

# How Do Children Develop?

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During the last 10 years, there has been an explosion in our knowledge of the ways in which humans develop and learn. It is now known that babies are beginning to learn even before they are born. As I have read the latest research, I often find myself wishing I had known these things when my children were young. We all want our children to be the best that they can be, and with some knowledge of how children learn and the sequential steps they must go through in many areas of development, we can provide many experiences at home to help them reach their potential.

When educators discuss children's development, they usually talk about physical, mental, social, and emotional development. The following is a quick lesson in how children develop and the stages they go through. Knowing these will help you understand what stage they are in and what comes next. For greater understanding of stages in the development of reading, writing, and math skills and for an idea of what goes on in a quality child care center, read **Ready To Learn**. You can use that information to help your child do the activities which will enable him/her to progress smoothly to the next stage. Always remember that some children progress faster than others and that the time spent in stages does not reflect their intelligence. They may have a personality which needs to move slower in order to enjoy life and really internalize their learning.

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## How Children Develop

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### **Physically**

Once born, children develop strength from top to bottom (head, then body, then legs, then feet); from the inside to the outside (trunk, then arms and legs, then hands and feet, then fingers and toes); from large muscle (jumping, hopping, running, throwing, catching, carrying, climbing, and balancing) to small muscle (using muscles of the wrist and hand in activities such as cutting, drawing, stringing beads, building block towers, working with play dough) skills. THIS IS A SEQUENCE THAT ALL HUMANS FOLLOW. (The development may vary for children with disabilities). While children are young we need to do many activities to strengthen their large and small muscles. Muscle skill development and maintaining a healthy body are especially important for future reading, writing, and math success.

### **Mentally**

When a child is born, he/she comes with a brain ready and eager to learn. The brain is very much like a new computer. It has great potential for development, depending on what we put into it. Early experiences greatly influence the way a person develops. Everyone who works with children has an awesome responsibility for the future of those children. The activities you do with them from birth to age 10 will determine how their learning patterns develop. As children interact with their environment, they learn problem solving skills, Critical thinking skills, and language skills.

### **Socially**

First children develop a sense of self and then a sense of belonging to a family. They begin to watch other children and to want to interact with them. Children's play develops through stages (playing alone, playing near others but

not with them, playing with others but not sharing, playing and sharing, playing with a purpose, organized games). These stages develop over time and with practice. Later, children develop the ability to respect the rights of others and to feel empathy for them. They learn to work cooperatively with others and to resolve conflicts in peaceful ways. You can interact with your child in ways that encourage cooperative behavior and respect for the rights of others. INTERACTING WITH OTHERS IN POSITIVE WAYS IS CRITICAL TO SUCCESS IN LIFE.

### **Emotionally**

As babies grow, they learn that they are not the center of the universe and that they can depend on others. They develop a trust or mistrust of others. As toddlers, they learn to be proud of their accomplishments and state their opinions and desires. As they become preschoolers, children learn to separate from their parents and adjust to the school environment. They begin to participate in classroom activities. They learn to take turns and to solve conflicts using words. They begin to learn to control their emotions. They learn that it is okay to make a mistake. They develop confidence in themselves and learn to love themselves. You can help your children by encouraging them and showing your faith in their abilities. HAVING CONFIDENCE IN YOURSELF AND LIKING YOURSELF ARE CRITICALLY IMPORTANT TO FUTURE SUCCESS IN SCHOOL AND IN LIFE.

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## **How People Learn Best**

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Lakeisha and George are painting at the easel. Each of them has a jar of blue paint and a jar of yellow paint. Suddenly George yells, "Look, 'Keisha, I made green!" "How did you do it?" asks Lakeisha. "I put yellow paint on top of my blue paint - yellow and blue put together make green!" yells George. Other children gather around to watch and ask for a turn. The teacher wonders aloud what would happen if they mixed other colors. She allows the children to explore colors and help her chart their color discoveries with words and color samples.

This is an example of discovery learning or hands-on learning. One child made a discovery about 2 colors mixing to form a new color. Many children explored other colors to make new discoveries. They charted them and posted the chart so they could use it for a reference. They learned by doing. You see this kind of activity going on daily in quality preschools and child care centers around the country.

Research has shown that people remember things better when they learn them by doing. This is even true for adults. Here is an example. You want to learn how to play softball so that you can join a team. How will you learn to play?

Will you:

1. Buy a book and read about how to play softball.
2. Watch a video about softball.
3. Ask a friend who plays to grab a ball, bat, and glove and teach you.

Which way will help you learn the game the best? Choice 3 is the best way for most people because they actually get to try the game and learn the rules as they play. They learn in a hands-on way.

Hands on learning is good for both children and adults. The learner is actively involved instead of just sitting and listening. This is the way we want our children to learn and we know that research backs us up. In order to learn best, children must be actively involved in hands-on activities every day. Some good examples of hands-on activities are: working puzzles, making collages, painting, measuring ingredients for you as you cook, counting out napkins to set the table, playing simple board games together, sorting silverware into piles of forks, knives, and spoons, looking

at books, and buttoning, zipping, and tying. You will be surprised at how much your child can do and how fast he/she can learn.

You are invited to participate with your child in many meaningful learning experiences - experiences using hands-on learning.

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## Ready to Learn

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### How do we prepare children to be ready to learn?

