

Understanding your child: A developmental point of view

For additional information and resources, visit www.gesellinstitute.org.

The Gesell Institute of Human Development, named for Arnold Gesell, Ph.D., M.D., has been associated with understanding how children grow and learn since 1950. Dr. Gesell was a pioneer in the field of child growth and development. Beginning early in the 20th century to systematically observe and document infant and child behaviors, he developed a set of norms that illustrate sequential and predictable patterns of growth and development.

Dr. Gesell observed and documented a pattern in the way children develop, showing that all children go through similar stages, though each child moves through these stages at his or her own rate. How children act depends on their physical growth, especially the growth of their nervous system, a complicated web of nerve fibers, spinal cord, and brain. As children's nervous systems grow, their minds develop and their behaviors change — because of this natural process, children can not be hurried or pushed to act in more grown-up ways.

There are developmental ages in which life seems easy for the child; he or she seems pulled together and on an even keel. These stages of *equilibrium* alternate with stages of *disequilibrium*, when the child has trouble with many areas of living, such as eating, sleeping, responding to other people, and behaving in an acceptable way.



Dr. Gesell's original and extensive research with more than 10,000 children has provided doctors, educators, and parents worldwide with fundamental knowledge of child behavior between birth and sixteen years. As Dr. Gesell and his associates have pointed out, "When the time comes, the child is normally ready for what he may need to do at that time. And he is never ready until his nervous system is ready."

Gesell stages of development show that behavior advances in a spiral pattern, going from one extreme to the other. The figure below shows these alternations as they typically occur for the average child in the early years of life. If your child isn't doing all of these things – or if you've been observing these behaviors for a while now – don't worry. Although these are typical behaviors for these ages, every child is an individual, developing at his or her own pace.

The Spiral of Development

Disequilibrium

Equilibrium

4½ Years:

- Sometimes acts like a four, sometimes like a five
- Insecure
- Emotionally changeable

3½ Years:

- Needs to succeed/have own way
- Insecure
- Disobeys
- Clumsy – stumbles often
- Objects to eating, dressing routine

2½ Years:

- Goes to extremes
- Can't make a choice
- Hates change
- Bossy, demanding, determined

18 Months:

- Difficult, impatient
- Frustrated when s/he can't communicate, cries or tantrums when not understood
- Can't make body do what s/he wants
- Can't do what s/he is asked, if s/he doesn't want to do it

5 Years:

- Quiet and secure
- Wants to be good and usually is
- Likes the tried and true, not the new and strange

4 Years:

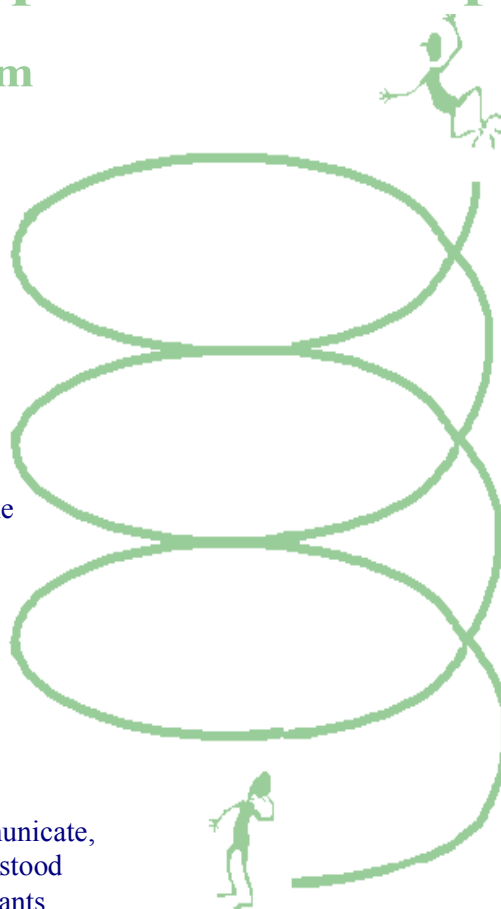
- Self confident, loves to be silly
- Willing to try anything, wild
- Laughs and cries loudly
- Brags, swears, and even lies

3 Years:

- Happy with the world
- Likes to obey
- Controls body well
- Proud of ability to feed and dress him/herself

2 Years:

- Pleasant, friendly, calm
- Talks more easily
- Controls body well
- Can cooperate



Gesell Institute programs and publications help parents, teachers, and other professionals understand the ages and stages of childhood. The Institute's workshops link the understanding of child growth and development with the use of an effective observation tool, enabling teachers to interpret behaviors, plan appropriate curriculum, and manage the classroom. Professional development and parent workshops cover a broad range of topics regarding child behavior, healthy growth and development, and positive learning outcomes. Community programs help create collaborative partnerships between parents and teachers to support school success.

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