

## **A Summary of THE DIR® MODEL**

**The DIR® Model was created by Dr. Stanley Greenspan in 1979 in**

***Intelligence and Adaptation***

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## **Stage 1: Attention and Regulation (develops from birth)**

**What it is:** Babies have an interest in the world from birth. Sights, sounds, touch and movement capture their attention. Once they can experience the world through their senses, they begin organizing the sensations and soon realize that a certain voice, touch, and smell add up to one person and a different set of sensations adds up to another. They are figuring you out.

The sensations can both excite them and overwhelm them. With different experiences babies need to learn to respond calmly and regulate their reactions. Being regulated gives them the opportunity to involve themselves more and more with what surrounds them.

### **Caregivers' role: HELP YOUR BABY STAY CALM AND ATTENTIVE.**

This stage is where the foundations for relationships begin. Your baby's attraction to and interest in you will be the basis for forming relationships with others. You help him stay calm so that he can bring sensations and interests together—simply by varying your vocal tones, rhythmic movements, and soothing touch.

**What to look for:** If a baby has reached this milestone, he can focus on you and show interest. He can look around a room to find things that attract him, his attention centering on an object to understand it and then moving on to something else, whether it is the sun reflected in a mirror, the brightly colored ball, the moving mobile, or a caregiver's movements. Most importantly the baby is able to be interested in many parts of his environment, with a growing attraction to you. But remember that this is an evolving and fluctuating process.

If a baby has difficulty with this stage, you might see him fix on a particular object for much longer than it warrants. Or his gaze may flit from object to object. Or he may regularly ignore new objects or sounds that should be of interest, staring into space, caught up in his own world. Sometimes babies turn away from the caregiver and avoid looking at faces. **WATCH FOR:** Too much or too little interest in new objects.

**Why this is important:** Paying attention is the first step in learning to think. It stimulates robust brain development. As a baby reacts to the world outside of his own internal sensations, he practices being calm, often with the help of a caregiver's soothing. Calmly he can absorb his new experiences and be ready to embrace his first deep relationship. This relationship helps him feel secure in his new world.

**"The sorts of expectable variations in the way babies pick up cues from their surroundings and move their muscles mean that there's no one-size-fits-all approach to helping your own child calm down and pay attention to the world. By taking note of your baby's own special biological makeup and interactive style, however, you can deliberately introduce the world to him."** (Building Healthy Minds, p.19)

## **Stage 2: Engagement (develops between 2 and 5 months)**

**What it is:** Engagement begins with your child's bond to you. It is a growing sense of relatedness and intimacy with you and others. Rather than just looking and listening attentively, he now experiences social and emotional interactions. He begins to form a multi-sensory response to those around him. It is the stage where your baby falls in love with you.

**Caregivers' role: WOO THE BABY** You are the other half of the relationship. You make overtures with your voice, face, and body that pull your baby to you. You start the rhythmic dance of engagement. Your actions let the baby feel pleasure, joy, assertiveness, curiosity, even protest when you interrupt the rhythm. Your presence and involvement let him practice using all these emotions. And, not forgetting the first stage, you help your baby be calm and feel secure so he can continue to discover the world.

**What to look for:** If a baby has reached this milestone, he will give his primary caregivers rapt attention and respond to their vocal and facial expressions with reciprocal ones. He will respond to your rhythm with a joy that asks for more. When upset, he will respond to your soothing by becoming calm and restful and continuing to be fascinated and in love with you (most of the time).

If a baby has difficulty with this stage, your wooing won't pull him into engaging with you. He may have difficulty in returning to a calm state after a disturbance, such as a loud noise. If he is overly sensitive to something, he will avoid or respond aversely to that sense. If he is under sensitive to things, his interactions may be more lethargic, less enthusiastic or energetic. **WATCH FOR:** His not falling in love with you.

**Why this is important:** Engaging with you forms the basis for your baby's learning about close relationships. This closeness opens up your baby's emotional world, letting him experience feelings of pleasure, curiosity and protest. These emotional interactions are the foundation for intelligence, morality and self-esteem. They are also the foundation for thinking. As you smile at your baby and he beams one back, you can see that your baby: recognizes you by sight (a visual-spatial capacity), coos rhythmically to your words (a cognitive or intellectual skill), and moves his arms and legs in synchrony (a motor skill). All of these responses activate important regions of the brain, such as the pre-communication system, so that the developing neuronal connections are constantly nourished for strong and continued growth.

