The Child Development Overview

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Growing With Your Child
The Art of Great Parenting
What Is Child Development?

Child Development is the science of understanding children through the development of their bodies, minds and social relationships. While there are many different theories of Child Development, each theory offers useful insights in understanding children and their behavior.

While children may look like miniature adults, they aren’t entirely the same animal. There are significant differences in children’s bodies and minds that make them behave differently from adults. They perceive and experience the world in unique ways. By understanding these differences, we as adults can better grasp a child’s experience of the world and of themselves. Through this understanding, it is possible to engage children more appropriately based on their experience instead of ours.

Some Things to Keep in Mind

While children grow physically in a linear fashion, they do not develop linearly. Each child develops uniquely, and at a different rate. Things that are easy for one child may be difficult for another, and children may return again and again to developmental issues that previously appeared to be resolved. Just because a kid ‘got it’ yesterday doesn’t necessarily mean they will ‘get it’ today. Like it or not, learning is a process that requires patience, consistency and encouragement.

Spirals are a more appropriate model for children’s intellectual and social-emotional development. Just like traveling on a spiral path, children often return to skills they had (to varying degrees) acquired and cultivated during previous stages of their development. As they grow kids circle back to various skills and concepts they’d been exposed to in earlier stages, and understand them from a new perspective. In this way, children continually revisit and refine aspects from each developmental stage.

This spiraling process allows children to ‘peel back the layers’, giving them an opportunity to integrate and comprehend various skills and concepts in more mature and complete ways. This same spiraling process is true for adults as well: What we understood yesterday we know differently today, and what we know today we will understand differently tomorrow.

How to Use Child Development

Child Development can be a powerful tool in the hands of parents, teachers and all others who work with youth. By understanding the arc of development, adults can see the world through a child’s eyes and understand things more as the child perceives and experiences them. This helps to frame appropriate expectations, and provides opportunities for more effective interactions with youth. By understanding child development, we as adults can understand what a child is capable of and how to best guide their behavior.

*It should be noted that developmental stages are not distinct and absolute, and there is some overlap in the ages associated with each developmental stage described below*
Infancy (Birth up to 2 years)

The Body: During infancy, human beings develop more rapidly than at any other stage. At the moment of birth all five senses are activated, flooding the brain with a near-constant stream of information. Motor control and speech both develop gradually during this stage. The brain grows at an astonishing rate throughout infancy, establishing new neurological pathways.

The Mind: Research suggests that infants have no sense of self but rather identify with their primary caregiver, usually the mother. Much of an infant's psychological life revolves around integrating sensory stimuli and meeting various biological needs. Infants are not capable of abstract thought and do not have any significant sense of time.

Social Growth: Infants do not recognize other humans as independent selves and have no concept of the inner emotional lives of others. Infants' social relationships are entirely based on the meeting of their various physical and emotional needs, and exploring their immediate world. Infants often seek attention by crying to gratify their physical needs and to soothe their emotions.

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Infancy is characterized by total helplessness, and the primary question infants are engaged with is, “Is the world a safe place?” When an infant’s needs are met consistently, they gain a sense of security that becomes the foundation of later psychological development. In early infancy, sensory input is largely overwhelming. Over time, infants learn to integrate the constant stream of information from their senses. They are intrigued by the world around them and actively seek to understand things through their senses – particularly sight, touch and taste. (Hence putting everything in their mouths!) Sensory stimulation at this stage is directly correlated to brain development: The more an infant is stimulated and interacts with the world, the more their brain develops. Exposure to music, colors, textures, smells etc. is key.

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### Toddlers (18 months to 4 years)

#### The Body:
The toddler years are characterized by rapid physical growth and expanding physical abilities. As toddlers learn to walk, talk and manipulate objects in their environment, they begin to develop new ways of interacting with their world and are able to meet some of their own wants and needs. Brain development continues at a rapid pace as new neural pathways are formed through constant sensory stimulation and exposure to new experiences.

