

Stages of Human Development

Our life span is divided into periods, each with its own problems of adjustment. Scientific studies of children have shown that at different ages certain general forms of development are taking place which distinguish that age from the ones which precede and follow it. As the child emerges from one developmental period to another, there is a gradual shift in emphasis on the dominant form of development taking place at that time. While there is no clear-cut dividing line between the different periods, nevertheless it is possible, on the basis of evidence derived from the study of large groups of children, to mark off major developmental ages, each characterized by its own specific form of development, which overshadows in importance the rest of the development occurring at that age.

The five major developmental periods, with their characteristics forms of development, approximate ages, and names commonly applied to them are as follows.

1. **Prenatal Period:**

This period extends from conception, when the female ovum is fertilized by the male spermatozoon, to the time of birth, roughly 9 calendar months, or 280 days. While the prenatal period is a short one, it is nevertheless one of extremely rapid development. Developing from an organism microscopically small to an individual weighing 6 to 8 pounds and measuring approximately 20 inches length is without question rapid growth. The primary development taking place at this time is physiological and consists of the growth of all the bodily structures.

2. **Infancy:**

Beginning with birth and extending to the age of ten to fourteen days is infancy, the period of the *neonate*, or the *newborn*. This is a resting stage, in human development. At this time adjustment to a totally new environment, outside of the mother's body, must be made, and thus the infant learns to be self-dependent. During this time growth, for the most part, comes to a standstill temporarily and is not resumed until the infant is able to cope successfully with his environment.

3. **Babyhood:**

The third developmental age in the child's life is babyhood, a period extending from the age of two weeks to approximately two years. This is the age of helplessness because of the baby's necessity for depending on others for his every need. Gradually the baby becomes more independent through learning to control his muscles so that he can feed himself, walk, dress himself, talk, and play. Accompany this self-reliance is an attitude of independence, which is apt to make the child resent being "babied".

4. **Childhood:**

Strictly speaking, the childhood years include the years from age two to puberty, through the entire period of immaturity, from birth to maturity, is often *called childhood*. Development at this age is characterized first by growth of control over the environment.

The child who, as a baby, learned to control his body now seeks to gain control over this environment so that can make him a part of it. When he is not able to do this, he relies upon the use of speech to gain the information he seeks. As a result; he is often a “living question mark.” In addition to this, the child learns to make social adjustments at this age. From approximately the sixth year, socialization is of paramount importance. The name “gang age” is sometimes given to this period because group activities of all sorts play so important a role in the child’s life.

5. **Adolescence:**

The adolescent years extend from the onset of puberty, between the ages of eleven and thirteen years in the average child, to the age of maturity, twenty-one years. Because this is such a long developmental age and because different forms of development occur at different times within this age, it may be subdivided into three shorter periods, (a) pre adolescence, (b) early adolescence, and (c) late adolescence.

(a) Pre adolescence. This is a short period, approximately a year long, immediately preceding adolescence proper. In girls it generally occurs between the eleventh and thirteenth year, while in boys it comes approximately a year later. It is called the “negative phase” because there is normally a negative attitude at this time. Rapid psychological development of the sex life of the child seems to upset, temporarily, the environmental and social control developed in earlier ages.

(b) Early adolescence. This period follows preadolescence and extends to the age of sixteen to seventeen years, thus coinciding with the high –school age. Very often it is called the “awkward age,” because of the awkwardness, clumsiness, and accompanying self-consciousness which so frequently occur. During this time physical and mental growth are completed.

(c) Late adolescence. This last development age, coinciding roughly with the college age, is often referred to as the “smart,” or “show-off,” age because of the keen delight which the normal boy or girl in this phase of development shows in being the center of attention. The most important forms of development which occur are adjustment to a mature form of life, in which the child learns to be independent of adults and plan his life according to his own wishes. In addition to this, there is adjustment to members of opposite sex, in which the adolescent gradually learns to get along with members of the opposite sex in work and social activities.

In general, late adolescence may be looked upon as the last step in the long period of development which begins at the time of conception. By the end of the adolescence, development has reached a point where the individual is legally and socially regarded as mature, and thus capable of living an independent life, free from supervision and guidance.