

Overview - Child Development

The three stages of child development relate to both mental and physical development and the relationship between the two. There exist clear physical indicators that children are moving out of one stage of development and into the next stage. The stages last from birth to seven; from seven to fourteen and from fourteen to twenty-one.

The physical indicator of the child moving from the second to third stage is puberty and this is obviously well documented, no doubt because of the effect of this period on those adults in close proximity to the adolescent!

The physical indicator that the child is moving from the first stage to the second stage is the change of teeth; very little evidence and documentation exists on this physical change.

Two qualifications need to be made. The first is that there occur further subdivisions and these will be described in other descriptions on child development. Secondly, we are going to describe the stages as separate from each other. It is obvious, however, that a child does not move from one stage to another overnight so to speak.

The changes occur gradually over long periods of time; some changes taking many months - some even longer.

Let us consider the first seven year period. The baby and toddler have very little power of conscious thought in as much as they are not yet conscious of their thinking process; adults' remonstrations (as the saying aptly puts it) "pass over their heads". On the other hand the activity of the limbs surpasses anything the adult can aspire to. Practically every waking moment is filled with some kind of movement.

The first years of childhood, up until the change of teeth, can therefore be described primarily as the cycle of development concerned with will and not with thinking. One only has to watch a small child at play to see that any perception regarding the results of their actions is almost entirely lacking. Similarly the bold defiance of toddlers when they are set on getting their own way is an experience that all parents have undergone.

Between the ages of seven and fourteen the emphasis moves from action to feeling. Primary school children think in a different way to adults.

Their thinking is pictorial, uncritical and unspecialised.

They possess a rich inner life where imagination and feeling are the main factors influencing their thinking. It is not uncommon for children to express their opinions of life in terms of extremes, of sympathies and antipathies. Healthy children of, say, nine or ten will act and judge almost entirely on their likes and dislikes.

The seven years of the third stage is when the development of logical thought occurs and it reaches its climax towards the end of this period. The example of students studying over their books and weighing everything with logical thought, or their questioning the deepest and profound aspects concerning life illustrates the development and use of the thinking process. At, or towards, the end of the period we recognize this development by respecting the right of the individual to judge, quite independently, the rights and wrongs of life in all its manifestations.

A proper understanding of the seven year cycles, with all that they imply, will help in understanding the growing child. We should also appreciate that teachers should not force results by causing or encouraging premature intellectual development and that recognition of the stages and their turning points is fundamental to optimizing the wellbeing and learning of students.