Children's Home Society of North Carolina

Ages & Stages: Understanding Typical Child Development

Understanding what is age-appropriate can help foster parents respond with patience and guidance rather than frustration. Many behaviors are part of typical development and not necessarily due to trauma or being in foster care. By providing stability, support, and love, foster parents can help children grow and thrive at every stage.

Infants & Toddlers (0-2 Years Old)

What's Typical?

- Crying to communicate needs (hunger, discomfort, tiredness, scared, attention seeking)
- Separation anxiety
- Exploration through touch & putting objects in their mouth
- Testing limits & boundaries (e.g., throwing objects, saying "no")
- Short attention spans
- Mimicking learned behaviors

How to Support:

- Provide consistent routines & comfort
- Offer safe spaces to explore
- Use soothing techniques & patience

Preschoolers (3-5 Years Old)

What's Typical?

- Strong emotions & tantrums when frustrated
- Developing independence ("I do it myself")
- Difficulty sharing & taking turns
- Imaginary play & storytelling
- Asking many "why" questions

How to Support:

- Use positive reinforcement for good behavior
- Teach simple emotional regulation strategies
- Encourage pretend play & creativity
- Set clear & consistent boundaries

Early Elementary (6-8 Years Old)

What's Typical?

- Increased curiosity & many questions about the world
- Developing friendships but occasional conflicts
- Struggles with frustration & disappointment
- Desire for approval from adults & peers
- Testing rules & limits

How to Support:

- Encourage problem-solving & independence
- Help them navigate friendships & emotions
- Set clear expectations & consequences

Tweens (9-12 Years Old)

What's Typical?

- Increased independence but still needing adult guidance
- Mood swings & sensitivity
- Stronger friendships & peer influence
- Developing personal interests & hobbies
- Testing authority & questioning rules

How to Support:

- Provide structure but allow for independence
- Be a patient listener & offer guidance without judgment
- Support self-expression through activities & hobbies

Teenagers (13-18 Years Old)

What's Typical?

- Seeking independence & forming identity
- Emotional ups & downs due to hormonal changes
- Strong peer influence & desire for social connection
- Questioning authority & making their own decisions
- Experimenting with risk-taking behaviors

How to Support:

- Maintain open communication & trust
- Set clear but fair expectations & boundaries
- Offer guidance while allowing independence
- Encourage positive peer relationships & interests