

Plain Talk

About how children grow



Children – are not adults!

But it's amazing to see how often we treat children as if they were little versions of ourselves. Of course we expect them to be polite when company comes, not to spit out food they hate, always to tell the truth, never to be selfish with their toys, and not to hit the neighbor boy when he is mean. But these can be tough standards for grown-ups, much less children!

Sometimes we forget that it takes children many, many years of watching, copying, and making their own mistakes before they really start acting like adults. And no wonder we want to forget—wouldn't parenting be a hundred times easier if only little Johnny and Susy were dependable, cooperative and mature—if only they acted like little grown-ups.

Instead, they do childish and immature things, and for no other reason than that they are children. Baby Johnny cries for no reason you can figure out. Susy plays in the mud just as soon as you dress her in clean clothes. Together they empty boxes of crackers on the kitchen floor. They get into noisy fights when you are on the phone. In a few years, Susy will refuse to wear boots when it snows, and Johnny will forget to mention when he isn't coming straight home from school.

Now, if this is how your best friend acted, you'd have reason to worry. But children—well, they just aren't adults, and they are simply going through difficult but necessary stages of learning and growing.

Parents are sometimes surprised to learn that almost all child behavior (even crying, making messes, fighting, thumb-sucking, saying "no" all the time, and refusing to get toilet trained) is, at certain stages not only normal, but necessary. That kind of normal behavior shouldn't be punished, but rather redirected by firm, loving discipline. Normal behavior shouldn't be punished for the same reason you wouldn't punish a plant for needing to be watered.

In fact, you can compare a growing child to a growing plant. If you've ever done any gardening, you know how important it is to know the growing habits of each kind of flower or vegetable, and to cooperate with those needs at every stage. It's the same with children. They, too, have specific growth stages and special requirements at each stage.

But your child's growth from infancy to adulthood is far more complicated than any plant's. In fact, your child needs more understanding, watchfulness, patience and judgment from you than is needed from the caretaker of the world's most wonderful garden.

Knowing about the stages of child development is important for you as a parent. It will free you from needless worry about whether your child is "normal." It will help you help your child grow at the pace nature intended. Understanding child development will enable you to be a calmer, more effective parent, and will help reassure you that a particularly difficult stage won't last forever.

Here are some examples of the interesting—and sometimes mystifying—stages of child growth. You may well recognize some of them!

The Obstinate Stage

Two-year-olds actually need to be negative and rebellious. Saying "no" in words or in their behavior is their way of experiencing what it means to be an independent person. This stage—which is often difficult for parent and child alike—repeats itself in adolescence, and for the same reason—to achieve independence.

The Age of Tall Tales

Sometimes young school-age children make up wild stories ("Teacher told us all to bring candy to school tomorrow," or "Susy made me eat a squishy worm today!") Children at this age are discovering their imaginations and don't yet realize the important difference between what they've actually seen and what they've imagined or wished. For them, this really is not a form of lying. In fact, children don't even start to know the difference between "right and wrong," or develop a conscience, until at least age six, and then it's just the beginning of a long process.

The Age of Best Buddies

At about ages seven, eight and nine, children make close friends of the same sex. They often set up clubs that have secret rules and codes and messages, and even tape signs on their bedroom doors with warnings like "Adults keep out!" They love to dress alike and trade clothes and other belongings. It's

because at this stage they have their first chance to learn how to be accepted by people who don't "have to" accept them the way their families do. Their usual reaction is to try to be just like the person or group they want to accept them.

The "I'm just wild about Mother (or Dad)" Ages

Children go through phases of preferring one parent over another, sometimes leaving the other bewildered parent feeling hurt or left out. This is, however, only another stage in natural development. It's a fact that between the ages of about three and five a child is best able to learn about his or her own sex role by the experience of being different from the opposite-sex parent, and likes to spend more time with that parent. Later, from about eight to ten, the child learns more about that role by watching and copying the same-sex parent, or other same-sex adult such as teacher, TV star or sports hero.

Here are some hints about coping with the changes in your child:

- 1. Be ready to change, right along with your child.** Make rules and guidelines the same way you buy clothes—with the idea your child will outgrow them.
- 2. Be realistic about what your child can do at each stage.** Avoid difficult situations. For instance, if Johnny is in the Terrible Two's—rebellious and getting into everything—don't tempt fate by taking him shopping.
- 3. Realize no stage lasts forever.** The day will come when the baby will stop crying, or when you won't have to wash the diapers any more.
- 4. Remember that growing up isn't a race.** Don't try to rush things. Nature has its own seasons and patterns.
- 5. Look at the stages from your child's point of view.** Think how frustrating it must be to almost know how to talk or walk or ride a bike, or make a friend, or stick to a project until it's done... or anything else. Try to give Johnny the confidence he lacks when he is discouraged and thinks he has failed.
- 6. Remember that children learn by doing, not by listening.** That's why it takes them a long time to learn, and why they have to make the same mistakes over and over again.

It's why, just when you think Susy is toilet-trained, she'll have an accident.

- 7. Learn all you can about child development.** While parenting is a natural activity, learning how to do it doesn't come naturally for most people. There is plenty of information available that can help you understand your child's stages. Check with your doctor, public health nurse or library. Pre- and post-natal courses, child care or parenting classes, or parent help groups are offered at hospitals and schools in many communities

Help is not far away.

If you are facing a particularly difficult situation, check with a local social service agency or other counselor.

For parent education and support groups in your area, call your County Extension Family Living Agent or Prevent Child Abuse Wisconsin, 211 S. Paterson St., Ste. 250, Madison, WI 53703, (608) 256-3374 or 1-800-CHILDREN. www.preventchildabusewi.org

You can call a parent helpline for assistance:

Milwaukee: (414) 671-0566
Madison: (608) 241-2221

If you want professional counseling, call a local social agency or county social services/human services department. If the agency you call doesn't offer the kind of service you want, ask to be referred somewhere else.

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