

Child Development & Separation 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 her cope. The 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, children may assume their parents are 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.
- “At this age, children have not developed logical thinking abilities, and do not understand cause, effect, or permanence. Children of this age who experience loss may feel sadness, hopelessness, denial, and guilt. The fear of further loss may make the child clingy, anxious, and stubborn. Foster parents can help reduce the stress of loss by answering the child's questions honestly, providing loving, stable interactions, and patiently attempting to connect with the child” (Berrier, 2001).