

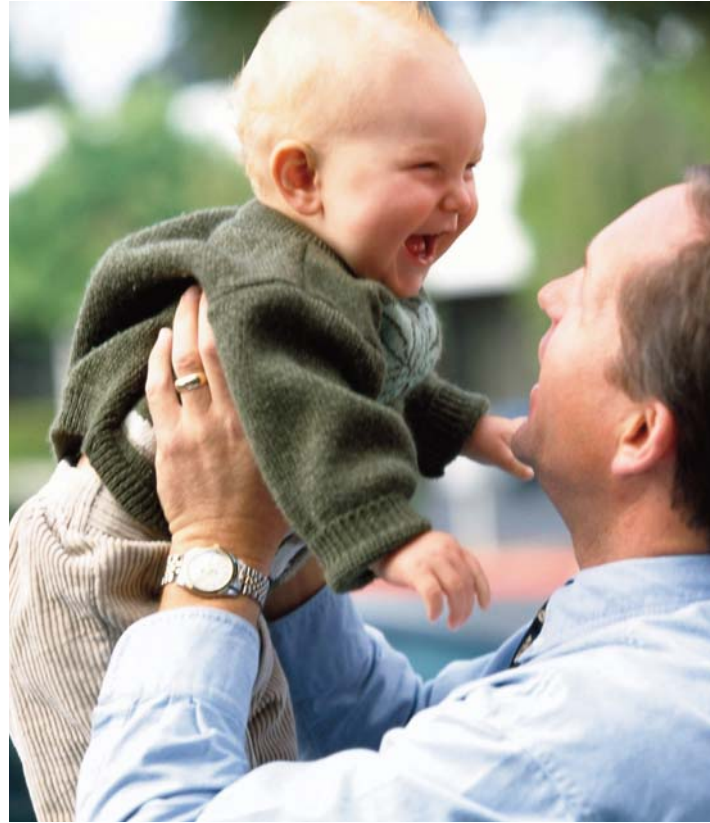


Parenting Series

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Responding to Children's Needs

Important Developmental Milestones in Young Children



Research over the past few decades clearly shows that the care children receive as infants and toddlers influences the people they will become. Studies indicate that when parents know how children develop, they are more responsive, sensitive, and skilful parents, and children are better off in both the short and long term.

According to the *Alberta Benchmark Survey: What Adults Know About Child Development**, parents have a good understanding of physical milestones, such

as when children learn to walk, but are less familiar with important intellectual and social stages.

To obtain these results, researchers with the *Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research* polled 1,400 parents and other adults who interact with children. They found that most people knew when and how children learned to walk, toss a ball or draw. When it came to questions about attachment and developing relationships, empathy, friendship, cooperation and communication, however, they weren't sure how to answer.

So, to help parents, caregivers and the people who support them, the significant milestones during a child's first five years of life are outlined here.

First Year of Life

Attachment, communication, personality and cooperation all begin developing as soon as a child is born and are well-established by a baby's first birthday.

Research shows that when mothers breastfeed exclusively for at least six months and continue for up to a year, their children are more emotionally attached

and also develop long term intellectual abilities. Some research shows that breastfed children cry less, are more alert and have better motor development. Mothers who breastfeed show improved confidence and nurturing skills. Breastfeeding also has important nutritional and health benefits for children, for example, protecting against some diseases and infections. These advantages may be due to the milk itself, being held by mothers in a close and intimate way, frequent skin to skin contact, and verbal and visual communication between mother and child.

Crying is the first stage in communication for babies. Different cries indicate needs and desires, but sometimes healthy babies cry for no apparent reason. The length of time babies cry varies widely. Most babies cry between one and three hours per day for the first six weeks of life. The length of time and the intensity of their cries increase until it peaks at about three months of age. Then, crying diminishes as babies learn to communicate through smiling, touching or babbling. Some babies cry excessively for no apparent reason and are difficult to soothe. These babies are

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* For more information on this survey, visit <http://www.research4children.com/admin/contentx/default.cfm?PageId=8268>.



“Differences in a baby’s temperament are evident from the early months.”

often called colicky, but this usually decreases by about month five.

