**Children and Youth: Their Growth and Development**

Human development is a continuous process that proceeds in a fairly orderly manner throughout life. All individuals experience the various stages of physical, psychological, and social development.

**Introduction**

The age group characteristics used here to describe human development are based on the characteristics and experiences of large populations.

Keep in mind that same-age children will exhibit individual differences in their development. Some 8-year-olds may be like 9-year-olds, and some may be more like 7-year-olds. Leaders who work with groups of children of different ages, that is, 5- and 6-year-olds or 5- to 8-year-olds, can expect some differences within age groups and between age groups. However, 5-year-olds will probably be more like each other than like 6-year-olds.

**Elementary School Children - Ages 5 to 8**

The early elementary school age child has moved from preschool to middle childhood. Rather than being home based, closely tied to the family, the child is learning to function more independently in a much larger world. This is a major transition.

There are three great "outward journeys" of middle childhood. They are:

- **social** — out of the home and into the friend group;
- **physical** — into the world of games and school work;
- **mental** — into the world of adult ideas, logic, and communication.

These journeys form the foundation for adolescence. Gaining early success with them is extremely important for feelings of competence and self-esteem later on.

Listed below are characteristics of each of the three journeys the 5- to 8-year-old child must travel.

**Social and Emotional Development**

Five- and 6-year-olds are still quite self-centered, but they are becoming interested in group activities. Interest in groups grows throughout childhood as children become sociable and interested in other children as friends.

Attachment to friends grows during this stage. Children want to continue playing with their friends, and don't like to stop. They need a 5- or 10-minute warning before they really have to leave or change activities.

Most have a "best friend" and often an "enemy." Therefore, much activity centers around how to stay with friends and identify who is "not wanted."

Friends are likely to be the same sex. Activities are becoming sex separated—girls don't want boys to interfere with their games and vice versa.

Tattling is a common way of attracting adult attention or helping to learn the rules. Adults can help children with these needs by paying attention to positive behavior and involving them in rule setting.

These children value winning, leading, and being first. They are competitive; they try to boss and are unhappy if they lose. Noncompetitive games and individual goal setting are important.

Children in this age group often become attached to an adult other than their parents. This might be a teacher, club leader, caregiver, or neighborhood teenager. They will quote their new "hero," try to please him or her, and compete with other children for this adult's attention.

Five- and 6-year-olds are beginning to move from home to community, but they are still home based and family oriented. For these children, good and bad are what's approved or disapproved of by the family.

Children in this age group release tension through physical activity. They may, for example, be extremely active even when tired. Adults need to encourage quiet play when children are tired from exertion.

New fears revolve around school, social relationships, and family loss of income.
More realistic fears replace the common preschool fears of ghosts, witches, and creatures in dark places. These new fears revolve around school, social relationships, and family loss of income. Adults need to give children realistic information to help them handle fears; never tease or joke about ideas that frighten them.

A positive self-concept continues to develop with successful experiences. Help children celebrate their positive achievements.

Children in this age group are sensitive to personal criticism and do not know how to accept failure. Concentrate on children's success and teach them how to learn from criticism. Ask them, "Can you learn to do it differently next time?"

Experimental and exploratory behaviors are a common part of development. Children often try out some new behavior just to see how it feels or to imitate a friend. If it is not immediately dangerous, such behavior can be ignored.

Inner control (conscience) is being formed. Talk with children about why self-control is important and why they should respect the rights of others.

Physical Development

Growth rate is slower than during infancy and early childhood—slow and steady. Boys weigh from 45 to 65 pounds, and girls weigh from 40 to 60 pounds. The normal rate of increase is 3 to 6 pounds per year. Children's need for food may fluctuate with activity.

Childhood diseases (such as measles and chicken pox) are most likely to occur at this time because the child interacts with a large number of peers each day in school. Children who were in day care may already have had these diseases or have built up resistance. Adults need to be prepared for school absences due to illness.

Muscle coordination and control is uneven and incomplete. Large muscles (used for moving the arms and legs, for example) are easier to control than small muscles (used for moving the fingers). Encourage children to participate in activities involving speed and energy. Intense activity may bring temporary exhaustion. Children of this age need 10 to 12 hours of sleep per night.

Hand skills and eye-hand coordination, needed for activities such as writing and shoe lacing, continue to develop as children gain small muscle motor skills. Projects often appear messy as children work to polish these skills. Encourage children to work briefly at tasks requiring small muscle control and then return to running and jumping—tasks that use their larger, more skilled muscles.

Mental and Vocational Development

Around age 7, children begin to think logically about their own behavior and about things they can easily imagine, such as sharing with a friend or going on a drive. Adults can do simple reasoning with children now.

