

The Effects of Children's Developmental Level on their Experience During Separation and Placement

INFANCY: (Birth-24 months)

Cognitive Development

- The infant has not developed object permanence.
- Infants have short attention span and memory.
- They do not understand change; they only feel it.
- Changes and unfamiliar sensory experiences frighten them.
- They have little or no language ability and cannot communicate, except by crying.
- Infants have limited ability to remember people and places they do not regularly see.

Emotional Development

- Infants are emotionally dependent upon others to meet their basic needs.
- Infants generally form strong attachments to their primary caregiver and often cannot be comforted by others when distressed.
- After 5-6 months, the infant displays anxiety in the presence of unknown persons.
- Emotional stability depends upon continuity and stability in the environment and the continued presence of their primary caregiver.

Social Development

- Infants have few ways to communicate their needs. If adults do not recognize their distress, their needs may remain unmet.
- Social attachments are limited to immediate caregivers and family members.
- Infants do not easily engage into relationships with unfamiliar persons.

Implications for Separation and Placement

- Infants' cognitive limitations greatly increase their experience of stress. Infants will be extremely distressed by changes in the environment and caregivers.
- Infants have few internal coping skills. Adults must "cope" for them.
- The infant experiences the absence of caregivers as immediate, total, and complete. Infants do not generally turn to others for help and support.
- Separation during the first year can interfere with the development of trust.
- The child's distress will be lessened if his/her new environment can be made very consistent with his/her old one and if the birth parent can visit regularly.
- Infants must experience their new environments in a sensory manner with the support and "permission" of a trusted caregiver.
- Preplacement visits should occur daily; longer time periods between visits may not allow the infant or toddler to become accustomed to the new environment. Further, whenever feasible, the infant should be introduced to the new caregiver in the home of the infant's trusted caregiver, where the infant feels safe and secure.

PRESCHOOL: (2-5 Years)

Cognitive Development

- Child has limited vocabulary, does not understand complex words or concepts.
- Child does not have a well developed understanding of time.
- Child has difficulty understanding cause and effect and how events relate.
- Child may display magical thinking and fantasy to explain events.
- Child displays egocentric thinking: The world is as he views it. He doesn't understand other's perspectives.
- The child may not generalize experiences from one situation to another.

Emotional Development

- The child is still dependent on adults to meet his emotional and physical needs. The loss of adult support leaves him feeling alone, vulnerable, and anxious.
- Development of autonomy and a need for self-assertion and control make it extremely difficult for a child this age to have things "done to him" by others.

Social Development

- The child is beginning to relate to peers in cooperative and interactive play.
- The child relates to adults in playful ways and is capable of forming attachments with adults other than parents.
- "Good" and "bad" acts are defined by their immediate, personal consequences. Children who are bad are punished; children who are good are rewarded.
- Cultural expectations regarding how and what the child plays will influence the child's play patterns. For example, there are often cultural expectations regarding the degree to which children are expected to explore their environments.

Implications for Separation and Placement

- The child needs dependable adults to help him cope. Child can turn to substitute caregivers or a known and trusted caseworker for help and support during the placement process.
- The preschool child is likely to have an inaccurate and distorted perception of the placement experience.
- Any placement of more than a few weeks is experienced as permanent. Without visitation, child may assume parents to be gone and not coming back.
- The child will often view separation and placement as a punishment for "bad" behavior and will cling to her own explanation for the placement. Self-blame increases anxiety and lowers self-esteem.

- Because the child cannot generalize experiences from one situation to another, all new situations are unknown and therefore, more threatening.
- The child will display considerable anxiety about the new home.
- The child will likely be confused and perhaps anxious about expectations for his behavior, especially if the codes of conduct in the foster home are different from his parents' codes of conduct.
- Most often, while verbal reassurances are helpful, the child needs to experience the environment to feel comfortable in it.
- Forced placement without proper preparation may generate feelings of helplessness and loss of control, which may interfere with the development of autonomous behavior.

SCHOOL AGE: (6-9 years)

Cognitive Development

- The child has developed concrete operations and better understands cause and effect.
- The child has limited perspective taking ability. She is beginning to understand that things happen to her which are not her fault.
- The world is experienced in concrete terms. The child is most comfortable if her environment is structured and she understands the rules.
- The child has a better perspective regarding time: can differentiate days and weeks, but cannot fully comprehend months or years.

