

## Understanding child development: Ages 9–12 years

Dr Sara McLean, *Emerging Minds*

Children develop in the context of their relational and social environment. Since the late 1950s, developmental research has documented the cognitive, social, emotional, and moral development of children in order to better understand their experiences (e.g., Bruner, 1966; Piaget, 1957; Piaget & Cook, 1952; Siegler, Deloache & Eisenberg, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978; Wadsworth, 2004). Although there has been some variety in the way that children's development has been described, most researchers agree that children typically go through relatively predictable developmental stages, mastering increasingly complex cognitive, social, language, and emotional regulation skills as they age.

A child's developmental stage will determine how they experience the world, how much they feel they are able to influence their world, and how they make sense of the events that happen to them. It is important for practitioners to understand a child's developmental journey so that they can respond to children in the ways that are most helpful.

This resource is part of a series from the Emerging Minds: National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health that outlines the key developmental issues and experiences for children, from birth to age 12. It focuses on the developmental experiences of children aged 9–12 years, providing a brief description of how adverse events may be experienced by a child of this age, and how adults can support a child that has been exposed to disruptive life events.

### More summaries from Emerging Minds:

- [Understanding child development: Ages 0–3 years](#)
- [Understanding child development: Ages 3–5 years](#)
- [Understanding child development: Ages 5–8 years](#)



### Typical development for children aged 9–12 years

At this age, children are still largely concrete thinkers but are beginning to be able to think in more abstract ways, and about more abstract concepts. Most children are reliably able to see things from another's perspective and, because of this, can show genuine empathy for another's experiences and feelings. By this age, children can also distinguish between fact and fantasy. They may become intolerant of younger children and the 'childish' games that they used to enjoy.

During this stage, children are able to draw on their capacity to think logically, and can use their verbal skills to resolve differences and solve problems. Difficulties and delays in cognitive and language abilities become more noticeable and are more likely to cause a child social distress and embarrassment, which they may try to avoid. Competency in problem solving and in schoolwork is the 'currency' of this stage of development. Difficulties in language or in keeping up with schoolwork will be extremely frustrating for the child, as it means they are not able to 'keep up' in the way that their peers might expect. This can lead to behavioural issues, as children may rather be seen as the 'bad' kid than the 'dumb' kid.

Children can become focused on their own areas of interest, and their individual strengths become more obvious. A child is increasingly able to engage in more sophisticated and complex conversations during this phase of development, particularly around their area of interest. They become more interested in facts and knowledge, and have a strong need for mastery (learning how to do things and demonstrating their knowledge).

A child's self-image becomes increasingly distinct and multi-dimensional during this stage, and mastery and competency feature strongly in children's self-image. For this reason, it can be helpful to identify a child's strengths and provide opportunities for them to develop these skills, especially if there are areas of development that a child is struggling with. Children at this age are forming their self-identity, and are increasingly interested in their family and cultural background during this time.

It is normal for a child of this age to have an intense and exclusive 'best friend' relationship, typically with a peer of the same gender. Towards the end of this stage, children develop closer relationships with friends outside of their family of origin and the influence of their peer group becomes stronger, although adults remain important role models to them. These friendships tend to be centred on a common interest, like a hobby or sporting activity. Children are usually willing to join in on club activities that revolve around their interests and provide opportunities to experience success.

Children at this age are more reliably able to see things from another's perspective. They are becoming more social beings, beginning to adopt a more social 'world view' and becoming more genuinely interested in others and in the world around them. They also begin to show a reliably internalised sense of conscience and 'right and wrong'. They aren't usually as reliant on adults to reinforce social rules, and their social interactions typically reflect concepts of fairness and the needs of others. They are increasingly able to tolerate failure and losing in competitive situations, but may still need adult support with this.

Towards the end of this phase, marked differences in physical development and the onset of puberty can make children feel more awkward and challenge their confidence. They may begin to develop and test out their emerging values, beliefs and 'identity' through arguments with parents and other significant adults. The end of this phase may be marked by a prolonged period of self-reflection, and the testing out and defining of beliefs and values against those of their parents.

## Children's reactions to adversity, trauma and loss

Children at this age are beginning to be able to think in increasingly abstract terms and to consider abstract concepts like death and loss in more depth. They are able to think about how any loss or adverse event will affect them into the future, which may make them more likely to experience feelings of hopelessness. Although capable of logical thinking, they may resort to magical thinking under pressure, meaning they may associate adversity and loss with their own personal attributes and feelings such as being too demanding, too selfish or a bad person (even though their logical mind tells them this doesn't make sense).

