Early childhood is sometimes referred to as the preschool years. This is a period of the life span after infancy and before the child begins formal schooling. This is typically from ages 3 to 5 or 2 to 6 years.  
  
First, let’s examine physical growth.  
  
  
There is considerable difference in the body proportions of a child entering and exiting this stage.   
Toddlers have large heads and stomachs and short arms and legs.  
But 6 year old children tend to have longer, leaner bodies as their torso lengthens.   
  
  
The rate of physical growth in early childhood is slower than what was found in infancy.  
Overall physical growth is at the rate of about 3 inches in height per year.  
And about 4.5 pounds of weight is gained each year.  
The average 6 year old in the United States is about 46 inches tall and weighs about 46 pounds.  
This slower growth rate translates into a smaller appetite for children between ages 2 and 6 years.  
  
This diminished appetite means these children are vulnerable to nutritional deficiencies.   
This is particularly true if those small appetites are satisfied with foods poor in nutrition.  
Preschoolers can suffer iron deficiencies particularly if they drink too much cow’s milk which interferes with the body’s ability to absorb iron.  
Children in the United States consume too many high fat, high sugar junk foods.  
And while the effects of such poor nutrition might not be immediately evident, the preference for eating such intensely sugary and fatty foods is being established and can interfere with nutrition for years to come.   
  
How can you avoid setting up eating problems in this age group?  
The following tips are directed toward establishing reasonable expectations about food and avoiding associating food with psychological needs.  
First, don’t try to force feed your child or fight with them over food.  
Recognize that appetites vary and adjust accordingly.   
Keep mealtime pleasant and as a time for family members to unite and enjoy one another’s company.  
Don’t become a short order chef. Choose a reasonable menu that all can share.  
Limit choices, particularly when allowing young children to make selections. Too many options can be confusing.  
Serve balanced meals. Take the time to think about nutrition and prepare meals that are healthy.  
Don’t bribe the child with food. Offering certain foods as rewards can set up a hierarchy of good and bad foods which can get in the way of eating healthy meals.  
  
  
Now let’s turn our attention to the brain.  
During early childhood, the brain continues to grow and mature. At age 2, the brain is 75% its adult weight. By age 6, it’s at 95 percent its adult weight. And by 7, the brain is about 100% its adult weight.  
Changes in the child’s ability to override emotional outbursts and to coordinate movement are seen as the cortex continues to mature.   
Visual pathways continue to be established and the child becomes able to reproduce what is seen on paper when drawing.   
The left hemisphere of the brain undergoes a growth spurt between ages 3 and 6 facilitating language skills. The right hemisphere grows throughout childhood improving spatial skills, and the recognition of shapes and patterns.  
Corpus callosum also grows between 3-6 years.  
  
Gross motor skill development occupies much of the life of a young child.  
Running, jumping, swinging, and learning to ride a bicycle are all examples of gross motor skills.  
Many childhood songs combine music and words with large physical movements. Can you think of any examples? How about “Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes”? Remember that one?  
  
  
Young children are also practicing their fine motor skills by learning to pour, using scissors, and coloring.   
Early childhood classrooms include a number of activities for improving fine motor skills.  
Many songs and children’s activities incorporate fine motor skills. Have you ever heard the song, “The Itsy Bitsy Spider”?   
You’ll find a video of it being performed in your lesson. Enjoy!  
  
  
Sexual development begins even before birth.   
Erections and vaginal lubrication are present before birth.   
In infancy, babies stimulate their genitals when they have sufficient motor skills.  
Their curiosity about the genitals continues in early childhood. Hopefully, this curiosity is met with a reasonable response rather than one that evokes shame or fear.  
  
  
Let’s continue our look at cognitive development.  
  