Emotional Development

- Self esteem is strongly affected by how well she does in her daily activities, including academic performance and play activities.
- She is anxious when she does not have structure and when she does not understand the "rules" or expectations of a new situation.
- The child's primary identification is with her family and her self-esteem is tied to people's perception of her family's worth.

Social Development

- The child can form significant attachments to adults and to peers.
- The child derives security from belonging to a same-sex social group.

- The child recognizes that being a foster child is somehow "different" from the other children.
- The child is fiercely loyal and exclusive in her relationships.
- Her value system has developed to include "right" and "wrong," and she experiences guilt when she has done something wrong.

Implications for Separation and Placement

- The child can develop new attachments and turn to adults to meet her needs, which increases her ability to cope in stressful situations.
- The child's perception of the reason for the separation may be distorted. In her concrete world, someone must be blamed, including caseworker, foster caregiver, agency or herself.
- The child will compare foster caregivers to her parents, and the caregivers will lose.
- The loss of her peer group and friends may be almost as traumatic as loss of her parents. Making new friends may be difficult. The child may be embarrassed and self-conscious about her "foster child" status, and she may feel isolated.
- The child will be very confused if the "rules" and expectations in the foster home are different from what she is used to.
- The child has a better understanding of time. Placements of a few months can be tolerated, if the child understands she is eventually to go home. Longer placements may be experienced as permanent.
- If the child was placed after some perceived misbehavior, she may feel responsible and guilty, and anxious about her parents accepting her back.
- Each placement, in effect, is cross-cultural, in that the specific culture of each family is unique. The degree of difference between the culture of the child's former home, and the child's foster home will vary, and may be most pronounced if there are racial differences. The child may experience confusion, hostility, and resentment regarding these differences.

PREADOLESCENCE: (10-12 years)

Cognitive Development

- Some preadolescent children are beginning to think and reason abstractly, and to recognize complex causes of events.

- The child is able to understand perspectives other than his own. Some children have developed insight and may recognize that their parents have problems which contributed to the need for placement.
- The child's time perspective is more realistic.
- The child can generalize experiences from one setting to another.
- The child understands that rules often change depending upon the situation. The child can more easily adapt his behavior to meet the expectations of different situations.

Emotional Development

- Self-esteem and identity are still largely tied to the family. Negative comments regarding the family reflect upon him, as well.
- The child has increased ability to cope independently for short periods of time. He still turns to significant adults for approval, support, and reassurance when things are difficult.
- He may be very embarrassed and self-conscious by his foster child status.
- The pre-adolescent has integrated cultural information into his/her identity and has developed pride in his/her heritage. Cultural codes of conduct and values provide guidance regarding the mastery of several adolescent developmental tasks, such as managing emerging sexuality, becoming independent, and relationships with peers.

Social Development

- The child's social world has expanded to include many people outside the family.
- Peers are extremely important. Most peer relationships are of same-sex.
- Opposite sex friendships exist, but unless the child has been prematurely introduced to sexuality, these are of no special interest or concern.
- The child still needs trusted adults for leadership, support, nurturance, approval.
- They can begin to understand that their parents have the capacity to do wrong.

Implications for Separation and Placement

- The child has an increased ability to understand the reasons for the separation. With help, the child may be able to develop a realistic perception of the situation and avoid unnecessary self-blame.
- The child can benefit from supportive adult intervention, such as casework counseling, to help sort through his feelings about the situation.
- If given permission, the child may be able to establish relationships with caregivers without feeling disloyal to his parents.
- The child may be embarrassed and self-conscious regarding his family's problems and his foster care status, which may contribute to low self esteem.
- The child may be worried about his family as a unit and may demonstrate considerable concern for siblings and parents.
- It may be difficult to replace "best friends" in the foster care setting. The child may be lonely and isolated.
- Preadolescents may be preoccupied with fantasies of returning to earlier attachment figures (primary parents, kin, or earlier foster caregivers). These fantasies can interfere with the child's successful attachment and adjustment in his new home.

EARLY ADOLESCENCE: (13-14 years)

Cognitive Development

- The child's emerging ability to think abstractly may make complicated explanations of reasons for placement more plausible.
- The child may have an increased ability to identify her own feelings and to communicate her concerns and distress verbally.