**"[Your baby's] sustained relationship with you allows trust, security, and intimacy to build. It is the fabric that keeps us all striving to fulfill and be fulfilled emotionally."** (The Learning Tree, p.34)

### **Stage 3: Two-Way Communication (develops between 3 and 10 months)**

**What it is:** During these months babies begin to communicate intentionally. In this dialogue, the baby organizes purposeful, non-verbal gestures to convey a wish or desire. These sequences of gestures do not imply well-formed thoughts (yet) but rather an emotional need. It is more than mirroring a caregiver's behavior; the baby begins to read others' signals. The baby begins to differentiate others' cues and respond appropriately with gestures according to the cues. It is the beginning of communication and cause-and-effect reasoning that over time develops the flow of a back-and-forth conversation or circles of communication.

**Caregivers' role: RESPOND TO AND INITIATE GESTURES** You are the primary partner in this dialogue. You respond to the baby's gestures and initiate gestures for the baby to respond to. These gestures include facial expressions, touch, vocalizations, and movements to create a preverbal conversation. Since babies are all different, you have to watch your baby to see his reaction. If he gets disorganized, you tone down your gestures and emotions a bit. You don't want to overwhelm him. If, on the other hand, he doesn't respond, you notch it up a bit. *You want to provide the right level of stimulation for his particular nervous system.* You want to foster a purposeful and meaningful dialogue.

**What to look for:** If a baby has reached this milestone, you will see him intentionally respond to your presence or your overtures. He will raise his arms for you to pick him up. He will look to the floor when his toy drops and vocalize to you. He will pick up something interesting and try to put it in his mouth. He will convey different emotions depending on the situation, say, his joy in seeing you or his apprehension at the presence of a new person.

If a baby has difficulty at this stage, he will have problems responding to your cues. He won't put his arms up when you reach out or he will be self-absorbed and not greet you when you come in the room. Your vocalizations aren't met with gestures. Your facial expressions and movements don't develop into a flow of conversation between the two of you. He doesn't convey his desires intentionally or purposefully. **WATCH FOR:** Lack of gesturing.

**Why it is important:** Being intentional allows babies to learn that they can have impact on the world. When he signals his emotions and desires and gets a response, he gains the basic lesson in cause-and-effect. Since a conversation requires two people, he begins to see himself as a separate person. This conversation supports a baby's self-confidence and curiosity, and as he learns to crawl, he can communicate with you at a distance.

**"[At this stage] a child develops the ability to interact with the world purposefully. Being able to act on the world is a critical step toward understanding the world. You can't figure things out unless you explore them. This passion to understand how the world works is the beginning of scientific reasoning."** (Great Kids, p. 171)

#### **Stage 4: Shared Social Problem Solving And Continuous Flow (develops from 9-18 months)**

**What it is:** Here, the gestures grow more complex so that the toddler can communicate the problem as well as the solution. For instance, your thirsty toddler pulls you towards the refrigerator, gestures for you to open it, and points to the juice. By imitating your patterns of behavior, he learns how objects function and how to use them. This behavior creates a greater flow of communication, where he opens the dialogue with one behavior and closes it with another. He creates longer chains of cause-and-effect behavior (getting the juice) and becomes a more active partner in a reciprocal relationship.

**Caregivers' role: SUPPORT BACK-AND-FORTH INTERACTION** You aid the toddler's communication, intentionality, and emotionality. Your actions show how certain patterns of actions and expressions cause a particular effect. He will try to copy and you encourage him. You engage with him when he initiates the dialogue and continues it to get his needs met. You respond to create a lively series of back-and-forth gestures, expressions, emotions, and vocalizations. You admire what he can communicate and you can even let him be the boss, letting him choose the toy, or the T-shirt, or the type of juice.

**What to look for:** If the toddler has reached this milestone, he will imitate you, but he will also begin to combine behavior and emotions into his own original expression. He will be more assertive about his needs. His gestural conversations with you will broaden in length and scope, with initiation on his part (opening the circle) and response to your actions (closing the circle). He will feel comfortable at greater distances from you in the house, using your voice as the touch point that gives him security to explore.

If your toddler has problems at this stage, he will be slow to use imitation and pattern recognition to solve his problem. His interactions with you will not lengthen very much or increase in complexity. He may cling to you more if he can't use the security of your voice to give him confidence to explore. **WATCH FOR:** Lack of initiative in getting needs met.

**Why it is important:** In solving problems, your toddler begins to organize bits of emotion and intention into patterns in his mind that will gradually form symbols (language). He uses his organizational skills to understand how things work, including how he can help himself calm down or comply with limits. These patterns will support his sense of right and wrong and a greater sense of cause-and-effect.

**“Look for special times during your busy day to connect with your child. Once you've got a dialogue cooking, try to stay focused. If your attention flags or you become distracted by nagging thoughts about the file you left at the office...you're likely to miss opportunities to parlay your child's gestural openings into longer and more complex interactions. (Building Healthy Minds, p. 173)**

### **Stage 5: Meaningful Use of Ideas (develops between 18 and 42 months)**

**What it is:** The symbols that now form in a child's mind emerge as words, pretend play, and emotions with names. These new symbols are unconnected islands and not full chains of thought but they represent a new understanding of the world. They are more stable. It is the beginning of symbolic reasoning. He can begin to reorganize and express these mental images (through language, gestures, pictures, sign language) with longer chains of imitative behavior, such as feeding the hungry dolly.

