

# Developmental Stages of the Child

Many therapy approaches have described ‘working with the child’. But, in reality, there isn’t just one ‘child’. In our work, we will come across a whole collection of child states, that have evolved at particular developmental milestones. An understanding of the various stages of the child’s journey can help us to work more effectively with our clients when they experience these regressive states. In this article, Sydney-based psychologist and Hakomi Teacher-in-training **Karen Baikie** draws on a number of maps of child development to provide an overview of the worlds of the child.

A CLIENT GENERALLY COMES TO PSYCHOTHERAPY looking for some kind of change. As psychotherapists, when we support a client towards that transformation, we often address some childhood experience or difficulty, which often includes something the client didn’t get as a child. In Hakomi, we usually talk about ‘working with the child’ or ‘providing a missing experience’. In the processing phase of the session, a child state may spontaneously show up, and as therapists we work with that state in order to move the client towards some kind of transformation.

WHEN WORKING WITH THE CHILD STATE, THE BEST way to come up with an effective intervention is to understand what is going on for the child and what the child needs. When we say ‘working with the child’ it is important to recognise that there isn’t just one ‘child’. In our work, we will come across a whole collection of different child states that will depend on the particular age and developmental stage. So if you have a good working understanding of what goes on for a child at different stages of development, then it will be a lot easier to get a

sense of what the child might need from you and so design an effective intervention.

IN THE CURRENT SYDNEY HAKOMI TRAINING, WE are focusing on the first 6 years of life, and looking at the development of the child in four stages – infant, toddler, pre-schooler and school child. There are many different models of child development in the literature, including several maps that we use in Hakomi. In this article, I have attempted to draw together some of these maps to provide an overview of child development that might be useful when working with child states. Naturally, there will be some differences with other models and the specifics of each stage will be somewhat different for each child. I have also drawn up a diagram that brings together some of these maps, detailing the life issues that the child is facing around each stage as well as the developmental tasks the child is addressing. Whilst there are different character styles that arise out of each developmental stage, this article just focuses on child development rather than character. I hope that this model guides you as you work with ‘the child’ state in your clients.

## THE INFANT

THE FIRST STAGE OF CHILDHOOD IS INFANCY, FROM utero through birth and up to about 12 months of age. In Hakomi, we call this the BEING stage. During infancy, there is no separate sense of self. The infant and caregiver are one, merged and undifferentiated. On the diagram, this is shown by a full circle, representing the sense of dependence and merger at this age.

THE FIRST GREAT LIFE ISSUE THAT THE CHILD IS navigating is that of **Safety** and the **Right to Exist**. From utero, at birth, and in the early months, the baby will either develop a sense of being connected or a sense of being isolated in the world. If the environment is optimal, the infant will feel safe, secure and that he or she belongs. On the other hand, if the environment is suboptimal, the infant will feel unsafe, insecure, threatened, disconnected or even as if an alien on this planet.

### **Physical, Neurological and Psychological Development**

THERE IS AN ENORMOUS AMOUNT GOING ON IN TERMS of physical, neurological and psychological development at this stage. At birth, much of the basic brain architecture is set up but the interconnections are immature. The brain continues to grow at an amazing rate for a few years after birth. By the age of 2 years, the brain is about 80% of the adult size. During first three years, there is a massive increase in connections among neurons – at times, 250,000 neurons are added every minute. Some of these neural connections are maintained by exposure to stimulation from the environment, which Daniel Siegel refers to as ‘use it or lose it’ brain growth. For example, the eyes need to be exposed to light or else the already established visual circuits will wither and die. Other neural connections are initiated by experience itself – novel experiences all create new synaptic connections. For example, the infant often has a sudden leap in development after spending time in a new environment or with new people.

DURING THE FIRST YEAR OR TWO, THE BABY IS primarily a right hemisphere creature, with most neurological processing occurring through the limbic or emotional system. As a result, much of the infant’s activity is instinctive and reflexive. The infant learns about himself and his environment through motor and reflex actions. The infant cries or fusses to make its needs known and to get its needs taken care of. Eye contact is particularly significant at this stage. The mutual gaze of parent and infant actually helps to develop the infant’s

brain, promoting the production of the neurotransmitter oxytocin. This helps the parent and infant fall in love, promotes limbic resonance and strengthens attachment. The baby makes sounds, looks at and responds to faces, especially the eyes, which encourages the caregiver to maintain eye contact.

