



Family Issues Facts

A FACT SHEET FOR FAMILIES AND PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH FAMILIES

Parenting: Growing with Your Child

Bulletin #4170

Becoming a Parent

Becoming a parent can be one of the hardest challenges you face as an adult. New parents often have happy feelings — love, wonder and joy. At the same time, they may feel tired, confused, angry or not skilled enough for this new “job.” This mix of feelings sometimes makes parents feel worse, not better. They may also be overwhelmed by the changes they must make and new things they must learn. New parents may feel unhappy with their life and need some “parenting” themselves.¹

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Becoming a parent and being a parent are stressful. You'll probably have many questions about whether you'll be a good parent. You might worry about leaving your child with a caregiver and wonder how much time a baby needs. Just like your child, you may go through your own stages of development as a parent.



Parenting Basics

Children need three kinds of basic experiences to grow and develop emotionally.² If we think of these as parts of a triangle or pyramid, it makes them easier to understand. At the bottom of the pyramid is **physical care**. Everyone, but especially children, need medical care, nutritious food, protection from abuse and neglect, and nurturing and support for growth.

On the middle level of the pyramid is the need for **ongoing,**

positive human relationships.

Positive relationships mean that people can share their feelings and expect to be understood and valued. It means, as a parent, that you are available for your child. It means your child can



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rely on you for time, interest, love and support. Your child needs to feel that, no matter what, you, as a parent are “on their side” — their own private cheerleader. This positive relationship is the cornerstone of the child’s first sense of security.

The middle level of the pyramid can be the most demanding. Even in the best of times, parent-child relationships can be trying. All parents have a limited amount of time, but this is especially true for single-parent families and two-parent working families. Plus, we often forget that adults are growing and changing every day, too. Sometimes the challenges adults face in their own development conflict with

being a nurturing parent.

At the top level of the pyramid is the need for **specific emotional experiences**. At each stage, your child has different emotional needs.

protection, a constant loving human relationship and specific emotional experiences — is a lot. It may not be easy to get all the adults in your child’s life to work

Parents have “images” (visual expectations) about how things are supposed to go and the way they and their children are supposed to act.

The emotional needs of a new baby are primarily to feel safe and comforted. These are very different from the needs of the 2 1/2-year-old for pretend play and use of language.

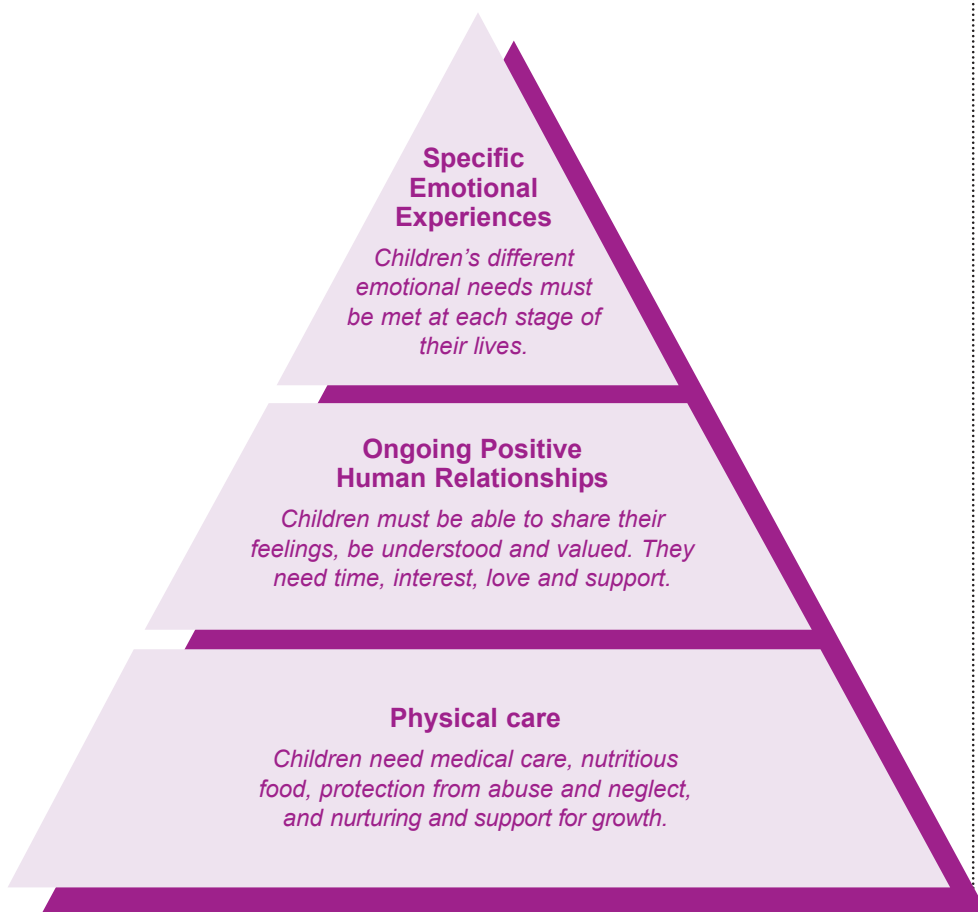
Providing all three basic experiences — physical care and

