

Child development: summary of stages

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Birth to two years

Birth to two months

- At birth, the brain cells are ready to respond to sensory input, such as sights and sounds.
- The baby's brain resembles the adult brain though it is only 25% of its weight.
- The process of developing connections continues as the dendrites and the synapses attached to each neuron continue to multiply.
- Reflexes include grasping, rooting and sucking the breast.
- Baby responds to stimulation that follows quickly from some action, for example, when the baby's arm movements cause a mobile to turn around.
- At the beginning, the infant orients towards the adult without discriminating between people.
- The new-born shows an intent regard for faces and, within a few days of birth, appears to recognise the mother's face.
- Parents play a significant role in facilitating sensori-motor play by adjusting their actions to complement what the baby is doing. This is called **co-regulation** – a social process through which parent and baby dynamically alter their actions in harmony with one another.
- Baby engages in rhythmical and playful actions, often in partnership with the caregiver.
- The baby shows a preference for attending to people.
- Indicates recognition of the parent's voice.
- Shows an intent regard for faces.

- Parents and babies can hold one another's attention; for example, they engage in subtle, mutually regulated exchanges, defined by psychologists as **primary intersubjectivity**.
- Babies begin to smile.
- Babies also begin to imitate the adult's facial expression.
- Babies enjoy songs and rhythmic games.

Two to six months

- The infant shows preference for familiar people.
- Baby's smiling is now co-ordinated with that of the parent/caregiver and can be comforted by them.
- Baby is now more responsive to familiar adults than to strangers.
- The parent needs to reassure the baby when in the presence of unfamiliar adults.
- Baby appears to expect the parent's responses to be in tune with his/hers and may become upset if they are not by frowning or looking away.
- Baby can communicate emotions like sadness and joy.
- Baby can lift his/her head to 90 degrees from prone position by around four months.
- Baby's gaze can follow an object from side to side.
- By four months, baby has simple action schemes, such as grasping a rattle.
- By six months, baby can keep head level when pulled into a sitting position and can communicate with sounds.
- By six months, baby's visual acuity is around 20/60.
- Baby shows growing interest in playful behaviour accompanied by babbling.
- Baby enjoys imitating caregiver's actions, e.g. clapping or opening the mouth.
- Baby produces more vowels and some consonants rather than cooing.
- *Echolalia* appears where the baby frequently repeats sounds, such as "dadadadad" or "mummmummm".
- Baby can shout for attention and scream with rage; sometimes refuses to look at parent when annoyed or upset.

Six to nine months

- The baby shows ability to imitate parents' actions, such as hand gestures and sticking out tongue.
- Can stand up with support.
- Emergent sense of the connection between the bodies of self and other.
- The baby maintains proximity to preferred adults; crawls after them when they leave the room; begins to show wariness of strangers.
- Baby demonstrates more intense attachment behaviour.
- Emergent understanding of emotions of others; can tell the difference between happy, sad and angry facial expressions.

- Emergence of separation anxiety, by eight months, the baby needs reassurance after short separations.
- Mind-minded parenting continues to be important.
- Parent and baby have well-established conversational routines and games with objects, in order to sustain communication and interaction.
- Each movement is adjusted to the next, providing an example of **co-regulation of intentions** during the communication process. These shared experiences foster feelings of security in the baby.
- **Intersubjectivity** continues out of the many playful exchanges between parent and baby; these games and routines are a form of mutually enjoyable communication in which each gesture and expression is new and meaningful.
- Baby can imitate social stimuli, can clap and copy facial expressions.
- Baby's smiling is now co-ordinated with that of the parent/caregiver, can express positive and negative emotions.
- Can stand up with support.

Nine to 12 months

- Baby uses referential gaze to direct the parent's attention to interesting objects.
- Can clearly differentiate between familiar and strange adults.
- Responds differently to male and female adults.
- Can clearly 'read' parents' visual expression and can use this as a cue for enjoying new experiences.
- Baby's visual acuity reaches adult level (20/20).
- Baby shows differentiation of relationships between what he/she tastes, touches, hears and feels.
- Is learning through playful activity that objects have different properties and reactions.
- Continues to experiment with familiar and unfamiliar objects.
- Responds positively to a wide range of toys, textiles, wooden and plastic bricks, paper and cardboard, natural and everyday objects.
- Responds positively to varied sensor-motor opportunities to explore, touch and feel.
- Appears to understand that objects have a separate existence from him/herself.
- Moves around by crawling and can stand when supported.
- By 12 months, some can walk by holding onto furniture.
- Increased mobility gives baby increasing independence since he/she can now move away from objects that are annoying or unpleasant.
- Shows capacity to entertain him/herself with familiar objects, toys and people.
- Shows intentionality by deliberately manipulating objects or using gestures to communicate needs.

