

## Characteristics of Early Childhood

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Childhood begins after babyhood at approximately the age of two years and extends to the time when the child becomes sexually mature at approximately 13 years for the average girl and 14 years for the average boy.

Childhood is subdivided into two periods- early and late childhood. Early childhood extends from two to six years and late childhood from seven to the time when the child becomes sexually mature. Thus, early childhood begins at the conclusion of babyhood- the age when dependency is practically a thing of the past and being replaced by growing independence- and ends at about the time the child enters first grade in school.

As the age of six marks the beginning of the compulsory school period in our culture, it serves as a convenient dividing line between early and late childhood. This dividing line is significant because when the child leaves his home environment and enters school, new pressures and new expectations lead to great changes in the pattern of his behavior, his attitudes, interests and values. As a result, children become 'different' people from what they were earlier. It is this difference in their psychological make up rather than the difference in their physical make up that justifies dividing this long span of years into two subdivisions, early and late childhood.

Another reason of placing the dividing line at six years is of social factors. There is relatively little difference in the physical growth and development of children before and after they are six years old. For exam-the five-year-old is not radically different from the seven-year-old.

### Characteristics of Early Childhood

Just as certain characteristics of babyhood make it a distinctive period in the life span, so certain characteristics of early childhood set it apart from other periods. These characteristics are reflected in the names that parents' educators and psychologists commonly apply to this period.

#### 1) Names Used by Parents

Most parents consider early childhood a problem age or troublesome age. While babyhood

represents problems for parents, most of these centers around the baby's physical care. With the dawn of childhood, behavior problems become more frequent and more troublesome than the physical-care problems of babyhood.

The reasons of behavior problems are-the child gradually develops a distinctive personality and demands an independence which he may be incapable of handling successfully. In addition, young children are often obstinate, stubborn, disobedient, negativistic and antagonistic. They have frequent temper tantrums, irrational fears and suffer from jealousies.

Early childhood age seems to be less appealing than babyhood to many parents. The dependency of the baby is now replaced by a resistance on the children's part to their help and a tendency to reject their demonstrations of their affection. Furthermore, few young children are as cute as babies, which also make them less appealing.

Parents also refer early childhood as the toy age because young children spend much of their waking time playing with toys studies of children's play have revealed that toy play reaches its peak during the early childhood years and then begins to decrease when children reach the school age. This does not mean that they are not interested in playing with toys but with entrance to first grade. Children are encouraged to engage in games and modified forms of sports which does not require the use of toys. When alone, they continue to play with toys, up to third or 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

During the preschool years, nursery schools, kindergartens, day-care centers and organized play groups, all emphasize play which makes use of toys. As a result, whether young children are playing alone or with peers, toys are an important element of their play activities.

#### 2) Names Used by Educators

Education refers to early childhood as the "pre-school age", the period preceding the child's entrance into school or to distinguish it from the time when children are considered old enough both physically and mentally to cope with the work they will be expected to do when they begin their formal

schooling. Even when children go to nursery school or kinder garten, they are labeled preschoolers rather than school children. The early childhood years, either in the home or in a preschool, are at a time of preparation.

### 3) Names Used by Psychologists

To the psychologists, early childhood is the 'pre-gang age', the time when the child is learning the foundation of social behavior. This learning will prepare him for the more highly organized social life of the school.

Early childhood is the period when the major development is that of control over the environment. So many psychologists refer to early childhood as the exploratory age. Having acquired a workable control of his own body during the first two years of life, the child is now ready to explore his environment. He wants to know what his environment is, how it works and how he can be a part of it. This includes people as well as inanimate objects. One common way of exploring in early childhood is by asking questions, thus this period is often referred to as the questioning age.

Imitation of speech and actions of others are more pronounced during early childhood. For this reason, it is also known as the imitative age. However, in spite of this tendency, most children show more creativity in their play during early childhood than at any other time in their lives. For that reason, psychologists also regard it as the creative age.

### Significance of Early Childhood Years

The early childhood years i.e. 3-6 years is the most impressionable age in one's life. It represents a remarkable period of physical and psychological development. Personality development begins during infancy, but during early childhood only one sees the uniqueness of the individual emerging in complex

ways. He acquires the ability to communicate with others- and to be communicated with- through the use of words which are symbols to represent ideas.

During this period children can move about freely, so they are better able to explore the world around them.

As their ability to communicate grows, they become intelligent enough to use their memory power, they relate in more significant ways to others to members of their family with whom they come in contact.

At the preschool stage, personality develops through starting new activities, getting new ideas and through exploration of places, people, language, objects and materials.

The study of early childhood is very useful for teachers, or parents to plan curricular and co-curricular activities. Whatever is learnt at this stage gets so deeply embedded in him that it becomes difficult to change it later on. Therefore, a rich environment and rich experiences are to be provided to the child to develop good habits, proper attitudes and a questioning mind.

- Early childhood is regarded as the teachable moment for acquiring skills because children enjoy repetition essential to learning skills.
- Speech development advances rapidly during this stage. So, improvement in comprehension as well as in difficult speech skill are also seen.
- During this stage, the foundation of social development is laid.
- Early childhood is characterized by morality by constraint- a time when children learn, through punishment and praise, to obey rule automatically.

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