

A FREE GUIDE FROM THE NURTURED CHILD MOVEMENT™

The Whole Child

A Developmental Guide to
Understanding Children Beyond Their Birth Age



By Maria Placer

Founder, The Nurtured Child Movement

For parents, educators, and caring adults



The Whole Child

*A Developmental Guide to Understanding
Children Beyond Their Birth Age*

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a specific child's development, please consult an appropriately
qualified professional.

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Created by Maria Placer



Welcome



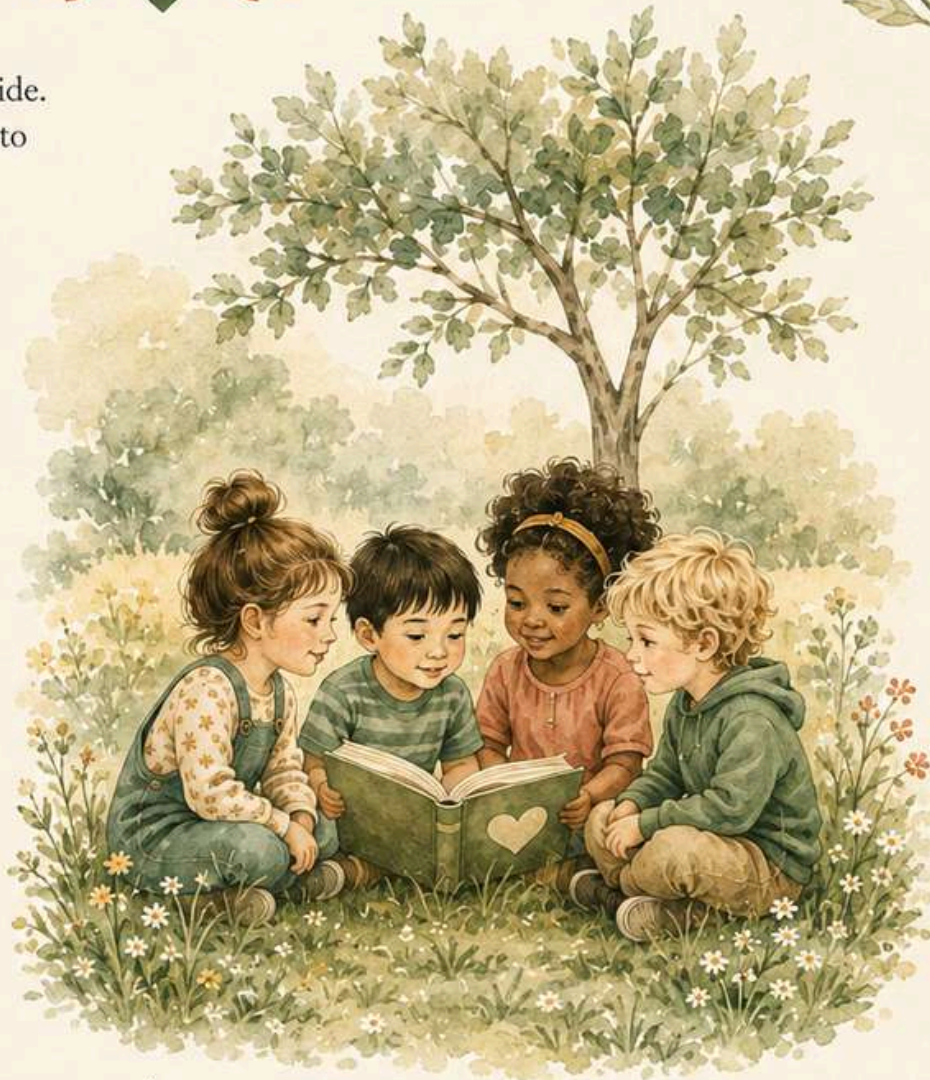
Thank you for choosing this guide.
Thank you for caring enough to
understand children more deeply
and to show up for them with
intention and compassion.

The Whole Child was written to
help adults look beyond behavior
and recognize the experiences,
development, and emotional needs
that shape every child.

When we understand more, we
respond differently, And when we
respond differently, we help children
feel safer, more connected, and
more capable of growth.

May this guide encourage you,
support you, and remind you that
the work you do every day

matters more than you know.



At **The Nurtured Child Movement™**, our mission is simple:
*To help create a culture where children are nurtured through
stronger relationships, healthier adults, and environments
that honor the whole child.*



Thank you for being part of this movement.

WHEN WE NURTURE THE CHILD, WE HEAL THE WORLD.



A Note Before You Read



Every child you meet is more than their age.

They are a whole person with a story, a nervous system, a developing brain, a unique temperament, and a heart that is learning how to trust the world.

This guide is an invitation to pause and look deeper.
To move beyond checklists and milestones.
To honor the child as they are right now—while supporting them as they grow.