Babies begin to develop an emotional attachment to their primary caregiver by about six months of age. This process is known as “attachment.” Caregivers who are warm, responsive and sensitive to their children’s needs help them to build positive attachments and relationships. Children who trust at least one caregiver enjoy a personal sense of worth and a belief in others. They are self reliant, efficient, empathetic and competent from the toddler years to adolescence. If they remain attached to initial caregivers as they grow up, they will continue to build close relationships with others throughout life. Attachment relationships also provide children with an understanding and appreciation of their culture. Children with insecure attachments may suffer from conduct disorder, aggression, depression or anti-social behaviour later in life. Recent research also suggests that children who received mixed signals from caregivers (comforting and anger at the same time) face heightened risk for poor development. (For more about attachment, see the article on page 3.)

Differences in a baby’s temperament or ways of responding to the world and new people are evident from the early months. Some respond to new objects quickly; others respond more slowly or not at all. Some travel easily from one adult to another; others insist on staying in their mother’s arms. Some are active; others are not. Some are easily soothed and welcome new experiences; others are hard to soothe and don’t like new experiences. Some laugh a lot; others don’t laugh very much. Parents need to learn how to respond sensitively to

their children’s temperament and adjust to the baby’s signals.

By their first birthday, babies begin sharing activities and objects with others. They show an interest in other children and family members such as siblings and grandparents. They also raise their arms to be picked up by parents or caregivers and they like to play games.

One to Three Years

Toddlers aged one to three years become more independent. They learn language, become aware of themselves and the needs of others, and choose activities that interest them. By age two, children begin to develop patience, a sense of self control, and begin making friends. Kindness, nurturing, curiosity, creativity and cleverness appear over the next year. By about the age of three, all these character traits begin to define the child’s personality.

As parents impose rules and limits, often to protect the child’s safety, conflicts often occur. Toddlers who are upset and frustrated may respond by screaming, biting, hitting or having temper tantrums. These difficult behaviours tend to decrease as children’s verbal and social skills improve. This time is important for young children to learn to express emotions verbally instead of having tantrums, to negotiate instead of making demands, and reconcile with others after conflict. Learning these skills at this age means they are likely to be maintained throughout children’s lives.

The ability to speak languages develops prior to the age of three. Children first express themselves using single words (“juice” for “I want juice”), then progress to

two-word phrases (“want juice”) and then to three word (“I want juice.”) and more complex sentences (“I want juice in a red cup.”). Caregivers who repeat words, identify objects and ask frequent questions during this stage can improve language ability. Reading to children is also important for their early language development and learning to read.

Three to Five Years

As toddlers become more verbal and their imagination and empathy grow, they choose friends, form groups and cooperate to reach goals. (For more about peer relations, see the article on page 5.) All these skills are attained through unstructured play and by interacting with family members.

Children learn to play on their own first or with adults. (For more about play, see the article on page 4.) By age three, children spend much time playing next to other children and by age four, they are more skilled at playing in small groups of children. Some children prefer to play alone, while others are usually seen playing with small groups of children. Some children prefer more cognitive toys (e.g., puzzles, construction toys); others like to engage in pretend play (e.g., family roles, storekeepers, firefighters); others like to construct things (e.g., in art or with blocks). Other children prefer lots of physical activity and outdoor play. Sometimes, boys “play fight” or chase their friends, while laughing and giggling together.

Unstructured play enables children to imitate adults, improve motor skills, build confidence, develop creativity and learn to cooperate with their (continued on page 3)

Building a Bond that Lasts a Lifetime

Eight-month-old Zachary* is hungry and tired. He starts to whimper and squirm. It's his way of communicating what he needs. His mother notices, feeds and comforts him. Zachary is starting to recognize this pattern of care from his mother. He is learning that when he needs help, his mother will help him. The mother and baby are forming a bond of trust.

Humans are all born with the drive to bond with others. Like most babies, Zachary began to recognize and relate to voices even before he was born. Since birth, he has continued to form a bond with the important adults in his life. This bond, or attachment, becomes stronger and more secure as he learns to trust these adults.

The benefits of forming a secure attachment last through childhood and beyond. Zachary will become confident if he forms a bond of trust with at least one of his parents. Children can form attachments with either or both parents. As he grows, he will be more willing to enter into new situations and explore his surroundings. He will be open to making friends and meeting new people. He is likely to form close relationships as an adult.