  
Here is a picture of Piaget. Recall Piaget’s second stage of cognitive development: preoperational intelligence.  
Early childhood is a time of learning to use thought to solve problems and learning to know and communicate about the world through the use of symbols, primarily language.  
Now the child can think about what happened several days ago or image an event. Watch closely and you may see a child surprised by being able to hear a song in their head. “Wow! I can hear a song and it’s playing in my head!”   
Being able to think about the world in this new way doesn’t mean that the child is logical about how the world works. Preoperational thought is ‘prelogical’ or before logical. Instead, there may be a tendency to believe that everyone sees the world through the child’s eyes. I’ll give you an example. One child came up to me at around Halloween (October) and said “I know why god put skin on people.” “Oh, really? Why?” I responded. The child proudly reported, “So they wouldn’t be scary to little kids!”  
  
Here are some other aspects of preoperational thought.  
Children love to play out roles at this age. This type of play, called sociodramatic play, allows them to take on a role fully and think about how to speak and act as well as what kinds of props are needed to become the part.   
  
  
Syncretism refers to thinking that if two events occur simultaneously, one must have caused the other. Here is an image of a hospital. A child whose mother brought a baby with her when she last left the hospital may think that a new visit to the same building will produce another child!  
  
  
Egocentrism is one of Piaget’s early concepts that refer to how these children assume that everyone thinks the way that they do.   
Try reading to a child and they may ask, “Where am I in the story?” They believe that they are at the center of activity.  
Or you may head a child ask whether a character in a movie or cartoon loves them? That’s an odd question, unless you’re a 3 year old.  
  
Animism is the thought that objects have lifelike qualities. Be sure to watch the video clip in your lesson. It’s an attempt to help young children distinguish between living and non-living objects.   
  
  
Piaget challenged children’s ability to understand how to classify objects.   
For example, in this image showing numerous red buttons and a single green button, you have objects that can be classified in several ways.  
If you ask a 3 year old, “What are there more of? Red things, green things, or buttons?” The child will probably respond, “Red things” not recognizing that all are buttons.  
  
Piaget’s experiments on conservation of matter indicated that children have numerous misconceptions about matter.   
For example, if a container of water is poured into two differently shaped containers so that the water levels now vary, the child may think that the higher water level indicates more liquid. Or a child may think that if one line moves further to the right, it is more or if one row of pennies is widely spaced apart, it has more.  
  
The theory of mind is the understanding that other people have different thoughts than one’s own.   
This realization replaces egocentrism and occurs between ages 3 and 5, typically; or around age 4.  
This knowledge of other’s mental states can aid in social relationships.  
It serves as our everyday mindreading.   
It can be absent or difficult for children with autism spectrum disorders. Such children may not be able to appreciate other’s mental states, depending on the level of severity of the disorder.   
  
  
Vocabulary grows at the rate of 10 to 20 new words per day and the child has a vocabulary of approximately 10,000 words by age 6.  
However, children do not have a complete understanding of words. For example, a child may not understand that the expression, “time flies” simply means that time passes quickly.   
Children tend to learn nouns more easily than verbs, even in more verb-friendly languages such as Chinese.   
Rules of grammar may be misapplied. An example of such over-regularization is found in statements such as “I goed there.” Or, “I doed that!” in which adding ed to the end of the word is used to indicate past tense incorrectly.  
  
Remember Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development? This is the potential a child may achieve through guided participation. Language, both verbal and non-verbal is the vehicle of this guidance.   
Do you ever talk to yourself? When and why? Chances are you talk to yourself as an adult only when you want to express an emotion or clarify your thoughts. This inner speech is not the same as the speech you use when communicating with others; it’s short and to the point.   
But when you were learning to use language, you may have struggled as you began to use words to communicate ideas to others. You probably spoke aloud. Then words became directed toward your own behavior. You may have talked to yourself with a sort of running commentary about your own activities and feelings as you learned to think using words. Gradually, this egocentric speech (spoken when alone) became private speech, or thinking in language. Inner speech is only spoken aloud if thoughts need to be clarified or emotion expressed.   
Think about it. Did you use words?  
  
Now we turn our attention toward psychosocial development in early childhood. We’ll explore self-concept, gender identity, and family life.  
  