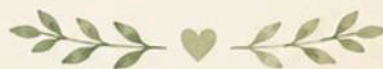
When we understand the whole child, we are better able to nurture their potential, protect their well-being, and walk alongside them with compassion and confidence. ♥

In these pages, you will find:

- ♥ An understanding of child development from birth through eleven
- ♥ Insights into the brain, behavior, and emotional world of young children
- ♥ Practical ways to support the whole child—mind, body, and heart
- ♥ Encouragement for the important adult in the child's life—*you*

Thank you for being here. ♥

Your presence matters more than you may ever know.



How to Use This Guide



This guide is designed to be practical, gentle, and easy to return to. You can read it from start to finish, or you can use it as a reference whenever you need clarity, reassurance, or new ideas.

Each chapter offers understanding, reflection prompts, and practical strategies you can use in everyday moments.

You know your child best. Use this guide to support your intuition, not replace it.

Take what resonates, leave what doesn't, and return as often as you need. ♥



YOU ARE AN IMPORTANT PART OF A CHILD'S STORY.

Your understanding, presence, and care make a lasting difference in their life. ♥



Let's continue learning together. 

One child. One moment. One step at a time.



BIRTH-2

Trust & Safety

Core developmental question:
Is the world safe? Am I safe in it?

What children this age are working on

- Learning that when they signal a need, someone responds
- Reading faces, voices, touch, and movement for cues of safety
- Discovering that their body has needs and those needs matter
- Building the earliest patterns of trust through repeated experiences of comfort, connection, and care
- Beginning to organize their nervous system with the help of calm, responsive adults
- Learning that relationships can be a place of safety

What they need from us

- Consistent, warm responses to their signals
- Physical closeness, gentle touch, eye contact, and comforting presence when welcomed by the child
- Predictable rhythms and routines around feeding, sleep, play, and comfort
- Adults who can stay as steady as possible when the child is distressed
- Simple language for feelings and experiences, even before children can use those words themselves
- Time, repetition, and reassurance as they learn that their needs will be noticed and responded to

What challenging behavior may be communicating

At this age, what adults sometimes experience as 'difficult behavior' is not defiance.

Crying, pushing away, clinging, arching the body, throwing food, waking frequently, or becoming overwhelmed may reflect hunger, exhaustion, overstimulation, discomfort, fear, frustration, separation needs, or a nervous system that has reached its limit.

Young children do not yet have the language or regulation skills to explain what is happening inside them.

Their behavior is communication.

Before asking how to stop the behavior, we can begin by asking:
What might this child be needing right now?



AGES 2-3

The Age of Autonomy

Core developmental question:

Can I do it myself and still stay safe and connected?

What children this age are working on

- Discovering that they are a separate person with their own wants, preferences, and ideas
- Testing independence through movement, repetition, and the strong desire to do things by themselves
- Learning early self-help skills like feeding, dressing, washing hands, and helping with simple routines
- Building language for needs, feelings, and choices, even when words are still limited
- Tolerating frustration when their body, language, or skills cannot yet do what they want
- Learning that boundaries and relationships can exist alongside growing independence

What they need from us

- Safe opportunities to try, explore, and practice doing things independently
- Calm adults who can offer help without taking over too quickly
- Simple choices, predictable routines, and clear, gentle boundaries
- Encouragement, repetition, and patience as skills grow slowly over time
- Language for feelings, transitions, body needs, and frustration
- Co-regulation when big feelings appear and autonomy feels hard to manage

What challenging behavior may be communicating

At this age, what adults sometimes experience as “challenging behavior” is often a sign of a child working hard to build autonomy.

Tantrums, saying “no,” refusing help, throwing, hitting, biting, running away, or collapsing during transitions may reflect frustration, limited language, fatigue, hunger, sensory overload, separation needs, or a nervous system that is overwhelmed.

Young children often want independence before they yet have the skills to manage everything they are trying to do.

Their behavior is communication.

Before asking how to stop the behavior, we can begin by asking:

How can I protect connection while supporting autonomy?



AGES 3-5

The Age of Initiative

Core developmental question:

Can I try? Can I do it myself? Does what I do matter?

What children this age are working on

- Turning ideas into action through play, movement, creativity, and exploration
- Testing what they can do and discovering their growing abilities
- Using imagination, pretend play, and curiosity to make sense of the world
- Developing a stronger sense of self, voice, and preference
- Beginning to take more initiative in relationships, routines, and problem-solving
- Learning through repetition, experimentation, and meaningful hands-on experiences

What they need from us

- Safe opportunities to explore, choose, create, and take healthy risks
- Warm, responsive adults who guide without taking over
- Clear, calm limits that offer structure without shaming
- Encouragement that supports effort, problem-solving, and persistence
- Language for feelings, choices, and social experiences
- Play-rich, relationship-based environments where curiosity is welcomed

What challenging behavior may be communicating

At this age, what adults may experience as challenging behavior often reflects a child's effort to seek power, practice independence, express frustration, manage big feelings, or make sense of a world that still feels bigger than they are.

