



HOW CHILDREN LEARN

David and Sarah are both a year old. David hasn't started to walk yet—but Sarah runs circles around him. Here are reasons why David's parents shouldn't worry

By Leah Levinger, Ph.D., with Jo Adler

No two children learn and develop in exactly the same way. Each has an individual style and pace. Even though all children go through the same stages of development, it's not possible to know exactly at what point when your child should be crawling, tying shoelaces, or reading *Moby Dick*.

But parents, aware that the adult world is highly competitive, often compare children of the same age. This approach can be misleading. The best way to help your child reach maximum potential is to understand and respect individual growing time.

Let's take a look at some of the ways children differ in how they learn.

WHAT AFFECTS LEARNING?

- **Temperament.** Recent research shows that children are born with certain distinct characteristics or temperaments that generally remain with them throughout life. Some children adapt easily to new situations right from birth; others need repeated exposure to people and surroundings before they feel comfortable. A "slow to warm-up" child may ultimately have a greater grasp of a subject than a child who catches on quickly; he just needs added time to get used to the new learning situation.
- **Concentration.** Some children concentrate on one task so intently that they have no time for anything else. For example, 14-month-old Adam isn't speaking



A lesson in sharing: Brothers Christopher and Danny Marschinke, St. Charles, Ill.

yet, but is walking and trying to climb the stairs. Using his hands for balance, he makes his way up the full flight. The minute his mother brings him down, he tries again, crawling up six or eight times in a row. He intends to master efficient stair navigation no matter what it takes. While perfecting his skill, he lets speech take a backseat. He'll get to it in good time, but right now he's busy practicing on the stairs.

- **Skipping a Step.** At 11 months, Brian could say a few words like "hot," which he used for anything that might hurt him, and "dog," which referred to the cat as well. At 16 months he was combining some words and at 20 months speaking in sentences. Brian's parents were very pleased with his progress because he seemed to be right on schedule.

But Brian's sister, Julie, caused parental concern. At three, though she responded to verbal directions, she barely uttered a word and seemed way behind others in her age-group. Then, just after her third birthday, she amazed her mother by announcing at lunch, "This lemonade is too

sour!" Julie simply skipped a substage of learning. While other children experimented with each step in acquiring speech, Julie figured out how to speak but kept this new knowledge to herself. When everything clicked, she was ready to converse.

Sometimes a conflict takes priority in a child's life and learning tasks are ignored for a while. For example, when a new baby enters the home, a young child's interest and affection for the newcomer may conflict with fear of being displaced. Sorting through these feelings requires a special learning process of its own and demands just as much concentration as learning to read or ride a bike.

HOW PARENTS CAN HELP

Now let's see what parents can do—and not do—to help children learn and develop.

- **On the Move.** At seven or eight months, a child is developmentally able to begin crawling, and that's what most children do. But not all. Some first sit up and "row" themselves across the room. Parents of "rowers" often wait eagerly for that magic moment when their child crawls. But that moment may never be. Instead, one day, usually between nine and 16 months, their child stands up and is ready to walk.

Kids also have different methods of learning to walk. One holds on, falls down, crawls part of the way, tries and tries again. Another

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won't make a move until both feet are planted firmly on the ground. Parents need do little more than provide a safe learning area and then observe how their baby masters locomotion.

● **Can We Talk?** Speaking for most children begins somewhere between four to eight months with nonsensical language or babbling. Babies are innately capable of the entire range of sounds possible in human speech. Through babbling, they get ready to speak their native language by imitating its specific sounds. In fact, a baby's babbling has an accent; you can usually tell whether she is from France, Maryland, or Brooklyn by listening to her inflection. Parents can help their children with language by babbling back to their infants and by speaking, singing, and reciting rhymes. This verbal communication should continue through early childhood to set the

groundwork for speech and later for reading.

When children begin to speak in earnest, many have trouble with certain sounds, such as "th," "r," or a sharp "s" sound. Some parents rush these kids to speech therapists, but it's wiser to wait; most outgrow this "baby talk" by first or second grade. Some children all but master the "th" sound only to find themselves back where they started after the first visit from the tooth fairy.

Young children need time to master correct pronunciation and grammar. It's wiser not to stop a child in the middle of a sentence when she says "dat" instead of "that" or "mouses" instead of "mice." Interrupting a child's continuity of thought may cause her to forget what she was saying and become uncomfortable about expressing her ideas.

How is a child to learn to speak properly if not corrected? Most children eventually correct themselves by being around adults who speak well. If a child does become self-conscious or is repeatedly

teased about a speech problem by other children or adults outside the home, it may be best to set aside a special time for some exercises. A pediatrician will suggest exercises geared to specific problems or make a referral to someone who can. Be sure to keep the exercise sessions separate from ordinary, daily conversation.

● **ABCs and More.** Reading is a form of magic. Those who possess its key have the power to transform simple strokes on a page into something quite fantastic—a story, an idea, an answer to a question, or instructions for a special toy. Such possibilities make finding the secret code very appealing. Studies show that children should not begin structured reading lessons until they are six or seven. But there is much a parent can do to enhance a child's feeling for language without formal teaching. Here are some tips:

Provide a verbal environment. A child's vocabulary increases if adults don't talk down. One teacher of five year olds uses words like "claustrophobia" and "deco-

rum" to the children's delight. They can be understood as easily as "too close" or "behavior" and offer a wider range of experience.

Be alert to a child's method of learning. Some children learn to read by recognizing the visual pattern of words. Others guess the right word from the context. Still others decode by breaking words into sight and sound. If you assume your child is learning to read in the same way you did, you may miss opportunities to help.

Encourage children to be creative with language. Young children make up their own spellings, reinvent letters, and write in scribbles only they can understand. This is a meaningful step in learning. A child develops best at this stage if parents accept and enjoy this early foray into the adult world. Tender feelings can be hurt with remarks that a crayoned sentence is only "scribbles" or that a backwards letter is "silly."

Participate. Parents can easily create an atmosphere filled with the fun of reading. In the car, have children help with road signs.

"Slow" and "Stop" are easy words. Most early readers enjoy figuring out words on cereal boxes, street signs, and billboards. And, of course, the more you read to a child, the better.


● **How Children Think.** As children grow, the way they understand the world grows with them. Before about 10 months, a child believes that if something disappears from sight it no longer exists. But gradually, he learns to look for a ball that has rolled under the couch or a coin hidden in someone's hand.

By between 12 and 16 months, children are able to make use of symbols. Language is one such set of symbols. Objects, too, can be symbols. A bar of soap floating in the bathtub becomes the symbol for a boat. While fantasy play continues into early school years, it slowly gives way to a perception of the world based on facts. "How does it work?" is a typical question at this period. This is a time for games with complex rules like baseball and *Monopoly*, and for learning how events really evolve.

At around 12, children begin to

think abstractly, to generalize, and to relate different ideas. They become interested in forces that cannot be seen, such as gravity, and moral principles, such as justice.

Michael Jellinek, M.D., chief of child psychology at Massachusetts General Hospital, says, "Children move at their own pace from stage to stage. Getting to a stage early has no particular significance or value. In fact, rushing a child into more advanced kinds of thinking is likely to turn him away from learning."

What can parents do to maximize a child's intellectual potential? "Just involve your child in normal life events, such as playing with toys, reading the newspaper, and having discussions," Dr. Jellinek advises. "If parents provide these opportunities for interaction, nature and learning will take care of themselves." 

Leah Levinger, Ph.D., is a clinical child psychologist and a professor at Bank Street College.

Jo Adler writes about child development.