

Growing Together

preschooler development

Being able to wait their turn, not throwing a hard puzzle across the room in frustration, and staying in bed at night are all behaviors that children must learn. There are many factors that may affect a child's development and behaviors:

- Family — culture reinforcement of behaviors, habits, and levels of support.
- Environment — the child's family, school, church, relatives, friends, media, and caregivers.
- Thought patterns — the child's ability to make choices, cooperate, make decisions, and recognize outcomes.
- Social interactions — the child's temperament, sense of self-control, self-esteem, and motivation.
- Physical capabilities and traits of the child, including size and abilities.
- Moral maturity, indicated by the child's developing sense of values, knowing right from wrong, and attitudes toward people with different values.

The Child as a Whole

Children usually grow up in some form of family, surrounded by a variety of people who try to provide a warm and secure environment. Understanding how children develop will help parents and other caregivers know what to expect. Although different areas of development (intellectual, physical, social, and moral) should be considered, the goal is to treat a child as a whole person who needs to develop in all areas.

The Body

Children generally grow bigger as they grow older. But even this simple statement may lead to some surprises. The biggest

surprise for most is that at birth infants are nearly one-third of their adult height; by age 2 they are almost half as tall as they will be as adults. Another interesting aspect is that from birth to maturity, children grow in spurts rather than at a constant rate.

Physical development is complex. Development of skills in one area affects development in other areas. Adult expectations may be influenced by a child's size and shape, attractiveness, and physical skills. Physical skills, or absence of them, can have a major effect on a child's self-concept.

The term *motor development* describes the complex changes in the child's body activities and movement, such as walking, running, jumping, hopping, skipping,

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pushing, pulling, bending, grasping, throwing, catching, kicking, and other actions involved in receiving and moving objects. By the time most children reach 6 or 7 years of age nearly all of their basic motor skills have developed.

During this period, a child's thinking is extremely self-centered. Children see the world only from their own perspective, focusing on themselves and having difficulty understanding other points of view.

Plenty of regular exercise and nutritious foods promote healthy physical development, prevent heart problems, and improve intellectual performance. On the other hand, researchers are finding that the combination of low physical activity and high-calorie/non-nutritious eating habits of children can lead to high-risk physical problems and disease.

The Mind

Learning, remembering, deciding, planning, and organizing are taken for granted by adults. In young children, these complicated skills occur at different rates and follow a pattern. They are strengthened through good relationships in the family and community.

Children under age 2 have an incomplete and sometimes incorrect understanding of what is "real." This causes confusion when they try to make sense out of what they see and experience. For example, when a pet dies a young child may expect the pet to return. Children also combine words into what makes sense to them, such as calling a briefcase a "work purse" or a pancake a "flat cake."

During this period, a child's thinking is extremely self-centered. Children see the world only from their own perspective, focusing on themselves and having difficulty understanding other points of view. They do not sympathize with the feelings or needs of others.

As they learn to talk, preschool children learn to name objects and identify pictures, labels and symbols; they combine words, discuss, negotiate and make decisions with playmates.

As their thinking skills advance, preschoolers begin to use simple classification (putting similar items together by color, shape, etc.). More advanced classification and identification follow. An example might be: animals include cows, chickens, and dogs; or birds include robins, eagles, and blue jays.

During infancy, early language consists of cooing, gurgling, babbling, and eventual repetitious letter combinations (ga-ga-ga). The first word marks a major milestone and is spoken sometime around 10 to 15 months. Children generally know 50 or more words by 16 to 20 months. By age 2, a child may know as many as 300 words. Parents who have awaited the first word now take pride in their child's ability to name things.

Imitation is important to the child's ongoing language development. Children will repeat what they hear and apply voice tones used by others.

Two-way conversation is important as language ability grows. Reading with children, patiently listening, and talking with them help children learn language. The use of open-ended "what if ..." or "how does ..." questions help to raise a child's thinking and language abilities to higher levels. This builds decision-making and critical-thinking skills.

Social and Emotional Development

Developing a personality and becoming socially adapted are perhaps among the most baffling aspects of child development. A child's development of self-esteem, self-control, and personality depends greatly upon interactions from within the environment (the family, the neighborhood).

Personal development begins with a basic sense of trust during infancy. During toddlerhood, children usually complete the

stage of trust. Trust allows toddlers to explore their world independently. Toddlers begin to see themselves as individuals who are separate from their parents and able to explore freely.

