

Growing brains and child development stages

From an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective, focusing on developing social and emotional wellbeing is of great importance for sustainability of culture and traditional practices. Aboriginal identity plays a significant role in a child's sense of self, belonging and purpose in the world. The more connected a child is to their culture, language, Country and kinship structure, the stronger the child's social and emotional wellbeing will be.

Perinatal – 2 years old

Child development stages

“My emotions and connections to my family start from the day I am born. This means my experiences now will impact my resilience for the rest of my life.”

‘Baby’s first 1000 days (from conception until two years old) is the time when we form our strongest bond with baby. Culture starts being instilled in baby at this time, whilst in the womb. It is the time when building blocks for baby’s life are being made, the foundations for a strong mind, a strong body, good wellbeing and spiritual connections to Country and family.’

Brain and development stage

This is when the Body Centre (Brain Stem) and the Movement Centre start to develop.

In the womb, babies grow quickly, getting ready for the world they’ll enter. Once born, infants rely fully on their carers. It’s through their care that babies learn the world is safe and people can be trusted. Early on, their brains are growing fast and are very sensitive. They need their carers to be there for them, to understand their feelings and needs.

By having their needs met, they learn to feel secure and see the world as stable. They discover how relationships can calm and comfort them.

As they grow, they start to crawl and walk, enjoying their newfound abilities and learning daily.



2 – 5 years old

Child development stages

'It is important for my parents to encourage me to be inquisitive and explore the world around me as it helps me to grow and develop.'

Brain and development stage

In the toddler and preschool years, the movement centre is working on bigger skills: climbing, kicking, jumping, and dancing. Their thinking centre is starting to see cause and effect and learning to use language to communicate needs. However, the thinking centre is still only young. When emotions take over, children lose the ability to use their new language skills and slip straight back into easier ways to communicate. Crying is no longer just instinctive, but also used intentionally to communicate feelings, along with facial expressions and postures, and acting out certain behaviours. These younger children check the feedback that they get from the people around them to help guide them through challenges, and this also helps them learn to understand feelings.



6 – 12 years old

Child development stages

'Attending school is important because it helps me to build up life skills. This helps me learn how to become more capable, solve problems, control my emotions and form friendships.'

A lot happens for children during these middle years as they begin school and build their social, emotional and thinking skills. They are more able to express their care and understanding of others, but still get frustrated by tricky emotions such as envy or jealousy. Children start to build their self-identity throughout these middle childhood years and work out the kind of person they want to be. This self-identity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children involves the development of their cultural identity, based on their community's customs and practices, such as language, dress, food, and ceremonies.



6 – 12 years old

Brain and development stage

School-aged children are now developing more delicate movement skills like writing and drawing. The thinking centre is learning more advanced language and figuring out how to solve complicated problems. Children in primary school are now beginning to use their thinking centre to manage their emotional centre; they are learning to manage their feelings. This means that unless they are in immediate danger, they will intentionally hold back tears in front of their friends or squeeze their fists instead of screaming with excitement when they're in public, so they can come back later to process big feelings when they're alone. However, if children don't feel secure or their thinking centre is underdeveloped, children will quickly resort to behaviours and loud noises to express their feelings in a way that comes more easily to them.

12 - 18 years old

Child development stages

'Exploring rites of passage, learning about men's and women's business helps me to find my identity. It's hard for me to make "adult" decisions at a time when I am still developing.'

Adolescents experience profound changes in how they look and feel. The release of hormones can make emotions feel stronger, which can make adolescents act-out or put themselves in risky situations. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, adolescence can also be a time where they face important life questions like, 'Who am I?' and, 'Where do I belong?' This is when a teenager's understandings of racial identity are affected by external factors such as the media, police and teachers, as well as their own cultural group experiences. Creating early intervention practices that reclaim cultural and ecological connections, kinship, songs, dance, language and stories from our ancestors are vital for our children's and grandchildren's social and emotional wellbeing. We know that connection to our culture, family, community, Country and spirit are all protective factors that will ensure positive outcomes for children.

Brain and development stage

Adolescence is when all these things come together to build the foundations for adult life, along with adult hormones that prepare the body for sexual development and a more advanced sense of identity. Adolescents are becoming who they truly are, independent of their guiding adults, so they are developing skills they are personally interested in, and losing motivation to do things that don't seem useful to their goals. The thinking brain has a big task that has become more important than ever: understanding who I am, what I believe, why I do things, and which groups I belong with. For teenagers who do not have strong relationships with family, friends, kin, and community, this is a painfully confusing time. When you add developmental trauma, the thinking centre can still struggle to stay in control of the emotional centre, so a teenager may behave in extreme or surprising ways that can further impact how they see themselves and how they feel they belong with others.