Children in this age group begin to form ideas similar to those of an adult. They can group things together that belong in one category (for example, babies, fathers, and mothers are all people).

They cannot read and write skillfully at the beginning of this stage, but they should be quite self-assured in these areas by the end. During this stage children form a basic understanding of numbers. Encourage such skills by letting them read signs, make lists, or write prices of objects they buy.

These children understand the value and uses of money. They can begin to plan for their allowances, and are learning to use money for items they want.

They can think through their own actions and situations to understand causes of events. For example, a 7-year-old generally knows why he or she was late to school.

To enhance learning experiences, center them around a physical activity.

At this age, children tend to talk as they learn, and they learn best if physically active while learning. For example, make a landscape of blocks, cars, and people to teach them about the need for traffic rules.

Five- to 8-year-olds have a short interest span-up to 20 minutes. Don't expect them to spend much more than 20 minutes alone on any one task or activity.

At this age, children begin to learn the value of "work." They can perform realistic chores at home and at school.

The process of work is more interesting to children in this age group than the resulting product. They may begin many projects and finish few. They need help in learning how to use new tools and materials, and to enjoy exploring.

They can take on the role of an admired adult in fantasy or dramatic play.

They show some independence in the youth community (school, church, and youth organizations). Adults should encourage these positive experiences in a caring community.

Typical Behaviors

Behaviors typical of children ages 5 through 8 are listed below. The list is by no means complete, and many children will exhibit characteristics listed under several ages. For instance, Mike may be 8 years old, but he might behave like a 7-year-old in some ways and a 9-year-old in others.
The 5-year-old
- is self-centered
- sometimes wants to please parents or other adults
- likes to explore
- develops learning skills through playing
- is gaining general bodily control
- is developing fine muscle control
- is learning about right and wrong
- is learning about gender differences
- enjoys make-believe stories and play
- likes singing, games, and music—often the same song or game over and over again
- needs small tables and chairs
- likes to use large crayons and paper
- is still very much home and family based, even if he or she has been in daycare settings during preschool years

The 6-year-old
- is highly active
- dislikes losing
- is usually not modest
- works in spurts
- is self-centered
- seeks to be the center of attention
- has a positive attitude toward school
- is proud of self and skills
- is more ready to dish out criticism than to receive it
- is often competitive with brothers and sisters
- is sensitive about being called names, but calls others names
- often pairs up and has best friend; tends to enjoy leaving out a third child
- is interested in games with rules and but lacks skill
- enjoys rough housing, but does not know when to stop; may end up hurt, upset, or exhausted
- is learning to write letters and numbers/often backwards
- has a difficult time making choices and decisions; is hesitant and indecisive

The 7-year-old
- is active
- likes to know rules
- sees teacher as authority
- worries about being liked
- complains of unfair treatment by playmates
- listens as well as talks at mealtime
- enjoys activities alone as well as with others
- can relate evenly to brothers and sisters, but this depends on age (the closer in age, the more fights)
- is very sensitive to reactions of others
- wants to do things right—erases and tries again and again
- sees the end result as more important than the "route"
- begins to enjoy reading as a pastime if he or she has had success in this skill
- begins to show politeness and consideration; less opinionated and stubborn
- begins to be modest and concerned about "private parts" or sexual organs
- shows friendship by possessions, secrets, and time together

The 8-year-old
- enjoys dramatic play
- is often demanding of parents
- is curious about nature, things, and people
- talks with adults, rather than to adults
- is concerned about the reasons behind things
- likes to help when in the mood
- makes collections of all kinds of things
- seeks new experiences; tries out new behaviors—sometimes swearing or challenging rules
- has both liking for and hostility toward opposite sex
- is discovering parents are human and make mistakes
- is often more polite away from home than at home
- begins to select friends on basis of personal qualities or for a reason, not positive
- has a keen sense of privacy: "This is my room—keep out!"
- may be very self-critical
- may show anger by sulking rather than using harsh words or fighting

Middle School Children - Ages 9 to 12
Children ages 9 to 12 are becoming "early adolescents." They continue to experience the developmental changes that began during the early elementary ages. In addition to undergoing physical, mental, and social changes, they develop serious ideas about career plans.

Toward the end of this period, children should be confident and feel positive about themselves. They can move toward taking more risks and gaining a better understanding of themselves in adolescence.
Physical Development
Growth in weight and height continues at a steady rate. Some children experience a growth spurt and enter early adolescence.

Bodily changes begin (hips widen, breasts bud, pubic hair appears, and testes develop), indicating the approach of puberty. Eyes reach maturity in both size and function.

