

Understanding Child Development as a Violence Prevention Tool



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Adults can do many things to protect young children from violence. Adults can help children grow up so that they are not likely to be violent—or to be victims of violence. Adults are more effective in teaching positive behaviors and in responding to children if they know how children of different ages tend to think and act. For instance, if parents understand that a 2-year-old child has a very short attention span, they would not expect the child to stay seated quietly at a long church service.

This document summarizes important information, based on decades of research, about children's typical abilities and behaviors from birth to age 8. Bear in mind, however, that not all children will show these behaviors at the same time. Also, children develop differently in different communities and cultures and because of disabilities or medical conditions. This document reports averages, but each child will develop a specific ability at his or her own pace.

To be successful in teaching children positive nonviolent behaviors, adults need to take action based on what children are capable of understanding and doing at different ages and stages of development.

Child Development and Violence Prevention

Child development is the unfolding sequence of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional changes that children undergo as they grow. The changes take place over time and are influenced by a child's unique biological makeup and the effects of his or her particular culture, family, and community environment. It is easy to see the dramatic changes that occur from birth to early childhood.

Children grow **physically** while learning how to react to the world and the people in it. They develop **cognitively** (they become aware of, think about, understand, remember, and use knowledge about the world), **socially** (they learn to interact with others), and **emotionally** (they experience emotions such as joy, fear, love, discomfort, anger, and other feelings).

Why Is It Important for Adults to Understand Child Development?

Young children learn by example in the context of important relationships, and the adults in their lives are their most influential teachers.

Adults who understand child development

- are more likely to take positive steps to support the child's development;
- are less likely to become frustrated or anxious, because they expect children to do only the things children are capable of doing at a given developmental stage;
- are less likely to resort to physical or emotional abuse that might occur when they become angry or frustrated with a child's challenging behavior;
- will more likely use age-appropriate responses when young children misbehave.

Although each child is unique, with an individual pattern and timing of growth, there are predictable milestones along the way.

The early years are important because that is when the brain matures rapidly, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and thinking.

A young child's brain is a work in progress, and experience plays a vital role in shaping the way it functions.

The early years are when children develop a sense of being individuals, separate from their parents, and they develop the ability to feel, think, trust, and relate to others.

Understanding Child Development Can Lead to Violence Prevention

1. Children who have their basic needs met are more likely to develop resilience and be protected from later involvement with violence.

Young children's basic needs include

- developing a strong, warm, intimate emotional relationship with their primary caregivers;
- feeling safe, loved, and secure—physically and emotionally;
- trusting that their physical needs will be satisfied with responsive, consistent, reliable, and loving care;
- receiving positive attention from adults through play and everyday activities that build mutual respect and a sense of being connected to them;
- having family members model, by example, how to constructively solve problems, deal with disagreements, and handle anger and stress;
- developing the confidence to deal with things that happen to them by learning to solve simple problems;
- learning to appreciate similarities and differences among people;
- being protected from exposure to violence—for example, young children are deeply affected by the violence they see in real life or on television.

2. Young children need caregivers to help them manage their emotions. When the emotional climate in the home is dysfunctional or abusive, children have no positive models to teach them how to manage their emotions. Positive role models will teach children to manage and control their emotions, to understand emotion in others, and to be socially competent.

Remember!

Violent behavior is mostly learned—often early in life. The experiences that children have at early ages have a long-standing impact on their future!

Child Development From Birth to Age 8

The following sections address the cognitive and social/emotional aspects of child development and their relevance to violence prevention. Cognitive development includes thinking, reasoning, problem solving, memory, and language development. Social/emotional development includes understanding and expressing feelings and responding to and interacting with others.

From Birth to 18 Months

Changes in the first year-and-a-half of life are both dramatic and significant. Extensive biological and physical changes, in addition to brain maturation and growth that produce new cognitive abilities, allow children to gain mobility and coordination, experience and use memory, and develop emotional and social relationships. It is a period of great dependence on caregivers, as babies have only rudimentary communication skills to deal with the challenges of new situations.

Cognitive Development

Important characteristics of this age period:

- An infant's brain grows rapidly in size and complexity. At around 7–9 months, development in the prefrontal area of the cortex (the area of the brain where high-level cognitive functions take place) makes it possible for children to start controlling their behaviors (e.g., stop grabbing the first thing they see).
- The ability to remember increases rapidly. In the beginning, babies attend only to people and objects they can see or hear in the moment. Between 6 and 8 months, however, babies can recall objects and people that are not present. By age 1, children are capable of remembering past events for long periods of time.
- Babies are able to categorize people and objects in simple ways.