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THERE ARE SOME KEY DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES that happen during infancy. At birth, the infant cries, sleeps, and feeds. She is able to see best at a distance of 20-25 cm – it’s no coincidence that this is the same distance as mother to infant gaze during feeding. At about 6 weeks, the infant smiles, holds eye contact, and begins engaging. She coos, squeals, and gurgles – all of which encourage adults to engage with her and increase her sense of safety. At 3-4 months, she becomes more mobile, initially rolling from back to front and front to back and then she stands and sits supported. She also becomes more social, starting to laugh. At 5-6 months, she begins to sit up. Her interactions become more reciprocal, she mimics sounds and facial gestures and shows more intentionality in her play. At 6-9 months, she learns to crawl, and pulls herself up to standing. She makes babbling sounds and can raise her arms to signal ‘pick me up’. At this age she shows stranger anxiety. At 9-12 months she is cruising around, climbing furniture, learns to stand without holding, and walks with assistance. She is now reliably sounding ‘ma-ma’ or ‘da-da’, claps her hands and waves bye bye. This is the age when infants develop separation anxiety. At 12-15 months she learns to walk alone – and officially becomes a toddler. She most probably says 4-6 intelligible words and more partial words. At 15-18

months, she walks, trots, and prances. She understands simple language, has 10-20 intelligible words and puts 2 words together, such as “all gone” or “go bye bye”. By this age, separation anxiety lessens, as she is able to retain a mental image of the person when they are out of sight.

### **Key Developmental Tasks and Questions**

**At each stage, there are some key developmental tasks the child is dealing with. For the infant, these are:**

- Being Alive – to be, to live, to thrive, to trust, to be joyful
- Belonging/Arriving – being welcome
- Attachment – feeling secure and connected
- Nourishment – getting basic needs met, both physically and emotionally
- Exploration – to learn to trust others, to trust that it’s safe and wonderful to explore, to use all the senses to experience the world, to be creative and active, and to get support while doing all these things.

**The key questions that the infant is navigating are:**

Is it safe? Do I have the right to exist? Do I have the right to be in this body, on this planet? Am I welcome here? Do I belong? Am I a blessing or a burden? Am I lovable? Am I OK as I am?

## **THE TODDLER**

THE SECOND STAGE IS THAT OF THE TODDLER, USUALLY delineated as around 1-2 years of age. In Hakomi, we call this the **Taking In** stage. There is an emerging sense of self as the toddler moves towards separation from the caregiver and begins to see that there is a separate ‘me’ and ‘you’. On the diagram, this is shown by a circle with dotted lines down the middle, representing the movement towards separation at this age.

THE SECOND GREAT LIFE ISSUE THAT THE CHILD IS navigating is that of **Dependency** and the **Right to Need**. The toddler will either develop a sense of feeling nourished or a sense of feeling deprived in the world. If the environment is optimal, the toddler will feel supported and cared for, with a belief that his needs are okay. On the other hand, if the environment is suboptimal, he will feel alone, lacking in care, and undernourished.

THIS SECOND LIFE ISSUE OF DEPENDENCY DOES actually begin in infancy, as the little baby is completely

dependent on the caregiver for all his needs and nourishment. However, during the infancy stage, the issue of safety is primary. If basic needs like nourishment are not provided this will actually be a threat to the infant’s existence – so even the issue of nourishment is really one of safety. As the baby grows and moves into toddlerhood, his needs become more complex and the issue of needs and dependency become primary to development.

### **Physical, Neurological and Psychological Development**

PHYSICALLY, THE TODDLER BECOMES MORE AND MORE mobile – he goes from walking to running to climbing, and even the start of pedalling a bike. Language continues to develop, becoming more complex and conversational, as the toddler becomes a little chatterbox. Cognitive functioning develops and becomes more significant, compared to the more emotional processing of the infant. The toddler is still dependent on the caregiver to meet his needs, but as the brain becomes more cognitive, the needs are more complex and less instinctive than in the infant stage. The emotional parts of the brain are developing, so the toddler is more able to express feelings, including anger.

DURING THIS STAGE, TODDLERS PARTICULARLY need their emerging emotions to be seen and validated. With the development of language, the child begins to use symbols to represent objects. Toddlers are now better able to think about things and events that aren’t immediately present. Children at this age show egocentrism, that is, they assume that others see situations from their viewpoint. They take in information and change it in their mind to fit their ideas. With other children, they start ‘parallel play’ in which they play near others but are not yet playing with others.

WITH THEIR INCREASING MOBILITY, THE TODDLER IS more able to explore and his curiosity flourishes. We see the beginnings of individuation as the toddler is increasingly able to become separate from the caregiver and begins to develop the ability to think for himself. The toddler is moving out of the symbiotic stage and begins to differentiate, with a developing sense of ‘I am me and you are you’. The toddler has more freedom, and is able to develop likes and dislikes. As preferences develop, toddlers begin to assert their will and experiment with ‘no’. Issues of boundaries, power, and assertion begin to become more significant. The toddler begins to test reality, pushing against boundaries and other people. Combining the increasing freedom, boundaries, and expression of emotions, especially anger, we get the classic toddler tantrums.