The range of height and weight widens. Boys weigh from 60 to 90 pounds and girls weigh 55 to 90 pounds. Height for boys and girls varies from 50 to 60 inches.

Small muscles develop rapidly. This makes activities like hammering or playing musical instruments, activities requiring the use of small muscles, more enjoyable. Children in this age group are as coordinated as adults, although lapses of awkwardness are common.

Energy abounds, and children may become overstimulated when participating in competitive, physical activities. (Children this age need 10 to 11 hours of sleep each night.)

Mental Development
Children in early adolescence begin to think abstractly and can plan ahead for several weeks. They can evaluate behavior with insight. Their attention span and ability to concentrate increases from 30 minutes to several hours.

These children are developing a sense of morals based on what they have learned from adults. They have a need to know and to understand "why," also need to feel independent and free to express themselves.

Social Development
Peer groups grow important for members of this age group. They may want to gangs, or secret societies; organized groups such as 4-H are key at this stage.

These children want to be more independent of adults. Sibling rivalry is common.

A child's "world view" is expanding from home to neighborhood and local community. Children are developing a concept of "fair" or "unfair" in relation to the actions of others.

Children want to discuss sex often to correct information from peers.

Emotional Development
Signs of growing independence and disobedience—perhaps even backtalk and rebellious behavior—become more frequent. Common fears include the unknown, failure, death, family problems, and nonacceptance. Concepts of and wrong continue to build.

A sense of humor develops during this period.

Every time children succeed at something, their self-view improves. When adults set up inappropriate competition, children can suffer serious emotional disturbances. Children are to face consequences if their mistakes are not too serious.

They have a strong attachment to their own sex and show antagonism toward the opposite sex.

Vocational Development
Children of this age think about possible occupations when selecting junior high courses. Their occupational preferences are based on personal abilities and interests. Self-image as "worker" begins to emerge. Many children begin to want a part-time job.

Typical Behaviors
Listed below are characteristics known to be typical of 9- to 12-year-olds. The list is by no means complete, and many children will probably exhibit characteristics of several ages. Mike may be age 10 chronologically, but he might behave younger than 10 in some ways.

The 9-year-old
- is gaining self-confidence
- quarrels less
- is perfecting motor skills
- is becoming more inner-directed
- likes organized play with very definite rules
- has bursts of emotion and impatience
- accepts failures and mistakes more realistically
- tries to give impression of being calm and steadfast
- is becoming selective about activities and spends time with them
- loves to form clubs, be an officer in them
- has a well-defined sense of humor
- may show signs of neglecting personal hygiene, while gaining interest in clothing styles and fads
- may start puberty growth spurt (girls)

The 10-year-old
- enjoys friends
- begins to argue logically
- has more long-lasting interests
- has fairly well-developed motor skills
- enjoys "fitting in" at home, school, and play
- relates well to parents, siblings, teachers, and friends
- enjoys organized activities and has secret groups, codes, etc.
- seems to be at peace with self and the world (calm and self-confident)
- shows concern and is sensitive to others
- begins to develop special motor skills (sports, music, dancing, and handicrafts)
- feels more comfortable when his or her world is organized and schedules are kept
• loves trivia
• enjoys outings and helping to plan them
• may resent being told what to do, yet needs constant reminders regarding routine responsibilities

The 11-year-old
• is very active and has a greater appetite
• can be loud, boorish, and rude at times
• tends to be moody and sensitive
• may be cooperative, friendly, lively, and pleasant with strangers
• argues often with parents
• selects friends based on mutual interests
• shows a change of interest in the opposite sex
• shows a change of attitude about school

The 12-year-old
• is outgoing and enthusiastic for short periods
• goes to extremes in emotions—either really likes something or really hates it
• no longer wants to be considered a child
• focuses on "best" friend
• can be critical of physical appearance (especially girls)
• may be restless, may: day dream, and may fool around after school
• sometimes has difficulty accepting praise
• talks frequently of opposite sex

Adolescents - Ages 13 to 15

The 13- to 15-year-old
• is quite comfortable in the community
• has a maturing body
• undergoes uneven growth—some in spurts
• experiences a new sense of physical self
• enjoys both physical and mental activities
• enjoys activities with members of both sexes
• prefers some activities with same-sex peers
• needs to solve own problems
• still requires adult guidance and support
• continues to seek parents' counsel

Adapted by Anne L. Heinsohn, former associate professor of extension education, from Children-How They Grow: Elementary School Children Ages 6 to 8 and 9 to 12, Bulletins GH 6230 and GH 6231, by Mary McPhail Gray and Terry Foltz, University of Missouri, Columbia.

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