



Gofal Cymdeithasol **Cymru**
Social Care **Wales**

Child development

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Go to <https://socialcare.wales/resources-guidance/improving-care-and-support/children-who-are-looked-after/child-development> for the latest version.

Find out about the milestones of child development: physical, emotional and behavioural

An introduction to child development

Child developmental milestones are like building blocks, with each stage building on the previous. If children haven't experienced good enough care in their early years, they may be missing important building blocks. This is why, as a residential child care worker, you will see a lot of behaviour in older children and teenagers that you might expect from a much younger child.

The missing building blocks mean they don't have all the resources they need to meet their educational, psychological, emotional and physical potential.

Child development is also affected by [trauma](#). The children you care for may have experienced a lot of trauma when they were younger. Trauma literally changes the way their brain works, meaning they may not behave in the same way as other children of the same age.

Another thing to consider is that some of the children you look after will also have [learning disabilities or autistic spectrum disorders](#). This might mean they won't reach some of the development milestones below.

The stages of typical child development

There is a wide variation in typical child development and you may care for children who don't have the skills you may expect for their age. It's also commonly thought that girls are quicker to mature emotionally than boys.

However, you can use the following as a guide to milestones:

Age 0-5

From babyhood through to school-age, children are developing a huge range of skills, including:

- walking
- talking
- recognising and understanding their emotions
- recognising and understanding other people's emotions.

Almost all their learning will be through play. For babies and young children to develop well they need to have parents/caregivers who interact with them through:

- eye contact
- talking
- singing
- playing
- meeting their physical and emotional needs.

Young children need responsive adults who are consistently warm and encouraging, especially when they are afraid, cross, upset or hurt. By five, a child's 'internal working model' (the kind of person they believe themselves to be, based on how they've been treated by their parent's/caregivers) begins to impact on their identity and behaviour.

Age 6-10

Play remains a key way of learning, but games with rules become more important as children become more confident (and also more competitive). Their understanding of the world (and the impact they have on it) is increasing. They're learning to fit in with their peers and learning how to:

- negotiate
- compromise
- take turns
- co-operate with others.

Children of this age are developing the ability to understand how other people might be thinking or feeling and can step-in to stop behaviour they see as unfair or unkind.

They have a growing sense of their own identity (gender, racial, community and so on), which can make them very aware of what things may be stereotypically described as 'for boys' vs what things are 'for girls'.

They will usually be able to cheerfully manage separation from parents/caregivers for the school day and overnight with friends/extended family and can form relationships with new people who come into their lives (teachers, peers and so on).

Their self-esteem will be strongly influenced by how good they feel they are at the things others find important (for instance school work or sports).

Adolescent brain development

Adolescence is a time where the teenage brain is undergoing major changes. At puberty young people can lose some skills they had when younger, like certain kinds of reasoning and memory (this is why letters home get forgotten).

Teenagers find reading people's expressions and body language hard. They can struggle to understand why people do things or how other people feel (empathy). They won't always be able to predict the outcome of their actions (consequential thinking), which is why they do things that seem clearly risky. The brain's reward receptors also mean taking risks is more fun as a teenager than at any other age.

Teenagers become highly sensitive to their peers' opinions and react intensely to them. But they don't yet have the social skills to either work out what their peers really think or how to manage their own reactions. This is why friendship groups become so important. They can have a huge impact on a teenager's sense of self-worth and self-esteem, and can also make them feel so miserable. Teenagers are more likely than adults to upset (and be upset by) their friends, and not know why.

The teenage brain is highly vulnerable to stress and this is at a time when they have not yet developed the skills or resilience to manage it. This is why they slam doors and stomp out of rooms in tears.

So being a teenager is tough, and for teenagers in residential care, who have the extra challenges this brings, it can be especially challenging. The teenager you're working with is not just being difficult, their brain is in the process of changing.

Age 11-13

Puberty can start as young as nine and brings with it a host of changes. Children's bodies start to change. This can include the following:

- girls get curvier, boys get more muscular
- they will start to grow body hair
- girls will start to have periods
- boys' voices will drop.

At around this age children have a growing interest in sex, and masturbation is common. Hormonal changes mean they sweat more and acne can be an issue. Most children will be anxious about how they look.

They will be aware of romantic/sexual relationships and be starting to be aware of their sexual orientation although at this age this may be heavily influenced by peer group attitudes.

This is the age when some children will start to take risks. These could be positive risks, for instance taking up sports, or negative risks such as stealing, smoking or putting themselves in unnecessarily dangerous situations. Children of this age can think logically about the risks they take.

Their friendship groups take on increasing importance and children of this age can feel intensely lonely. They are also developing their ability to think for themselves and the ability to manage peer pressure.

Age 14-16

As teenagers mature they begin to value genuine affection over popularity and status. They increasingly value intimate relationships which can be very intense

and can feel devastating when they break down.

Teenagers are developing their sense of who they are: cultural and ethnic identity will be important and friendships are very important. They are learning how to manage conflict and disagreement and are starting to think about, and reflect on, moral, political and religious issues and how these affect them. Adults around them play an important role in helping them reflect and reason logically.

Teenagers of this age are becoming more self-aware and reflective (e.g. “I try not to get annoyed but I find it hard sometimes”). The social anxiety that is common between 11 to 14 is starting to reduce a little as teenagers develop more independence from their family and peers.

Useful resources

[Our work to support children who are looked after](#)

[Our chosen or 'curated' research about the number who are looked after](#)

Dr Bruce Perry, an internationally recognised authority on childhood trauma and development, talks about the impact of trauma on brain development in childhood.

[Early brain development: reducing the effects of trauma](#)

[Six core strengths for healthy child development: an overview](#)

[Adolescent brain development](#)

We want your feedback

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