

Social and Emotional Development - The First Five Years

Children develop at different rates from each other, but go through the different developmental stages, usually in the same order.

Each child develops in his or her own unique way depending on their personality, how he or she is managed and family background. Children develop in their minds, bodies and feelings. A delay in one area can result in a delay in another.

The first three years of a child's life is a crucial period of rapid brain development. The human and environmental interactions that he/she receives during this time are two components that can affect their capacity to realize their full potential in life.

In the First Year

During the first year of life, the main developmental task for babies is to build feelings of safety, security and trust in other human beings. It is the quality of the relationships between the parents/carers and the baby that helps the baby to develop mentally, physically and emotionally. In the first year, babies become increasingly aware of their environment and start taking a more active part in their relationships with others. The relationship that the parents/carers have with the baby will be shaping their development as they learn to adapt to the world around them.

Babies will be working hard to understand their environment and the relationships with the adults around them, along with needing to be understood. Having adults who are consistently available for them will have helped them to learn to trust. Babies thrive when their emotional needs are met. They find comfort in touch and in the human face. Babies gain physical and emotional comfort from 'snuggling in'.

Babies eagerly explore their world and that includes themselves and other people around them. Infants are interested in people and learn to recognize primary caregivers. They enjoy the company of others and are sociable from birth.

From birth onwards, babies show a range of emotions. From about 7 months onward fear responses, anger and pain show more strongly.

At about eight months babies:

- Like to engage adults using speech sounds and enjoys taking turns in a 'conversation'
- Like babbling sounds to be repeated back to them
- Use many forms of communication, for example facial expressions, laughing, squeals and cries to make feelings known
- Develop awareness of what happens when you do something, eg when I press this, it makes a noise
- Can show fear and sadness as well as pleasure, joy, anger and distress
- Start to throw body back in protest

Around 8 - 10 months, babies have a tendency to become more clingy. They may seem nervous of strangers and cry more when their parent/carer leaves the room. This is a key time for babies to learn about trust. He or she needs those short separations from their parent/carer so that they can learn that they do always come back.

From One to Two Years

From 12 - 18 months, toddlers continue to show anxiety about separation from parents/carers, they tend to feel out of control of the situation and become more nervous and anxious. This is often referred to as separation anxiety. It tends to wax and wane, but typically peaks at 18 months. It is not until about 18 - 24 months that toddlers can carry a picture of their loved ones in their mind.

At this age, children show intense feelings for parents and show affection for other familiar people. Toddlers become more aware of themselves and their ability to make things happen.

Toddlers express a wider range of emotions and are more likely to initiate interaction with other people.

By the age of two:

- Tantrums are common (crying, kicking and/or biting)
- Begin to show feelings of pride, pity and sympathy
- Fear of strangers is less
- Fear of noises is normal, for example thunder, trains or flushing toilets
- Will play alone or alongside others, but they won't be able to share

At about 18 months toddlers are becoming more independent and can get angry, especially when stopped from moving somewhere. They may hit, kick or struggle if an adult tries to control them. They need parent/carers to tell them what is right and what is wrong.

Toddlers have a short attention span and are easily distracted. Their behaviour can usually be managed by distracting them. Harsh parenting and smacking gets in the way of a child's emotional development.

From Two to Three Years

During this year, children's confidence grows and they are able to separate from their parents/carers more easily, but still need reassurance. However, they can find it difficult to wait for adult attention as they live for the moment. Children are usually quite balanced, and are normally happy and content.

Children begin to put words to their emotions in a very simple way. They are able to use language to comment on and explain their own feelings. Children can be very affectionate at this age as they start to realize that those around them have feelings too. Moods can change very rapidly and dramatically. Children can often be laughing one minute and crying the next, often for no apparent reason.

Play is the work of this age, with a focus on becoming confident and efficient. Children begin to experience themselves as more powerful and creative 'doers'. They explore everything, show a stronger sense of self and expand their range of 'independence skills' (ie dressing and undressing themselves, let me do it...etc). They begin to recognize danger and know who to turn to for help.