  
A self-concept is one’s own perception or image of self. We aren’t born with a self-concept. It develops through interaction with others.   
Usually these others are those close to us like parents, siblings, or peers.   
Let’s look at two theories of self-based on interaction.  
  
  
Charles Horton Cooley used the metaphor of a mirror or looking-glass when describing this process.  
Our self-concept develops when we look at how those around us respond to us, how we look, what we say, and what we do.   
We then use their reactions to make self-judgments.   
If those around us respond favorably to us, we’ll form a positive sense of self. But if those around us respond with criticism and insult, we interpret that as evidence that we are not good or acceptable.   
But those around us may respond to us based on more than our own performance or worth. Perhaps they don’t notice what we do well or are reluctant to comment on it. As a result, we may have an inaccurate self-concept.   
And there may be certain periods in life in which we are more self-conscious or concerned with how others view us. Early childhood may be one of those times as children are piecing together a sense of self.  
  
  
George Herbert Mead also focused on social interaction as important for developing a sense of self.   
He divided the self into two parts: the “I” or the spontaneous part of the self that is creative and internally motivated, and the “me” or the part of the self that takes into account what other people think.  
The key to living well is to find ways to give expression to the “I” with the approval of the “me”. In other words, find out how to be creative and do what you care about within the guidelines of society.   
The I is inborn. But the me develops through social interaction and a process called “taking the role of the other.”  
A child first comes to take the role of a significant other person, typically a parent or sibling. A child, who has been told not to do something, may be found saying “no” to himself.   
Gradually, the child will come to understand how the generalized other, or society at large, comes to view actions. Now a behavior is not just wrong according to a significant other person, it is wrong as a rule of society. In this way, cultural expectations become part of the judgment of self.  
  
  
Early self-concepts can be quite exaggerated. A child may want to be the biggest, or be able to jump the highest, or to have the longest hair. This exaggerated sense of self is external; the child emphasizes outward expressions and responses in developing a sense of self.  
Older children tend to become more realistic in their sense of self as they start comparing their own behavior with that of others.   
  
Erikson views early childhood as a time of building on autonomy and taking initiative. The child wants to think of an activity and carry it out without interference of others.   
  
  
Early childhood is also a time of developing gender identification or a sense of self based on gender. You may recall Freud’s theory of the phallic stage in which the child develops a sense of masculinity or femininity.  
Nancy Chordorow believed that mothers promote gender specific behavior in the way they interact with sons and daughters. Daughters are kept close and dependent while sons are encouraged to be independent and assertive.   
Cognitive theory suggests that children actively seek their gender roles through a gender schema in which they sort their world into male and female categories. They ask whether activities, objects, colors, and mannerisms are for boys or girls.   
Learning theorists focus on the ways in which children are reinforced for gender stereotypic behavior and how modeling and media images promote gender stereotypic behaviors. The focus is on how society imposes gender expectations on children.   
  
How is gender taught?  
The training is said to begin in infancy as parents treat their sons and daughters differently. In some cultures it means cuddling and speaking to daughters, while directing sons toward outside activities.  
Sons are given more freedom and less supervision than daughters. And daughters may be given unnecessary assistance thus undermining their confidence.   
Teachers call on boys more often in the classroom and schools may direct students into certain fields of study based on gender rather than ability.  
Friends have a different code of behavior for girls than for boys. Girls focus on closeness in friendship whereas boys may focus more on competition.   
  
  
Is gender taught or do children seek out how to behave based on their sex?  
Gender expectations are taught and messages are presented in the media, in the schools, among friends, and by family members. But children also vary in the extent to which they follow the roles presented.   
There is an interactive role between the individual and society’s expectations with respect to gender. This is called “doing gender.” It means that we approach these expectations and respond to them in a variety of ways, depending on individual motives and attributes.  
  
  
Think of your parents. How would you describe their style of parenting? Are they consistent? Were they alike in their approach to discipline and support?   
Here are two models of parenting styles. You may be able to identify your own parents to some extent in these descriptions.   
Of course, these models represent clear categories. Real parents often fall somewhere in between.  
  
