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STAGES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT: THREE TO SIX YEARS AND SIX TO EIGHT YEARS

As children reach the age of bracket of three to six years, they get ready to be placed in preschools. Perhaps this is the reason why at this stage, they are at times said to be in the preschool stage. Thereafter, as children reach the age range of six to eight years, they are considered to be in the Early Primary stage. In the last lesson, you have learnt about the journey of a growing foetus, birth and infancy. You have also read about the developmental path and milestones from birth to three years. In the present lesson, you will know about the pattern of development in different domains during the preschool stage and the early primary stage.

Let us study about these in detail.



LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this lesson, you will be able to:

- explain the developmental characteristics and needs of three to six year-old children;
- describe the pattern of development in relation to milestones in different areas in three to six year old children;
- describe the pattern of child development in different areas during six to eight years;
- describe the characteristics and developmental needs of children in age the bracket of six to eight years; and
- discuss the importance of play in the development of children.

9.1 DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN DURING AGES THREE TO SIX YEARS

Pre-school age is the time for achieving muscle development and coordination, and also to build abilities to think and speak. Their power of observation, memory and verbal skills improves rapidly. This aids in better understanding and adapting themselves to the world around them. During preschool years, children learn essential life skills like dressing up and feeding themselves and thus grow independent in a number of ways. This is also the time when children learn to separate from parents and family in preparation for school.

The sections that follow describe physical-motor, socio-emotional, cognitive and language development of preschool children.

9.1.1 Physical and Motor Development

Children in the age group of three to six years grow slower than infants but their growth is rather steady. The growth made by them in muscle development and coordination ensures that they can physically do a lot of things that previously they were unable to achieve. Generally, three to six year old children gain about four to five pounds per year and grow approximately two to three inches per year. Now, they need less sleep than they did. At this stage, children's muscular and skeletal growth progresses and they become physically stronger. The capacity of their respiratory, circulatory and excretory system develops and this promotes development of an array of motor skills in them. Since their eye-hand coordination improves, this gives them an edge at engaging in a number of tasks such as running, throwing, skipping and jumping. Along with these gross motor skills that require large muscles, they also become efficient in using their fine motor skills that require engagement of their fine muscles. Since now they are able to use their fine muscles with precision, it makes them skilled at drawing with crayons, use a spoon to feed themselves, button their clothes and tie shoelaces. You must have also observed that the walls of a pre-schooler's home are often coloured with crayon marks. This is because children during this age can physically coordinate and pull themselves up to the wall and use fine motor muscles to stroke the wall with crayons. Some of the gross and fine motor skills attained in this age are:

Gross Motor Development

- Becoming more skilled at running, jumping, throwing, kicking
- Catching a bounced ball
- Pedalling a tricycle at around three years; becoming able to steer well at around age four years



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- Hopping on one foot at around four years, and later balancing on one foot for up to five seconds
- Doing a heel-to-toe walk at around age five years

Fine Motor Development

- Drawing a circle, square, triangle
- Beginning to use children's blunt-tip scissors and eventually cutting a straight line
- Self-dressing with supervision
- Putting on clothes properly
- Managing a spoon and fork neatly while eating
- Spreading with a knife

9.1.2 Socio-emotional Development

Children's understanding about themselves, their feeling and how they sustain relationships with others are a part of their socio-emotional development. Preschoolers often wonder 'who they are'. This is the first question to entangle the mystery of self. Our self-concept is constituted by who we are; how we see our abilities; what characteristics we use to describe ourselves.

In toddlerhood, children develop self-awareness. As children reach preschool age, their descriptions about themselves become more detailed and comprehensive. They are now able to associate a number of characteristics that define them. They mostly focus on observable, concrete and physical characteristics about themselves. They often talk about their name, what they possess, their toys and their family members when they describe themselves. They also mention the achievements of these ages like, "I run fast".

This is also an age where gender identity takes shape. Children of this age are able to classify themselves as male or female and show preferences for wearing clothes and dressing appropriate for their own gender. They use gender appropriate language and their play also tends to reflect gendered practices.

