Understand developmental stages can help you support your child’s learning at home and in school.

All children go through developmental stages as they grow up. Just as children’s height, weight, and physical abilities change, so do things such as their desire to play alone or with a group, how they learn best, or how talkative they are.

These stages of development are fairly predictable in children within any given culture. With each stage come certain predictable changes in how children relate to others and approach the world.

Children go through these stages at different rates. Although there are general characteristics at each developmental stage within a given culture, how quickly a child goes through these stages depends on many things, including the child’s personality and environment.

It’s common and normal for some children to arrive at a developmental stage a bit later or earlier—sometimes as much as a year later or earlier—than their peers. Also, a child might mature quickly in one area, such as physical development, but more slowly in another, such as social development.

Children don’t change suddenly on their birthday. For example, a child who just turned six may still show a lot of five-year-old behaviors, and a child who is six-and-a-half may already be showing a lot of seven-year-old behaviors.

ENJOY YOUR CHILD AT EACH AGE.
Each age is unique. Each is a wonder.

*The characteristics in this pamphlet are based on research on children in European and U.S. schools. Children growing up in other cultures may show different developmental patterns.

Additional resources about child development and children’s success in school

BOOKS


Nelsen, Jane. Numerous books, including the “Positive Discipline” approach. For full list, descriptions, and other resources, see www.positivediscipline.com.


WEBSITES

Child Development Institute
www.childdevelopmentinfo.com
Offers information on child development, parenting, and other topics of interest.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
www.casel.org
Includes a section on how parents can support their child’s social and emotional learning at home.

National PTA
www.pta.org
Tips and articles on topics related to parenting and school-home collaboration.

PBS Parents
www.pbs.org/parents
Tips and information on a variety of topics, including child development and how to support your child’s learning and work in school.

For full list of resources, see www.responsiveclassroom.org.

Child Development Pamphlets are available for grades K through 8.

To order pamphlets, Yardsticks, or other resources, call 800-360-6332 ext. 125 or visit www.responsiveclassroom.org.

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COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF
Five-Year-Olds

Five, overall, is a time of great happiness. Life is “good,” says the five-year-old. Five is also a time of great change. During this one year, children may go from being cautious and compliant to uncertain and oppositional.

SOCIAL
- Early in the year, like to help, follow rules, and be “good”
- Later, may test or oppose adult authority or show uncertainty (not sure whether to be “good” or “naughty”)
- Need consistent rules and enforcement; respond well to clear and simple expectations
- Need empathetic discipline as they test limits and make mistakes

COGNITIVE
- See only one way to do things, rarely see other viewpoints
- Imaginative and believe toys and other objects are alive
- Think very literally (“raining cats and dogs” means cats and dogs are falling from the sky)
- Easily upset when criticized
- Easily upset when criticized
- Love encouragement, surprise, and treats
- Might test authority with ignoring, complaining, or whining

PHYSICAL
- Eyes are maturing, so reading is easier, but copying from board or chart is still hard
- Often chew pencils, hair, or fingernails (may be due to the discomfort of new teeth growing in)
- Bodies growing rapidly
- Like lots of physical activity
- Tire easily and get sick often

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF
Six-Year-Olds

The bodies, minds, and social behavior of six-year-olds are changing dramatically. Sixes have lots of energy. Egerness, curiosity, imagination, drive, openness, and enthusiasm—all are at their peak in the typical six-year-old.

SOCIAL
- Competitive, not always good sports; sometimes bossy or critical
- Either rush to be first or slow down to be last
- Want to have friends; may have best friends
- Enjoy dressing up, putting on plays, and other children’s stories
- Easily upset when criticized
- Easily upset when criticized
- Love encouragement, surprises, and treats
- Might test authority with ignoring, complaining, or whining

COGNITIVE
- Beginning to understand past and present, and how and why things happen
- More able to see other viewpoints and understand reasons for rules
- Love new ideas and asking questions
- Learn well through games, poems, riddles, and songs
- Very ambitious, often choosing projects that are too hard
- Learn well from field trips and hands-on projects
- Like doing lots of work; not that concerned with the quality of the work

PHYSICAL
- Eyes are maturing, so reading is easier, but copying from board or chart is still hard
- Often chew pencils, hair, or fingernails (may be due to the discomfort of new teeth growing in)
- Bodies growing rapidly
- Like lots of physical activity
- Tire easily and get sick often

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF
Seven-Year-Olds

In contrast to brash, noisy sixes, seven-year-olds are generally quiet, sensitive, and serious. Their intense moods often change quickly. Sevens tend to work hard at everything they do and need private time to manage their new thoughts and feelings.

SOCIAL
- May be moody, shy, sulky, touchy; sometimes depressed
- Prefer playing and working alone or with one friend
- May change friendships quickly and feel “nobody likes me”
- Rely on adults for help and reassurance
- Need the security of rules, routines, and physical boundaries

COGNITIVE
- Better at understanding ideas such as time, space, and quantity
- Learn new words and meanings quickly; enjoy writing stories
- Open to learning math
- Good at classifying, such as sorting buttons, pictures, leaves, and shapes
- Listen well and speak precisely
- Enjoy hands-on exploration of how things work
- Bothered by mistakes and try hard to make their work perfect
- Like to work slowly and finish what they start
- Enjoy repeating tasks and reviewing learning

PHYSICAL
- Often keep their eyes focused on a small, close area
- Copying from board or chart is very hard
- With head on arm or desk, grasp pencil point tightly and write very small
- Can do quiet work for longer periods
- Can get sick from worrying about tests, assignments, etc.

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