- Young infants can imitate others. Babies can imitate live models as well as what they see on TV, even without fully understanding the actions involved. Babies learn by watching and imitating others.
- Children learn to understand language by hearing it. Babies understand language much earlier than they learn to speak it.
- Although babies do not talk, they produce increasingly sophisticated noises to communicate and get their needs met. By as early as 4 months of age, they can recognize their own names. By 6 months, they begin to show an understanding of words for highly familiar objects. By age 1, they can comprehend about a dozen common phrases. By 18 months, they begin to use *me, I, you*.
- As babies start to move around on their own, they begin to explore the environment and manipulate objects.
- Children are naturally curious and learn by exploring and manipulating things in their environment. They need social interaction and play to learn language, develop memory, and increase their attention span.

Social/Emotional Development

Important characteristics of this age period:

- The form of communication with adults changes. By 3 months, it is based on direct face-to-face interactions. When babies start to move around and are able to recall objects and people, they look to adults for directions and indications about objects.
- Babies readily show interest, pleasure, excitement, contentment, joy, and affection. They watch interesting faces and objects and show their emotions by cooing, babbling, and smiling in response to gentle voices, familiar faces, caressing, comforting, or feeding.
- Babies also show displeasure, distress, sadness, anger, anxiety, or fear. These emotions are shown through fussing, crying, and flailing arms and legs to show pain or distress brought on by hunger, thirst, fatigue, new situations, or new people. Whatever the cause, the behavior is the same.

- When babies become more mobile at around 6–9 months of age, they form strong attachments to specific caregivers, usually their mothers. Their emotional expressions change: They show distress when they are separated from their familiar caregiver, they become angry when frustrated, and they are afraid of strangers and wary of unexpected situations.
- By about 8 months, babies gradually learn to recognize and interpret the emotional expressions of others and react to them: They relax when the caregiver looks pleased, and they show distress when the caregiver is upset.
- By the end of the first year, babies can differentiate people and can be affectionate to those whom they know.

Important Points Related to Violence Prevention

1. Infants do not misbehave to annoy their parents and caregivers. They don't know how to use words to express their feelings; they don't understand the consequences of their actions. Crying is the way they usually express themselves. They should not be punished physically or verbally.
2. Infants should be comforted when in distress. Comforting does not spoil children; it helps them trust that the caregiver will meet their needs because they are loved and valued.
3. Having a positive, strong relationship with caregivers early on is fundamental to a child's positive self-esteem, sense of security, and confidence. These early relationships with caregivers help children become socially competent and less angry and aggressive with other children.

From 18 to 36 Months

During this period, changes in the brain, rapid physical development, and exposure to a wider range of experiences result in changes in the way children interact with their world and the people in it. Their interactions and reasoning become increasingly more sophisticated, so that by about age 3, they can typically communicate using language, imitate the actions and behaviors of others, play with other children, and engage in pretend play.

Cognitive Development

Important characteristics of this age period:

- The brain continues the rapid production of new nerve cell connections (synapses).
- More complex thinking abilities make it possible for toddlers to mentally represent the world to themselves—not just perceive their present experience.
- Since they are able to have mental images of people and objects that are not present, children can develop fantasy and engage in pretend or fantasy play, where they use particular objects to represent others. For example, toddlers can play a game in which they pretend that a stuffed toy is a real dog, or that a big box is their home.
- At the beginning of this period, children are more likely to play by themselves, but by around 30 months, they can have an object perform a social role. For example, a youngster may use a doll to represent a mother or a child.
- Children initially learn by imitating adults and other children in their presence. As they develop the ability to remember, they gradually imitate actions and events that occurred in the past.
- Youngsters get increasingly better at solving simple problems using mental schemes rather than resorting to trial-and-error attempts.
- Toddlers understand that pictures represent objects and people—that is, pictures are not the actual objects and people.
- The ability to represent things mentally and search for hidden objects is also associated with the development of vocabulary. Children start to speak when they begin to have mental representations of hidden objects. At around 16 months, babies understand 150–200 words. By age 2, they can follow verbal instructions, and by age 3, they master about 1,000 words. They always understand more words than they can use in speech.
- Over this age range, children have a vague notion of time but still struggle with the meanings of *today*, *tomorrow*, and *yesterday*.
- This is a time of exploration, especially as children become more skilled at basic mobility—walking, running, and climbing. They have high energy levels.
- Children’s attention span is short, and they are easily distracted. They can listen to stories for short periods of time.