Preschoolers learn social skills needed to play and work with other children. As time passes, although four to five year olds may start playing games with rules, their rules are likely to change and they are able to cooperate better with peers.

Children at preschool age start understanding their own emotions and can talk about their feelings. They understand that emotions may be aroused under certain



conditions and they are now able to express and verbalise their emotions. They have a vocabulary of words associated with emotions. It is worthwhile mentioning that at this stage, they may not be able to name and understand complex emotions and hence may need assistance from parents and other adults in managing their emotions. During experiences that bring on aggression or shame, they may not know how to act.

According to Erikson (1950), this is the stage when children want to take initiative in planning and doing things for themselves. Being able to do that brings positive feelings in children, but if children are constantly stopped from doing things on their own, they may develop guilt within themselves and this may be detrimental to their growing sense of self.

Some of the socio-emotional skills of preschoolers are :

- describing oneself
- emerging concept of self
- talking about one's feelings and emotions
- complex emotions such as guilt, shame and pride emerge
- telling stories and narrating events
- display initiative, curiosity and exploration

9.1.3 Cognitive Development

Preschoolers are often filled with questions about the world around them. They may sometimes apply rudimentary logic and at times may look confused about particular situations. The preschooler's growing awareness about the world around them, their logics and insights present to us the gateway to their minds.

In this section, you will read how development of cognition takes place in pre-schoolers and how their growing cognitive abilities make them understand the world around them.

The complexity of children's thoughts increase considerably by the end of infancy and at the beginning of pre-school. You have read in an earlier lesson that according to Jean Piaget, the period between two and seven years of age is termed as pre-operational stage. At this stage, their thinking is illogical, rigid and unsystematic. One of the abilities that develops is their ability to engage in symbolic thought i.e. they no more need to be in actual contact with an object, person or event in order to think about it. In fact, they can imagine about an object or person and use their representational abilities to remember and conclude about the properties of that object or person.



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Symbolic Function: Preschoolers make and register an image of an item in their mind and even in the absence of any sensory cues from their environment, and they can still remember about them. They have an ability to name these objects using symbols such as words and numbers.

Spatial Thinking: Children in this age group become better at understanding spatial relationships. They can understand that a picture represents something that is not present but may exist. However, they may not be able to correctly understand the relationship between the picture and the actual object.

Causality: Children at this stage are able to think about causes of familiar events. They can comprehend that all living things grow in size when they receive nutrition. They reach such reasoning by their observation of the natural environment coupled with what they hear from their parents and others about such events. However, they cannot yet reason logically about the cause and effect. They may link two events that occur close together in time or space to be related as cause and effect. For example, just because the preschooler had a bad thought just before the sibling fell sick, a preschooler may relate the negative thoughts with sibling falling ill.

Categorisation and Identities: Categorisation refers to the children's ability to identify similarities and differences in objects. Children at this stage have not yet fully mastered this but they may classify objects as good, bad, friend, non-friend, edible, inedible, utensil, furniture and so forth.

In addition to that, they may attribute life-like characteristics to non-living objects and assume them to be living. This cognitive limitation was termed animism by Piaget.

You have studied in the lesson, 'Domains of Development' that preschool children develop a better understanding of identities i.e. they understand that objects remain the same even if they change their physical appearance or form and size. This helps them to see the order and predictability in the world around them. But preschoolers' understanding of identities is not fully developed. They lack the ability to conserve. They may believe that out of two rows of coins, a longer looking row of coins has more coins (conservation of number); when a stick is placed ahead of the other, even when the two stick are of same length, preschool children may believe that one is longer than the other. They also focus their thought on only one aspect of a situation and are not able to take into account three to four aspects of a situation simultaneously.

Egocentrism: You have already studied that according to Piaget, preschool children centre on their own viewpoint and cannot understand another person's perspective. To study this, Piaget designed a Three Mountain task, where a doll



was placed opposite to where the child was sitting and the child was asked questions about how the things would appear or look to the doll. Piaget found that the children did not respond as to how the things would appear to the doll. Instead, they answered from their own perspective and imagined things from their own viewpoint. This is called egocentrism.

With age, children's cognitive abilities expand further and they are able to overcome the cognitive limitations to this stage.