  
Diane Baumrind’s model classifies parents in several ways based on the amount and direction of communication they have with their children, their level of warmth, and the level of maturity expected from the child.   
The authoritarian model is a traditional model in which the parents are in control. Children are expected to be obedient and respectful. These parents have low warmth and high maturity demands for their children.  
The permissive model is one in which parents allow children to make the rules. These parents show a good deal of warmth, but have trouble setting limits.  
The authoritative model is parenting that is strict within reason and that is accompanied by affection. Children have some say in making rules and the exchanges are warm. This is also known as democratic parenting and is the model favored by Baumrind. The parenting program called “Love and Logic” is a good example of this model.  
Uninvolved parents are unresponsive and non-demanding. As a consequence, their children may difficulty in social relationships, school, and other areas.  
  
  
LeMaster’s and DeFrain’s model focuses on what parents are trying to accomplish when parenting. It offers a glimpse at the psychological motivation of the parent suggesting that a parent’s psychological needs rather than the child’s developmental needs are frequently being addressed when parenting.  
The martyr is the type of parent who will do anything for their child; even those things that children should and could do on their own. This is to help the parent feel in control through self-sacrifice with the expectation that the child will be indebted to them.  
The pal is lonely and wants a friend. The pal lets the child do what they want in hopes that the child will spend time with the parent and satisfy their need for companionship.  
The police officer/drill sergeant wants direct control and gives the child many obedience tests. Obedience tests are often meaningless activities with the sole purpose of showing the child who is in control.   
The teacher-counselor parent is one who probably pays too much attention to what the “experts” have to say about parenting. The teacher-counselor takes all responsibility for the child’s behavior and thinks that if they just do the right things, they can have a perfect child.  
The athletic coach is the preferred model. It involves being objective and consistent in parenting and allowing the child to learn by doing.  
  
Which model is best? It turns out that showing concern, warmth, and support is the most important ingredient. The way this care and concern is demonstrated depends on culture.  
  
  
As of 2009, 64.2 percent of mothers with children under age 6 and 77.3 percent of mothers with children between the ages of 6 and 17 worked outside the home in the United States.   
Since the dramatic increase of women in the labor force, we’ve seen many studies done to evaluate the impact of childcare on child development. Most of this attention has been devoted to looking at formal preschools and day care programs and the teacher-child ratios, type of environments, and activities available. The conclusion has been that day care that is stimulating and provides adequate attention to children is beneficial and sometimes superior to the world of children staying at home.   
In some parts of the world, child care concerns are more about safety and healthcare. Market Women in Liberia are women who sell small items as street or market vendors. These women are providers for their families and also take care of their children. Day care is not available to them so their children accompany them to the markets. These markets are crowded and often near waste dumps. Recently, there has been a nationwide effort to improve the conditions for children in the market places and to offer social services such as nutrition and health care for the children. You can learn more in your reading. Certainly, childcare concerns are varied throughout the world.  
  
  
Some amount of stress is normal in the lives of children. Normal stress includes everyday frustrations and disappointments and minor illness. These stressors can in fact be good life lessons for children and do not cause harm.  
But toxic stress is long-term and undermines a child’s sense of safety and support. This might come from living in an abusive household or one filled with neglect. Or it might be due to the lack of safety and fear that results from living in a crime-ridden community or with war.   
Prolonged stress leads to the production of stress hormones such as cortisol. Normally, these hormones help the body prepare to take action and get out of harm’s way. But prolonged exposure reduces our immunity to disease and leads to problems with digestion, blood pressure, and muscle tensions.  
In early childhood, our brains are building wiring systems in response to our environments. A child who undergoes chronic, intense stress can develop a low threshold to stress within the brain circuitry. Such a child may be nervous or hypervigilent.  
Having a caring, supportive parent or other caregiver can reduce the impact of toxic stress.