One to two years

- First words appear at around 12 months.
- These are followed by two- and then three-word utterances.
- Verbal age and gender labels, such as “mummy”, ‘daddy’, ‘baby’, ‘boy’, ‘girl’ begin to be used correctly.
- Reactions to social situations are strongly influenced by the response of the parent, this is known as **social referencing**.
- Recasting the child’s sentences in a conversational way is more effective than correcting them.
- The child can engage in teasing and can anticipate parent’s reactions to forbidden behaviour, e.g. saying playfully, ‘That’s naughty!’
- Often children at this age engage in strong protests and even tantrums when they do not get their own way.
- Fantasy play emerges from around 12 to 15 months. This early pretend play is literal and depends on real objects, such as bricks and toys.
- By two years, a single brain cell (neuron) can have as many as 10,000 connections with other neurons; these connections help the child to develop behaviourally and cognitively.
- By the end of this stage, can communicate desires and wishes verbally and non-verbally.
- Can demonstrate pro-social, helpful behaviour; indicates some awareness of other people’s mental states.
- Can talk about own feelings as well as those of others.

Two to five years

Sensory and physical

- The child is more independent in knowing when they need to eat, drink and go to the toilet.
- Develops physical strength through more active games, e.g. by pushing and pulling toys, running around in games, kicking balls.
- Cooperates in physical activities with other children – siblings or friends at playgroup.
- Develops greater sensory awareness of colours, shapes, quantities and sizes through water and sand play.
- Typically shows curiosity about own bodily functions; explores own body, including their own genitals.

Communication and interaction

- Three-to-four-word utterances appear by 24 to 27 months.
- This is followed by a rapid increase in prepositions (“up”, “down”), irregular verb endings (“written”), questions (“why is doggy eating?”) and negative (“I no want it”).
- Rhyming and alliteration as evident in nursery rhymes and songs are very enjoyable to children at this stage.
- By 36 months most children have a vocabulary of around 1,000 words.

- By 36 months, most children can talk about their own beliefs (e.g. "I think that the biscuit is in the cupboard").
- Child develops preference for particular companions.
- Shows early signs of cooperative play, for example in the Wendy house.
- Enjoys language play, such as telling jokes and riddles.
- Can take different roles in play, such as doctor/patient, mother/baby.
- Friendship is increasingly important; shows grief when separated.
- Some children report the presence of an imaginary friend.
- Engages in play-fighting showing that it is fun by putting on a 'play face' and through smiling and laughter.
- Theory of mind continues to develop.

Cognition and learning

- The child's thinking is still pre-operational and egocentric; finds it hard to grasp that objects retain their qualities even in different conditions.
- Object play emerges, such as stacking bricks, doing simple jigsaws. Much is solitary play but it is a precursor of play with other children.
- Fantasy play emerges involving toys and dolls as characters where stories are enacted with scripts and differentiated characters. Children give these characters different voices to demonstrate individuality.
- Play with dolls, puppets and figures facilitates conversational dialogues and develops the capacity to take the perspective of different characters in a situation.
- Play is increasingly imaginative and goes beyond play with objects that are literally there.
- From three to five years, the child can increasingly talk about inner states and show an evolving understanding of the relation between other people's feelings and their actions.
- They also show growing understanding of the rules of their family and community.
- They can now differentiate photographs of adults and children into categories by age and gender. Their curiosity is boundless and there are many "why?" and "what?" questions.
- By four to five years, can verbalise the beliefs of others and acknowledge that these may be different from their own.
- Most four to five-year-olds can pass the Sally-Anne test of theory of mind.
- Everyday interactions and imaginative play play an enormous part in developing the child's theory of mind. Inevitable conflicts between siblings give opportunities for the child to learn about sharing, cooperation, taking turns and learning about the social and moral rules of the family.

