



## For Professionals: Infant and Toddler Development



Infant and toddler development have been studied for decades. In *Mother Goose Cares About the Early Years* we have grouped some of the observations and conclusions of developmental theorists into five general themes:

### **I Need You**

Trust, Emotional Development, Attachment, Separation, Social Development

### **I Am Important**

Emotional and Identity Development

### **I Can Do It**

Developing Autonomy, Self-Help and Self-Esteem

### **I Think About Things**

Cognitive Development and Receptive Language

### **I Communicate What I Am Thinking**

Expressive Language

### **I'm On the Go**

Physical Development

### **I Play**

A Combination of All Domains

Use this and your own knowledge of child development in the environments, experiences and explorations you create for infants and toddlers. Find appropriate ways to communicate this information to families: in conversations, journals, newsletters and documentation. Most importantly, use this knowledge to help you understand how to support the learning and development of infants and toddlers and to understand their behavior.

Before we begin to discuss strategies for using books in your interactions with children, it is important to establish a common understanding of child development and the age levels to which we refer.

When we refer to *infants* or *babies* we are thinking about babies from birth to about 15 months of age.

When we use the term *toddlers*, we are thinking about children from about 16 months to their third birthday.

## **I Need You: Trust, Emotional Development, Attachment, Separation, Social Development**

One of the first lessons an infant learns in life is the lesson of trust. When an adult tries to find the reason for a baby's cry and tries to relieve it, the baby learns that the world is a safe place. In this way a baby learns that adults will not only meet basic needs, such as food, warmth and shelter, but also higher level needs for emotional comfort, security and belonging.

As a healthy child begins to develop, he begins to accept that these loving adults have needs and wants of their own and that this person I love (and who loves me) is a separate being who doesn't always want what I want and sometimes goes away from me.

During the first three years of life, one central theme in a child's social and emotional development is to understand that the people they have become attached to, the ones they trust, will be there as stable and consistent figures in their lives even when they are not immediately visible or available.

Another central theme in the first three years of life is how to get along with the people you need. Because infants and toddlers see much of the world from their own perspective, they often operate as if everyone else in the world is there to meet their needs and desires. Someone so self-centered needs help understanding their place in the world and how their actions and behaviors can be moderated to acknowledge the needs and desires of others.

Early childhood educators who spend time with young children find much of their work centered on helping children learn to get along with one another and express their feelings appropriately.

## **I Am Important: Emotional and Identity Development**

Children come into the world dependent and connected to others for their basic needs. The messages children get from their caregivers and the world around them contribute to their feeling of importance, of knowing that adults are paying attention and being responsive to their preferences, and that they can express their feelings and be understood and accepted.

Educators who are child centered create an environment that is tuned in to children and meets their needs for connection, relationship and emotional security. This child-centered environment helps children develop a strong identity and self-concept.

This means many things to children's emotional and identity development. It acknowledges that each child is an individual with different abilities, personalities and ways of learning. It also means that adults follow a child's lead in play, allowing the child to dictate play themes, times and level of activity.

For example, when a child isn't interested in playing, the adult should take the cue from the child and save it for another time. Forcing a child to engage by tickling, being too loud or overly expressive takes away control from the child.

## **I Can Do It: Developing Autonomy, Self-Help and Self-Esteem**

The ability to make things happen is a powerful driving force in human beings. Infants begin life totally dependent on adults to meet their basic needs. They grow to become competent, capable and autonomous individuals by the age of three.

Babies learn they can extend interactions with loving caregivers by cooing, smiling and gazing at them. They want the spoon to feed themselves, and may push your hand away or use their own hands to eat snack or lunch.

Toddlers may insist on putting on their own shoes or walking down the hall without holding your hand. They learn to say "no" before they say "yes" because "no" is so much more definitive—they like the independence so much they often say "no" when they mean "yes"!

### **The Interrelatedness of Autonomy, Self-help and Self-esteem**

As children discover what they can do, and what they can make happen, their attempts should be acknowledged and encouraged by supportive adults. This encouragement produces good feelings inside the child, and an urge to keep going and try more things. Even though each attempt isn't always successful by adult standards, the drive to try is appreciated and results in better self-esteem.

When children try to do things for themselves, like feeding, toileting, dressing, soothing, we call that developing self-help skills. Families and educators usually shower children with praise for attempting self-help behaviors because it signals the beginning of the end of constant caretaking, and the beginning of independence in the child.

When children's attempts to show you what they can do and make happen are thwarted or discouraged because the outcome is unsatisfactory, they may develop feelings of self-doubt—"I can't really do much" or "I'm not very good at this"—and become less inclined to try new things.

Early childhood educators who help develop nurturing, responsive relationships with infants and toddlers will find much to praise in children's attempts—while recognizing that the product, or outcome of those attempts is secondary.

### **I Think About Things: Cognitive Development and Receptive Language**

Infants and toddlers are deep thinkers even though their ability to express thoughts in ways adults can understand is limited.

If you watch closely, you will see the depth of their cognitive skills as they explore the people and objects in their environment and make conclusions about how the world works. Since most of what babies and young toddlers think about comes to them through their senses, sensory exploration is critical. Having brightly colored objects to look at, varied textures to feel, soothing and interesting sounds to hear and good smells provide infants with important sensory information.

As they get older their grasp of ideas becomes more important than sensory input and they begin to make connections between cause and effect, symbols and real objects and ways to classify and categorize things.

