

Stanley Greenspan's Six Developmental Levels (Stages) of the Mind

- Process consists of six specific stages that together illustrate how a baby translates the raw data of her senses and inner feelings into images that represent them both to herself and others
- Can be thought of as the mind's deepest structural components, supporting all later development
- Require nature and nurture to form properly
- Without this structure the mind cannot function coherently, but only in fragmented, jumbled fashion
- Addiction and the various co-occurring disorders often interfere with the development of the mind's structure

Stage 1: Security and the Ability to Look, Listen, and Be Calm

The first developmental skill is the ability to be calm and regulated and at the same time interested and engaged in the world. This skill allows a child to take-in all the exciting things going on in the environment through the various senses, organize them internally, and simultaneously focus on particular stimuli while ignoring other things. It is the ability to focus on the face of mommy, or touch a particular toy without losing control that leads to a sense of internal security. As sensations are exchanged between you and your child, emotions of pleasure and joy emerge, leading to greater engagement and the second developmental stage.

Stage 2: Relating: The Ability to Feel Warm and Close to Others

Critical to all childhood and adult relationships is the ability to relate to others in a warm, trusting, and intimate manner. Normally, this skill is in full swing by 4 to 6 months of age when a child smiles back at a parent in a special way, or later as a toddler when she enthusiastically shares her toys or gives hugs to other kids. As Greenspan puts it, "without some degree of this ecstatic wooing by at least one adult who adores her, a child may never know the powerful intoxication of human closeness, never abandon herself to the magnetic pull of human relationships, never see other people as full human beings like herself, capable of feeling what she feels [1] (p. 51)." The ability to relate to others in a warm and intimate manner is a process that continues to evolve throughout childhood, and develops even more within the context of romantic relationships.

When children at any age experience trauma in some form (physical, sexual, emotional), this stage of development is very often critically affected. When trust is broken or a child's expression of emotion is met by distance and rejection, then a child often will retreat into an internal world where thoughts, feelings, and sensations become disconnected and alienated from external reality. Children with special needs, particularly those with obvious physical or psychological abnormalities, are at increased risk for problems at this stage because of how cruel other kids can be. When a child expects to be humiliated or teased because of how he looks or acts, the best (and natural) defense is to isolate and avoid other kids. Because most learning occurs in the context of relationships, avoiding others results in significant problems with all later stages of development.

Stage 3: Intentional Two-Way Communication Without Words

Developing the capacity to focus and relate to others allows children to begin communicating with willful intention through facial expressions, gestures, and body language. By 18 months of age, many children are quite good at reading nonverbal cues and engaging in the most rudimentary forms of communication. A smile leads to a smile, pointing results in obtaining an object, and crying brings on attention and comfort. It is through learning to read others nonverbal language that we learn to differentiate emotions in other people, and how to send and receive nonverbal messages that establish our personal boundaries. Children and adults who never master skills at this stage struggle in school, work, and in friendships because they are still learning to read nonverbal cues from others and figure out what a person is really saying. In one

study by UCLA researchers, 93 percent of communication effectiveness was determined by nonverbal cues and 7 percent by the words that were spoken [2].

In the best selling book *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman [3], he explains why bright individuals who have achieved significant academic success often struggle in relationships because they lack emotional intelligence, or the ability to read and respond appropriately to emotions in others. For children who grow-up in families where parents are not well equipped to facilitate emotional growth (because they are stuck developmentally themselves), academic success can become the primary vehicle for a child's sense of self, leading to advanced degrees and professional careers where intelligence is highly valued. But for many who follow such a path, the price of academic and professional success comes at a significant cost – developmental constrictions and deficits in reading nonverbal cues, subtle emotional gestures, and knowing how to deeply engage with all sorts of people in different contexts.

Stage 4: Solving Problems and Forming a Sense of Self

At this stage, children 14 to 18 months of age are successful at getting what they want, and begin to develop more advanced skills in relating to others and building an internal sense of who they are. In the beginning, a child's sense of self is like a map with most areas still blank. The earlier developmental stages provide some essential outlines on the map, but the details get filled in as a child engages in more and more complex interactions with other people. Greenspan and Brazelton use the phrase *circles of communication* to describe interactive sequences of behaviors in a given communication exchange. In the previous stage, it is not uncommon to observe an infant and parent going back and forth thirty or forty times in a series of smiles, laughs, waves, and giggles. As such reciprocal interactions grow in richness and complexity (and number), a child begins to discern patterns of behavior, both in himself and others. Areas of the map begin to get filled in, and children begin to solve problems with the help of others.

Stage 5: Emotional Ideas

As children master the ability to engage others with intention through their emotions and behaviors, they move on to the fifth stage of development that involves learning to form mental pictures or images of their wants, needs and emotions. This is the stage of symbolic expression where a child can substitute a thought or an idea for an action or behavior. Instead of throwing an object in anger, a child can now say "I am angry." As Greenspan and Brazelton note:

They not only experience the emotion but are also able to experience the idea of emotion, which they can then put into words or into make-believe play. They are using an idea, expressed in words, to communicate something about what they want, what they feel, or what they are going to do. This ability opens a whole new world of challenges: Children can begin to exercise their minds, bodies, and emotions as one [4] (p 119).

Children (and many adults) who never fully master the skills of this stage, have difficulty identifying what they are feeling and instead simply act-out feelings in actions and behaviors. Many who drink excessively or use illicit drugs do so in response to feelings that are difficult to identify, talk about, and experience. Parents can help children negotiate this stage by modeling appropriate expression of emotions in both words and nonverbal behavior (i.e., emotion coaching).

Stage 6: Emotional Thinking

The final developmental stage usually begins when a child is between three and four years of age, and involves taking the mental images from the previous stage and building bridges between them. Now, a child can go beyond simply labeling emotions, and connect them to external events or other internal images or ideas. "I feel sad because daddy cannot take me to the zoo" or "I feel angry because mommy won't let me play with my toy trains" are examples of feelings now connected to different categories of ideas. This final stage is so critical that Greenspan and Brazelton conclude:

This ability to build bridges between ideas on an emotional level underlies all future logical thought. More abstract logic and cause-and-effect thinking builds on this fundamental cause-and-effect thinking. In fact, emotional thinking is the foundation for all future thinking [4] (p. 119).”

The capacity to reflect on future behavior, feel empathy for others, and realize that actions can have consequences, all require mastery of the skills of emotional thinking. Parents play an important role in helping children at this stage to the extent that they themselves have such abilities.

1. Greenspan, S.T. and B.L. Benderly, *The growth of the mind: And the endangered origins of intelligence*. 1997, Massachusetts: Perseus Books.
2. Mehrabian, A., *Silent messages: Implicit communication of emotions and attitudes*. 1981, Belmont: Wadsworth.
3. Goleman, D., *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. 1995, New York: Bantam Books.
4. Brazelton, T.B. and S.T. Greenspan, *The irreducible needs of children: What ever child must have to grow, learn, and flourish*. 2000, Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.