Social/Emotional Development

Important characteristics of this age period:

- Children increasingly show a strong sense of self as a separate individual—they say NO to adults.
- By 18 months, they think they are the center of the world (egocentrism) and that their needs should be met immediately.
- They begin to engage in pretend play by using objects to symbolize others.
- Children are interested in one another very early in their lives. The kind and complexity of the relationships they establish with each other vary as they grow older. For toddlers, playing with unfamiliar children is difficult; they prefer to play with friends.
- Until around 18 months, children enjoy playing alone, but by age 2, they will share play space with and enjoy the company of other children. They still require close supervision and adult support.
- Toddlers learn social skills through play, by watching and imitating other children and adults, and by making choices—preferably with the security of a caring adult nearby.
- Young children move from expressing frustration through tantrums to verbalizing their feelings more often and/or expressing them through pretend play.
- They have a strong notion of territory: “This is mine!” Between ages 1 and 2, children are concerned with ownership rights and possession. There is an increase in aggression directed toward obtaining something (“I want your ball!”). Physical and verbal forms of aggression occur at equal frequency.
- Between 18 and 24 months, children begin to experience new emotions: shame, pride, guilt, and envy. These feelings emerge because children can now think about and evaluate themselves in terms of some social rules or desired goals.
- By age 2, children are able to measure their behavior against the expectations of others. There is a growing sensitivity to and acceptance of adult standards.

- By the middle of the second year, children begin to control and regulate their emotions, because they can now understand behavioral standards and use them to evaluate their actions. Children who are able to control and modulate the expression of their emotions are more likely to get along well with others.
- By age 2, children are less likely to be distressed when separated from familiar caregivers.
- Children strive to show their independence and can be stubborn and contrary, showing rapid mood changes.
- Toddlers thrive in a balanced, secure, predictable routine with clear and reasonable limits.

Important Points Related to Violence Prevention

1. Toddlers misbehave because they think they are the center of the world and want their needs met immediately. They are developing a strong sense of self as independent individuals. They get easily frustrated and angry.
2. Since they still can't control their emotions and are just beginning to use words to express their ideas and feelings, they frequently use tantrums to express themselves when they are frustrated, tired, or angry.
3. Parents and caregivers should handle and respond to tantrums and other difficult behaviors without resorting to violence. By avoiding violence or verbal abuse, parents will serve as a model for their children, who will learn how to behave appropriately when there is a conflict.

From 3 to 5 Years Old

Children in this age group are no longer babies and toddlers. Important developmental changes continue to occur, although more slowly than in the first 3 years. This is the beginning of a long period marked by gradual changes that continue throughout adolescence and adulthood. Increasingly in U.S. society, this is the age when children start nursery school, kindergarten, or other out-of-home care, thus expanding their contact with the outside world. During this period, their brain grows to 75–90% of its adult size, their coordination improves, and their senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste are fully developed.

Cognitive Development

Important characteristics of this age period:

- There is rapid growth in the frontal lobe area of the brain, although this growth will not be completed until the end of adolescence. This area of the brain is responsible for the planning and organization of new actions and behaviors, motor control, regulation of emotions, and maintaining attention to tasks.
- Children have trouble thinking about two aspects of the same problem. It is hard for them to focus their attention on more than one salient aspect of whatever they are thinking about.
- Children's thinking continues to be influenced by their egocentrism. It is still hard for them to see things from someone else's perspective and to realize that other people can have thoughts different from their own.
- At younger ages, children seem to transfer thinking about things from the particular to the general: "My grandma bakes cookies, your grandma bakes cookies, too." Therefore, they are likely to confuse cause and consequence (cookies come from anyone who is a grandma).
- Toward the end of this period, children begin to see the relation between cause and effect (if I do this, then that will happen) and can think ahead to anticipate the consequences of their actions.
- Children start to make distinctions between reality and appearance, between what things seem to be and what they are. A 3-year-old will be more focused on appearance (a stuffed dog is a dog), whereas a 5-year-old will make the distinction between reality and appearance (a stuffed dog is not a real dog). Their thinking is still based on the observable aspects of objects and people and on firsthand, concrete experience.
- During this period, children have a greater ability to generate mental representations of objects, actions, and events and can therefore plan their actions in advance and use make-believe/pretend play in a more elaborate way. Using their imaginations, children can think about things and people without seeing them.
- Although their attention span improves during this period, children still cannot remain attentive for long periods of time. They quickly become bored and tired of a single activity, such as waiting for something, listening to someone, or doing one thing for more than a few minutes. For instance, a 4-year-old can play with something or another child for about 20–30 minutes.