## **Key Developmental Tasks and Questions**

**The key developmental tasks that the toddler child is dealing with are:**

- Getting Support – to be sustained emotionally and physically
- Interdependence – developing capability, still with some help
- Acceptability of needs – developing respect for individuality
- Thinking – thinking and solving problems
- Feelings – learning to express and handle feelings

**The key questions that the toddler is navigating are:**

Are my needs OK? Can I express my needs? Is someone there for me? Can I get support? Is it safe to explore? Can I explore and still be close? Am I respected? Can I say no? Are my feelings OK? Can I be angry and still be loved? Can I be myself?

## **THE PRE-SCHOOLER**

THE THIRD STAGE OF CHILDHOOD IS THAT OF THE PRE-SCHOOLER, when the child is around 3 to 4 years of age. In Hakomi, we call this the **Putting Out** stage. During the preschool stage, a separate and coherent sense of self develops and the child becomes more autonomous. On the diagram, this is shown by two separate circles, representing the sense of separation and emerging individuation at this age.

THE THIRD GREAT LIFE ISSUE THAT THE CHILD IS navigating is that of **Freedom** and the **Right to Freedom**. This issue begins towards the end of the toddler years, around 18 months old, but becomes central during the pre-school years. The pre-schooler will either develop a sense of being free or a sense of being determined by others. If the environment is optimal, the pre-schooler will feel spontaneous, creative and basically good. On the other hand, if the environment is suboptimal, the pre-schooler will feel trapped, stuck and basically wrong.

DURING THE PRE-SCHOOL YEARS AND MOVING INTO the next stage, the child also begins to navigate the fourth great life issue of **Truth** and the **Right to be Real**. The child will either develop a sense of being real or a sense of being invulnerable. If the environment is optimal, the child will

feel vulnerable and authentic, with a belief that faults are okay. However, if the environment is suboptimal, he will feel unreal and invulnerable, believing that it's not okay to show weakness.

## **Physical, Neurological and Psychological Development**

DURING THE PRE-SCHOOLER YEARS, THERE IS A significant growth in the emotional part of the brain, so the child starts to express and really get into their feelings. However, the corpus callosum, the band of tissue connecting the two hemispheres, is still quite immature. So children at this age still have an innate difficulty 'putting words to their feelings'. Sometimes their right hemispheres may be so intensely reacting that they tantrum, and even though their language may be reasonably well developed, during the tantrum they cannot use language to communicate. This means that even at this age, when language is well developed, nonverbal soothing communication is needed.

THIS STAGE IS ABOUT PLAYFULNESS, FREEDOM, AND curiosity. The pre-schooler years are a magical time, during which the child makes the transition from the magical world to the real world. Fantasy life is prevalent, with the pre-schooler entering the world of dress-ups and imaginary companions, and trying on different identity roles by role playing. The pre-schooler has a belief in invincibility, power and strength. There is a sense of no boundaries, believing he can do and can transcend, with anything being possible – it's the world of superheroes. At this age, hurts can be more easily consoled with magical thinking.

FREEDOM AND ASSERTION OF WILL CONTINUES AND becomes even more significant as the pre-schooler develops their own boundaries. Until now, the child has primarily been a receiver of love, but now begins to express and show his love for others as he moves more into feeling his vulnerability. The pre-schooler has a natural sense of grandiosity and omnipotence. He needs to learn limits and be allowed to make mistakes, all without being shamed or laughed at. The pre-school child gathers information about the world, the self, the body and their sex role. He is full of curiosity and wanting to know, asking lots of how, why, when, where, and who. The preschool years herald the beginnings of identification of gender and sexuality as the child starts to distinguish between boys and girls. At this age, the child starts cooperative play and begins to show interest in games and rules.

# DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES OF THE CHILD

Life Issue: **SAFETY - EXISTENCE**



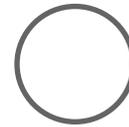
**INFANT**

**0 - 12 MONTHS**

## BEING

Being Alive  
Belonging  
Arriving  
Attachment  
Nourishment  
Exploration

**Merged, no sense of self**



Age / Stage

Life Issue: **DEPENDENCY - NEEDS**



**TODDLER**

**1 - 2 YEARS**

## TAKING IN

Getting Support  
Interdependence  
Acceptability of needs  
Thinking  
Feeling

**Emerging sense of self**



Age / Stage

Life Issue: **FREEDOM**



**PRE-SCHOOLER**

**3 - 4 YEARS**

## PUTTING OUT

Independence  
Freedom  
Responsibility  
Identity  
Power

**Coherent sense of self**



Age / Stage

Life Issue: **TRUTH - VULNERABILITY**



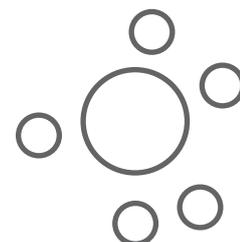
**SCHOOL CHILD**

**5 - 12 YEARS**

## DOING

Mutual responsibility  
Equality  
Acceptance  
Structure  
Skill Acquisition  
Worth

