



CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Body, Mind and Personality — How Preschoolers Develop

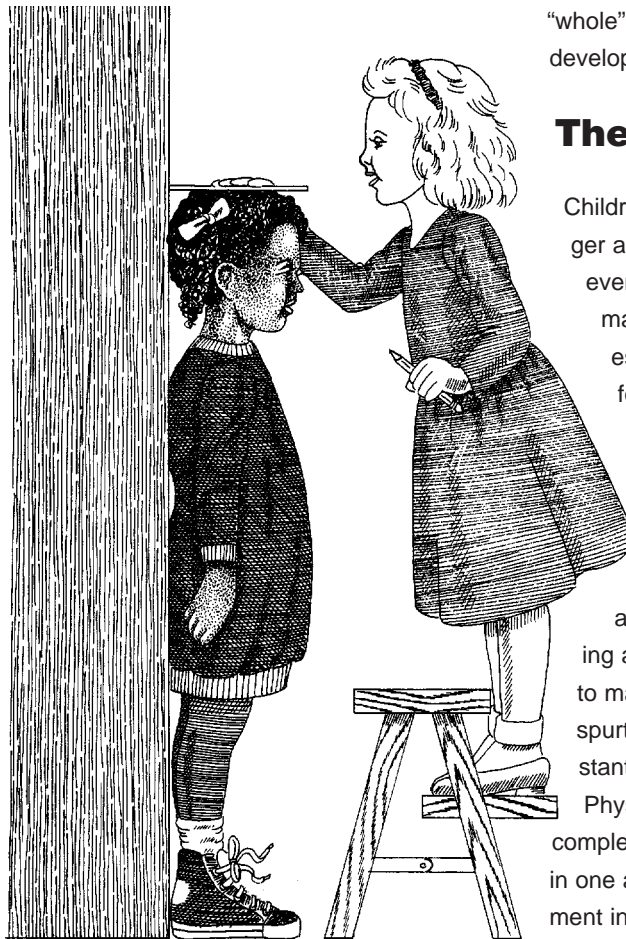
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(originally written by Karen DeBord)

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 care-givers 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.

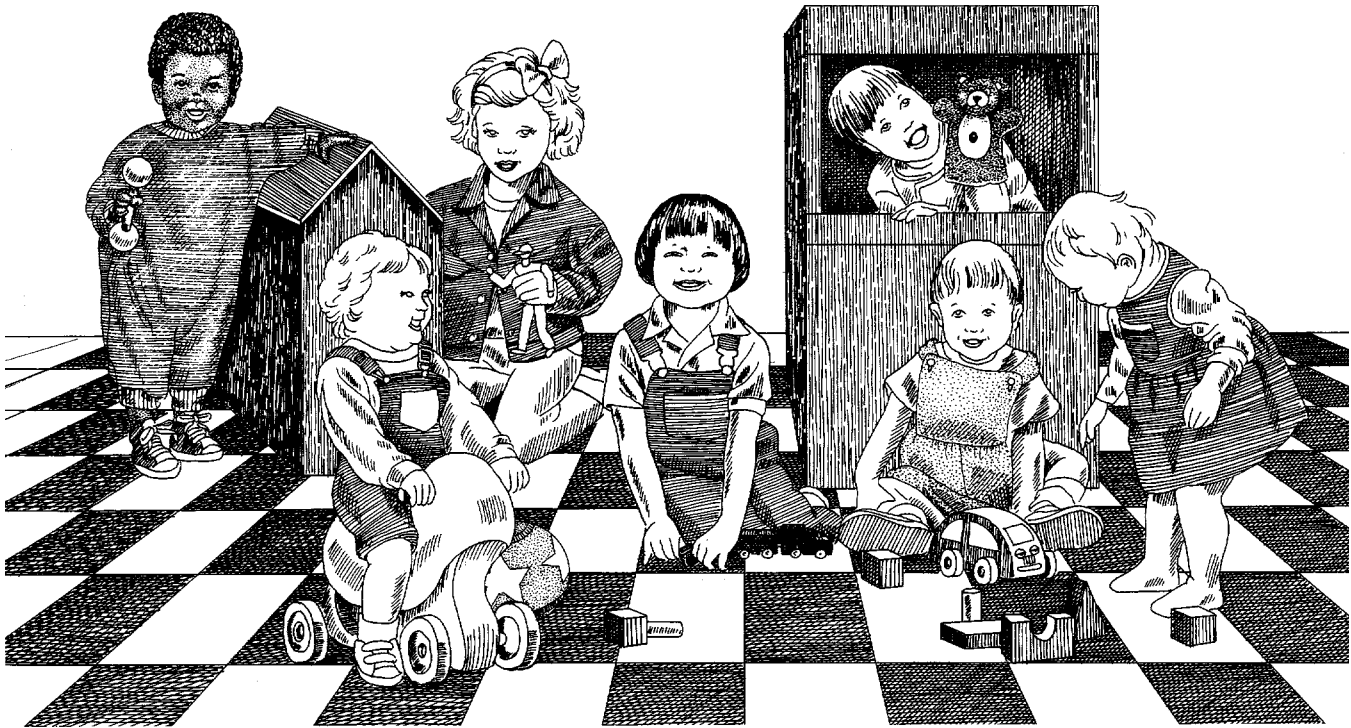
The body

Children generally grow bigger as they grow older. But even this simple statement may lead to some surprises. The biggest surprise for most people 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 influ-

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

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 in children can contribute 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 had 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 skill

Preschool stages of personal development.

Life phase	Stage
Infancy	Developing trust, getting trust, or giving trust vs. learning to mis-trust
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)

Social 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 venture freely.

Independence is a primary emotional stage during 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 devel-

opment 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, this is normal and predictable

behavior 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,” while being guided with examples and being able to choose among options and possible solutions. 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

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 choice at ages 2 to 5 (clothing, snack foods, activities).

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 allow children to become involved in their play.

Frequent interruptions and suggestions by adults are frustrating and discouraging to children, and they inhibit a child’s creativity. Using open-ended questions is one technique to guide a child’s play without interrupting her or him. Play is a process, not a product.

Through play children can master skills, learn to use symbols, increase their language ability and learn flexible problem solving. When children play, they discover 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, in the long run 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.



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