Preschool children may resist, insist, grab, yell, control play, or become easily overwhelmed—not because they are “bad,” but because they are still learning how to regulate impulses, navigate disappointment, and hold onto connection while asserting themselves.

Their behavior is communication.

Before asking how to stop the behavior, we can begin by asking:

What is this child trying to do, practice, or communicate right now?



AGES 6-11

The Age of Competence & Belonging

Core developmental question:
Can I do this? Do I matter here?

What children this age are working on

- Building confidence through practice, repetition, and real responsibility
- Learning to solve problems, follow through, and recover from mistakes
- Comparing themselves to others and noticing where they feel capable or unsure
- Developing friendships, teamwork, fairness, and a stronger sense of belonging
- Strengthening focus, self-regulation, and persistence
- Discovering interests, strengths, and the joy of contributing

What they need from us

- Encouragement that notices effort, growth, and progress—not just performance
- Safe opportunities to practice independence, responsibility, and problem-solving
- Adults who guide with warmth, clear expectations, and steady support
- Protection from shame, harsh comparison, and labels that reduce them to behavior or ability
- Support navigating friendship struggles, disappointment, and self-doubt
- Environments where they feel competent, included, and valued

What challenging behavior may be communicating

At this age, behavior that looks like refusal, perfectionism, withdrawal, bossiness, giving up, silly behavior, or frustration may reflect fear of failure, comparison, overwhelm, friendship pain, learning stress, or uncertainty about belonging.

Children this age are becoming more aware of how they are seen by others. When they feel behind, disconnected, embarrassed, or not good enough, behavior often communicates that struggle before words do.

Their behavior is communication.

As children approach adolescence, questions of identity, independence, values, and who they are becoming begin to grow more prominent.

Before asking how to make them try harder, we can begin by asking:
***What might this child be needing
in order to feel capable, safe, and included?***





The Most Important Principle

Every Child Is Always More Than Their Age

Children do not move through development in a straight line. They ebb and flow. They grow, pause, regress, and grow again.

A tired child may act younger.

A stressed child may need more support.

A loved and supported child can reach higher.



Meet each child where they are.
Not where they should be.
Not where other children their age are.
Right where they are today.

They are not just their age.
They are a whole story.
And they are always worthy of connection, kindness, and belief.



What This Means for Us



Look beneath the behavior.

Ask what your child might be needing.



Offer connection before correction.

It builds safety and opens the door to learning.



Celebrate small steps.

Growth happens in tiny, powerful moments.



Stay consistent and steady.

Your calm presence helps their nervous system grow.



Be the safe place they return to.

Even on the hard days, your presence makes all the difference.



Children don't need us to be perfect.
They need us to be present.
When we nurture the child, we heal the world.



One Last Thing

For the Days That Are Hard

There will be days when everything feels hard.
On those days, come back to these truths.



You don't have to do it all.

You don't need the perfect strategy.
You just need to be willing to try again.



Small moments matter most.

A kind word. A calm breath.
A stay beside them.
These moments build trust.
This is where growth begins.



You are more important than you think.

Your calm is their anchor.
Your belief in them helps them believe in themselves.



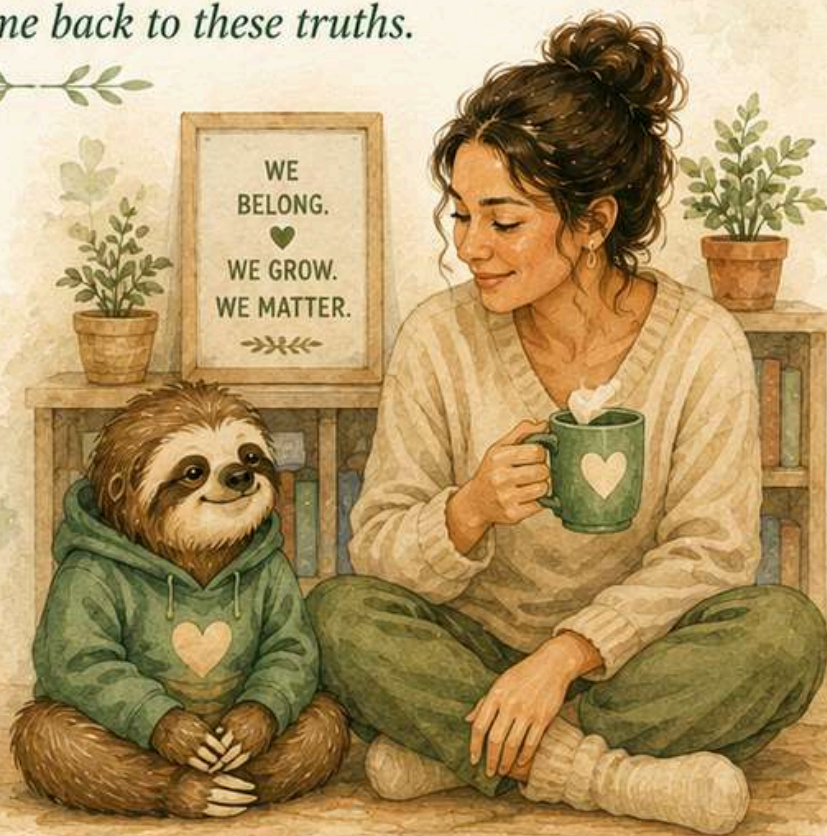
You are not alone.