Emotional Development

- Preadolescence is a time of emotional "ups and downs." The child may experience daily (or hourly) mood swings and fluctuations.
- Physical and hormonal changes, including significant and rapid body changes, generate a beginning awareness of sexuality. The child experiences many new feelings, some of which are conflictual and contradictory.

- The child begins to desire "independence" but independence is expressed by rejecting parental values and rules and adopting the values of her peers.
- The child experiences anxiety when deprived of structure, support, and rules.

Social Development

- The child may be embarrassed to admit her need for adult approval.
- The child is status conscious. Much of the child's self-esteem is derived from peer group acceptance and from being in the "right" peer group.
- The child may need to keep up appearances and defend her family to others.
- The child is becoming aware of social roles, and she experiments with different roles and behaviors.
- Although many children will have developed a moral attitude with clearly defined "rights" and "wrongs," values of the peer group often supersede their own.

Implications for Separation and Placement

- Early adolescence is an emotionally chaotic period. Any additional stress has the potential of creating "stress overload" and may precipitate crisis.
- The child may resist relationships with adults. Dependence upon adults threatens her "independence". By rejecting adults, the child deprives herself of an important source of coping support.
- The child may deny much of her discomfort and pain which prevents her from constructively coping with these feelings.
- Separation from parents, especially if the result of family conflict and unruly behavior on the part of the child, may generate guilt and anxiety.
- Identity is an emerging issue; dealing with her parents' shortcomings is difficult. Parents may be idealized, shortcomings may be denied or they may be verbally criticized, and rejected.
- Entry into sexual relationships may be very frightening without the support of a consistent, understanding adult.
- The child has the capacity to participate in planning and to make suggestions regarding her own life.

- Persistent, repeated attempts to engage the child by a caseworker can have very positive results. The child may greatly benefit from the support and guidance of the worker.
- Relationships with peers are tremendously important to young adolescents, and they may run away from the foster home to be close to them.
- Young adolescents may feel they are unable to "fit in" to their new social environments, especially if there are obvious cultural differences between him and his peers. This can result in considerable anxiety, and sometimes, depression. The adolescent's cultural identity formation may be compromised. These issues also affect later stages of adolescent development.
- Cultural differences between the young teen's previous home and the foster home (such as expectations regarding dress, language, choice of friends, dating, and level of independence) may affect the success of the young teen's placement. The substitute caregiver and caseworker should talk openly with the teen about these differences and develop methods of helping the teen feel "at home" and comfortable in his new setting. These issues also affect later stages of adolescent development.

MIDDLE ADOLESCENCE: (15-17 years)

Cognitive Development

- The child has the cognitive ability to understand complex reasons for separation, placement, and family behavior.
- The ability to be self-aware and insightful may be of help in coping with the situation and his conflicting feelings about it.
- The child is more able to think hypothetically. He can use this ability to plan for the future and to consider potential outcomes of different strategies.

Emotional Development

- The child is developing greater self-reliance. He is more able to independently make or contribute to making many decisions about his life and activities.
- The development of positive self-esteem is as dependent upon acceptance by peers of the opposite sex as it is in being accepted by same-sex peers.

- Identity is being formulated. Many behaviors and ways of dealing with situations are tried, and adopted or discarded in an attempt to determine what feels right for him.

Social Development

- Opposite-sex relationships are as important as same-sex relationships. Individual relationships are becoming more important.
- The child is very interested in adults as role models.
- The child is beginning to focus on future planning and emancipation.
- Toward the end of middle adolescence, many children may begin to question previously held beliefs and ideas regarding “right” and “wrong,” and they may be less influenced by peer attitudes. An emergence of independent ethical thinking may be evident.

Implications for Separation and Placement

- The child will probably experience ambivalence about his family. With help and reassurance that ambivalence is normal, the child may be able to accept his feelings and be able to be angry at and love his family at the same time.
- The child's need for independence may affect his response to placement in a family setting. He may be unwilling to accept the substitute family as more than a place to stay. This may be perceived as the child's failure to “adjust” to the placement, even though it is a healthy and expectable response.
- The child may not remain in a placement if it does not meet his needs.
- The child may constructively use casework counseling to deal with the conflicts of separation and placement in a way that meets the child's needs without threatening his self-esteem and independence.