

Remember They're Kids

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Introduction

One challenge of working with youngsters is that you need to relate to them as children, not as miniature adults. To do this, you must understand where they're coming from—that is, where they are in their development¹ physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually.

Among any team you coach, you're going to find children who mature relatively early for their age as well as those who mature relatively late. A player may be quite intellectually mature and quick to understand basketball tactics and the skills required to carry them out, but she may be slow in physical development and thus have a hard time successfully executing the skills. Another player may be well developed physically but underdeveloped emotionally. Dealing with such a potpourri of physical, social, emotional, and cognitive ranges in your players is one of the main challenges of coaching.

The more familiar you are with the physical capabilities and mindset of youngsters, the better you'll be able to communicate with them and help them grow through their experience in basketball. The following lists detail children's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Understand that each child will not conform to the characteristics at any given age—and, of course, this doesn't mean the child is abnormal. These lists provide a general understanding of children's developmental characteristics and should help you better relate to children and better coach them.

3 to 5-Year-Olds

Physical Characteristics

At Three and Four

- Children's running, jumping, hopping, throwing, and catching become better coordinated.
- Galloping and one-foot skipping begin to appear.
- They can ride a tricycle.

At Five

- Children are three and one-half to three and three-quarter feet tall. They may grow from two to three inches and gain from three to six pounds during the year.

¹ Development characteristics are adapted from the following:

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- From Humphrey, James H., *Sports for Children: A Guide for Adults*. Copyright © 1993 by Charles C Thomas, Publisher, Ltd. Adapted by permission.

- Girls may be about a year ahead of boys in physiological development.
- Children are beginning to have better body control.
- Their large muscles are better developed than the small muscles that control the fingers and hands.
- Their eye and hand coordination is not yet complete.
- Children are vigorous and noisy, but their activity appears to have a definite direction.
- They tire easily and need plenty of rest.

Social Characteristics

At Three and Four

- Children form their first friendships.
- They are becoming less likely to play alone and more likely to play interactively with others.

At Five

- Children are interested in neighborhood games with other children. They sometimes play games to test their skill.
- They like being with other children, and they seem to get along best in small groups.
- Their interests are largely self-centered.
- Children imitate when they play.
- They get along well in taking turns and they respect other's belongings.
- Children show an interest in home activities.

Emotional Characteristics

At Three and Four

- Self-conscious emotions (shame, embarrassment, guilt, envy, and pride) become more common.

At Five

- Children seldom show jealousy toward younger siblings.
- Children usually see only one way to do things and one answer to a question.
- They are inclined not to change plans in the middle of an activity; instead, they'd rather begin over.
- They may fear being deprived of their mothers.
- They are learning to get along better, but they still may resort to quarreling and fighting.

- They like to be trusted with errands and enjoy performing simple tasks. They want to please and to do what you expect of them.
- They can better interpret, predict, and influence others' emotional reactions.
- They are beginning to sense right and wrong in terms of specific situations.

Cognitive Characteristics

At Three and Four

- They can generalize remembered information from one situation to another.
- They have a basic understanding of causality in familiar situations.

At Five

- They enjoy copying designs, letters, and numbers and counting objects.
- They are interested in completing tasks.
- Their memory for past events is good.
- They are able to plan activities.
- These children may tend to monopolize table conversation.
- They look at books and pretend to read.
- They like recordings, words, and music that tell stories. They also enjoy stories, dramatic plays, and poems.
- Children of this age can sing simple melodies, beat good rhythms, and recognize simple tunes. They enjoy making up dances to music.
- Their daydreams seem to center around make-believe play.
- They have over 2,000 words in their speaking vocabularies and their pronunciation is usually clear. They can speak in complete sentences and can express their needs well in words.
- Their attention span may have increased up to 20 minutes in some cases.

6 to 7-Year-Olds

Physical Characteristics

At Six

- Children are three and one-half to four feet tall and grow gradually.
- They usually have a lot of energy.
- They like to move, doing things such as running, jumping, chasing, and playing dodging games.
- Their muscular control is becoming more effective with large objects.

- A noticeable change occurs in eye-hand behavior. Children can tie their shoes and write their names.
- Children's legs are lengthening rapidly.

At Seven

- They may grow two to three inches and gain three to five pounds during the year.
- They may tire easily and show fatigue in the afternoon.
- Whole-body movements are under better control.
- Children can throw better and catch more accurately.
- Children's reaction times are slow.
- Eye-hand coordination improves.
- Children's hearts and lungs are smallest in proportion to their body size.
- Children may be susceptible to disease and have low resistance.
- Children's endurance is low.
- Small accessory muscles are developing.

Social Characteristics

At Six

- These children are self-centered and need praise.
- They like to be first.
- Sex differences are not of great importance to them at this age.
- They enjoy group play when groups are small.
- Children like parties, but their behavior may not always be proper.
- Most of them like school and have a desire to learn.
- They are interested in the conduct of their friends.
- They show an interest in group approval.

At Seven

- They want recognition for individual achievements.
- They are not always good losers.
- They often talk about their families.
- They are interested in friends and are not influenced by friends' social or economic status.
- They begin to learn to stand up for their rights.
- Some children may have nervous habits, such as nail biting, tongue sucking, scratching, or pulling on the ear.
- Children are beginning to have a sense of time.

- Children show signs of being cooperative.

Emotional Characteristics

At Six

- Their anger may be difficult to control at times.
- Their behavior may often be explosive and unpredictable.
- Sometimes children show jealousy toward siblings, but at other times the children take pride in them.
- They are greatly excited by anything new.
- They may be self-assertive and dramatic.