#### The Mind:
Toddlers begin to develop an independent sense of self, but continue to regard other people more as objects than as other beings with their own feelings and desires. Children at this stage are subject to their own emotional experiences, which are often intense and over which they have little control. Toddlers generally have very little sense of time, and remain primarily focused on what is immediately present.

#### Social Growth:
Toddlers are increasingly able to communicate their needs and wants through language, which expands their ability to interact with others. They constantly experiment with how their actions affect the people and things in their environment. Toddlers engage primarily in ‘parallel play’, playing next to or near other children engaged in similar activities, rather than engaging others in meaningful and substantive interaction (cooperative play).

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Toddlers are characterized by an increasing sense of self and a growing independence with which they are constantly experimenting. The primary question for toddlers is, “What will happen if I do this?” Toddlers master skills and concepts through repetition. A hallmark of this developmental stage is endless exploration and testing of boundaries. One minute they want to be held and for parents to help them do something, and the next they want to get down and do things by themselves. Parents will often observe toddlers looking over their shoulders when there’s any substantial distance between them, visually checking in with parents for reassurance. This confirmation helps them know that they are safe, while the freedom to venture out and explore develops greater self-confidence. These kinds of experiences support the development of a child’s ability to self-soothe, helping them to address their own internal emotional conflicts.

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**Child** (3 to 7)

**The Body:** Children have fast metabolisms and lots of energy, requiring a great deal of physical activity. They transition from focusing on gross motor skills to developing fine motor skills such as writing, coloring and cutting things out. Girls often show more interest in fine motor activities before boys. Life-long habits begin forming, particularly around food, sleep, personal hygiene and other activities such as reading and exercise.

**The Mind:** Children have an increasing need to initiate and complete actions toward a particular goal, indicating more purposeful play. Imaginative play is another crucial outlet that helps them make sense of themselves and the world. An expanded sense of time begins to develop, along with the capacity for symbolic and representative thought. Children of this age are very concrete thinkers. They begin to form firmer distinctions between fantasy and reality, and become more aware of themselves and others. The question “Did I do it right?” asserts itself more dominantly in children’s consciousness as they develop value judgments about themselves, others and their environments.

**Social Growth:** During this stage of development peer relationships become increasingly important. Children engage in more cooperative play, indicating stronger language skills and an evolving awareness of the self-hood of others. They learn to collaborate and build upon each other’s ideas, working toward mutually-chosen goals and objectives. Children continue to test both personal and externally-imposed boundaries regularly, thus developing a more sophisticated understanding of how their actions affect others.

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During this stage, children become noticeably more social creatures. Their verbal skills improve by leaps and bounds, opening up new possibilities for interaction with both peers and adults. Children’s self-awareness continues to grow, and they begin to understand that others have thoughts and feelings much as they do. This growing awareness helps them to perceive and even empathize with the inner emotional lives of others, which often extends to animals and other natural beings. Children at this age tend to enjoy concrete activities that involve sorting and categorizing, and direct their play with increasing purpose — often mimicking adults. Their high levels of energy demand equivalent levels of physical activity, nutrition and rest.

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Pre-Adolescent (7 to 13)

The Body: Pre-adolescents have largely mastered gross and fine motor skills and enjoy exercising these skills. They continue to have high energy levels and need regular outlets for this energy in order to sustain focus and attention. Hormonal changes leading to puberty begin at this stage, but may take years to fully manifest. Pre-adolescents are physically capable of providing for most of their own needs and enjoy the autonomy and independence that comes with doing so.

The Mind: Children of this age make clear distinctions between fantasy and reality. Imagination remains an extremely powerful part of play, and is a tool pre-adolescents use to help them understand and cope with the complexities of the “real world”. They have a sharper understanding of cause and effect, and a budding capacity for abstract thought. Pre-adolescents also begin to develop sexual awareness, and curiosity about both genders’ sexual characteristics is normal.

Social: Pre-adolescents become acutely aware of themselves and how they are perceived by others, resulting in more peer-conscious (and self-conscious) behavior. They are more capable of empathizing with others, and are better equipped to engage in meaningful social interactions. That being said, the social pecking order at school can cause pre-adolescents to be more defensive and reactive than empathetic. Social boundaries are continuously tested as pre-adolescents begin to figure out who they are and how they fit in with their peers, which can put a greater distance between parents and their increasingly independent children. Sexual awareness typically begins to emerge at this stage, resulting in significant shifts in gender relationships.