Let us now try to understand development of language abilities in preschool children.

9.1.4 Language Development, Communication and Emergent Literacy

As stated earlier in this lesson, pre-schoolers are full of questions. Asking questions is not merely a function of growing cognitive abilities but is also made possible by growing language competencies that children acquire. Vocabularies of preschool children expand in this age and they are able to understand and use words in everyday talk much easily. Preschoolers also quickly understand the meaning of any difficult word that they hear for the first time. This is called fast mapping. It helps them to learn new words rather quickly. They also have a natural tendency to understand how words can be combined to form meaningful sentences.

By pre-school age, most children are able to combine two to three words into sentences. They show a growing awareness of the rules to form sentences. At three, they begin to use plurals, possessives and the past tense. They are able to appreciate the usage of words like, I, me, you and we and use them appropriately during their everyday conversations.

Children at this stage also become competent in pragmatics, i.e. the practical usage of language. They know how to speak with whom. They become skilled with the social side of language. They also become proficient in understanding social rules and practically using long sentences to make demands, tell a story and so forth. They become receptive to social cues while communicating. If they seem to feel that other people cannot understand what they are saying, then they tend to repeat themselves or explain themselves differently.

All children do not follow a regular developmental trajectory. Some children may have delayed language development. Adequate language inputs in the early years of life help children achieve milestones of language development.

Some of the language competencies of pre-schoolers are:



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- Using pronouns and prepositions appropriately
- Making three-word simple sentences
- Signifying size relationships eg. small, big
- Following a three step command
- Counting until 10
- Naming four colours
- Enjoying rhymes and word play
- Responding to “why” questions
- Talking to oneself



INTEXT QUESTIONS 9.1

Fill in the blanks.

- (a) Attributing life-like characteristics to non-living objects is called
- (b) refers to children’s ability to identify similarities and differences in objects.
- (c) Preschoolers quickly understand the meaning of any difficult word that they hear for the first time, from the context of the sentences. This is called.....
- (d) deals with practical usage of language.

9.2 DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN DURING SIX TO EIGHT YEARS

Middle childhood brings many changes in the lives of children. Physical, social and cognitive skills develop rapidly at this time. In terms of cognitive capacities, they are now able to remember and memorise more. This time is critical for children to develop confidence in all areas of life and attain independence and industry. Developing independence from family becomes more important now. During this period, children come into regular contact with the larger world outside. Friendships become more important and peers start playing a very crucial role.

Let us now study the developmental milestones of the early primary stage.



9.2.1 Physical Development and Motor Development

At this age, children grow about one to three inches per year. They start gaining weight faster at the age of eight to nine years. Their large muscles including those of arms and legs are more developed than small muscles. At this stage, children engage in a lot of physical play. They can bounce a ball and run, but it is difficult to do both at the same time.



Fig. 9.1 Children at Play

Some of the physical capacities of children during this phase are:

- Slow and consistent growth
- Muscle mass and strength
- ‘Baby fat’ decreases
- Muscle tone improves
- Control over body movements increases

9.2.2 Socio-emotional Development

In this stage, children develop relatively complete concepts of themselves. They develop a growing understanding about one’s place in the world. They start to feel about how they look and how they are growing. They become more realistic about their abilities and capacities. Their descriptions about themselves are based on both their explicit (such as physical capacities and possessions) and internal characteristics (such as, "I am good").



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Children at this stage can verbalise conflicting emotions. They also understand more complex emotions, such as confusion and excitement. Although they can verbalise the importance of their family for them, yet they also value their privacy. This can be seen in their preference and claim for their own spaces and toys. As their peer groups are expanding at this time, they engage in competition and play competitive games with their friends. They uphold their friendships and value teamwork.

