

Holistic Development of Kindergarten Children

Supporting Kindergarten

- 1 Socio-emotional Development
- 2 Physical Development
- 2 Intellectual Development
- 3 Spiritual Development

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Children move through stages of development as they mature. The rate of development varies from one child to another. Development is influenced by the experiences children have, as well as by hereditary factors. Children may grow rapidly in one area and more slowly in another. The direction of development is from general to specific, from dependence toward independence and interdependence, and from gross motor control to fine motor control.

The descriptions of children are grouped according to the four areas of holistic development. They are the socio-emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions. Kindergarten children, no matter what their cultural and experiential background, have characteristics in common with other children of their age while other characteristics are theirs alone.

Socio-emotional Development

Children develop socially and emotionally during the Kindergarten year. At the beginning of the year, some children may be shy and appear to lack initiative. As they come to know the situation, their teachers, and their peers, children usually gain confidence and begin to establish friendships and become an active part of the class. Other children may be too aggressive before learning from experience more appropriate ways of relating to peers. It is a time of testing and exploring social relationships.

Kindergarten children are eager to be trusted with responsibility. They appreciate running errands, using proper tools, participating with grown-ups in such activities as cooking, bringing things from home, and suggesting solutions to practical problems. Although Kindergarten children can be egocentric (that is, tied to their own view of things), they are also able, in a suitable group environment, to be of help to each other.

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They can show considerable empathy toward people and animals when their own needs do not conflict with the needs of others. When helpfulness is noticed, modelled, and encouraged by the teacher, helpful behaviour is likely to become more common in the classroom. Kindergarten children are developing a sense of independence but are also learning to work cooperatively with others.

Kindergarten children are more stable socio-emotionally than they were as preschoolers. They are developing a good sense of humour, which they express by delighting in nonsense words and playing with language. Children may develop specific fears, such as the fear of death, and mistakenly assume that they have caused such events as their parents separating. Kindergarten children take criticism, name calling, and teasing very seriously because they still think that what is said exists in reality, at its face value.

Physical Development

Physical activity is one common characteristic of Kindergarten children, although children vary a great deal in the development of physical skills and abilities. Some children are slow and cautious about trying new things; others seem to accept any challenge that is presented. Most Kindergarten children are full of energy, ready to run, swing, climb, and jump, and are eager to try their strength by moving big blocks or boxes. Kindergarten children are developing a sense of rhythm, and enjoy such activities as marching, jumping, or clapping to music. These group activities need to be short and allow for more participation than standing. Required stillness is more exhausting and stressful for most Kindergarten children than movement.

Sensory development is uneven. The coordination of the eyes and other senses are still developing. Physical growth has slowed down. It is a time of consolidating gains and developing fine motor control. Over-emphasis on fine motor activities, however, such as writing, cutting, and making very discrete visual discriminations may result in tension and frustration.

Intellectual Development

Kindergarten children love to talk. Their intellectual development is reflected in the rapid growth of vocabulary and the power to express ideas. They are developing visual and auditory memory, and the ability to listen to others. Their ears are keen but they still need help in distinguishing sounds, although they can pick up another language and accurately imitate other people's intonations and inflections. Children are especially interested in acquiring new words and using such words as "actually" and "trillion". Kindergarten children welcome opportunities to be inventive with language, to play with rhyme, to joke, to explain things to each other, and even to argue.

Opportunities to talk about what they are doing, what they see, and what they hear help children construct meaning and learn from their experiences. The language and ideas shared by others enable children to gradually organize and attach meaning to their daily observations and activities.

Kindergarten children have a powerful urge to find out about things and to figure things out. They ask many questions, often deep unanswerable questions, and they love to play guessing games or solve riddles. Their curiosity leads them to figure out concepts and relationships, and become interested in symbols. Children enjoy listening to stories, but they do not learn very much from passive attention to the teacher or mere listening to information. The intellectual growth of Kindergarten children comes from exploration, testing, and investigating rather than only from listening.

The children are still figuring out the properties of objects and are not yet able to reverse operations; that is, to understand that 250 ml of water in a tall narrow glass and 250 ml of water in a large, flat pan are equal in volume. Their reasoning, from an adult perspective, is still illogical. Happenings that occur together are thought to have a causal relationship to each other, for example, “Because I wore my new shoes, it rained”.

Spiritual Development

Spiritually, children develop as they grow in their understanding and appreciation of the spiritual dimension in life. Kindergarten children are beginning to develop an awareness that thoughts and feelings are part of the self that cannot be seen. The concept of an “inner self” as part of the self that is important but not visible to others is beginning to develop in Kindergarten children. The idea that people cannot always tell how a person is feeling unless words are used may be a new concept for some children. Children in Kindergarten are becoming aware that individuals and families may have different spiritual or religious beliefs and practices, and are developing a sense that these differences should be respected. As young children explore questions of meaning and purpose, they

engage in wondering, exploring, and discussing larger questions which are of particular importance or interest to themselves. Questions such as “What are the stars for?” and “How did the stars get up in the sky?” may be asked.

In Kindergarten, children continue to learn about the world around them. They start developing the ability to be calm, still, and quiet. Children’s awareness of and appreciation for experiences with these peaceful and focused qualities may increase during Kindergarten. As children participate in new experiences designed to increase their sense of connection to others and other life forms (such as nature walks and class celebrations of mutual accomplishments), their confidence and willingness to participate also increases. As their confidence increases, young children may begin to expand their interests and appreciation for the natural world (such as collecting stones, exploring ways that each stone is unique, wondering about the origins of stones). Children in Kindergarten begin to develop a sense of gratitude for life; one that is larger and more encompassing than being grateful for possessions.

Individual Differences

Descriptions of holistic development are helpful in understanding children. Such normative statements, however, do not provide the information teachers need about particular children. The teacher’s systematic observations of children provide the information needed for appropriate planning.

During the Kindergarten year, the behaviour of many children changes from the rambunctious behaviour of a four-year-old to the relatively mature and responsive behaviour of a five-year-old.