Social, mental and emotional health

- Around 65% of children have an imaginary companion whose presence can last up to 10 years or so. These "friends" offer help when the child is troubled by difficult feelings and by problems with relationships, and take the blame when things go wrong.
- Can both include and exclude other children, for example, "I'm not your friend today!"

- Siblings and other children in their family and community network play a very important role in the child's social and emotional development. The majority of children grow up in families where there is at least one other brother or sister. Interactions among siblings help children to develop understanding of the perspective of others.
- The daily negotiations with a brother or sister (and with friends in day-care or nursery) enhance the child's growing awareness of the needs of others and the nature of relationships with others.
- The child is beginning to take account of the interplay between self and others with the **internal working model of relationships** playing a mediating role.
- Tantrums and defiance are typical of this age, as well as jealousy of siblings and friends; however, the frequency of tantrums declines from three to five years as the child becomes more able to regulate negative emotions, such as anger, fear and sadness.
- They begin to use words depicting inner states, e.g. 'I want', 'Look', 'I see', 'I taste'.

Five to seven

Sensory and physical

- During infancy and childhood, the brain generates many more synapses than it needs and then, at the onset of adolescence, begins the process of synaptic pruning.
- Play continues to promote healthy physical development, through skipping games, football, dancing and running.
- Play fighting takes place among friends and is distinct from real fighting through its playful quality and lack of aggression; play fighting is often accompanied by laughter and a 'play face'.
- In a small number of vulnerable or socially rejected children, play fighting may escalate into real fighting.
- Games with rules (e.g. skipping games, hide-and-seek, football, marbles) are increasingly important to children at this stage; this type of play helps to develop a sense of mastery and confidence in their own skills.
- The child shows ongoing interest in body parts; demonstrates some sexual play and may ask questions about sexual concepts and behaviour.
- The child is making an important shift in thinking from the **sensori-motor stage** to the **intuitive stage**. In other words, the child is becoming less reliant on the sensori-motor qualities of the environment and more on his/her own **mental** representations of the world.

Communication and interaction

- The child engages with the process of learning to read and write.
- Literacy skills can be extended through word games, role play, socio-dramatic play, considering the size and shape of letters, exploring words and meanings through reading of books adapted to the interests of the child.

- The child's interpersonal communication shows some awareness of the needs and wishes of peers; can bargain and compromise in social situations.
- The child becomes aware of their own sociometric status within the peer group.
- Child shows capacity to play cooperatively with others, for example, by sharing toys and other resources.
- Child can fit into small groups; shows some understanding and awareness of other children's viewpoints.

Cognition and learning

By this stage, the child is developing mental operations of ordering, classifying and quantifying in a more systematic way, though is still unaware of the principles that underlie these operations.

- The development of a **theory of mind** – that is, the capacity to understand how other people may be thinking and feeling – is extremely important at this stage, though it may be years before they fully realise that the mind is always an interpreter of reality.
- Once children discover that other people may have different views of the world from their own, they have made an important step towards logical reasoning that they will need in later life.
- Children show some awareness of belonging to a particular cultural group and can distinguish between their own cultural group and that of others.
- There is an emergent sense of gender identity as expressed in describing a range of gender roles and relationships.
- They also show growing understanding of the rules of their family and community.

Social, mental and emotional health

- The child can usually deal with separation from parent/caregiver; typically is reunited at the end of the school day in a cheerful, affectionate way.
- The child can express awareness of different kinds of relationship through narrative play, (e.g. with dolls and figures), expressing contrasting qualities such as happiness/sadness, trust/mistrust, affection/dislike.
- Demonstrates theory of mind by negotiating different characters and personalities in a range of settings.
- The child shows the capacity to form new relationships with adults, such as teachers and classroom assistants, as well as peers.
- But bullying can emerge at this age and causes target children distress and loss of confidence.
- Children have both friends and enemies.
- Imaginary friends are present for some children.
- Keeps a balance between the secure base of familiar people and situations on the one hand and the willingness to develop new relationships and explore new experiences.

- The child shows preferences for some peers over others; can play cooperatively, e.g. by sharing toys.

Seven to 11 years

Sensory and physical

- Can accommodate to the needs of others, for example during team sports.
- Continuing interest in sexual play, like kissing and flirting.
- Some girls start menstruating by nine years.
- Before the end of this stage, adults can discuss some of the physical changes that will take place during puberty and in understanding messages about sexuality from the media or from their own social networks.
- Child continues to demonstrate pro-social behaviour through cooperative group work.
- Child shows ability to play fairly and cooperatively in team sports, informal games and online gaming.
- Self-esteem can be specific to one domain, such as skill at sport, or global, by referring to the whole person.

