

Early Childhood Milestones in the Development of *Caring* and *Empathy*

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These milestones show how children begin to connect to the human community. The approximate age for each milestone is based on research (with a wide range of methodologies) with young children that demonstrated the achievement is possible. This is a partial list drawn from the author's book *Raising Courageous Kids*.¹

This checklist represents overall age trends. Individual differences exist in the precise age at which children achieve each milestone. Children learn these milestones through playful and sensitive interaction with parents and other loving caregivers, not through formal instruction. A developmental timetable is operating here that cannot be artificially accelerated. A child's temperament will influence the timing and frequency of these milestones. Children who were born premature will acquire the milestones later. Failure to observe milestone behavior is not evidence that the child has failed to achieve that milestone.

These milestones are not solitary achievements. They reflect accomplishments achieved in a partnership between loving parents and their children. Conversely, failure to achieve a milestone *may* be a statement about the quality of that relationship. Developmental delays in these milestones could be due to neurological problems outside of a parent's control.

3 months

- Responds to you (and other friendly people) with a true social smile at @six weeks (Eliot, 1999, 301)
- Responds with sound and movement when you talk to her; has good eye contact with you (eyes brighten)
- Engages in brief face-to-face interaction with you that is emotionally satisfying and positively arousing (*mutual affect synchrony*). Critical for coordination of biological rhythms (Shore, 2001, 18) (Shore, 2001, 18)
- Discriminates between positive and negative facial expressions (first emotional recognition) (Caron, Caron, & Myers, 1982; Haslet, 1997, 30) More gaze aversion, protest behavior and crying in response to mothers with a sad expression, flat voice, and minimal body movement (Gemelli, 1996, 155)
- Re-experiences positive affect with you following a negative interruption (Shore, 2001, 20-21)
- Imitates your facial expressions of happiness and anger (Haviland and Lelwica, 1987)
- Imitates simple facial expressions of a loved one (sticking out tongue, opening mouth, purse lips shortly after birth (Meltzoff, 1988, Reissland, 1988).
- Cries in response to another child's crying (Simner, 1971)
- Responds differently to your happy, sad, and angry facial and vocal expressions

¹ These milestones are reprinted from *Raising Courageous Kids: Eight Steps to Practical Heroism* by Charles A. Smith (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2004). Used with permission. *Raising Courageous Kids* includes an expanded list of milestone topics and ages (from birth to about fourteen years). You can read about the book and download free resources at <http://www.raisingcourageouskids.com>.

- She may look away and fuss if you show her a motionless sad face
- Ceases crying when you enter the room (Restak, 2001, 31)

6 months

- Recognizes familiar faces; responds differently to strangers (Iowa State University, 1993)
- Engages you in brief “conversations”: she will coo and gurgle, often accompanied by hand or finger movements and by a smile or excited facial expression (Gottman, 1997, 187; Eliot, 1999, 302-303)
- Adjusts to turn taking in conversations (Eliot, 1999, 302) Matches switching pauses (when one speaker stops and the other begins) with loved one (Haslet, 1997, 51)
- Expressions of happiness are greater when interacting with you than with someone who is less familiar to him
- Shows distinct sadness, distress when put down and left, and then reacts positively when you return (Barnet and Barnet, 1998, 137)
- Enjoys your gentle caresses and cuddling
- Knows when you are angry, surprised, or afraid by your facial expression
- Imitates your gestures, facial expressions and vocalizations (Eliot, 1999, 300; Haslet, 1997, 51)
- Reacts to the strong emotions of others by focusing on self, e.g., cries or touches self when hearing another baby cry (*Stage 1a: Global empathic distress*. Distress focused on self; reacts to the strong emotions of others—what happens to you—happens to me) (Barnet and Barnet, 1998, 167; Hoffman, 1994)
- Becomes more withdrawn, more negative emotionally, and less responsive when loved one demonstrates sadness (Gottman, 1997, 187)

9 months

- “Conversations” become more a reciprocal give-and-take. She seems to be listening to you
- Shows joy in simple social games (Sroufe, 1996, 168-169)
- Displays joy, sadness, fear, disgust, interest, surprise, anger, and affection (Eliot, 1999, 299)
- When you display a happy face, responds with gazing and expressions of joy. When you display a sad face, shows more sadness and averts your gaze. Mirrors your posed expressions of joy and sadness (Haslet, 1997, 30; Termine & Izard, 1988)
- Associates vocal tones of happiness or sadness with the appropriate facial expression (Walker-Andrews, 1998; Gopnik, 1999, 28)
- Acutely aware of you and will do everything in her power—fussing, crying, clinging—to try to keep him or her nearby (sense of personal agency) (Eliot, 1999, 410)
- Coordinates his visual attention to an object with that of a loved one, aware of both the object as well as the loved one’s attention to the object (joint attention—the loved

one is attending in such a way that joint experiences are possible; treats the loved one as an intentional being (Shore 2001, 34)