- Knowledge and skills are acquired by “doing”—having direct experiences like exploring, creating, and trying new things in social interactions with others through play.
- Learning also occurs by imitating adult behavior.
- There is a great acceleration in language development: Children of this age learn an average of 50 new words/month and understand many more words than they can speak. They use more than 1,200 words at age 3 and 5,000–6,000 words by age 5. During this period, they go from speaking in two- or three-word sentences to more complex ones.
- Children develop the ability to think aloud or talk to themselves in an attempt to control their own behavior.
- Children ask many questions to satisfy their curiosity or get adult attention.
- Young children understand and remember simple relationships, concepts, skills, and routines.
- Children understand spatial concepts like *up*, *down*, *over*, *under*, *around*, and *through*; time concepts (*today*, *yesterday*, and *tomorrow*); and the ability to sort things by category (*food*, *animals*, *flowers*).

Families are crucial
in helping children have a
positive sense of self.

Social/Emotional Development

Important characteristics of this age period:

- Peers are very important—they are agents of socialization. Children in this age range can play cooperatively with other children, share things, and take turns when they want to.
- Children have a diminished sense of themselves as “the center of the world,” and their improved ability to think helps them have a more stable perception of themselves. They also develop the capacity to make judgments about themselves and their worth. Families are crucial in helping children have a positive sense of self.
- Children can interpret other people’s emotions correctly. Children in this age range have a greater ability to read the emotions of others and to control their own, although they tend to be more sympathetic to those with whom they are familiar.

- Children continue to use different strategies to control their own emotions: They close their eyes and ears; remove themselves from the situation; and can resist the temptation to respond to whatever is disturbing them.
- Children start to display emotions more appropriately because they are better able to assess negative emotions.
- Children's physical disputes over possession of objects or getting space decrease while the amount of verbal aggression (threats, teasing) toward others who anger them increases, and bullying becomes a way to establish dominance.
- Boys tend to use object-oriented aggression to cause physical pain; girls are more likely to use person-related aggression to cause psychological pain.
- By age 3, children usually need help in resolving conflicts with other children and still have difficulty sharing things. They express intense feelings but can play more cooperatively than toddlers.
- By age 4, children seek to resolve conflicts, want to please their friends, are able to share things, and increase self-regulation of behaviors and emotions, but they still need adults to help them express and control feelings appropriately.
- By age 4, children can have a sense of their ethnic identity, and the way their social group is viewed by society can influence their perception of their own identity.
- By age 5, children cooperate well with other children, enjoy others, and can be empathetic. They understand the power of rejecting others.
- Because of their increased capacity to think and fantasize, children can imagine terrible things and develop fears. Adults should help children feel safe and make the distinction between fantasy and reality.
- Children learn social skills and ways to express emotions by watching other children and adults.

Adults should help children feel safe and make the distinction between fantasy and reality.

- Children can distinguish among moral rules, social conventions, and personal rules and begin to understand when to apply these in different situations.
- As children become more capable of planning and reasoning, they are also more capable of understanding and internalizing social rules and acting in accordance with them.
- Children understand that either praise or blame can result from something they do. They enjoy helping and will respond well to praise, care, and concern from an adult.
- Children can understand the difference between doing something “on purpose” and an “accident.” They tend to focus more on the resulting damage than on the intentions of the perpetrator.

Important Points Related to Violence Prevention

1. As children grow, they have more interactions with people other than family members and in places other than their homes. As a consequence, conflicts and disputes increasingly become part of their lives.
2. Because of their brain development during this period, children have greater mental abilities and a wider vocabulary, and they begin to understand that other people can have different thoughts and ideas.
3. Children of this age can learn how to resolve conflicts without violence and how to find positive solutions to problems. They can learn how to express their anger with words and how to understand other people’s feelings when there is conflict. These are lessons for life.

From 6 to 8 Years Old

During these years, children’s rate of physical growth is slower. The brain has almost reached its adult size, and there is a dramatic increase in the quantity of real-world knowledge as children expand their experiences outside their homes—in school, with peers, and in activities without adults present. Thus, children start to experience increased freedom and autonomy to explore their world. Children’s better physical and cognitive capacities make it possible for them to be more responsible for undertaking tasks at home and in school. At this age, children are very energetic, like to make things and to take risks, and are interested in accomplishing tasks.