Independence is the primary emotional stage during the preschool years. During this stage, toilet training and language development usually occur. Being sensitive to the child's fragile sense of independence allows for healthy development as opposed to developing a sense of shame or doubt (see "Preschool Stages of Personal Development" box). Responding to acts of normal development with severe punishments or by making the child feel guilty can be harmful, particularly during this stage.

Developing a "sense of self" also follows a sequence. At about 18 months of age children realize that they are separate from their parents, but they are not aware that who they are will remain so throughout their lives. This recognition does not occur until between ages 5 and 7. This is why we hear young girls say, "When I'm a boy, I'll ..." or children say, "When I'm a baby again, I'll ..."

Developing a sense of self-control is also slow. Behaviors such as whining in check-out lines, physical outbursts against siblings, and inability to sit still when waiting are examples of loss of control. Although these actions try adult patience, they are normal and predictable behaviors in young children. When children are able to begin talking about the reasons for their behaviors, they are better able to practice self-control; this does not happen until about 7 or 8 years of age.

Mastering independence paves the way for the next stage — developing a healthy sense of ambition, drive, or motivation. Children who learn to initiate activities by exploring, questioning, and investigating develop skills that will be important for school activities. Children learn to make decisions when they are given chances to think and figure out simple problems. Giving children examples and chances to choose among options and possible solutions are ways to help children learn to make decisions. Skills in making decisions

will prove valuable in the school years and adulthood.

Moral Development

Moral development also follows a pattern. In the early stages, the child simply tries to avoid punishment. An older preschooler proceeds through a very self-centered stage with decisions based on self-satisfaction and "what's in it for me" actions. In later stages, children develop a greater concern for being "good" and doing what is socially acceptable.

The Importance of Play

Sometimes parents of preschoolers question why all their children seem to do is play. Play is a child's work, and learning how to play is essential. Through play, children learn many important social skills while reducing tension and pressure. Children play for play's sake and focus on discovery. Adults can guide play, but must

Preschool Stages of Personal Development

<i>Life phase</i>	<i>Stage</i>
Infancy	Developing trust, getting trust, or giving trust VS. learning to mistrust
Toddlerhood	Exploring independence safely VS. developing feelings of shame or doubt for trying new things
Early childhood	Taking initiative by starting activities or pretending during play VS. developing guilt for trying
School age	Being industrious by making things and wanting to do things together VS. developing feelings of being "put down" and inferior

Individuals resolve one stage before comfortably moving on to the next stage.

(From Erik Erikson's *Psychosocial Stages of Development*)

allow children to become involved in their play.

Frequent interruptions and suggestions by adults are frustrating and discouraging to

things that do not make sense to them. Play helps them to make adjustments, question, and curiously explore what they do not understand. This moves children to a higher level of thinking, helping them master many skills.

Learning is a process. Parents and teachers who understand the importance of the steps involved in learning are better able to encourage children to enjoy learning. Learning should meet the needs of an individual, as opposed to creating an environment where all children follow an adult's lead. Research shows that through exploration and choice, children will be more independent, better decision makers, have higher self-esteem, and develop a desire for learning without being forced to learn.

Children need consistency with reasonable limits to create security in knowing what to expect. Children will learn to make decisions through practicing the exercise of choice (choosing clothing, activities, snack foods, storybooks, etc.) By learning to make good decisions, children can

begin to depend on themselves rather than others for answers to problems.

Key Points

There are many parts of a growing child:

Children grow in spurts.

Activity for the body helps the mind grow.

Young children are self-centered and cannot see your point of view.

Children first learn to name things, then learn to put like things together.

Talking to and reading to children helps them learn new words.

Ask children questions to help them think, not just yes or no questions.

Developing trust in adults is a basis for all learning to get along with others.

Play is how children learn.

Suggested Teaching Activities

- Discuss funny things 1- to 3-year-olds say and interpret why they use these words. Is it developmental? Symbolic? Learned from environmental cues?
- Practice using open-ended questions to interact in a play situation after reading a story: "What do you think would happen if ...? or "What would you have done?"
- Practice or role play using open-ended questions to encourage problem solving and as a discipline technique: "How can we solve this?" or "What could we do?"
- Discuss how to provide opportunities for making choices at ages 2 to 5 (clothing, snack foods, activities).

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