

Child Development - The Child from Birth to Three

When a child is born we can see that parts of the body are well-formed and will grow little while other parts are in their first stages of growth. For example, the head is large and well developed, particularly the forehead and upper head, and will grow little compared with the rest of the body.

The limbs, on the other hand, are extremely small compared to the size they will reach in adulthood. They are unformed in as much as it will take many months to reach the stage where they are sufficiently straight and strong enough to bear the weight of the body. The rhythmic system of the infant is also undeveloped. The breathing of any young child is often irregular compared with that of the adult, to the point where it may cause apprehension.

One of the results of observing these physiological occurrences, and the changes of such occurrences, is to appreciate how gradually and slowly such changes occur. It follows, and this applies to all the changes throughout the three stages, that content needs to be formulated so it relates to the inner experience of children at all periods of their growth and development.

During this stage of development children are not yet conscious of their thinking process. If parents attempt to remonstrate with their offspring their remarks (as the saying aptly puts it) “pass over their heads”. On the other hand, the activity of the limbs surpasses anything adults aspire to. Practically every waking moment is filled with some kind of movement. We can say that development during this phase is dominated by a “willing” type of consciousness.

This “willing” determines that children will always be doing things and it follows that they will seek to “do” those activities that the grown-ups are engaged in. Some of the foundations for “willing” for the rest of one’s life are established at this stage of development. It is therefore necessary to see that children are surrounded by a great number of activities that are worthy of imitation.

Such imitation is, however, different from the imitation carried out by adults. When adults imitate, they engage in a deliberate conscious act whereby, through control and discipline, they copy the actions, or whatever, of others.

Children, on the other hand, instinctively imitate others; they become completely absorbed in their surroundings without any conscious effort or study. Around the age of two to three an adjustment of great significance occurs.

A child uses the word “I”; the word itself is unique because it is the only word which cannot be learned through imitation. If a child learned his speech by imitation alone he would call other people “I” and himself (as he does at first) by his given name.

The significance of the use of the word indicates a very important point in development, for it indicates that the child has a realization of his own ego and consciousness. We refer to this process as the birth of ego-consciousness. It should be appreciated that the period when this is occurring is not an easy one for small children.

They are likely to be assertive and the affects of the adjustment are usually felt by those around the child; most mothers will have experienced the “terrible twos”. It is important throughout this stage that children should be allowed to express their “willing” consciousness and imitate the right sort of activities.