One year

- Waves hi or good-bye to you
- Quiets down at the sound of your soothing voice or when held affectionately
- Shows awareness of the comings and goings of loved ones
- May cry when separated from you (child retains image of absent loved one)
- Regulates own behavior in a situation of uncertainty by studying your emotional response (Emde et al., 1987; Haslet, 1997, 31) (e.g., will cross the visual cliff if mother's face is happy; not if frightened), i.e., social referencing (Stroufe, 1996)
- Smiles at strangers when you are nearby
- Difficult to console when separated from those she loves
- Shows interest in nearby babies
- Follows a line of sight of your eyes or the direction of your pointed finger to pick out an object of your attention (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl 1999, 32)
- Points to objects to bring them to the attention of others (Schulman, 1991, 37)
- Can point to a picture of a happy or angry person when hearing a matched voice tone (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl 1999, 28)
- Observes and imitates others without being coached to do so (with a slight time delay)
- Becomes agitated and disturbed when she views others in distress (Eisenberg, 1992, 8)
- May appear to be upset when loved ones yell at each other (Barnet and Barnet, 1998, 194)
- Chooses a familiar, kind action based on what he knows will make a loved one happy (e.g., will give mother something she likes to eat even though he himself does not like it)
- Will freely give information—if they know where an object is that someone is looking for, they will point to it (Liszkowski, Carpenter, Striano, T., & Tomasello, M., 2006)

18 months

- Looks at you when she begins talking with you; tries to understand you
- Uses gaze and hand movements to indicate two different directions, one referring to the social partner, and the other referring to the referent (Haslet, 1997, 45)
- Makes sounds or motions to capture your attention to show that she wants you to do something (like raising arms to be picked up) (Barnet and Barnet, 1998, 139).
- Engages and sustains a brief action-reaction play with a familiar child (primarily copying each other in what they say and do); engages in rhythmic co-action sequences (large scale—falling down, jumping, loud chanting) (Dunn, 1988, 112)

- ❑ Anticipates your feelings and receives pleasure from her power to influence another's emotions (may seem like teasing). For example, she pulls your hair. You say no. She says yes and smiles. You say no, and she says nice!
- ❑ Tries to comfort her loved one when she sees him sad or crying, although is more likely to seek to be comforted; may feel so agitated that she hits him to make him stop (Barnet and Barnet, 1998, 165). Sometimes clumsy attempts to provide aid (Denham, 1998, 35)
- ❑ Helps someone in distress by patting or stroking, or to a lesser extent hugging and kissing. Does primarily what he would find self-comforting
- ❑ Anticipates your feelings and receives pleasure from his power to influence your emotions. May seem like aggressive teasing surrounding transgression (Dunn, 1988, 17) (e.g., pulls hair, mother says no, child says yes and smiles, mother says no, child says nice!)
- ❑ Understands the causes, consequences, and correlates of emotions and that feelings can affect a person's facial expression ("Katie not happy face, Katie sad"); feelings result from another's action ("You sad Mommy. You hurt finger."); and feelings can elicit a reaction from someone else ("I cry so Gramma picked me up and rocked me") (Gottman, 1997, 73)
- ❑ *Stage 2: Egocentric empathic distress.* Distress of others does not belong to him (agitation wanes, e.g., touches other, not self) but the boundary between self and other is not distinct. Still cries but can now focus on other as a distressed person. Creates internal cues that help him vicariously experience another child's emotions. Genuine concern and comforting emerges a little later but not *effective* action (Barnet and Barnet, 1998, 165-167) (Gottman, 1997, 67-70) React to the distress of another with less tears and distress, more and more with little efforts to do something for the other child or adult, such as patting or stroking, or to a lesser extent, hugging and kissing (Eisenberg, 1992, 9). May get his own mother when he sees a child crying (Zahn-Waxler, 1990, 105) Uses what is self-comforting on distressed other (e.g., suck thumb with one hand, looks sad, pulls his father's ear. Wipers his mother's tears while wiping his own eyes. Rubs her elbow then rubs his own elbow while saying "Ow," and grimaced as though in pain (Hoffman, 2000, 89)
- ❑ Brings toys to show you
- ❑ Leaves your side to explore and then establishes contact with you from a distance for reassurance. Returns occasionally during play for "emotional refueling" (California Department of Education, 1990)
- ❑ Recognizes discrepancies in self in a mirror reflection (touch nose with rouge on it) (Siegel, 2001, 135; Sroufe, 1996, 197-198)
- ❑ Calls attention to things that are broken or flawed (e.g., child brings toy doll with missing eye to parent and points to the flaw) (Dunn, 1988, 22-24)
- ❑ When asked, consciously or deliberately restrains himself for a brief interval (@20 seconds) before giving in to an impulse (e.g., opening a brightly wrapped package or snatching a raisin from under a cup) (Eliot, 1999, 411)