as a team — an “extended family” tied together by common goals and feelings. But all three levels are needed for your child to grow emotionally.

Stages of Parenthood

Do parents also go through stages of growth? Child development expert Ellen Galinsky thinks so. She has written a book called **The Six Stages of Parenthood**.³ In her interviews with over 200 parents, Galinsky found that parents have “images” (visual expectations) about how things are supposed to go and the way they and their children are supposed to act. Usually, parents are not aware they have these expectations or that they judge their behavior and their child’s behavior by these images. But even when these images are unconscious, we use them to measure our successes or failures as parents. If our behavior or our child’s behavior doesn’t match the image, then we may see this as a loss and feel angry and depressed. If the image and the behavior are the same, then we feel happy and successful.

These parenthood stages occur when parents modify or *change an image* to be closer to the real behavior, or they *change the behavior* to more closely match



Parenting Pyramid

the image. The parenthood journey is a personal story of “images failed and achieved.” The stages are times when we put much of our energy into sorting our images of what we think *should* happen and what is *really* happening. Let’s look at each of the stages more closely.

The first stage is the **Image-Making Stage**. It occurs during pregnancy. This is the time when parents think and form images about their new baby, what they will be like as parents, how the baby is going to effect their lives and the changes they will have to make.

The second stage, the **Nurturing Stage**, starts at birth and lasts until the baby is 18 months to 2 years — the age when “No” is your baby’s most important word. At this stage, parents compare their images of birth, of their child, and of themselves as parents with their actual experience.

The third stage is the **Authority Stage**. It starts at about the baby’s 2nd birthday and goes until the child is 4 or 5. In this stage, parents have to decide how strict or permissive to be, what kind of rules they need and how to set them, and what to do when the rules are broken.

The Interpretive Stage begins about the time the child enters preschool or school and ends with the start of adolescence — about age 11 or 12. In this stage, parents are concerned about how realistic they have been as parents and how they are helping their child develop positive self-concepts. They may worry about how to answer their child’s questions and what kind of values, knowledge and skills they want their child to have.

The Independent Stage is very similar to the Authority Stage but covers the child’s teenage years. Parents have the same questions about rules, strictness and permissiveness, but now need

different answers. As their child grows to adulthood, parents also need to start forming a different kind of relationship with their child.

The sixth and last stage is the **Departure Stage** — the time when the child leaves home. This is a stage of evaluation and, often, loss for the parents. Parents judge how well they have done and how their image of their child fits the reality. In addition, parents have to change their lives to let go of their child, to let their child become another adult.

*Prepared by Judith Graham,
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¹ B. A. Rothenberg. **Parentmaking**. Menlo Park: The Banster Press, 1983:88.

² Greenspan, S. and N. T. Greenspan, **The Essential Partnership** (NY: Penquin Books, 1989).

³ E. Galinsky. **The Six Stages of Parenthood**. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesely Publishing Company, Inc. 1987.



For more information on family issues,
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