There are others walking this path with you.
We are a community.
We are better together.



What we do matters.

Every regulated child.
Every healed adult.
Every connected classroom.
It changes the world.



Progress is not a straight line.

It is a spiral.

We keep coming back.

We keep growing.

We keep choosing connection.



You are doing something
beautiful and brave.

Thank you.

When we nurture the child, we heal the world.





About the Author



Maria Placer

Founder ♥ Educator ♥ Writer ♥ Creator

Maria Placer is the founder of The Nurtured Child Movement. She creates whole-child resources rooted in connection, mindfulness, nature, and emotional well-being.

Her work is guided by a deep belief that children thrive when they are supported through strong relationships, healthy adults, and environments that honor the whole child.

Through The Nurtured Child Movement, Maria shares nurturing tools, reflections, and resources for the adults who care for children every day.

I created The Nurtured Child Movement to help children be supported through stronger relationships, healthier adults, and environments that honor the whole child.



What I Believe About Children



Children deserve to feel safe, seen, and supported.



Connection comes before correction.



Emotional well-being matters as much as learning.



Adults need support too.



Nature and mindfulness help children flourish.



Childhood should be honored, not rushed.

Why I do this work



Because children need to feel safe, seen, and supported—and the adults who care for them need support too.

This work is my way of helping create a world where every child belongs, grows, and matters.



"Some children have been waiting their whole small lives for someone to see them."

Let's be that someone.



ABOUT THE NURTURED CHILD MOVEMENT

The Nurtured Child Movement™ exists to help create a culture where children are nurtured through stronger relationships, healthier adults, and environments that honor the whole child.

Our work begins with a simple belief:

Children flourish when they feel safe, seen, supported, and connected.

TNCM creates resources, experiences, and professional support for educators, parents, caregivers, early childhood programs, and others who want to understand children more deeply and respond with greater connection, presence, and intention.

What We're Building



The Nurtured Child Curriculum A growing 12-module whole-child curriculum for young children, integrating social-emotional learning, relationships, regulation, mindfulness, nature, creativity, and meaningful classroom experiences.



Peace's Pathways™ A 108-card regulation toolkit offering seven gentle pathways — Emotion, Breathing, Sensory, Movement, Music, Nature, and Cozy Corner — to help children understand feelings, regulate their bodies, and return to connection.



Books & Publications Resources for the adults who nurture children, including *The Nurtured Child*, free educational guides, journals, and future publications for children, families, and educators.



TNCM Music Original movement songs, calming music, children's meditations, soundscapes, Spanish-language music, and reflective music for adults — available through The Nurtured Child Movement on YouTube.



Professional Services Relationship-based support for early childhood programs, including classroom support, environment guidance, observation and reflection, professional learning, and collaborative problem-solving.



Free Resources & Community Learning Accessible tools, reflections, blog articles, and educational resources created to help whole-child ideas reach more homes, classrooms, and communities.

The Nurtured Child Movement is still growing.
Each resource, song, publication, service, and partnership is another way of carrying the same message forward:

**See the whole child. Strengthen the relationship.
Create the conditions in which children can flourish.**



Stay Connected

Thank you for being part of The Nurtured Child Movement. Whether you're an educator, parent, caregiver, or someone who simply believes in children, your presence helps this movement grow.

Let's nurture the child — together.



WEBSITE

www.thenurturedchildmovement.com



INSTAGRAM

@thenurturedchildmovement



FACEBOOK

The Nurtured Child Movement



YOUTUBE

The Nurtured Child Movement



EMAIL

thenurturedchildmovement@gmail.com

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we heal the world.



JOIN OUR COMMUNITY

Get updates, free resources,
new releases, and gentle inspiration
delivered to your inbox.



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Your interest, support, and belief in children
means more than you know.

Thank you for being here.

SEE THE WHOLE CHILD. STRENGTHEN THE RELATIONSHIP. CREATE THE CONDITIONS
IN WHICH CHILDREN CAN FLOURISH.