

Child Development & Separation

Infant & Toddler (Birth to 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.
- “A child's major developmental task during infancy is establishing trust. When an infant experiences the profound loss of a parent or primary caregiver, the infant is at risk of losing his or her basic sense of trust in adults, and the world at large. Specific grief and loss related behaviors include crying loudly, withdrawal, apathy, and mournful crying. Foster parents can help reduce an infant's experience of loss by maintaining the infant's routines (as best as possible). Infants also find comfort in familiar smells—although sometimes it goes against our instincts not to wash all of the infant's belongings, it gives the infant a sense of security to keep something that smells of the infant's home” (Berrier, 2001).