At Seven

- They have learned more control over anger.
- They become less impulsive and boisterous than at six.
- Their curiosity and creative desires may condition their responses.
- Children are critical of themselves and sensitive to failure. It may be difficult for them to take criticism from adults, and they are overanxious to reach the goals set for them by parents and teachers.
- Children want to be more independent. They reach for new experiences and try to relate to a larger world.

Cognitive Characteristics

At Six

- They have a speaking vocabulary of over 2,500 words.
- Their attention span is likely to be short.
- They know number combinations up to 10 and the comparative values of common coins.
- They can define objects in terms of what they are used for.
- They know the right and left sides of the body.
- Their drawings are crude, but realistic.
- They will contribute to guided group planning.
- Their conversations usually are concerned with their own experiences and interests.
- These children's curiosity is active, and their memory is strong.
- They identify with imaginary characters.

At Seven

- Their attention span is still short, but they do not object to repetition. They can listen longer at seven than at six.

- Their reaction time is still slow.
- They are becoming more realistic and less imaginative.
- They can read some books themselves.
- They can reason, but they have little experience on which to base their judgments.
- They are just beginning to think abstractly.
- They are learning to evaluate the achievements of themselves and others.
- They are concerned with their own lack of skill and achievement.

8 to 11-Year-Olds

Physical Characteristics

Many children from ages 8 to 11 are growing rapidly, and this growth is accompanied by changes in dexterity, coordination, and muscle strength. Girls particularly are showing signs of oncoming adolescence. The ages of 10 and 11 are awkward for many children, as muscle strength lags behind growth. Some of the physical characteristics of 8- to 11-year-old children include

- increased strength in arms, hands, and fingers;
- accelerated development of skills in the use of small muscles;
- improved execution of gross motor skills such as running, jumping, throwing, catching, kicking, and batting;
- improved reaction time; and
- improved endurance.

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Social and Emotional Characteristics

Life gets more complicated for children during these years. Some handle changes well, while others have trouble adjusting to new expectations that come along with being in school and growing older. Discipline can be a problem at this age as children grapple with new responsibilities and demands. There is a strong tendency

for children to compare themselves to others, which can lead to conformity. Children at these ages seldom strive to be different from their peers. Here are some common general traits that characterize children at ages 8 through 11:

- They don't like playing alone; they respond well to group activities.
- They feel loyal to their team.
- They like variety and get bored more easily than they used to.
- They make social comparisons and use these to help define their self-concept.
- They appreciate the link between moral rules and social conventions.
- They are more attentive to peer groups but still want approval of adults.
- They don't like to be criticized by adults.
- They don't want to be different from their friends.
- They compete more with their siblings and are sensitive to perceived imbalances in parental attention.
- They become more responsible and dependable.
- They like challenge and adventure.
- They don't like to be treated as children.
- They tend to blame others first.
- They want to be recognized for their accomplishments.
- They are inclined toward "hero worship" and can be inspired by others.
- They compare their skills to those of others, and lesser-skilled players withdraw from their group.

Cognitive Characteristics

Children make great cognitive strides from ages 8 through 11. Adults are often amazed at how quickly children learn and how well they can remember. Cognitive character traits of children during this period typically include

- an increased attention span;
- stronger memory skills;
- improved self-evaluative skills;
- rapid increases in vocabulary;
- a finer, more discriminating sense of humor;
- an improved ability to understand sophisticated concepts such as double meaning of words, metaphors, and analogies;
- a tendency to think in concrete rather than abstract terms;
- a desire for simple, clear-cut reasons for decisions made by others;

- a readiness to learn from failure (if the consequences aren't too great); and
- a greater likelihood to quit because of perceived failure.

12 to 16-Year-Olds

Physical Characteristics

Physical awkwardness continues during the ages 12 through 16, especially for boys as they begin the main growth spurt of their lives during these years. Some girls will have begun their growth spurt before the age of 12, but many continue up to age 15. Other physical characteristics common among kids during this period include the following:

- They continue to gain skills that use small muscles.
- Girls reach peak of growth spurt by 14 and slow way down by 15 or 16.
- Girls' motor performance gradually increases, then levels off.
- Boys begin growth spurt by 12 to 14 and often continue until 16 or 17.
- In both genders, strength and endurance increase, though girls add more body fat than muscle.

Social and Emotional Characteristics

Some of the traits that surfaced in children during the years from 8 through 11 peak prominently during ages 12 through 16. They outgrow some of the other tendencies of their earlier youth as they begin to compare themselves (favorably) to adults. During this period they tend to

- identify better with adolescents of their gender,
- see more weaknesses and faults in adults,
- see themselves as adults rather than children,
- begin to develop a truer picture of morality,
- feel the pressure from their peers, and
- care more about their personal appearance and how they look compared to others.

Cognitive Characteristics

As they strive to become more adult, adolescents value and use their intellects and become much more critical in their thinking. They tend to

- reflect more about abstract issues and perceived injustice;
- acquire and sometimes cultivate a social conscience;
- grasp irony and (perhaps overuse) sarcasm;
- argue and reason more effectively;

- become more self-focused, idealistic, and critical; and
- use language better.

Be Patient

No matter what age children you're coaching, few virtues are more valuable to a coach than patience. As they test and repeatedly push their limits, children from ages 8 to 16 can try a coach's patience much more than younger children. Whereas young children usually embrace adult instruction and guidance, older children and adolescents are often encouraged by their peers to resist it. This makes your job more challenging but also more rewarding when you succeed.