- ❑ Without encouragement or praise, 14 month olds will pick up an object that someone has accidentally dropped and hand it back to him or her. (Warneken and Tomasello, 2006.)

Two years

- ❑ Seeks out and enjoys simple interactions with other children, e.g., loud chanting or jumping up and falling down together (Barnet and Barnet, 1998, 158)
- ❑ Brings toys to share play with loved ones (more advanced than just showing).
- ❑ Talks spontaneously about his genuine affection for those he loves.
- ❑ Refers to another by his or her name
- ❑ Enjoys an audience and applause (Iowa State University, 1993)
- ❑ Understands that wanting and getting lead to happiness and that wanting and not getting lead to sadness (Denham, 1998, 58-59)
- ❑ Genuinely understands that he and others are independent agents, that both actors in the social exchange are playing separate roles and have separate independent intentions
- ❑ Acts as if they “know” what others feel. They look at and talk about babies who are crying, saying things like “Baby is sad.” They comment when mom or dad looks unhappy. They frown when others frown. Suggests they feel for others.
- ❑ Genuinely understands that self and others are independent agents; that is, both actors in the social exchange are playing separate roles and have separate intentions—play real game of hide-and-seek (waiting to be found is still hard, run in opposite direction when seeker comes near (Dunn, 1988, 18-19; Sroufe, 1996, 196-197)
- ❑ Talks spontaneously about his genuine affection for loved ones (Barnet and Barnet, 1998, 158)
- ❑ Shows caution toward but not excessive fear toward friendly strangers when you are present; reacts positively to strangers from a safe distance
- ❑ Makes appeals for sympathy when hurt (Dunn, 1988, 69)
- ❑ Can pretend to be in a state other than his own if it serves his interests (e.g., acts tired to get snack) (Dunn, 1988, 21)
- ❑ Know and act out that various objects are not just what they are but also representations of other things. For example, he may treat a doll or stuffed animal as though it were alive. Invent as well as understand that there might be a relationship between an object and an idea that has nothing to do with the actual function of the object (Small, 2001, 113)
- ❑ Occasionally teases (able to assess what comments annoy another, based on an understanding of the other’s feelings, and able to anticipate the other’s reaction) (e.g., removes sibling’s comfort object in the course of a fight, leaving a fight in order to go and destroy a cherished possession of the sibling; pulling the sibling’s thumb (sucked in moments of stress) out of his mouth, pushing a toy spider at a sibling who was afraid of spiders.(Haslet, 1997, 156)

- Dampens negative emotions—wrinkled brow, compressed lips, lip biting (Denham, 1998, 52) based on an understanding of what is allowed and what is not (Eisenberg, 1995, 145)
- 18-month-olds-2 year olds help, comfort, and share with a victim of a moral transgression, even in the absence of overt emotional cues. Moral transgressors incite infants to vocally protest and they are less inclined to help, comfort, or share with them. (Vaish, Carpenter, Tomasello (2010 Poster session))

30 months

- Talks with you about the day's recollections
- Pretends to be kind to a doll or stuffed animal (as in feeding a teddy bear)
- Shows verbal concern when things are broken or flawed (e.g., may ask, "Who broke it?" or "Who hit him?") (Barnet and Barnet, 1998, 181; Dunn, 1988, 22-24)
- Acts upset when seeing someone or something that is hurt
- Adjusts his behavior somewhat when in public
- Knows that her own happiness depends on the happiness of others; knowledge of interdependence (Wilson, 1993, 59)
- Shows a sense of humor; laughs at silly labeling of objects and events (as in calling a nose an "ear").\
- Offers a spontaneous and familiar kindness to comfort someone who is sad, e.g., shares her blanket
- Uses words to console a brother or sister in distress
- Understands conversations even when not directly participating in them (Haslet, 1997, 105)
- Contributes new information to a conversation between a loved one and a sibling (Haslet, 1997, 105)

