

How Do Children Grow and Learn?

We know that all children need affection and interesting experiences to develop into mature adults. Let's briefly trace the stages of children's development. When we know what behaviors are common for young children, we can understand why labels such as *stupid*, *mean*, or *liar* can damage children's self-esteem. Then we will examine ways to keep children emotionally healthy and strong.

Infants

From birth, children start learning whether they can trust us. When they cry, do we come? Can we figure out whether they are hungry, wet, lonely, or uncomfortable? Are we gentle and soothing? If babies can't always trust or depend on us, they will most likely not trust other people throughout their lives. They may be selfish and unfriendly because that is the way we have treated them.

Some people think that if we quickly respond to babies' needs we will spoil them. Not so. When crying babies are tended to as soon as possible in their first few months of life, they cry less later on. When we comfort a crying baby, we teach the most important emotional lesson of the first year: the world is a good place and we can be trusted.

Loving and learning go together too. If we take good care of babies they seem to learn to play and enjoy games like peek-a-boo more easily. Remember, infants learn from every experience in their day-to-day life because the whole world is new to them.

Later in the first year, babies have enough experience to recognize the people they love. The sight of strangers may make them cry. While this behavior may be upsetting to adults, it really is a cause for celebration. These alert babies are indicating their love for us and their ability to distinguish between familiar and unfamiliar people.

Toddlers

As soon as children learn they can trust us and that the world is a good place, they are off to discover their surroundings. When children begin to crawl or walk they see everything from a new perspective! Toddlers are curious, and they want to be independent. Their frequent nos mean they can stand up for themselves, begin to make decisions, and start to take responsibilities.



© Keith Brofsky

Toddlers' experiences are still relatively limited. How can they be expected to know it is dangerous to poke a stick into an electrical outlet? Or that a sparkling glass dish is a family treasure? Or that, if they share a toy, they will get it back in a few minutes?

Toddlers' nos and inquisitiveness are major steppingstones in their development of language, learning skills, and the ability to care about others. These behaviors can be turned into joyous learning experiences by offering good choices, such as "Would you like a banana or an orange for snack?" We can protect children from inadvertent harm by removing valuable objects and replacing them with items children can touch.

To become eager learners, toddlers need a safe environment. Their confidence grows with each day. If we continue to meet their needs, they become increasingly in control of themselves, generous, and sensitive to others. Even so, toddlers are still very dependent upon us to love and take care of them.

Preschool and beyond

Between the ages of 3 and 6, children become better able to share and take turns. Their friendships blossom. When problems arise, preschoolers can usually resolve the issue without adult interference. They enjoy being as grown up as possible, and take pride in their accomplishments.

The solid foundation that we help infants and toddlers construct to deal with their emotions will be evident by the preschool years. Their trust in us enables them to become increasingly competent. They can understand our explanations about behavior as well as follow our example. While preschoolers still have strong emotions, with our support and guidance they learn to channel and control emotions themselves. What marvelous people they are!