

# Stages of Child Development and Implications for Communicating with Children



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# Stages of Child Development and Implications for Communicating with Children

# I.

## Introduction

Children of varying ages and stages of development communicate in different ways. It can be helpful to have some knowledge of developmental stages, to better understand the communication needs and styles of the children and young people with whom you're working. However, it's important to note that a child's chronological age and developmental age may be different. Therefore, while information about typical development can provide a starting point, it's important to tailor your approach to the needs of each child and consider other factors such as cultural and societal background. Furthermore, exposure to trauma can have an impact on a child's development, as well as their communication (see the 'Children and Trauma' guide for more information).

This guide provides a brief overview of each developmental stage and corresponding suggestions for engaging children of that age group, as well as communication strategies and approaches that can be used with children of all ages.

## II.

### 2 to 6 Years

In this age range, children learn primarily through playing and doing, and thrive on repetition and routine. They can get frustrated easily, as they are learning to express and control their emotions, and have a short attention span. They are also beginning to develop a sense of independence and are highly egocentric, meaning they think that everything that happens (including abuse or violence) relates to them. In addition, they may not have the cognitive skills to answer complex questions.

When communicating with this age group, it's helpful to:

- Use simple language and don't speak too quickly.
- Speak with a gentle and warm tone in your voice but vary your tone to match the child's emotion. For example, if they are showing you a toy or drawing that they like, you could say, "Wow, that looks great!" with pride and excitement in your voice. But if they are talking about a difficult situation, change to a more serious and calm tone and acknowledge their emotions.
- Use a lot of repetition and try asking a question or explaining something in different ways to see what works best.
- Communicate that all feelings are ok and help the child identify different emotions using simple language (e.g. happy, sad, mad, scared).
- Encourage curiosity and the asking of questions.
- Be playful and get down to the child's physical level to interact (e.g. sit on the floor with them).
- Build rapport with the child by asking about their interests and/or doing a simple activity together (such as coloring or playdough), before delving into a deep conversation.
- Encourage and promote simple decision-making and the sharing of opinions by offering the child choices where possible and asking what they think about different topics.
- Take frequent breaks.



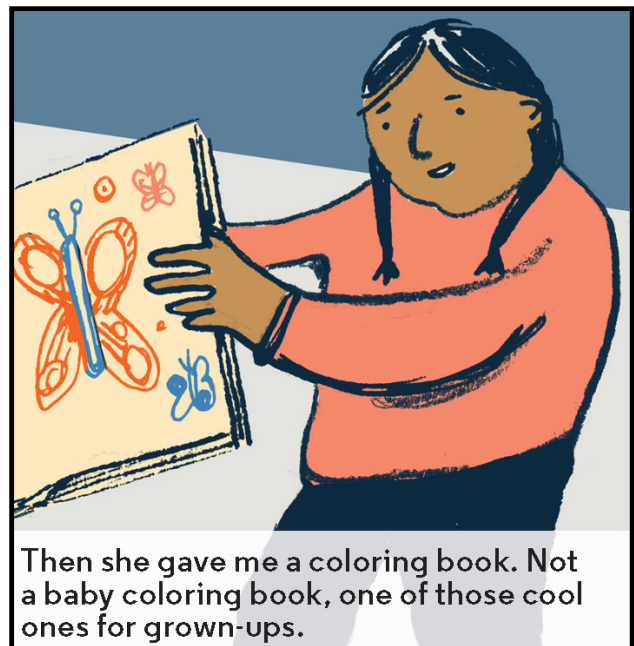
### III.

## 7 to 10 Years

During these ages, children develop more of an understanding of moral choices, rules, and cause and effect, and are very attuned to issues of fairness. They are becoming more independent and can take more responsibility for their actions. They also increasingly use sophisticated language and start to develop critical thinking skills. However, they may still be egocentric, leading to self-blame for violence and abuse.

When communicating with children in this age range, it's helpful to:

- Use positive, nurturing language, especially when talking about the child and their loved ones. This will help to bolster the child's feelings of self-esteem and confidence. This also applies when referring to the alleged perpetrator. Instead of using negative or blaming language such as "Your Auntie is bad," you could say, "Your Auntie made a mistake" or "What happened with your Auntie should not have happened and it is not your fault."
- Encourage and promote simple decision-making and problem-solving.
- Acknowledge and respect the child's feelings and worries.
- Demonstrate and encourage positive social behaviors such as kindness and empathy.
- Introduce examples or stories of other children dealing with difficult situations such as death, anger, and family conflict in a healthy way.
- Where appropriate, use humor and learn about the child by asking about their interests.



## IV.

### 11 to 14 Years

In this age range, children begin to place more emphasis on their relationships with friends and peers, more so than family, but this can vary according to cultural and social factors. Risk-taking, rebelling against authority, growing independence, and the forming of strong beliefs and principles are common for early adolescents. Children this age may also compare themselves with others more frequently and may be trying to figure out what's 'normal.'