Some of the other socio-emotional capacities of children during this phase are:

- Developing sense of right and wrong
- Wanting emotional freedom and space from parents
- Becoming better at controlling and concealing feelings
- Beginning to form a broader self-concept based on recognition of one's strengths and weaknesses, especially with regard to social, academic and athletic skills
- Sustaining peer group interactions and friendships

9.2.3 Cognitive Development

In middle childhood, children start thinking more logically than before. Their thinking becomes flexible but they are able to think about concrete situations only. They have yet not mastered abstract thought. They can now think of more than one aspect of an object, although they have not mastered it at this stage. Now then can remember routes to familiar destinations and have an idea of how long it takes to reach from one place to another. They may walk back from school independently. They are now also able to conserve number, length, liquid, matter, weight, area and volume. They also have reversible thought. Children of this age are no more egocentric.

Some the cognitive abilities of this age are:

- Ability to describe experiences and talk about thoughts
- Ability to focus on the past and future as well as the present
- Increasing attention span and developing selective attention
- Planning ahead
- Questioning based on observation and anticipation of events
- Ability to read and write and to acquire information through the media



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9.2.4 Language Development

Children at this stage become skilled at the use of language. They are able to pick up the nuances of language and use them appropriately at appropriate places. They are able to appreciate humour and gather conversational skills like turn taking. They can sustain conversations on a single topic for considerable time. Their vocabulary and syntax improves. They add new words to their repertoire and are able to use them aptly in different social situations. They start understanding the social usage of words i.e. what and how to speak with different persons such as parents, teachers, siblings and friends. They also show increased appreciation for hidden intent of words.

Some of their competencies related to the language development during this stage are:

- Comprehension and use of language becomes more sophisticated
- Share opinions in clear speech
- Conversational and narrative skills improve
- Try to visualise what is being described
- Invent new words and phrases



INTEXT QUESTIONS 9.2

Match Column A with Column B to understand the development of children during the early primary stage.

Column A	Column B
(i) Physical development	(a) Invent new phrases and words
(ii) Social development	(b) Can remember routes to familiar places
(iii) Emotional development	(c) Engaged in competition
(iv) Language development	(d) Verbalise conflictive emotions
(v) Cognitive development	(e) Grow about 1" – 3" per year

9.3 IMPORTANCE OF PLAY DURING EARLY CHILDHOOD

Play offers many valuable opportunities to children that contribute to their development and learning. Evidence shows that play can support learning across physical, social emotional and cognitive areas of development. Particularly in



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the first three years, play helps children to learn about the world through listening, looking, touching, tasting and smelling. During play, children also increase their social competence and emotional maturity.

Play is an essential and critical part of all children's development. Play is how children learn to socialise, think, solve problems, mature and most importantly, to have fun. All early childhood practitioners need to know the significance of play and implement a play-based programme. According to Froebel, play is not a trivial pursuit but a serious occupation for a child. It has a deep significance on the development of children. Maria Montessori also stresses free and spontaneous play as an important activity for the development of children. Piaget defines play consisting of responses repeated purely for functional pleasures.

Young children are curious beings, discovering and investigating the world around them. Play is the tool for young children to explore the mysteries of the physical and social worlds. In play, children learn collaboration and conflict resolution with friends as they investigate the properties of equipment, materials, and routines. Through the phenomenon of play, children develop and learn as they participate in activities in every area of the classroom. At different ages, children indulge in different types of play.

Let us read the role of play in early childhood development.

- Play lays the foundation for literacy. Through play children learn to make and practice new sounds. They try out new vocabulary on their own or with friends, and exercise their imagination.
- Play is learning. Play nurtures development and fulfils children's inborn need to learn. Play takes many forms, from shaking a rattle to peek-a-boo to hide-and-seek. Play can be done by a child alone, with another child, in a group or with an adult.
- Play gives children choice. Having enough toys or activities to choose from will allow children to express themselves.
- Play gives children space to practice physical movement, balance and to test their own limits.
- Play allows adults to learn children's body language.
- Play is fun. Learning to play well, both by themselves and with others, sets children up to be contented and sociable.

Let us now study the significance of play in promoting holistic development among children.



