

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: A Crash Course in Child Development¹

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Goal: To help grandparents learn how to promote positive child development.



Figure 1.
Credits: iStockphoto

Ages and Stages of Child Development

Understanding and guiding your grandchildren's behavior will be easier if you consider the various ages and stages of their development.

Although you have raised your own children, it is easy to forget what children are like. Children face different challenges at every stage of life. As their parent, you need to be able to put yourself in their shoes. Keep in mind that

many times a child's behavior is a characteristic of his or her stage of development. Following are some age-related characteristics:

Infants: Birth–12 Months

- Require physical touch such as cuddling, stroking, and rocking for physical and emotional growth
- Communicate through crying, smiling, cooing, and babbling
- Explore by putting objects in mouth
- Need stimulation through touch, sounds, and textures
- Soothe themselves by sucking hands and fingers

Toddlers: 1–3 Years Old

- Like to explore and are very curious
- Seek independence
- Are impatient
- Do not understand sharing
- Have a hard time expressing their emotions and, therefore, have temper tantrums

Preschoolers: 3–5 Years Old

- Ask lots of questions
- Enjoy pretend games and have imaginary friends
- Are learning to be more cooperative with other children
- Have extreme mood changes

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- Are proud of their ability to complete more tasks on their own

School-Age Children: 6–12 Years Old

- Begin to question rules of parents
- Enjoy being with their friends
- Have an increased interest in out-of-school activities
- Find it hard to deal with criticism and failure
- May like to tease and criticize each other

Teens/Adolescents: 12–18 Years Old

- Experiencing puberty, including hormonal and physical changes
- Are overly self-conscious or self-critical
- Are developing a sense of identity and discovering “Who am I?”
- Are more idealistic and hopeful
- At the same time, can be anxious or sad
- Beginning to spend more time with friends
- Experience increased influence from peers
- Question authority and challenge rules, which creates conflict

Tips for Healthy Development for Your Grandchildren

Understanding what to expect at each stage of your grandchild’s development is only the first step. The next step is to put it into practice. It is important that your behavior matches the developmental needs of your grandchild. The following tips are grouped by developmental stages. Review them and consider how they relate to your grandchild’s stage.

Infants

- Attend to an infant’s cry—this develops trust.
- Establish a routine and predictable schedule to create a sense of security.
- Talk and sing to your grandchildren and imitate their sounds to help develop language skills.
- Touch and cuddle your child to develop a strong, loving bond.

Toddlers

- Keep your environment safe and childproof—this allows them to be curious and explore safely.

- Help your grandchildren develop a sense of independence by offering choices. For example, “Do you want to wear your sneakers or your sandals?”
- Have appropriate expectations. For example, understand that they will not “play nicely” with other toddlers because they do not know how to share yet.
- Read to your grandchildren daily—this develops reading skills and promotes a strong attachment.

Preschoolers

- Be patient while listening and responding to your grandchildren’s many questions—this helps create a healthy self-concept.
- Establish clear rules and limits to guide expected behavior.
- Encourage your grandchildren to play. It is through play that children learn best.
- Monitor what your grandchildren watch on TV. Children should not watch more than two hours of educational television a day.

School-Age Children

- Keep an eye on your grandchildren’s activities and friendships. School-age children still need your guidance in learning acceptable behaviors.
- Provide support and encouragement for your grandchildren’s hobbies and interests; keep in mind that no matter their skill level, too many demands discourage them.
- Be consistent with discipline by setting clear rules and consequences. Children need to know what is expected of them.
- Get to know your grandchildren’s school teachers—this encourages good behavior and study habits.

Teens/Adolescents

- Recognize your grandchildren’s need for independence.
- Work to create a supportive and loving environment for your grandchildren.
- Be aware of the emotional and physical changes your grandchildren are going through. Be patient, and expect moodiness and self-doubt.
- Listen to your grandchildren before jumping to conclusions—this opens lines of communication and trust.

In summary, as a guardian for your grandchildren you have taken on a major and admirable responsibility. The discipline and rules you teach your grandchildren will have lasting effects.



Figure 2.

Credits: Digital Vision

For More Information

- **Extension Family Caregiving:**
http://www.extension.org/category/family_caregiving_grandparents_raising_grandchildren
- **Parenting 24/7:** <http://parenting247.org/>
- **Child Development Institute - Ages and Stages:** <http://childdevelopmentinfo.com/ages-stages/>

References

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