Three years

- Participates in family storytelling about shared experiences.
- Uses words or gestures to communicate a desire for closeness, e.g., says "hug" or gestures to sit in your lap to allow for hugging.
- Directs social acts to two other children at once (aware of audience).
- Knows that individual emotional reactions in others will diverge depending on the desires or preferences of the individual.
- Shows awareness that others' feelings can differ from her own.
- Engages in pretend play about emotional states, e.g., pretends to be sad or angry.
- Accurately names emotional expressions of happiness and sadness.
- Understands that facial expressions reveal emotions ("Katie not happy face, Katie sad").
- Understands that a person's experiences affect feelings ("You sad Mommy. You hurt finger.").

- Understands that feelings can elicit reactions from others (“I cry so Gamma picked me up and rocked me”).
- Uses emotion language in reflective discussions especially about the causes and consequences of feeling states (“I miss Mommy; I get sad”); as a means of manipulating the feelings and behaviors of others (“Talk nice Mommy—don’t be so mad”), and in teasing (“I’m going to eat you up and I’ll tell Grandpa you died.” “You will? And will he be happy or sad?” “Sad.”).
- Speaks with intensity about his emotions (“My kitty gone. I cried.”)
- Verbalizes emotional experiences of feeling good, happy, sad, afraid, angry, loving, mean, and surprised
- Talks about causes of events and feelings to draw your attention to a need, to express distress, or to enlist support to achieve a goal
- Occasionally poses an emotional expression he does not feel
- Begins to inhibit altruism—more discriminating about whom they help; share more with others who have shared with them in the past (Olson & Spelke, 2008)

42 months

- Tries to make others laugh and enjoys the response to his humor
- Tells simple jokes as part of a family conversation (use of humor to place self within the family conversation)
- Draws a loved one’s attention to dangerous things (e.g., broken glass, pins on the floor)
- Understands that her behavior can hurt other people’s feelings
- Talks about past emotions and mental states (“I was sad yesterday”)
- Inhibits and corrects herself just before she does something wrong (can stop the impulse to misbehave)

Four years

- Tells you about her experiences, narratives with coherent flow and direction, like a good story
- Prefers playing with other children than playing alone, unless deeply involved in a solitary task
- Knows what he does can trigger a positive or negative response by others
- Judges the causes and consequences of emotions by referring to internal goals (“He wants the toy”) and external outcomes (“The toy broke”)
- Has a systematic set of beliefs about the thoughts, feelings, intentions, motives, knowledge, and capacities of other people, including an awareness of false beliefs
- Accurately uses terms for feeling angry, loving, afraid, mean, and surprised
- Understands that the same situation can give rise to different emotions in different people (weighing multiple sources of information)
- Fear of dark and monsters (Iowa State University, 1993)
- Separates from a loved one for short periods without crying

- Delays an impulse through selective attention and purposeful distraction to achieve a more important goal (is more purposeful and can resist longer than at 18 months) (Goleman, 1995, 82)
- Adjusts behavior to conform to simple, understandable rules (Greenspan)
- Takes turns and shares (most of the time) (Iowa State University, 1993)

54 months

- Cooperates with other children in play and shows flexibility in both leading and following
- Distinguishes between appearance and reality (e.g., knows that a sponge can look like a rock or a stone like an egg, and that clouds are white, regardless of the color of sunglasses through which they view them) (Eliot, 1999, 412)
- Modifies her language when talking with younger children (Haslet, 1997, 128) (Westby, 1988, Shatz & Gelman, 1973)

Five years

- Talks about what he might do when he grows up.
- Forms a close relationship with at least one other child (Haslet, 1997, 124)
- Responds to a friend's crying with more sympathy than to a mere acquaintance (through all the preschool years)(Denham, 1998, 37; Eisenberg, 1992, 11)
- Enjoys social play but sometimes needs to get away and be alone.
- Understands that the causes of happy, sad, angry, and fearful feelings can vary depending on who is experiencing the emotion and that causes have uniquely individual effects; realizes the same event can produce different feelings in different people.
- Understands that someone can have a desire even if not acted on
- Has a sense of others as having a history, an identity, a life (Hoffman, 2000, 84)
- Interprets emotions in adult stranger's vocal tones and distinguishes between vocal tones in infant vocalizations.

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