**Social self**



Age / Stage

Life Issue: **WORTH - EQUALITY**

## **Key Developmental Tasks and Questions**

**The key developmental tasks that the preschool child is dealing with are:**

- Independence – getting support for autonomy, doing things themselves
- Freedom – assertion of will, doing what they want their way, being messy
- Responsibility – learning that their behaviours have consequences and they have an effect on others
- Identity and Power – establishing individual identity, figuring out role and power relationships with others

**The key questions that the pre-schooler is navigating are:**

Can I do it myself? Can I make my own choices and still be loved? Is the love I get conditional? Can I say no? Am I free to be messy? Am I powerful? Can I be powerful and still get help? Can I express my feelings? Can I be vulnerable? Am I free to be me? Am I enjoyed for who I am?

## **THE SCHOOL CHILD**

THE FOURTH STAGE OF CHILDHOOD IS THAT OF the school child, from about 5 years onwards, until adolescence. In Hakomi, we call this the **Doing** stage. During the primary school years, individuation continues and the child develops a sense of social self. The school child moves into a world beyond mum and dad, where other influences such as friends and teachers become significant. On the diagram, this is shown by a central circle with several smaller circles around it, representing the social self.

THE FIFTH GREAT LIFE ISSUE THAT THE SCHOOL CHILD is navigating is that of **Worth** and the **Right to Equality**. The school child is navigating the continuum between being and doing. If the environment is optimal, the child will feel worthwhile, good enough, and have a somatic sense of centredness and inner peace. On the other hand, if the environment is suboptimal, she will feel worthless, not good enough, with a corresponding somatic experience of restlessness and a readiness to act.

## **Physical, Neurological and Psychological Development**

DURING THE SCHOOL YEARS, NEURAL PRUNING HAPPENS in which neural connections that are not being used will be lost. The neocortex comes more online and the child is now neurologically more capable of reading

and writing. The school child learns skills, learns from mistakes, and becomes adequate and competent. Rules become important, the child has more awareness of right and wrong, how things work, how to fit in, and the consequences of breaking rules. The child is more able to listen in order to collect information and think and to reason about wants and needs. At this stage, the child begins to check out family rules and learn about structures outside the family, and to test out ideas and values and learn value options beyond the family. Friends become a significant influence as the school years progress.

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“ ***During the school years, neural pruning happens in which neural connections that are not being used will be lost. The neocortex comes more online and the child is now neurologically more capable of reading and writing.*** ”

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## **Key Developmental Tasks and Questions**

**The key developmental tasks that the school child is dealing with are:**

- Mutual Responsibility – the development of ‘what am I responsible for and what are you responsible for’
- Equality – to be recognised to contribute, to be an equal member of the community
- Acceptance – to be appreciated as whole, to make mistakes and still be ok, choosing friends and fitting in
- Structure – installing own internal structure, understanding the need for rules and the relevancy of rules and values on which rules are based
- Skill acquisition – learning, doing, and practicing
- Worth – celebrating own competence, to have own opinions and thoughts

The key questions that the school child is navigating are:

Can I do it? Will I be good enough? Will I measure up? Will I be worthy? Am I valued? Am I OK the way I am? Can I do things my way? Can I disagree? Can I be different and still be loved? Do I have to be something to be loved? Can I still get love and attention without having to earn it (by being funny, productive, or clever)?

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# Poems, Quotes and Blessings

Selected by Hakomi Graduate, **Katy Vidler**

## A POEM

Ten thousand flowers in spring,  
the moon in autumn,

A cool breeze in summer,  
snow in winter.

If your mind isn't clouded  
by unnecessary things,

This is the best season of your life.

—*Wu-men*

## A QUOTE

Let us not pray to be sheltered from dangers  
but to be fearless in facing them.  
Let us not beg for the stilling of the pain  
but for the heart to conquer it.

—*Rabindranath Tagore*

## A BLESSING

### Excerpt from Beannacht ("Blessing")

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,  
may the clarity of light be yours,  
may the fluency of the ocean be yours,  
may the protection of the ancestors be yours.  
And so may a slow wind  
work these words of love around you,  
an invisible cloak  
to mind your life.

—*John O'Donohue - Anam Cara*