When communicating with this group, it's helpful to:

- Ask what name and pronouns they would like you to use.
- Acknowledge and respect their feelings, ideas and opinions.
- Allow them to make choices (where appropriate) and praise them for achieving small goals.
- Be open to talking about issues of concern and interest to them (e.g. friendship groups, hobbies/interests, and pop culture).
- Discuss different points of view on a subject.
- Be open-minded, refrain from judgment and talk respectfully with (not at) them, and do not 'talk down' to them.
- Use language that promotes inclusivity, empathy and equality and does not reinforce stereotypical gender norms.
- Introduce examples of other children/young people dealing with difficult situations and demonstrating problem-solving and resilience.
- Where appropriate, use humor and lighthearted conversation to build a sense of trust and safety.





## V.

### 15 to 18 Years

During these years, sometimes referred to as middle adolescence, young people continue with the developmental tasks of early adolescence. For example, peer groups remain very important, but romantic relationships and sexuality might receive greater emphasis. At this age, teens are able to exercise abstract and complex thinking, follow numerous instructions, and consider risks, but may still act impulsively and have difficulty understanding long-term consequences.

In addition to the communication tips for the 11 to 14 age range, it can be helpful to:

- Remember that adolescence is a period of transition accompanied by complex feelings, so if a teen lashes out or becomes angry, it's best to remain calm and not match their anger. In most cases, the anger is not directed towards you but is due to their own frustration. It can also be helpful in some situations to reflect back their feelings or help them name the feelings.
- Allow space and opportunity for them to reflect on their situation and problem-solve, including weighing options and possible outcomes and talking through issues regarding values, morality and identity.
- Frame situations in terms of their rights and the choices they can make.



## VI. Communication Strategies for Children of All Ages

In addition to responding to age-specific needs, there are several other practices that can facilitate positive engagement with children and young people:

- Show a warm and friendly demeanor, as well as genuine interest in the child—this will help the child feel more comfortable and open up to you.
- Be truthful about why you are meeting with the child. This includes explaining your role, where you work, and the purpose of your meeting.
- Never make false or empty promises to the child and be honest if you do not know something. Acknowledge how hard it can be to not know what's going to happen in the future but advise that you'll find out and share whatever you can.
- Be flexible and patient with the child and allow them to guide some of the conversation. Understand that they may not feel ready to talk about what you need them to talk about right away and may avoid topics that are difficult or painful or that they worry may have negative consequences.
- Understand that 'why' questions may be difficult for children to understand. Instead, start questions with, 'how come?'



- Be mindful of cultural norms regarding communication and eye contact. For example, some children may take some time to ready themselves before responding, particularly if that's how they've been raised or if English is not their first language, so allow space for pauses and silence. Also, in some cultures, direct eye-contact is viewed as disrespectful, so don't assume that a child is being evasive or isn't listening if they are not making sustained eye-contact.
- It can be more comfortable for the child if you sit at an angle when communicating, so that you're not directly face-to-face. Also avoid sitting or standing above the child—get down to their eye level.
- It can be helpful to engage in an activity together while talking, such as going for a walk or drive, coloring, or making a craft.
- Respect the child's privacy and where possible, allow them to choose where they feel most comfortable speaking with you. For example, many children feel uncomfortable if you approach them at school or in the community, in front of their peers.
- Start with more general, neutral and rapport-building questions before talking about more difficult and sensitive topics.
- Remember that there are no prescribed or absolute 'right' words to say. Children feel when someone is being honest and genuine and has their best interests at heart, so be yourself.
- Demonstrate that you value what the child is bringing to the conversation by actively listening, nodding, summarizing what they've said, and asking clarifying questions.
- Acknowledge and accept how a child is feeling, and don't try to change or fix it. Also, ask children how they are feeling, rather than assuming.
- Communicate with the child regularly through all stages of their case.
- In addition to their words, pay attention to what the child is not saying—they may be communicating with you nonverbally through their body language, facial expression or tone of voice. If so, it can be helpful to say, 'I've noticed that you're [putting your head down]. Tell me what's going on for you right now.'
- When a child's wishes are overridden, they should be given an explanation of the reasons and acknowledgement of their concerns.
- Be mindful of the type of questions you ask, whether they be closed (questions that elicit only a yes/no response), open-ended (questions that cannot be answered with yes/no), or leading (questions that subtly prompt a response in a particular way). Many children find it difficult to say 'no' to a leading question (e.g. "do you agree?") and will say 'yes' even if they don't agree.
- It can be helpful to use a mix of closed questions when you want to elicit specific facts (e.g. "did you go to school today?") and open questions when you want to encourage free expression and narration (e.g., "what happened that day?" or "how does that make you feel?").
- Only ask one question at a time and do not pressure the child to respond or make decisions quickly.
- Regularly check in with the child to ensure that they have understood you. Give them the opportunity to ask you questions, or ask them to relay back what you've explained to them in their own words.
- It's helpful to end on a positive (but truthful) note in order to provide encouragement and lay a foundation for any future conversations. For example, you might say, "You may not be feeling like it, but you have been very strong," or, "I know that might have been hard, but thank you for talking with me. I really enjoyed meeting you."

## VII. Endnotes

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## VIII. Additional Resources

*National Children’s Advocacy Center’s Child Forensic Interview Structure*. 2019. Huntsville, AL: National Children’s Advocacy Center. [https://www.nationalcac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/NCAC\\_CFIS\\_Feb-2019.pdf](https://www.nationalcac.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/NCAC_CFIS_Feb-2019.pdf).







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