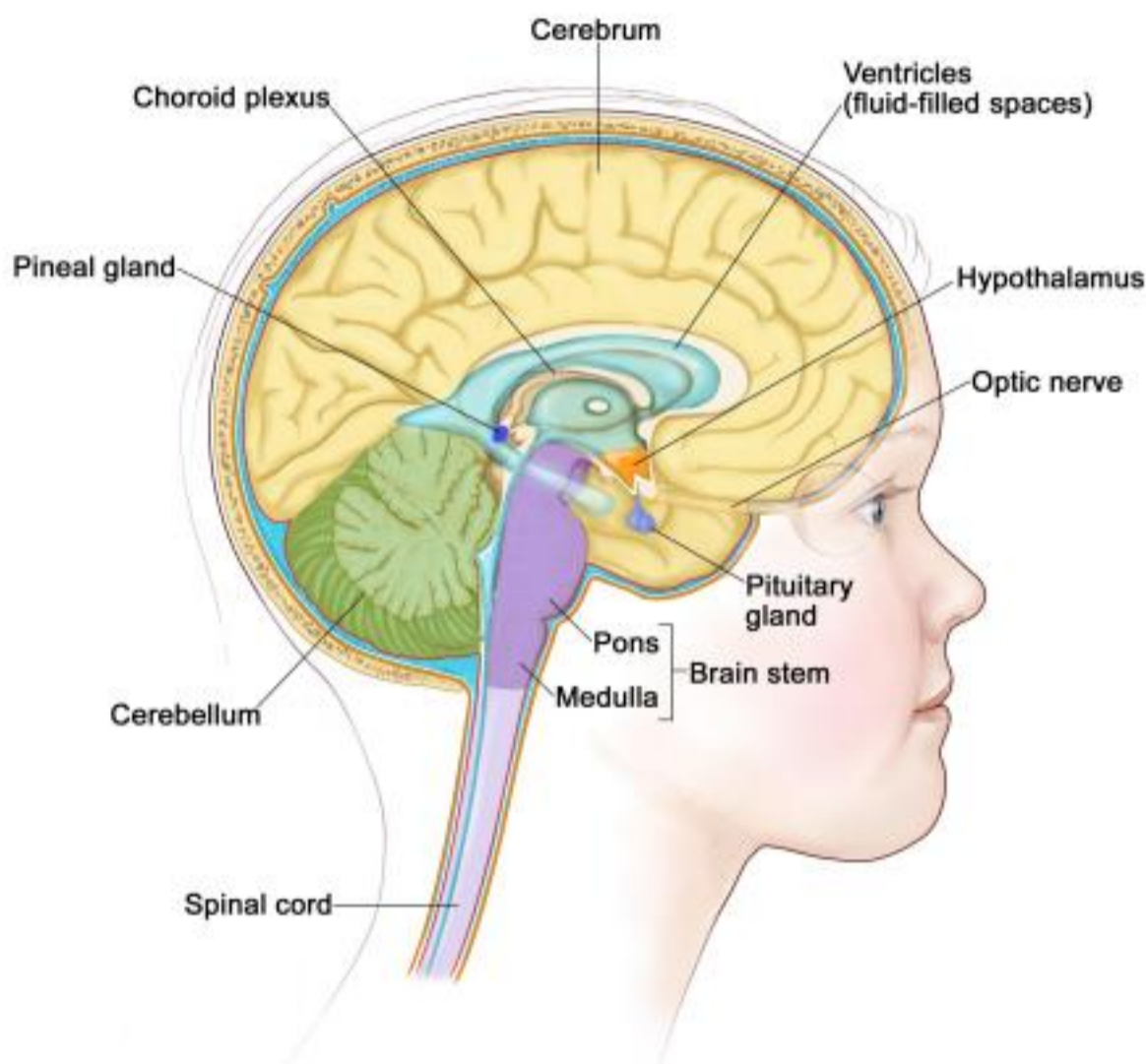


## Ideal Childhood Development

By: Dr. John N. DeGarmo, Ed.D.



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## About Dr. John N. DeGarmo, Ed.D.



