of teaching the same course multiple times a semester? Hardly. Christians says that, although the class remains similar in structure and the material doesn't change much, he is energized by the new students he meets in each class.

Each semester Christians leads his students through an exploration of human growth and maturation from conception to death.

"Every class is different," Christians says, noting that the students in each section are different from the ones he's taught 10 and 15 years ago and even different from the ones he saw the previous semester. "It's always a new learning environment that leads us into 'aha' moments as I help them to unfold and pull back the layers."

In the Lifespan Development course, Christians and his students pay special attention to the cognitive, language, physical, spiritual, social, and emotional development of infants, toddlers, adolescents, young adults, middle adults, late adults—people at every stage of life.

Many students take the course to meet a core requirement or to fulfill their major or minor credits, but Christians also recognizes a deeper curiosity that drives students to sign up for Lifespan Development.

"There's an interest in their own development—Lifespan Development has an allure," says Christians. "They gain a better understanding of human development, which can help them to be better nurses, psychologists, social workers, businesspersons, parents, coaches, and more. They want to gather more information about how God has created us and see how it all fits together."

Christians incorporates unique activities into his assignments to keep students interested. These include interviewing



JAMIN VERVELDE ('99)

"One thing that excites me about psychology is behavior. It is interesting to try to determine why people do what they do," says Dr. Mark Christians.

one middle-aged adult and one late adulthood person as well as writing a short autobiography of their own development from prenatal days to early adulthood.

Another valuable tool Christians uses is to invite guests; for more than 20 years, he has asked parents with infants to come to his class. Students ask the parents a series of questions about pregnancy, delivery, and infant development milestones. Students also check the baby's motor development, reflexes, and emotions through a series of exercises.

Kyle Lindbergh ('14), assistant men's basketball coach, took Lifespan Development when he was a Dordt student. He remembers watching a baby undergo a reflex test in class.

"In college, the last thing I thought about was getting married and having kids," he says. "But 10 years later, here I am—it seems like a long time, but it goes really quickly."

Lindbergh and his wife, Kara ('14), along

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— Dr. Mark Christians, professor of psychology

"The autobiography gives them a chance to focus inwardly and reflect on their own development, and the interviews push them to notice how other image-bearers of God exhibit behavior, personality, and thinking," explains Christians.

with two of their three children have participated in Christians' infant-and-parent exercise twice in the past few years.

"There's a lot to early parenthood, and some days are very long and hard. I think if students understand what a pregnancy and delivery can entail, they might be a little more compassionate toward new mothers," says Kara. "I like to bring my kids and talk through the early stages of infant development because some college-age students have no idea what it's like to be around a baby or what pregnancy can be like. A baby cannot be brought into this world without God's handiwork, and talking through some of the miracles of pregnancy and birth as well as a baby's development shows how God is in control."

The information that the parent shares is kept confidential, but sometimes infants can become minor Dordt celebrities simply by being who they are.

"One time our family was eating at a local restaurant, and a student came up to us and said, 'Is that Miles? He's so cute!'" laughs Kyle.

Students appreciate the activity. "What I enjoyed most about the class was being able to observe a toddler," says Lorelai Parreira, a freshman. "It was great to take a break from a structured classroom setting and be able to watch the child take in their new surroundings. Since it was a full classroom, it was quite a unique experience."

Christians, too, keeps learning to stay abreast of changes in the field of psychology as it relates to lifespan development. Much has been discovered about brain structure in the past 20 years. Although Psychologist Abraham

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory remains foundational and relevant, he says, there are plenty of new and interesting things to learn, even if students don't dream of becoming a psychologist post-graduation.

COUNSELOR TO PROFESSOR

Prior to being a professor, Dr. Mark Christians served as the Director of Personal Counseling at Dordt University from 1989 until 2000.

"When it comes to brain hemisphere activity, we used to think that certain actions stemmed from the right brain or the left brain, but in recent years we've found that there is so much neuroplasticity and communicating across hemispheres that it's not as black-and-white as saying,

'that's from the left brain,'" explains Christians.

There have also been changes in the way psychologists think about childhood trauma and the impact it has on brain chemistry, says Christians.

"Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACE, is a growing field looking at how any potential or real traumatic event negatively impacts development between birth and 17 years of age,"

explains Christians. "Experts are looking at these markers and considering how they impact behavior, thinking, emotions—the whole self."

Several years ago, Christians was part of a summer research project funded by the National Science Foundation that studied post-Chernobyl mental health and ACEs in the context of Ukrainian families. He likes to share about those experiences in Lifespan Development, to give students a look at how what they're learning in the classroom can be applied to real-world circumstances.

"We don't need to think about our spinal cord or our lungs to move and breathe. As parents, we know how to respond to our infants and kids when they cry or want to be held," says Christians.

Still, he hopes the class gives students a new appreciation for the complexity of the human experience. "We are wonderfully made, and we're also impacted by sin, but we still can learn good ways to relate to one another. I want students to use these insights to be active kingdom citizens in whatever roles they find themselves one day."

SARAH MOSS ('10)



After collecting data, students must then write an individual report explaining what they learned from their interactions with infants and parents.

DORDT ARCHIVES