Communication and interaction

- Friendship is increasingly reciprocal so can deal with everyday conflicts and begin to understand that there may be different ways of looking at a disagreement.
- Very aware of gender-appropriate behaviour and self-regulatory behaviour appears; tends to identify with same-sex peers.
- Can mediate in conflict situations, for example, can intervene to protect more vulnerable peers who are being bullied.
- Is increasingly able to deal with social relationships online, including cyberbullying and begins to be aware of the risks in cyberspace while still being increasingly involved in friendship groups online.
- Some are able to take on responsibilities in school, for example, the school council.
- Child is likely to need support and guidance in understanding the costs and benefits of relationships formed online or on social networking sites.
- Child can work cooperatively outside immediate friendship group.
- Child shows more advanced capacity to reflect on relationships, for example can explain why people fall out and can suggest how they might resolve interpersonal difficulties.

Cognition and learning

- Child makes a shift to concrete operational thought where he/she can consider several aspects of a task simultaneously; understands, for example, that objects retain the same properties even when the shape is changed.

- Conservation of number appears at five to six years; conservation of weight at seven to eight years and conservation of volume at ten to 11 years.
- Child becomes more skilled at classifying and ordering.
- Child is developing a more complex **theory of mind**. For example, is able to reflect on the ups and downs of relationships; can describe relationship difficulties like rejection, neglect, exclusion; shows some empathy for those who have such experiences; can give examples of qualities such as 'being fair' and 'being someone I can trust'.
- Can describe in more complex detail than at earlier stages the complexities of friendships and relationships; begins to articulate more abstract qualities such as trust and intimacy; begins to be very selective about friends on basis of shared interests and values.

Social, mental and emotional health

- Child can increasingly communicate inner feelings and emotional states; can also communicate judgements of self by others; sometimes this is done indirectly through drama and play.
- Continues to learn about how to manage difficult emotions; can learn more sophisticated ways of reading social cues in others.
- Child shows capacity to deal with conflicts in relationships and to resolve them in a range of ways and can mediate in disputes.
- Can join in discussions in groups: takes turns, listens respectfully, behaves confidently in the group.
- Child demonstrates growing capacity for empathy towards peers in distress; is able to show kindness and expresses concern for peers in distress.
- Learns about bullying and some strategies for addressing it in their own class/school.
- Children at this stage are able to use more complex language to express their emotions and to describe what other children might be feeling in a similar situation.
- Self-esteem is strongly influenced by the child's perceived competence in a variety of domains and in their experiences of social support from both adults and the peer group.

11 to 14 years

Sensory and physical

- Onset of puberty, physical and hormonal changes continue from around ten years until mid-adolescence.
- The outward signs of puberty appear with the onset of menstruation in girls and the emergence of pubic hair in boys, but also many other changes in the body.
- Growing interest in sexual activity. Solo sex/masturbation is common and there is some experimentation with different partners.

- Shows awareness of romantic/sexual relationships. Typically at this stage romantic relationships are often swayed by peer group attitudes, but show emergent understanding of ways in which romance and intimacy integrate with sexual feelings and emotions.
- Demonstrate some awareness of risks from partner violence, especially in context of pressure to be sexually active.
- Becomes aware of emerging sexual orientation. Demonstrates knowledge of risks and benefits of 'coming out' as gay, lesbian or bisexual.
- Has some knowledge of health risks involved in excessive use of alcohol or drugs, or 'initiation' practices such as body-piercing and tattoos.

Communication and interaction

- At this stage there is growing awareness that friendship involves mutual concern and shared values; the young person can describe his/her capacity to resolve conflicts within relationships, for example by becoming involved in peer support action.
- Some begin to engage in anti-social activities and risky behaviour; they will seek out cliques and gangs that reinforce this behaviour.
- Some show capacity to deal with peer pressure, for example, pressure to engage in unwanted sexual activity. Some know about a range of strategies to deal with online harassment from peers, for example, when compromising photographs are posted online.
- Emergent capacity to develop responsibility and autonomy in social networks, online and offline. Aware of boundaries between private and public spaces.
- Emergent awareness of conflict between pressure to conform to the opinions of peers and the need to form one's own independent views.