Dr. John DeGarmo has been a foster parent for 11 years, now, and he and his wife have had over 40 children come through their home. He is a speaker and trainer on many topics about the foster care system, and travels around the nation delivering passionate, dynamic, energetic, and informative presentations. Dr. DeGarmo is the author of several books, including *The Foster Parenting Manual: A Practical Guide to Creating a Loving, Safe and Stable Home*, and the foster care children's book *A Different Home: A New Foster Child's Story*. Dr. DeGarmo is the host of the weekly radio program *Foster Talk with Dr. John*, heard each Monday at 8 PM Eastern. He also writes for a number of publications and newsletters, both here in the United States, and overseas. He can be contacted at [drjohndegarmo@gmail.com](mailto:drjohndegarmo@gmail.com), through his Facebook page, Dr. John DeGarmo, or at his website, [drjohndegarmofostercare.weebly.com](http://drjohndegarmofostercare.weebly.com).

The normal development of a child can often pose some difficult times for even the most patient of parents. As a child moves through different stages of his life, each stage comes with its own set of developmental tasks. Foster children, though, may have this normal development disrupted, due to the significant and specific challenges they face from their background. As a foster parent, you will be better equipped to help your foster child if you not only understand the normal development of a child, but also some of the risks and potential problems associated with foster children, as they age from birth to 18 years of age.

Certainly, every child is a unique person, and thus will develop differently than the next, with children developing at different speeds and at different rates. Generally,

though, there are four main categories that each child will experience in his development. These include the Cognitive, Emotional, Physical, and Social categories.

### *Cognitive*

As a child grows in age, he will experience growth intellectually. His language will increase in terms of vocabulary development, as he first learns to speak, recite the alphabet, and eventually gain a larger personal vocabulary, conversational ability, and writing skills.

### *Emotional*

Trust is vital for a child. In order for a child to progress normally, he must learn to trust not only those who care for him, but also trust the environment around him. He must be able to recognize what is safe, as well as what might be harmful to him. His caretakers must be trusting, loving individuals who will teach him how to properly recognize and express his own feelings and emotions.

### *Physical*

As a child grows in size, their ability to crawl, walk, run, and jump (gross motor skills) will also increase. Along with this, their ability to work with their hands, such as writing, cutting with scissors, and holding dinner utensils (fine motor skills) will increase, as well.

### *Social*

The development of social skills is necessary in order for a child to successfully interact with his peers, as well as form healthy relationships with others. It is also important that the child develop the ability to empathize with others, thus understanding the needs of others and reacting to them in a positive and socially acceptable manner.

### *Ages of Development*

Generally, a child will develop certain skills and abilities as he ages. It is important to remember that what may be normal for one child can be different for another. Children placed in foster care often exhibit significant behavior problems as compared to those children who come from traditional homes. Those children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or trauma in their lives are more likely to be delayed in development, or may even regress to a younger stage, due to the stress they suffer from. Many foster children also suffer from internalizing their concerns and fears, causing additional harm as a result. Foster children are also more likely to fall further behind in their development while under foster care supervision. In order to better help your foster child, it is essential that you become familiar with his development. A list of what to expect for each stage of normal development, as well as what you might expect from a foster child at each particular age category both follow. Also included are some guidelines and suggestions to consider as you try and best assist your foster child through each

age group development.

## Normal Development-Baby: 0-12 months

- Develops own pattern of feeding and sleeping
- Brain is develop through use of senses
- Sleeps a great deal
- Swift growth
- Motor skills begin to develop
- Strong attachment to mother figure
- Begins to vocalize
- Enjoys repeating tasks over and over
- Loves to be held and hugged
- Requires a great deal of love, affection, and nurturing
- Plays by himself

Development in this age of life is one of the first steps at building loving and trust relationships in the world. If a baby should suffer from neglect or abuse during this formative time, the affects can last a life time. Foster parents often believe that they can effectively” heal” the child from his abuse. The truth is, the effects from neglect and abuse may need a lifetime of healing, and may require a great deal of both medical and psychological attention. When taking a foster baby who suffers from abuse or neglect into your home, it is best that you surround yourself with as much information and support as you possibly can. You simply will not be able to help “heal” the child by yourself. You can, though, provide a healing and nurturing environment for him, one that will help him in his early stages of life.

