

# 6. Normal Child and Adolescent Development

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## Why it's Important to Understand Child and Adolescent Development

All children are different. Nobody knows that better than teachers! While all children grow and develop at different rates, there are some common characteristics that most children share. By understanding normal child and adolescent development, teachers, parents, health professionals and other people who work with children are better able to recognize health and related problems early on and to take action before they become bigger problems.

To provide a context for the information in this manual, we provide a brief review of some of the common characteristics and behaviors that mark normal development in preschool and school-age children. For more information about child and adolescent development, call your school health contact or the speech-language pathologist at your public health centre.

## Growth and Physical Development

All children grow at their own rate. Preschoolers (children ages 3 to 5) continue to gain height and weight, but their brains are the fastest growing part of their body. In fact, by 5 years old, their brain is nearly at its full adult size. Between the ages of 6 and 12, children grow at a fairly steady rate and will probably have a growth spurt around 12 years old.

Children can reach their adult height in their early teen years or can continue to grow until they are around 20 years old.

Most children will start to lose their baby teeth around 6 years old and will start to get their permanent teeth between 6 and 8 years old. Permanent teeth will continue to come in until children are about 12 to 13 years old.

## Language Development

Between 3 and 5 years old, children learn new words and how to use the words in simple conversations. After 5 years old, most children will speak clearly and with good grammar. However, some children may demonstrate weaknesses in the area of listening, understanding, speaking or may have developmental delays. Speech and language skills are integral to the reading and writing process. If you have concerns, contact the speech-language pathologist assigned to your school.

# Social and Cognitive Development

- Cognitive development in preschoolers is characterized by much longer attention spans and short-term memory abilities, egocentrism and animism (personification of inanimate objects like toys).
- Play reflects cognitive development. Cooperative play is characterized by role playing, turn taking and games with rules. Children especially enjoy magic and fantasy play.
- Gender identity is generally constant by 3 years old. The preschooler's developmental task is to integrate socially appropriate gender roles. This is influenced by parental, peer and broader social influences, such as TV and mass media.

## **3 Year Old Children:**

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Are still using right and left hands interchangeably because they have not yet determined which hand is dominant.

Are cooperative for teachers and caregivers, but challenging for parents. At times, it may seem like nothing pleases a 3 year old!

Are able to express fears. They may swing between different feelings, like shyness or boldness.

Might not need daytime naps anymore. But, they still wet the bed at nighttime.

## **4 Year Old Children:**

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Are very interested in their world. They talk a lot and ask many "why" questions about difficult subjects. Four year olds tend to be very persistent in their explorations and learning.

Are fascinated with bowel movements and use bathroom language and humor, like "poo poo head".

May swear and cuss, but need to learn what the words mean and why not to use them.

Begin to have favorite playmates and sometimes exclude certain children from their play group.

## **5 Year Old Children:**

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Begin to assert their autonomy. They may openly challenge parents or authority figures by saying “Make me!”.

Can have defiant and aggressive behavior, but still feel indecisive. An emotional outburst may escalate beyond the child’s control.

Are learning social graces and manners. But, they still talk with their mouth full of food, suck their thumb, pick their nose or bite their nails.

Have difficulty admitting that they have done anything wrong. They may take things that don’t belong to them.

Are able to dress themselves, but may not want to!

## **6 Year Old Children:**

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Are becoming more independent and separate from their parents and other caregivers. They are more likely to challenge adults by saying things like, “It’s all your fault” or “You’re dumb.”

May talk back to adults and adopt “know-it-all” types of behavior. For example, a child may say things like, “Why should I?” or “Try and make me.”

Have a hard time making decisions and are often ambivalent.

Want to be the best and believe that they are “always right.” Six year old children cannot bear to lose or to be criticized.

Often have stormy playtimes with other children, marked by quarrels, name calling, pushing and fighting.

Love new places, ideas and learning new things.

## **7 Year Old Children:**

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Withdraw and are often silent, brooding, sulking and moody. They frequently feel that other children are picking on them or don’t like them.

Worry about everything – family illness, wars, tornadoes or whether the family has enough money.

Expect to be treated fairly and are easily hurt when they feel they have been treated unfairly.

Are good listeners and good students. They love to think, explore and discuss.

Have better control of their own body, tempers and thoughts.

### **8 Year Old Children:**

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Are outgoing and lively. They love to tackle new projects and have a new sense of confidence that was lacking at age 7.

Are ready for action. They work fast and play fast. This reckless approach to life can lead to accidents and sloppy work.

Love to talk and often dramatize what they say, such as, "Oh, it was so awful!"

Often listen closely to adults talk and can be quite "nosy."

Tend to brag and to make up excuses for their behavior.

### **9 Year Old Children:**

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Are becoming more separate from their parents and almost resent their parents' presence. They dislike when adults "check up on them."

Are very independent and have a lot of self-motivation.

Have varied interests and days filled with activities. They usually take their activities more seriously than younger children and try to do things just right.

Are like 7 year old children, in that they worry about everything. But, rather than worry silently like 7 year olds, 9 year old children complain. Their complaints are often related to health.

Like to collect anything and everything.

"Hate" the opposite sex but love to talk things over with same-sex friends. Having friends is important for all school age children but becomes even more important at the age of 9.

## **10 - 13 Year Old Adolescents:**

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Are becoming more and more separate from their families and prefer friends to family.

Are developing more sophisticated problem-solving skills.

Are more able to monitor and control their own behavior.

Are adjusting to the physical and emotional changes of puberty.

Have mainly same-sex friends and tend to interact in “cliques” or small, exclusive groups of friends.

Have vague and often unrealistic plans for the future.

Begin to test the moral system of their parents.

## **14 - 17 Year Old Adolescents:**

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Are strongly influenced by friends, which helps them separate from the family.

“Try on” or experiment with different images to find the “real self.”

Are learning to accept their bodies.

Have friends of both sexes and begin to view the opposite sex as sex objects.

Have many adult role models but tend to view authority figures as a threat.

Are preoccupied with self and their own concerns. Are moody and have limited social skills.

Are struggling for independence and autonomy and, as such, are constantly testing limits.

## Suggested Reading

Faber, Adele and Mazlish, Elaine. *How to Talk So Kids Can Learn at Home and in School.*

Bates Ames, Louise and Ilg, Frances L. *Your Five Year Old: Sunny and Serene.*

Bates Ames, Louise and Ilg, Frances L. *Your Six Year Old: Loving and Defiant.*

Bates Ames, Louise and Chase Haber, Carol. *Your Seven Year Old: Life in a Minor Key.*

Bates Ames, Louise and Chase Haber, Carol. *Your Eight Year Old: Lively and Outgoing.*

Bates Ames, Louise and Chase Haber, Carol. *Your Nine Year Old: Thoughtful and Mysterious.*

Bates Ames, Louise, Ilg, Frances L. and Baker, Sidney M. *Your Ten to Fourteen Year Old.*

Levine, Mel. *All Kinds of Minds: A Young Student's Book about Learning Abilities and Learning Disorders.*

Levine, Mel. *Keeping A Head in School: A Young Student's Book about Learning Abilities and Learning Disorders.*

Stevens, Suzanne H. *Classroom Success for the Learning Disabled.*

Turecki, Stanley. *Normal Children Have Problems, Too.*

## References

Santrock, J.W. (1997). *Life-Span Development.* McGraw-Hill

Family and Placement Outreach Support Services (2000). *Understanding Kid's Behavior.*

Smith, Robin (2000). *Personal notes.*