More than two-thirds of children develop strong and secure bonds with their parents. These children tend to be happy around their parents and want to be with them. They may often smile around their parents, play with them and look for loving contact from them.

But some adults find it difficult to respond to their children in a caring, reliable, and sensitive way. Concerns about financial, marriage and health problems may get in the way. Parents who did not form strong bonds with their own parents may not know how to build bonds with their children. The parent-child attach-



“The benefits of forming a secure attachment last through childhood and beyond.”

ment may suffer if these situations last too long or happen often.

Parents can help build a strong bond of trust that will help their child now and into the future. Here are some suggestions:

When baby is crying, uncomfortable or distressed, comfort him quickly. Hold him and speak softly. Feed him if he's hungry. Change his diapers if he's wet.

Set up routines for bedtime, meals, bathtimes. Routines send a message to children that their needs will be met in a predictable, stable way. Be sensitive to the baby's own rhythms of sleeping and eating.

Spend time each day focused on the child. Try not to think about other things that need to be done. Spend time holding, talking, playing with him. Be alert to signs that he is getting tired, hungry or uncomfortable.

Join in on his play, but let him lead the way. Offer new ideas that might be fun. Help him when he gets frustrated and congratulate him when he solves a problem.

Parents need to take care of themselves so that they can respond to their child's needs. Get enough rest. Ask for help from partners, friends and relatives.

Look for community resources to help with marriage, financial and health problems. ●

* not child's real name

Ref.: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development – Attachment* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/en-ca/parents-child-attachment/according-to-experts.html>.

(continued from page 2)

friends. Parents should provide children with lots of time for unstructured activities where children learn to guide their own play.

Conclusion

During the first five years of life, children learn to develop relationships with others, communicate, cooperate, make friends, and play. Caring parents and primary caregivers who understand these

milestones can respond to children in ways that enhance learning, improve behaviour and lessen future emotional problems.

For more information about any of these stages, refer to: www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca. Be sure to refer to the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, which provides a great deal of information about all the important social and emotional milestones in a child's life. ●

Ref.: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development – Aggression; Attachment; Breastfeeding; Crying; Language Development and Literacy; Parenting Skills; Peer Relations; Play; Temperament* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development. Available at: www.child-encyclopedia.com.

Learning is Child's Play

It's free play time at the community child care centre. Sixteen-month-old Hailey* is crawling through the tunnel of the play structure. Two-year-olds Arash* and Matthew* are moving their construction trucks through the sand box. Three-year-olds Myriam* and Anton* are playing pizza parlour. The children are having fun and they are learning valuable skills.

Children learn to play naturally. Play can help children learn the skills they need to do well at school and later in life. For example, when Hailey crawls, climbs and jumps in the play structure, she's developing gross motor skills. Arash and

Matthew are learning problem-solving skills by building their sand box construction site. The stories and situations that Myriam and Anton are creating in their pizza parlour are helping them lay the base for learning to read. Playing with other children teaches them social skills.

Unfortunately, many children today do not get enough time for free play. Families lead busy lives with many structured activities. They may not have suitable, safe play spaces in their homes. Their neighbourhoods may have too much car traffic or parks with out-dated and dangerous equipment. Also, some parents and people who work with children don't recognize the value of play and may try to get children to learn in a more structured way.

Parents can help ensure their children get play time that is fun and will help them learn. Here are some ideas:

Provide long, uninterrupted periods (45-60 minutes per day minimum) for free play.

Provide space for free play. Parents have to supervise children's play, even in safe places. Find a room or part of a room that can get messy and that doesn't have sharp or breakable objects. For outdoor play, find a park or open area where children can play safely and get lots of physical exercise.

Provide a variety of materials that will stimulate different kinds of play. These don't have to be expensive toys. Blocks, cardboard boxes, sand, clay and water can be tools for learning to problem solve and to be creative. Dress-up clothes and props (plastic dishes, menus, play money) can encourage make-believe play. Balls, obstacles for climbing and open space are ideal for active play.

Let children lead their play. Play along with them, but don't take over. Take a few turns down the slide. Help them load a dump truck with sand. Pretend to be a customer in their make-believe store. Encourage play with their friends.

