Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Understanding infant and toddler development stages

Following the birth of your child, a very special journey begins. What can you look forward to? What can parents do to support the development of their children during these challenging and formative years?



Infancy—the first year of life—is a time when babies are totally dependent on their parents and caregivers. Children are toddlers from one to two years of life. This stage is characterized by rapid growth and development in the following stages:

The neonate

During the first month of life, the new baby is known as the neonate or newborn. During this time, the baby must adjust to leaving the closed, protected environment of the womb and to living on his or her own in the outside world. Behaviour during this time is random and unpredictable.

During the neonatal period, parents should handle their new baby frequently so that the baby's new independent life does not feel very different from his or her dependent life in the womb. The needs of the neonate are simple and repetitive—food and water, warmth and comfort from cuddling and touching, cleanliness and protection.

The first four months

The need for people becomes very evident during this stage. The baby needs to attach itself to caregivers in order to survive. The infant is totally dependent on others for care. Trust continues to build as the infant's needs are met. Eating and sleeping schedules vary greatly, and by the end of this stage an infant can be comforted when unhappy.

At this age, parents can talk to baby, and hold their baby face-to-face. Feeding and sleeping times should be flexible and babies should be held during feeding times. Taking babies for walks and playing with them is very important at this stage of development, as every bit of sensory stimulation is helping them to develop physically, emotionally and intellectually.

Four to eight months

During this stage, infants are much more responsive to the adult caregivers in their environment and to the environment itself. Infants also develop a very close relationship with a caring adult during this time.

Eating and sleeping schedules become more regular. Baby enjoys playing games with adults or older children such as peek-a-boo. Eye-hand coordination is developing rapidly. The infant begins to use crying as a means to get attention, and not just as a distress call.

As physical development progresses, the infant begins to perceive the world from different angles. During this stage the infant begins to sit up with support, then without support, and moves on to

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standing while holding on to furniture to pulling up to a standing position. At the end of this stage, some infants are "cruising," that is, walking while holding on to furniture.

Children at this age are babbling and cooing. They imitate any interesting sounds or actions, and repeat them. They also begin to recognize their names and respond when someone calls.

Eight to twelve months

Mobility, language use and understanding all increase at this stage. Personality and individual characteristics are very quickly developing and infants are starting to behave like “little people.”

Infants have a very strong attachment to their caregivers at this age. At about nine months (until about eighteen months) they display separation anxiety, which means that they become distressed when they are separated from their caregiver. Infants also begin to display fears at this age.

Children of this age are mobile—they enjoy crawling and cruising. They seem to be in constant motion, and leave no stone unturned in their exploration of the world. By the end of this phase, most infants are walking alone.

One of the most gratifying behaviours that infants display at this stage is beginning to use names of familiar people and objects. They may scribble randomly and look at books on their own. They also have a tendency to exercise their preferences. Infants are testing limits and asserting their independence in a tangible way.

Twelve to eighteen months

At about a year of age, your baby is considered a toddler, since the child has a somewhat top-heavy, wide stance and walks with a gait that is not solidly balanced or smoothly co-ordinated.

Most children are walking alone at this stage. However, some are not yet able to climb stairs, and many have considerable difficulty in kicking a ball, for their balance is not reliable.

Language development is increasing. Children enjoy imitating those around them and have a keen interest in the world. Toddlers are able to stack from two to four blocks to build a tower, and can scribble with a crayon.

At this stage, children want to feed themselves and are able to drink from a cup with some assistance. Adult foods are part of their everyday diet and some children at this age do not want any baby foods. They will clearly indicate their preferences.

Eighteen to twenty-four months

Toddlers at this stage are quite self-sufficient. They can run, peddle a tricycle, jump in place on two feet, balance briefly on one foot and throw overhand. They can climb stairs, and crawl into, under, around and over objects and furniture. Toddlers at this stage can manipulate, carry, handle, push or pull anything. They can pour water into containers, mould clay, transport items in a wagon or truck and will explore, test and probe almost anything.

Language development is significant at this age. Toddlers are able to put together two to three word sentences and jabber excessively as well as expressively. They try to hum or sing and really enjoy listening to stories or short rhymes.

Toddlers at this age show affection, enjoy adult attention, and may become attached to a special toy or blanket. They use words like “me” or “mine,” and try to do things on their own. They do not share very well, and have a tendency to deal with situations aggressively (i.e., by hitting or slapping) when frustrated.

Children at this age begin to show some bladder and/or bowel control, however, complete control may not be achieved until much later on.

By about two years, your child's rapid growth and development will begin to taper off. As parents, you will look back—amazed and delighted—by all that your child has accomplished. Keep this profound miracle of social, physical and cognitive development in mind as your toddler is tearing around the house. The first two years go by in a flash, so cherish every day with your toddler.