Foster babies suffering from abuse may show a number of symptoms. He may have a hard time getting to sleep, or waking up. His body may be wracked with movement during his sleep, as it is a fretful one. Some babies suffer from delays in motor skills, as well as in speech. Another result of trauma may result in a baby who is quiet and non responsive to you. Other babies will seem depressed and withdrawn, and will not look you in the eye. Despite your attempts, you simply may be unable to soothe or comfort the baby. Still, others will suffer from minimal weight or height gain. Babies suffering from drug related problems, due to prenatal exposure to drugs or alcohol from their birth mother’s pregnancy, may also suffer from prolonged crying, as well as being startled easily. Often times, these babies will also be overly sensitive to lights and sounds, as well.

As a foster parent, it is important that you provide consistent physical comfort to a baby suffering from these symptoms. In order for him to develop healthy relationships, he will need you to hold him in your arms, providing love and warmth. In fact, your foster baby will require a great deal of hugs, kiss, and physical contact from you. By doing so, you will help him to learn how to develop trust in others. Speak to him often, in a warm and pleasant tone, and with positive words of love and comfort. Encourage him to be social to interact with you and others; engage him in eye contact. It will also be important for his senses to develop further. Find ways for him to use all of his senses; hear, sight, smell, taste, and touch. Try to allow him to experience each of these every day.

## Toddler: 1-5 Years of Age

- Develops and masters motor skills
- Unsteady in his emotional state; may throw tantrums for seemingly unnecessary reasons
- Learns to play with others
- Attention span generally increases
- Learns to dress himself
- Becomes toilet trained
- Continues to learn through senses
- Sensitive to other's needs
- Becomes very active and energetic
- Very curious: Asks "why" a great deal
- Imaginative
- Aware of what is right and wrong, and develops understanding of consequences

This is the age normally associated with "The Terrible Twos." For many parents, it can be a trying time, as it exhausts the patience of even the most patient of parents. For foster children who have come from abusive homes, this developmental stage can be even more draining. A foster child exposed to abuse and neglect may be overly aggressive; answering back to you with the continuous reply of "no", yelling and screaming in defiance, and even becoming physically defiant with kicking, hitting, and throwing of objects. He may act openly defiant towards you, as he struggles with feelings of hostility towards his birth parents at such a young age. Aggressive behavior is not uncommon with foster children at this age, and can often result in tantrums of some sort. He might hit, bit, kick, shove, or show other forms of outward aggression towards you or others. He may even turn his aggression upon himself, as he inflicts pain onto himself through hitting, slapping, pulling of hair, or even banging his head.

Foster children in the toddler age of development may have great difficulties with attachment. Indeed, he will most likely have trouble distinguishing between you and his birth parents or biological family members. You may find your young foster child is withdrawn or distant when you speak with him. Your foster child might cling to a toy or stuffed animal. He may experience strong feelings of insecurity. This insecurity may produce feelings of abandonment whenever he might leave your presence, causing him to cling to you tightly whenever you leave. Panic might set in when he is separated from you. Bedtime or naptime may also be times where he feels strongly unsettled, causing him to become anxious and thus having a difficult time getting to sleep. He might also simply refuse to go to sleep, due to feelings of anger and resentment.

His cognitive development might be delayed due to the abuse or neglect he experienced before coming to live with you. His speech patterns and use of vocabulary might also be delayed. You might find his maturity level hindered, as he acts in an infantile manner. Eating may also become burdensome, for both you and him, as he might simply refuse to eat. He might also hoard his food, hiding it in his bedroom or other locations. If he has been sexually abused, he

might show inappropriate sexual behavior for his age.

You can help him with these challenges in a number of ways. Provide for him additional nurturing. Do not allow him to regress to a younger age level, but instead encourage him to act his age, congratulating him when he acts like “a big boy.” Find areas you can compliment him in, giving him a sense of achievement. Provide a safe environment for him, ensuring that your house is childproof and secure. Teach him how to take care of himself with toilet issues, as well as brushing his teeth, combing his hair, and washing himself. Assign him small chores around the house. This will not only give him a feeling of accomplishment, but also a feeling of belonging. Assist him in dressing, and show him how he can dress himself. Expose him to new places, experiences, and people. Engage him in activities that allow him to strengthen his motor skills, such as forms of drawing, running, climbing, and other activities. Finally, engage him daily in communication, and encourage him to express his feelings openly and honestly with you.


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