When children get frustrated in their play, give them a hand or help them find an easier activity. Also, they will enjoy playtime better if they're not tired or hungry.

Children who are 3 to 4 years old may enjoy games that use words (rhyming games), singing, and numbers (*Snakes and Ladders*). Playing these types of games sets the stage for learning reading and math in kindergarten.

Find out about play at child care. Ask the child care practitioner questions about the time, space and materials she provides for playtime. Parents can find out what type of play their children enjoy at child care. Then, talk about their play, and show an interest in it! ●

* not real names

Ref.: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development – Play* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/en-ca/child-play/according-to-experts.html>.

“Children learn
to play naturally.”





“Playing with other children is the best way to learn and practice social skills.”

Sowing the Seeds of Friendship

Nine-month-old Nicole* smiles at the other babies in her playgroup and babbles happily. She already enjoys spending time with her peers. Nicole will continue to lay the foundation for many social skills over the next three to four years. In fact, learning to get along with others will be one of her most important tasks as a young child.

Unfortunately, some children have problems forming relationships with their peers. They may lack social skills and be rejected or bullied. These problems can continue into school and beyond. These children are more likely to have trouble getting along with classmates and may do poorly in school. In their teen years, they may suffer from loneliness, depression and anxiety.

There are a number of reasons why some children find it hard to make friends. Their family's culture or financial situation can set them apart from others. They may be too aggressive or withdrawn from others in social settings. Some children have not learned the social skills needed to make friends. Physical and mental disabilities may also play a role.

The good news is that parents can help children learn skills to overcome these problems.

Provide opportunities to socialize.

Playing with other children is the best way to learn and practice social skills. Children with weaker social skills can learn from peers with stronger skills. Learning to imitate other children is in

itself a valuable skill that will help them socially. Children with disabilities benefit from socializing with children without disabilities.

Encourage communication skills.

Children who can communicate with their peers find it easier to form relationships.

By age one, many children use non-verbal cues to communicate. For example: Nicole wants to show her friend the colourful fish in the aquarium. She touches her friend's arm and then points to the fish. Together they watch the fish swim around the aquarium.

As children get older, verbal communication becomes more important. Parents can help their child learn this skill by:

- speaking to her continually throughout the day
- keeping books and magazines in the places where she plays
- reading aloud to her, talking about the pictures in the book
- encouraging pretend play
- providing rich experiences such as going to the park, stores, museums and talking about them.

Help children learn to be in charge of their emotions.

The first step in controlling emotions is to recognize them and name them. Parents can talk to their child about their feelings. “You seem to be angry that we have to leave the park now. I feel frustrated because we need to get to our appointment

on time.” Sing songs (e.g., *If you're happy and you know it... If you're sad and you know it...*) and read stories that name feelings. Parents can be good role models by controlling and talking through their emotions aloud.

Help children learn to control their impulses.

Children need to learn to control their impulses and to put the wants and needs of others ahead of themselves. Playing games that reward self-control (e.g., freeze tag) and taking turns (e.g., board games) help to encourage this skill.

Help children understand that their actions affect others.

Young children are naturally self-centred. They start to be able to put themselves in others shoes by age four. Parents can encourage this skill from an early age. For example: Nicole is watching TV with her father. He asks questions like “How would you feel if that happened to you? Why does the little girl feel sad?”

Don't solve children's conflicts with others. Mediate them.

When conflicts happen, it's a good idea to resist the urge to solve them. Instead, parents can ask each of the children to state their feelings and explain what they want. Encourage them to negotiate a solution by coming up with ways to solve the problem so that everyone can live with it. ●

* not child's real name

Ref.: Tremblay RE, Barr RG, Peters RDeV, Boivin M, eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development – Peer Relations* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/en-ca/peer-relations-childhood/according-to-experts.html>.



Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development

CEECD Encyclopedia

For more information about attachment, play, peer relations, language development or about any of the 37 topics on early childhood development available on the online Encyclopedia of the Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD), visit www.child-encyclopedia.com.



The Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development identifies and summarizes the best scientific work on the social and emotional development of young children. It disseminates this knowledge to a variety of audiences in formats and languages adapted to their needs.

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