Cognitive Development

As the brain continues to grow and mature, its development continues to underlie changes in cognitive skills. During this period, different parts of the brain start to function more effectively as a coordinated system. These newly developed functions enable children to coordinate their thinking and behaviors more effectively. But the part of the brain that is responsible for good judgment and the control of impulses—the prefrontal cortex—is still immature; consequently, children of this age period do not yet have the capacity to fully control their impulses.

Important characteristics of this age period:

- Increase in speed and capacity of memory processing helps children focus on two or more aspects of a problem at a time while thinking about it.
- Children learn to control attention and concentrate on what they are doing for longer periods of time so they can obtain and use information more efficiently.
- Thinking becomes more organized, allowing children to ponder alternatives and reverse their thinking to solve problems.
- To achieve goals, children are able to develop simple plans before acting, making them more reliable without adult supervision. For example, when children invite friends over to play, they can plan their activities in advance.
- There is a greater ability to classify and categorize things and put them in order according to multiple criteria, such as color, shape, and size.
- Children can think concretely (not abstractly) to focus on several parts of a simple problem at the same time.
- Children’s vocabulary is continually increasing; by age 8, they can understand about 20,000 words. They begin to speak with more precision and to understand that a word may have different meanings.
- Their concepts of time and distance are improving, but children are not yet able to place events in correct time sequence.
- Children can distinguish between what is real and what is pretend.
- Practicing and paying attention can improve their chance of remembering new things.
- Youngsters understand and apply rules, make judgments, and want the rules strictly followed.

- Around age 6, children begin to internalize strict moral rules of behavior—what is right or wrong. This enables them to be more independent of adult supervision.
- Although they are not yet capable of thinking and problem solving like adults, children can increasingly understand the viewpoints of others, focus on several aspects of a problem at a time, classify objects, and control their attention.

Social/Emotional Development

Typical U.S. children of this age group increasingly spend more time outside of the home with peers of the same age and in situations both with and without adult supervision. Spending more than 40% of their time outside of the home means less time with parents and other family members. This increased freedom affects children’s social behavior in many ways.

Important characteristics of this age period:

- Children are intensely interested in peers, especially those of the same sex. Friendships are very important because they help children develop the ability to communicate and understand others’ points of view and to function as part of a group.
- Children learn social rules and develop their personalities by interacting with other children in their age group.
- Friendships provide opportunities for give and take, negotiation of differences, shared experiences, and mutual trust.
- Children’s play changes from fantasy play, in which imagination is the key element, to rules-based games, in which the rules are the essence of the game and the objective is to win a competition regulated by rules.
- They are more capable of playing with a large number of children for longer periods of time and of sticking to the rules as required in a game.
- A sense of belonging and of acceptance by peers becomes a very important concern for children; they no longer rely as much on adults for gratification.
- Children are not only able to understand and predict that there are points of view different from their own, but they can also view their own thoughts and feelings from someone else’s perspective.

- Children are very concerned with justice and fairness. They have a strict understanding concerning what is “right” and “wrong.” What is viewed by them as “fair” or “equal” is important, and if the standard is violated they can be verbally or physically aggressive in an attempt to “get even.”
- They develop and show social skills like empathy and compassion by observing the effect of their own and others’ behaviors toward others.
- Children experience a self-esteem shift: They measure their own worth in a more objective way based on social acceptance and their own sense of competence.
- Children need to develop a sense of mastery or competence by performing tasks without adult help.

Parents need to adapt their parenting strategies to incorporate reasoning, reinforce children’s understanding of right and wrong, teach problem-solving and prosocial skills, and use humor.

Important Points Related to Violence Prevention

1. Children in this age group can learn social rules, understand right and wrong, have more sophisticated thinking, develop strong relationships with other children, and become more independent of their parents.
2. Parents and caregivers need to continue to help children resolve conflicts without violence, express anger with words, and think about the consequences and fairness of their actions.
3. Parents must balance setting clear limits for their children’s activities and behaviors and allowing children to develop more control over their own lives. Involving children in tasks and giving them responsibilities help children gain a sense of accomplishment and acceptance, which in turn help them develop confidence and self-esteem. Children with these attributes tend to relate to others in positive ways.

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