Cognition and learning

- Is making an important shift from concrete to formal operational thinking.
- Can approach a scientific problem with a hypothesis to check out.
- Can describe the process of dealing with peer pressure to experiment and take risks.
- At this stage, young people need to think logically about risks they may take while also being prepared to experiment with new experiences.
- Development of moral reasoning in some adolescents with growing concern for ethical issues in society.
- Some adolescents, however, demonstrate increased moral disengagement.

Social, mental and emotional health

- Dramatic changes in self-concept.
- Many young people experience anxiety about their body image. Boys are often anxious about penis size with unrealistic views on what is typical.

- A period of storm and stress for some, but for many the transition to adolescence is relatively smooth.
- Is developing the ability to describe the process of navigating a wider circle of friends, including online relationships.
- Identity formation is a key task.
- Young people typically feel intense anxiety about their friendships so need to learn to be aware that they are not alone in this. Can make some attempt to deal with this kind of social anxiety.
- Some begin to engage in anti-social activities and risky behaviour. They seek out cliques and gangs that reinforce this behaviour.
- Able to discuss conflicting feelings, such as anger, shame and guilt in context of relationships.

14 to 16 years

Sensory and physical

- The onset of puberty is marked by profound physical and hormonal changes in the body; sleep patterns are affected.
- There are also changes in the prefrontal regions of the brain leading to greater capacity to make decisions based on logical reasoning; however, there are wide individual differences in the timing of these changes.
- Early or late maturation can have psychological consequences, e.g. in earlier or later sexual activity; adolescents need reassurance that long-term this will not affect their sexuality or emotional health.
- Some young people, especially early-maturers, are more vulnerable in their social and emotional development.
- There is growing capacity to be more confident in resisting peer pressure to engage in practices unwillingly, such as early sexual activity, excessive use of alcohol and drugs.
- Within romantic/sexual relationships young people begin to value genuine affection and intimacy over status in the eyes of others.
- There is growing awareness of their own sexual orientation; they are also aware of difficulties in coming out.
- Self-labelling and 'coming out' as LGBT emerges from early adolescence or even before.

Communication and interaction

- Increasingly young people demonstrate the ability to navigate a wider circle of friends, including online relationships. They become more aware of the values and interests that they are looking for in friendships.
- They become more aware of cultural and ethnic identity; can describe in some detail attributes that distinguish different cultures and ethnicities.

- They can articulate the importance of becoming independent from parents/caregivers. For example, can describe greater reliance on the peer group.
- Secure relationships contribute to a stronger sense of self and identity.
- They can demonstrate more advanced capacity to develop responsibility and autonomy in social networks, online and offline. They have clearer boundaries between private and public spaces.
- They demonstrate more advanced awareness of conflict between pressure to conform to the opinions of peers and the need to form one's own independent views.

Cognition and learning

- Adolescents at this stage make a shift from the more concrete thinking of younger children to abstract reasoning.
- There is a growing capacity for logical reasoning and a greater ability to apply logic to decision-making and negotiation.
- They are increasingly open to dialogues and debates on moral, religious and political issues.
- They show the capacity to reflect on their own thinking processes.
- They demonstrate more sophisticated thinking in understanding the complexity of relationships.
- Some show advanced empathy for vulnerable peers. They are more reflective in dealing with relationship difficulties and can discuss abstract qualities such as intimacy and values in relationships.
- Adults continue play a critical role in fostering and encouraging young people to think and reason logically but the peer group plays is increasingly influential.

Social, mental and emotional health

- The self-concept evolves; adolescents typically pass through certain stages in identity formation.
- Cultural and ethnic identity is strongly influenced by the social context in which the young person is developing.
- Young people at this stage increasingly value intimate relationships. These can be very intense and break-ups are felt keenly. When friendship is betrayed in close relationships the effects on self-esteem can be very powerful.
- The young person is developing the capacity to be realistic about the quality of friendship and to demonstrate awareness of the emotional impact of separation and loss.
- Self-awareness becomes more complex and reflective (e.g. 'I try not to be selfish but I find it hard sometimes').
- Social anxiety that is typical at 11 to 14 tends to be reduced by this stage as the young person develops greater independence and autonomy from family and peers.
- There is some evidence that mental health difficulties are on the increase during adolescence.