They may need support to talk through the facts of an adverse event in a 'matter of fact' way, while using simple and easy-to-understand language. While they may be cognitively able to understand another's perspective, they may resort to the egocentric reasoning of an earlier age when under pressure and during the acute aftermath of a trauma or adversity.

They may become confused about their role in the family and can feel pressured to adopt a parenting role when faced with a caregiver who is not coping. They can feel guilty about holding secret feelings of hostility or resentment towards a parent who has left or died. Feelings of sadness and grief can be resisted if they become associated with being 'childish' or 'babyish'.

### Related resource:

[\*Trauma responses in children aged 5-12 years\*](#)

## Children's experiences of parental difficulties

Children at this stage are generally able to understand that parental issues and behaviour are separate from them. However, a large part of their self-identity is based on how they (and others) perceive their parent's behaviour, emotions and reactions. Children at this age are beginning to compare themselves to others and can internalise any negative emotions that might arise when parents are disappointing, embarrassing, or act in ways that are different from other children's parents.

Children are more aware of financial issues and socioeconomic status at this age, and can feel acutely embarrassed by changes in parental circumstances that highlight difference in 'status' between themselves and their friends, or that limit their capacity to take part in social and recreational activities.

Children at this age can develop quite firm opinions of the moral 'virtue' of parental behaviour. This can impact strongly on their sense of developing identity, particularly when it involves a parent of the same gender.

### **Signs of distress in children and how they might attempt to cope**

This is an age where difficulties with managing strong feelings are likely to be reflected in changes in a child's mood, social relationships, and learning. These difficulties can tell us that a child is preoccupied with a trauma or adversity; or is having difficulty with processing and reconciling changing family circumstances.

At this age, children can express their difficulty coping in a range of ways, including:

- changes of mood, lasting one or more weeks and impacting on social relationships and learning feeling overwhelming emotions, or onset of fears or panic symptoms
- difficulty concentrating, or in keeping track of conversations or instructions changes in weight, appetite, or sleep
- onset of headaches, stomach aches or other bodily symptoms
- onset of attempts to harm, such as signs of scratching or cutting on arms or other body parts
- behavioural withdrawal or withdrawal from previously valued activities
- preoccupation with death or fantasies of being reunited with loved ones who have passed (Mayo Clinic, 2020).

### **How to support children and their families**

During times of change, it can be helpful to support parents to maintain as much routine and social connection as possible for their children. When family circumstances change, it can mean less financial ability or time for children to engage in social or extracurricular activities. However, these kinds of activities are an important source of support for children.

At this age, children are increasingly able to engage in 'talking' therapies and other expressive treatments that encourage the processing of strong emotions and conflicting feelings. Children can also benefit from strategies to encourage self-regulation and to build coping skills.

Children can be encouraged to remain engaged with activities and groups in which they experience success and that they enjoy.

It can be helpful for children to connect with other children of a similar age who have had similar experiences. This can help them to normalise the emotions they are experiencing, to understand that change is a part of life, and to differentiate between changes they can and can't control.

### **Adapted from:**

McLean, S (2016). *Children's attachment needs in the context of out-of-home care*. CFCA Practitioner Resource. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies. [Available here](#).

McLean, S. (2018). *Child development milestones: A guide for foster parents*. Adelaide: University of South Australia. [Available here](#).

McLean, S (2019). *Parenting traumatised children with developmental differences: Strategies to help your child's sensory processing, language development, executive functioning and challenging behaviours*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

### **References**

Argus Institute. (2011). *Developmental considerations concerning children's grief*. [Available here](#).

Bruner, J. S. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction*. Cambridge: Belkapp Press.

Mayo Clinic. (2020). *Mental illness in children: Know the signs*. [Available here](#).

Piaget, J. (1957). *Construction of reality in the child*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Piaget, J., & Cook, M. T. (1952). *The origins of intelligence in children*. New York: International University Press.

Siegler, R. S., DeLoache, J. S., & Eisenberg, N. (2003). *How children develop*. New York: Worth.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wadsworth, B. J. (2004). *Piaget's theory of cognitive and affective development: Foundations of constructivism*. New York: Longman.