There is great interest on the part of parents in teaching children their letters and numbers and writing skills. The following lists show the pre-reading and pre-writing skills and beginning number skills that every child must develop in order to learn to read, write, and do well in math.. After that, I have listed many of the activities that quality preschools and daycare centers do in the learning areas (physical, mental, social, emotional) to develop these readiness skills so that children will go to school ready to learn.

**Reading skills:** Reading skills develop in a sequence and we as educators try to help each child progress along that sequence as he/she is ready to progress. First, a child develops a love for books. At the same time they are beginning to develop eye-hand coordination. Next, they acquire tracking skills (the ability to follow words and pages from left to right through a book). Then children begin to recognize individual letters and later they realize that letters form words. Next they begin to understand that words remain the same from day to day. Listening skills improve at about the same time. The child begins to hear letter sounds and connect them with the written letters. Later, he/she begins to string sounds together to make words. The child then learns to hear and use the rhythm of the language. Reading ability continues to improve as he/she receives positive feedback from interested adults.

**Writing skills:** This is a sequence which each child passes through. One step follows another. A lot of practice is required at each stage. First the child begins to develop the sequence of drawing skills (from scribbling to making representational drawings). Encourage them to draw often. Small muscle strength needed for controlling writing instruments is increased through activities using squeezing, pinching and cutting. Then the child begins to recognize written names. Next he/she begins to imitate letters and numbers for fun and then to write for a purpose. When they receive positive feedback from interested adults, children's skills will continue to improve at a fast pace.

**Math skills:** These skills develop with much practice and we encourage their development as the child is ready. The child begins to count for fun (rote counting). Then they begin to see the purpose for counting and begin counting objects in a set (meaningful counting). Next they begin adding to or subtracting objects from a set. They begin comparing objects in a set. Then the child begins sorting (by size, shape, color, etc.) and ordering (by size, first-second-third, etc). They enjoy learning to estimate (guess how many) and predict (what will happen next). They begin to sequence objects (red, yellow, blue, red, yellow, \_\_\_\_). This is a slow process and requires a lot of practice. At last the child begins to recognize numbers and associate the number with a like number of objects. They also begin to write numbers. Later, they will write the number words. If we make this learning fun, children will enjoy learning math through their school years.

### To encourage physical development better preschools and daycare centers...

- Feed children meals with good nutritional value and teach nutrition activities to children and parents.
- Teach children and families about good hygiene.
- Practice large motor skills (balancing, galloping, skipping, building muscles in the arms, legs, and trunk).

- Build small motor skills through practice (cutting, holding writing instruments, drawing, painting, stringing beads, using play dough, water play).
- Present activities to develop eye-hand coordination.
- Offer many movement activities.
- Play instruments to the rhythm of the music.
- Play games that involve listening to and following directions.
- Don't forget to take your child for regular medical and dental checkups.

#### **To encourage mental development they...**

- Ask open-ended questions (questions which encourage children to think because they have no right or wrong answer).
- Give children choices.
- Allow and encourage creativity (through art, music and movement, dictation, retelling stories and creating new ones).
- Build language skills (through conversations with adults and each other, word games, reading stories, learning nursery rhymes, singing, dramatic play, introduction of new words, providing a writing center with word cards and writing materials, activities with puppets, listening center activities).
- Provide science experiments and introduce concepts about our world to help them make sense of it.
- Learn about the neighborhood and the city through walks and field trips.
- Provide many manipulative materials which encourage the development of problem solving skills.
- Encourage counting objects through games and individual activities.
- Ask the children for their opinions.
- Make charts with their predictions and their opinions and reread them often.
- Provide small group and individual activities involving counting sets and adding or subtracting; provide manipulatives which encourage classifying (by size, color shape, general classes like animals or plants and by function such as library and book or mower and grass).
- Read daily to the children.
- Help them learn sequencing by telling stories back to you.
- Observe each child in order to provide activities to encourage their individual learning. Remember, what children know depends on the experiences they have had.

#### **To encourage social development preschools and daycare centers...**

- Set up their classrooms in learning centers to enable and encourage children to work together in small groups.
- Help them develop self-esteem by accepting and respecting their efforts.
- Give them jobs and responsibilities in the classroom.
- Teach children to clean up and straighten up at the end of their work time.
- Help them learn to respect others through adult actions, words, stories and conversations.
- Encourage children to help other children in need and to share.
- Give them love and encouragement.
- Invite them to share their culture with others and encourage their parents to come in to the centers.
- Introduce them to children of other cultures and different abilities.
- Help children develop a positive attitude by being trustworthy models.
- Read books and have discussions which show parents leaving their children at school and being there when their children arrive home.
- Talk about careers and jobs and why parents have to work or go to school.
- Have a structured day so that children will feel secure.
- Let children help make the rules for the classroom and let them choose projects to work on.

- Through example and opportunity help them learn to work and play cooperatively with others.
- Give them the words to use to solve their problems with other children.

**To encourage emotional development they...**

- Help children learn to control their own behavior through setting a positive example.
- Help them learn to wait for a turn and to share with others.
- Help them develop plans for activities to do while waiting for a turn.
- Reassure children that it is okay to have feelings and to express them in acceptable ways.
- Give them the ability to channel their energy in constructive ways.
- Through showing respect to our children we help them learn to show respect for each other.
- Give children self-respect through accepting them as they are and helping them develop their negotiating and problem-solving skills.