Solving problems is an aspect of cognitive development that demonstrates young children's thinking skills. If a desired object is out of reach, this presents a problem. How will this problem be solved? A newborn could cry until someone comes along to help. An older baby could roll over and over until the object is close enough to hold. A toddler could use a tool—a long stick or perhaps a chair—to get to the right height to obtain the desired object.

Problem solving starts with concrete situations like this and progresses to social problem solving as children become more tuned in to other people in their lives.

Three processes characterize infant and toddler thinking skills:

- imitation
- practice and repetition
- sorting and classifying

Babies imitate facial expressions and sounds of older children and adults which leads to their own communication and language development. They use practice and repetition to master and refine new learning and skills. They sort and classify information to gain knowledge—round things roll and are thrown, balls are round, this must be a ball. They also sort and classify information to keep them safe—it burned and hurt the last time I touched that thing, I better not touch those kinds of things anymore.

Educators can support a child's exploration of thinking about things by providing many different experiences with objects and people, encouraging their innate curiosity about the world and understanding their need for practice and repetition.

Cognitive development is not something to teach. It is a positive by-product of a life full of rich and varied experiences.

**Receptive language** refers to language and communication that the infant and toddler understands. Receptive language is usually more developed than expressive language in the infant and toddler years. Children understand gestures, facial expressions and words before they are able to express themselves. They respond to a familiar voice and are soothed, they respond to outstretched arms as a signal that they will be picked up and as they get older they will follow simple directions.

## **I Communicate: Expressive Language**

Exemplary educators use their knowledge of child development to encourage children to express their wants and needs. Before children can talk, it is important to use language with children all the time, naming what children are doing, what they're looking at and what they are touching. This helps children learn to talk later on. Even talking to the youngest infants will help them learn to communicate and eventually speak.

Babies may say their first words at around 12 months of age, usually words that have meaning to them—family names, familiar objects. They mix recognizable words with babbling. They may sound like they are having real conversations because they can imitate the inflection and the tone of the language.

Once children can begin to speak, caregivers help them learn new words and encourage children to speak: I see you reaching for your bottle. Are you thirsty? Can you say, "I'm thirsty"? You are pointing at the dog. I know you love dogs. Let's say it together: "Duh, duh, doggie!"

Toddlers gain vocabulary and expressive language rapidly, especially if they hear complex sentences and sophisticated vocabulary from adults and older children. The more words a child hears, the more connections are formed in the brain. These connections help children use and understand language. But simply hearing words isn't enough: the words must be varied and descriptive of real objects and actions in their environments. As toddlers get older, caregivers should increase the number of questions they ask. Questions encourage toddlers to stretch their potentials by providing answers to questions.

Exemplary educators read children's expressions, body language and what they're looking at. They observe, name and talk about the actions and feelings of infants and toddlers. They listen patiently when toddlers try to speak and they encourage children to express themselves.

Naming, listening, having conversations, questioning, offering more language and then doing more listening: these are the ways educators can help infants and toddlers build their expressive language. Book reading time is a great way to encourage children to use the words they have heard spoken.

## **I'm on the Go: Sensory-Motor Development**

While there is considerable variation in the rate of physical development of infants and toddlers, the sequence of their development is quite similar. Children are developing their large (gross) muscles, which help them sit up, crawl, stand, walk, run, jump, kick, and throw.

They are also developing their small (fine) muscles which help them suck, smile, chew, grasp a rattle, hold an object in their hand or between two fingers, turn the pages of a book, hold a marker or paintbrush, knead and roll playdough or put on then pull off socks.

Physical development begins with control over simple movements and progresses toward more complex movements. It also begins with control over the central core of their bodies—head, neck, trunk—and progress outward to arms, legs, hands and feet.

These physical changes have a profound impact on the development of other areas. Infants and toddlers need a certain amount of fine motor development to master self-help skills such as zipping and buttoning, which lead to independence. And they need gross motor development in order to have more control of the separation experience. They now have the ability to crawl or walk or run away from or move back to adults as they choose.

Infants and toddlers experience the world through their bodies. They learn about the world primarily through their senses in the first two years of life and later start to think about things more conceptually. All five senses—sight, sound, touch, taste and smell—are used to try to make sense of the world. They learn to gravitate to some experiences and avoid others.

The work of an infant or toddler is to start processing, sorting and then putting into action this vast amount of information.

## **I Play: A Combination of All Domains**

The development of play in infants and toddlers overlaps all other developmental domains. Children use all their social, emotional, language, cognitive and physical resources when they play. Through play with objects, people and their own imaginations, they construct knowledge about how the world works, how to get along with others and how to develop inner resources to cope with unexpected changes and events.

Play involves free exploration and movement, and experimentation and practicing new skills. Some say that play cannot be controlled, that play is an activity one engages in of one's own free will. So, if you were able to tell an infant to play with a rattle, that would be an activity, but it wouldn't be play. Likewise if a supervisor told you to play a board game, it might be fun, but you would be following directions, not playing. Similarly, children engage in play when they are in control and make choices about who and what they are playing with. Dictating children's play choices is not a developmentally appropriate practice when caring for infants and toddlers.

When children play, they take the initiative to choose what and with whom they want to play, and come up with ideas to try out. That doesn't mean adults have no place in children's play. They have important roles in supporting children's development of play skills. Early childhood educators support children's play by:

- setting up a safe and healthy play environment
- selecting interesting and appropriate play materials
- providing guidance when children need help or ask questions
- following children's lead
- extending play by offering information or new ideas to assist children in staying with, connecting or going deeper into play themes