

Ages and Stages of Communication

Adapted from Communicating with Children, Unicef.

Children at different ages and stages have different ways of communicating. As a mentor, knowing your mentee's developmental communication stage can be extremely helpful. For instance, younger children tend to work out problems or frustration through play, whereas older children can use words to express their feelings and troubles.

The following charts outline the communication skills of children at different developmental stages and the implications of those skill levels. By understanding the level at which your mentee is communicating you will be able to connect more easily and communicate in ways that your mentee can understand.

Birth – 6 Years of Age

Cognitive Development	Behavioral and Physical Development	Social and Emotional Development	Communication Needs and Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing language • Development awareness and sensitivity to differences among others • Early formation of social attitudes • Difficulty understanding causality (cause and effect) • Concentrating on the concrete aspects of reality (what they can hear, see, and touch) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn by playing and doing • Learn through repetition and routine • Learning to express and control emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiencing new emotions • Developing sense of autonomy • Evolving awareness of their own and others' emotions • Understanding that others think and feel differently • Learning to resolve very simple conflicts and to cooperate • Showing signs of empathy, pro-social, and helping behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use nurturing language to develop positive feelings about themselves and others • Reinforce that the range of emotions and fear they have are normal • Help them to development resilience • Use loving tones and simple language • Encourage inquiry and curiosity • Facilitate learning through play • Use everyday experiences to explain concepts • Be open to playing pretend • Reinforce equality among peers and adults • Encourage dealing with difficult issues in healthy ways • Allow simple decision making and sharing of opinions

Age 7 – 10

Cognitive Development	Behavioral and Physical Development	Social and Emotional Development	Communication Needs and Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding inner motivation • Understanding causality (cause and effect) • Using more sophisticated language • Developing problem-solving and critical-thinking skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gradually becoming more independent • Learning to follow rules of play and interactions • More interested in being a part of a team • More concerned about body image • Taking more responsibility for their own actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Friends gradually taking a more central role • Need supportive adults and positive role models • Clearly preferring same-sex friends • Learning about right and wrong; making moral choices • Developing exclusionary behavior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use nurturing language to develop positive feelings about themselves, others, and the larger world • Create opportunities for them to explore and test their own ideas and skills • Demonstrate understanding and respect their feelings and worries • Facilitate interactive problem-solving and critical thinking • Model pro-social actions (kindness, conflict resolution, empathy) • Introduce and discuss topics that show other children dealing with difficult social issues

Age 11+

Cognitive Development	Behavioral and Physical Development	Social and Emotional Development	Communication Needs and Implications
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capable of adult-like abstract and logical thought • Emerging concern for, and exploration of, options regarding future plans • Literacy levels might not be consistent with chronological age 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing independence and breaking away from adult authority (depending on culture) • Interested in mastering physical challenges • Experimenting with new behaviors, including risky ones • Experimenting with identity behaviors related to gender, race, religion, class, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often influenced by peer culture • Holding strong beliefs and principles on moral dilemmas • Exhibiting rebellious behaviors against authorities • Developing romantic and sexual relationships (depending on culture) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guide them into adult life by being open to discuss behaviors that put them at risk about responsible sexual behaviors • Recognize and respect their ideas and opinions • Allow them to learn from their mistakes and correct self-destructive behaviors • Present divergent points of view, opinions, and perspectives • Create opportunities to discuss and learn about role models with whom they can identify • Reinforce ideas such as equality • Talk about issues of concern to their particular age group (substance abuse, sex, violence, romantic relationships, bullying and discrimination, friendships) • Talk respectfully and not didactically: don't "talk-down" • Use a lot of humor and creativity