

Knowing What to Expect

“I found out that toddlers are naturally curious and love to explore the world around them. Now I can be more patient when my 15-month-old gets into everything. Now I understand that she’s not just doing it to make me mad; exploring is an important part of her growing up.” The father who made this comment after taking a short workshop in child development had learned an important lesson: if you know what you can realistically expect from children at different stages of development, you won’t feel as frustrated or disappointed. It gets easier to be patient.

Development and discipline

Discipline becomes easier too, when you understand what a child’s needs and capacities are at different stages. For instance, the father of that 15-month-old toddler started directing her to places where she could explore without damaging anything. He filled the bottom drawer in the kitchen with safe and appealing objects, putting in new ones every week to keep her interested. Because he understood what she was learning, he could satisfy her curiosity and his own need for order at the same time.

Understanding difficult behaviour

Awareness of developmental stages can give useful insights into difficult behaviours. Many parents find it upsetting when their two year old refuses to share the toys with the other children at playgroup. Two year olds like the company of other children, but in this stage of their social development, they are discovering and practising the meaning of “this is mine!” To minimize conflict, expect to stay close to help children of this age get along when they play in a group. Learning to share will come when they’re older.

Don’t be surprised when a two year old loses control and has a tantrum. At this age, children still have trouble controlling their strong emotions and are easily overwhelmed by frustration. They want to do things for themselves, but are physically unable. They want to do things their way, but may not have the words to tell you how. Let your understanding give you patience.

Different timing, similar sequence

We know that different children reach developmental milestones at different ages: one child walks alone at 10 months and another at 15 months. However, the *order* in which they accomplish the various stages

will be quite similar: a child must be able to walk alone before being able to run and kick a ball. Toddlers start by playing *beside* one another before they are ready to really play *with* one another. Each stage builds on the one before.

Individual differences

Within the broad outline of developmental stages, individual differences mean that each child develops at his or her own pace. For instance, some children are able to learn colours earlier than others. Moreover, the same child may be ahead of others in physical abilities (able to skate, for example), but be slower in emotional development (ability to cope with frustration). Cultural variations in child care practices will also make a difference. Recognizing this diversity, developmental charts give an *age range* within which behaviours typically appear, rather than specifying an exact age.

Development through play

Young children achieve their developmental potential through play. Adults help most by giving children the opportunity to experiment with materials and activities that are appropriate to their developmental stage, whether in their home or in group settings. A simple obstacle course of boxes and chairs for a crawler, tumbling mats and a small slide for a toddler, a more complex climber for an active preschooler — all these allow children to practice their physical abilities at their developmental level.

Identifying problems

Some differences in rate of development are considered normal. On the other hand, certain milestones are important enough that children who do not achieve them within the expected age range should be checked by a professional. If there is an underlying problem, the earlier it is identified, the more effective help will be.

Becoming informed

You can learn about child development in many ways: books, magazine articles, videos, workshops, parenting courses, web sites — ask at a family resource program or a library to find resources in your community. One easy-to-read Canadian series, *Steps and Stages* by H. Bennett and T. Pitman (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1998), consists of four books which cover age groups from 1 to 12 years old. Learning about how your children develop will help you respond to their needs and support their growth.

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