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Much of the pre-adolescent experience is occupied with resolving the increasing demands placed on them by parents, school, peers and society. As academic and social responsibilities intensify, there is often a longing for the perceived freedoms of either childhood or adulthood. Pre-adolescents maintain strong fantasy lives, and gradually develop a capacity for abstract thought. The pre-adolescent brain is better equipped to process new information through interaction, reflection and dialogue. Social relationships, group affiliation, gender and sexuality become increasingly important.
Adolescence (13 and up)

The Body: The body of an adolescent is more developmentally active than at any other stage except infancy. Hormonal changes brought on by puberty result in rapid and dramatic physical growth, and have significant impacts on psychology and social relationships. This rapid growth results in a dramatically increased need for both food and sleep. The “executive” part of the brain responsible for cognitive analysis and abstract thought isn’t fully developed until the age of 25, and explains why adolescents often struggle with things like organization, planning ahead, risk-assessment and impulse control.

The Mind: Much of the adolescent’s psychological experience is in response to the interplay between the rapid and often disconcerting changes occurring in their bodies, their evolving identities and their social lives. As adolescents try to integrate and adjust to these physical changes, brain development leads to new levels of self awareness and awareness of the inner lives of others. Adolescents are often characterized by considerable self-involvement as they explore their inner environment and go about the lengthy process of reconciling their selves with the world around them.

Social Growth: Adolescents are acutely socially aware, and social relationships are of central importance at this stage of development. They are deeply involved in the process of identity formation, often experimenting with different identities through changes in group affiliation, attire and overall interests. With a heightened awareness of the inner lives and opinions of others (coupled with a serious fixation on their own sense of self), adolescents are increasingly preoccupied with other people’s perceptions of them.

Adolescents are intensely social creatures as they go about the process of identity formation. This takes place on both internal and external levels. Teens are emotionally sensitive and reactive, and sometimes to take out their frustrations on those relationships that are indisputably the strongest (ie, parents). Much is learned through experimentation at this stage, and it is very important for teenagers to exercise independence in decision-making and identity formation.
What Happens Next

Although legally an adult at the age of 18, significant development continues through the age of 25. The brain continues to develop in significant ways, increasing the capacity for understanding cause and effect and assessing risk. Social skills continue to evolve, as does self-control and internal processes related to the regulation of emotions. Young adults go through considerable adjustment as they move from home to college and into the ‘real world.’ Parents play an important role as listeners and guides, and can make a significant contribution by allowing young adults to vent their frustrations and by helping them to find their own solutions to problems.

Where to Go From Here

Child development tells you not only what children of different ages are dealing with, but also what they are likely capable of. This helps to explain many ‘whys’ of child behavior, and is critically important in terms of framing appropriate expectations of youth.

Now that you have a better sense of the arc of development, what can you do with all this information? Start by reflecting on the developmental stage your child is in. What physical, psychological and social factors are they dealing with? What are their strengths, and what are they developmentally capable of?

Next, reflect on the expectations you have for your child. Are they developmentally appropriate? Have you made these expectations lovingly clear and helped your child think of ways to meet these expectations given their abilities?

One of the most useful things you can do as a parent is to try to understand and respect your child’s point of view. Knowledge of child development will help you maintain a more comprehensive view of their needs at different stages, and will guide you in nurturing their physical, psychological and social growth.

Remember that progress through these stages occurs in a spiral, and that where they are today is not a hard-and-fast indication of where they will be tomorrow. The greatest gift you can give your child is understanding. With your patience, support and belief in them, your child will develop a strong foundation for a healthy and successful adulthood.

To Learn More

Growing With Your Child has a series of blogposts about child development that discuss each stage in more depth and provide more information about working with children of different ages. You can find these and many more resources to support you and your family at www.GrowingWithYourChild.com
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