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Physical and Motor Development

Play is significant to physical development and without it the body would not mature it normally would. In this age of obesity and processed foods, getting out and running or participating in a sport is essential to the health and liveliness of children. Play contributes to children's fine and gross motor development and body awareness as they actively use their bodies. Learning to use a writing tool, such as a marker, is an example of fine motor development through play. The natural progression in small motor development is from scribbles to shapes and forms to representational pictures. Playing with writing tools helps children refine their fine motor skills. Gross motor development, such as hopping and skipping, develops in a similar fashion. When children first learn to hop, they practice hopping on different feet or just for the pure joy of hopping. Using their bodies during play also enables them to feel physically confident, secure and self-assured. Play provides an outlet for all of the energy that children have. Here, it strengthens their smaller and larger motor skills and can build stamina and strength.

Socio-emotional Development

Play is vital to children's social development. During play, children also increase their social competence and emotional maturity. Psychologists contend that school success largely depends on children's ability to interact positively with their peers and adults. While at play, children are in control of the environment around them. This fosters self-esteem. They take part in different activities that might make them feel new emotions. Since play allows children to explore their feelings, they learn how to cope with feelings such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, excitement, frustration, and stress. Play also helps increase children's concentration and cooperation with others. Through play, children learn how to relate to one another and form ideas about how to negotiate roles, follow rules and observe group dynamics. Allowing them to create their own roles helps cultivate friendships and this is one of the most rewarding outcomes of play.

Cognitive Development

Children learn essential concepts such as counting, colours, and problem-solving through play. Their thinking and reasoning skills improve by engaging and participating in play-based activities. Since, in early childhood, 'play' is equivalent to 'work,' hence, it is important to allow them to engage in play in order to gain these new skills.

Language Development

Play helps children internalise the many rule systems associated with the language



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they are speaking. So, communication is essential in play. It also helps them generate multiple ways of expressing their thinking. Play is their arena for experimenting with and coming to understand words, syllables, sounds, and grammatical structure. During play, children learn to use language for different purposes in a variety of settings and with different people. In play with others, children often use language to ask for materials or ask a question. They seek information, provide information to others and express ideas and during the play. Children of all ages enjoy playing with language because, in doing so, they feel in control of it. Language play for children during this period manifests itself in the jokes, riddles, jump rope rhymes and games they use.

Art and Aesthetic Appreciation

We have talked about the important role of creative thought and expression in children’s development and learning. In 1958, Sigmund Freud suggested that every child at play, “behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him.” The creative person does the same as the child at play. So, play provides an opportunity to children to appreciate art and use it in their environment.



WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

In this lesson, you have learnt that:

- Children in the age group of three to six years grow and develop at a rather steady pace. They develop small and large muscles that help them with become physically stronger.
- Growing physical capacities of three to six year olds help them become better at doing everyday activities such as feeding themselves, buttoning clothes, tying shoelaces and so forth.
- Preschoolers can describe themselves in terms of their name, family members, their possessions etc.
- Children in preschool age lack cognitive capacities such as conservation and abstract thinking but they are able to use rudimentary logics that are bound by the outer appearance of the objects.
- Preschoolers acquire words and social understanding of the usage of words rather quickly.
- During middle childhood, children gain greater control over their bodies.

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- Children in the age group of six to eight years describe themselves in terms of their physical capacities, possessions and internal characteristics. They are more realistic in their descriptions about themselves.
- In middle childhood, children start thinking more logically than before but they remain bound to the physical appearance of objects. They are not yet capable of reversibility, conservation and abstract thinking.
- Six to eight year olds become skilled at the use of language. They make rather creative sentences.
- Play contributes to overall development of children. They develop capacities in all domains of development.



TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. What do you understand by play? Discuss the role of play in early childhood development.
2. Explain the different aspects of cognitive development of preschoolers.
3. List the abilities of a seven year old child in the following domains:
 - (i) Cognitive
 - (ii) Language
 - (iii) Socio-emotional
4. Make a comparative milestone chart of three year old child and six year old child.
5. Briefly explain the following :
 - (i) Symbolic thought
 - (ii) Spatial thinking
 - (i) Causality
 - (ii) Categorisation and Identities
 - (iii) Private speech



ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

9.1

- (a) animism



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- (b) Categorisation
- (c) Fast mapping
- (d) Pragmatics

9.2

- (i) e, (ii) c, (iii) d, (iv) a, (v) b

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