

# Stages of Brain Development

Reynold Chan, M.D.

What does the brain like to do?

From the time a newborn comes into the world to the time when that child grows into adulthood, one of the mysteries of life is to understand what the brain enjoys doing. Actually, the brain likes to have fun.

The newborn infant's brain is very basic: newborns like to suck and, hopefully, will swallow in order to eat well and gain weight. Because babies don't know how to talk, they cry when they don't get what they want. It's true that babies can't be spoiled when they are young. They can't do anything to help themselves, so it is important to help them as much as possible. Somewhere between three and four months, however, babies start to figure things out and learn what happens when they cry. If crying gets them what they want, they will learn to cry more. At that point it's nice to begin guiding babies to do the things parents want. This is the time when babies *can* get spoiled.

As babies mature into toddlers, their personalities begin to become more apparent. They may be shy, "happy go lucky," or headstrong. Their brains have decided they want to have things a certain way, and if they don't get that, toddlers will have temper tantrums. Once toddlers begin walking, they will begin to feel more powerful and will test the world. Now they can begin to investigate whatever their brains perceive might be fun. What is fun to them, however, may not be safe, so parents should be vigilant about childproofing the home and monitoring their children's activities. There is no logical thinking at this age! Many parents employ the "time out" routine at this stage so their children can begin to understand what behavior is right and what is wrong.

When children begin to talk, their brains will believe they can make things happen with words. Young children see language as a powerful tool they now possess, and in addition to crying, they begin to test with their words. "No" becomes a common word for both child and parent! However, just because toddlers can speak does not necessarily mean they understand logic. Their brains still want to have fun and do things their own way. When a toddler's behavior is not improving, some clear, visual reminders of what is right and wrong are helpful. Of course, consistency and repetition are keys to teaching your children what you want them to do.

As speech and language progress, adults may be tempted to think that their children understand the meaning of everything that is said. This is dangerous thinking! Telling children to eat their vegetables because vegetables will make them healthy does not always work. Reinforcing desired behavior means getting a child's brain to believe that the vegetables are fun. Many parents will start to provide stickers and stars for good behavior. Letting your child know that doing things your way is better and more fun sets up a good pattern of behavior for the future. Praise at this age (and any age!) can go a long way toward making children proud!

Sadly, at some point children will begin to lose their fantasy thinking. They begin to figure out there really is no Santa Claus or that cartoon characters are not real. This is the beginning of logical thinking. School will begin to teach them more conventional rules, such as math and grammar. Even so, the brain still likes to have fun, and teaching the brain to do things that are not fun becomes the challenge during these years. Stickers and stars may not be as helpful as chores and allowances and setting limits. Communicating with your child often during these years is essential in guiding your child in the right direction.

During the pre-teen adolescent years, the brain is able to experience more and more things. This may be a confusing time for a growing child's brain. The brain hears many different things from different people. Friends may behave and act differently from what a pre-teen has been accustomed to. The media, television, movies, and the Internet throw out information at a fast rate for the brain to receive. What is a brain to do?

Remember, the brain likes to have fun, but now it must begin to think! Being exposed to thousands of facts, however, does not mean the young brain is capable of deciding what is right or wrong. Fantasy thinking is not completely gone. How many kids at this age still list as their goal that they want to be a professional athlete, a singer, or a performer without understanding what the reality will be to attain these goals? The pre-teen's world is moving at a rapid rate, but thinking requires slowing the brain down a little. The adolescent brain can react to computers and video games, but will it be able to read a sentence and think about the content? Again, communicating with your child often will help your pre-teen think about things that are not fun but that he or she might have to do.

Hopefully, there will come a time in the teen years when the brain can "pull it all together." Even though the brain still likes to have fun, it can put aside the fun and plan for the future. The maturing brain can now think about doing something because it might be useful, even though it might not be fun. Once this type of thinking begins to occur, your teen is on his or her way to adulthood.

Every child is different, but in every child the brain truly likes to have fun. Of course, every parent hopes that the fun will be healthy, safe, and positive, because life will be much better that way.