Children mostly engage in solitary activities, but do this alongside other children. Yet they may participate in simple group activities, such as singing or dancing. As they move towards three, they may be able to begin to take turns, as a start to sharing.

From Two to Three Years Continued

At this age, children enjoy drawing, threading, play dough and simple jigsaw. They ask many 'what, where and who' questions

By the age of Three

- Children are still self-centered and magical in thinking. They believe that wishes can make things come true
- Often have imaginary friends, who can be blamed if things go wrong
- Doesn't get so frustrated and gets less angry when stopped

It is normal to show extremes of behavior between two and three years of age. Children can swing between dependent/independent, very aggressive/calm and helpful/stubborn. It really helps at this age if adults help them put their feelings into words to understand what has or is happening.

When managing children's behaviour, distraction still works. Bargaining also works, but reasoning does not.

From Three to Four Years

Play continues to be the important work of the child at this age. They are usually less rebellious than they were at two years. Children have reached some level of self control, and are usually friendly and helpful. They are less aggressive than before and can use words when they want their own way, rather than biting, scratching or kicking.

The child's separation anxiety has usually faded away, but it is still quite possible that they will dissolve into tears when first setting off to preschool or nursery. Three year olds are capable of being anxious or jealous for long periods of time. From about 3 years, children can deliberately manipulate emotions to achieve a certain effect on others.

A child's imagination begins to develop between the ages of three and a half to four years, and they may have frightening dreams. Their biggest fear is that their parent/carer will abandon them, especially at night. Other fears can also set in, for example fear of the dark or spiders.

At this stage, children are more able to play on their own and they enjoy this. They also become more interested in other children and begin to interact more directly with them. Children constantly move between real life and fantasy play. They are now more likely to share toys and take turns, initiate or join in play with other children and begin dramatic play.

Children become more independent and can follow a series of simple instructions.

They may enjoy walking, climbing and running, as well as drawing, threading, playing with dough and simple jigsaws.

When managing children's behaviour bargaining may work. A calm-down or thinking chair may be introduced to help to get some self-control back. Distraction is less likely to work and reasoning does not.

From Four to Five Years

Children show more awareness of themselves as individuals. They have a developing awareness of their own needs, views and feelings and are sensitive to the needs, views and feelings of others.

Children's sense of self-confidence grows. They learn to challenge authority and test the limits of their independence. As children turn four, some of the stubbornness that was seen at two years of age comes back. However, it is usually less strong and has a more playful quality to it.

Children are very interested in relationships with other children. They develop friendships, enjoy imaginative play with others and show interest in exploring gender differences. Children's friends begin to have a real influence on their behaviour and preferences. When playing in a group situation, one child often emerges as the leader, and will assign roles to the rest of the children.

Through play, children continue to work on the balance between dependent and independent. Two themes frequent in their play are big and little, and good and bad. Play becomes more organized, and role play is common.

Children show some understanding of moral reasoning. They understand what is right, what is wrong and why.

The most common fear amongst four year olds is fear of the dark. Children of this age use the words 'afraid' and 'scared'.

At five, children tend to be more stable, they are less frustrated and less aggressive. When angry, they may stomp their feet or slam doors. 'I hate you' or 'I wish you were dead' are common statements for both four and five year olds.

Bargaining continues to work as a way of managing behaviour; calm-down or thinking chairs help to get some self-control back. Distraction does not work as well as it did at an earlier age.

Once emotions occur they become powerful motivators of future behaviours; they chart the course of moment-to-moment action and guide us toward long term achievements. Many adults are not capable of expressing their emotions or of discussing them openly. As a result, a lot of children miss the opportunity to explore their emotions and to express them in a constructive way. Therefore, many emotions stay bottled up and unspoken, and this can lead to social and emotional problems.

Sources

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