**Caregivers' role: BECOME HIS PLAY PARTNER** You help to connect words with objects and feelings in conversation and play. If your child doesn't use words, you can say with emotion, "Oh, you are feeding the dolly so nicely." Words imbued with an emotional tie to his interests or to dangerous situations such as sharp objects or to his own feelings are likely to be easier for him to understand. But the main agenda is to have fun playing and being creative (even silly), opening and closing more complex circles of communication between the two of you. Creating play times that incorporate all his senses—looking, listening, moving, touching—with his new ideas will gradually broaden his creativity and use of emotions.

**What to look for:** If your child has reached this milestone, he will be able to look for hidden objects because he now is able to retain its image in his mind. He can begin to experiment with his imagination and create simple pretend scenarios for his dolls and stuffed animals. And he will be able to label some of his emotions to tell you how he is feeling.

If your child has problems with this stage, he will have difficulty keeping images in his mind, which will limit his combining them and expressing them in longer chains of pretend play and conversation, whether verbal or gestural. He will be less clear and organized in expressing his emotions. **WATCH FOR:** Very little pretend play.

**Why it is important:** His mental images allow him to substitute words and ideas for actions so that he can express feelings such as anger in words (I'm mad) rather than in actions (hitting). His understanding of himself grows as his mind knows the difference between himself and others. Greater organization of patterns makes cause-and-effect more evident to him. His images will gradually expand to richer ideas that are the basis of his mature, internal voice where he can make thoughtful decisions.

**"Your toddler's transition toward a 'life of the mind,' and not just a 'life of action,' is an exhilarating but exhausting development. As he makes enormous strides in understanding the world around him, he'll also be frightened from time to time by the barrage of ideas that assault his brain. ... He'll rely on your soothing embraces more than ever to calm himself."**  
(Building Healthy Minds, p.200)

## **Stage 6: Logical Thinking (develops between 3 and 4 ½ years)**

**What it is:** When a child builds bridges between images, he creates a logical structure that becomes a full idea. The initial organizing of emotions and behaviors to meet needs through gestures and then through symbols (language) has matured to create ideas, whether playing with toys or talking about feelings. He can use others' ideas as a basis for his own. With this continuous flow of images and ideas, the child draws a firmer understanding of what reality is and what fantasy is as well as a greater distinction between right and wrong. With greater thinking abilities, he appreciates his own individuality more and more.

**Caregivers' role: LISTEN AND RESPOND** As your child develops ideas, you become a collaborator, a debater, a limit setter, and an opinion seeker. As your child begins to answer 'W' questions (who, what, where, and why, with 'why' being the most difficult), you explore ideas together, sometimes agreeing, sometimes not. Your voice adds an outside reality and helps the child link up ideas. If a child shifts the conversation to an unrelated thought, your job is to slow him down and help him explain the reason for the sudden shift.

**What to look for:** If your child has reached this milestone, he will be eager to share his ideas and respond and build on yours with originality. He'll answer your W questions but with only one option, no elaboration. He'll begin to make sense of time—past, present, and future. And he will have a budding understanding of abstract thinking and emotional states.

If your child has problems at this stage, he will have a harder time creating bridges between images to form a more integrated idea. His conversation may have more missing links, as he skips from one topic to another. He may not get too much further than simply labeling feelings as opposed to understand how being mad or sad affects him more broadly. What's real and what's fantasy may be more difficult for him to understand. **WATCH FOR:** His ability to answer 'W' questions (who, what, where, why).

**Why it is important:** Logical thinking is the basis for our daily lives. It allows us to make judgments, understand reality, think about the future, and make plans. As we use logical thinking to understand our emotions, we begin to appreciate emotional nuances in others. These first links need to be strong to support the rest of the logical structure to follow.

**"The experience of exchanging emotional ideas during everyday chitchats and pretend play while remaining tuned in to the logical rhythm of conversation helps your child distinguish between what is real and what is not. This ability, which we call reality testing, will pave the way for all of her higher-level thinking skills. She'll rely on reality testing each time she has to do such things as correct her own math paper or search for the underlying meaning of a story. Her ability to reason stems from years of experience in bouncing her emotional ideas off something outside herself—you. (Building Healthy Minds, p. 257)**

## **Stage 7: Multi-causal Thinking (develops between 4 and 6 years)**

**What it is:** Logical thinking gets more refined when a child can give multiples reasons to explain actions, opinions, or feelings. He can more easily think through what he wants and why and consider the different steps it takes to do it. A sense of time becomes firmer and the future has more meaning as do spatial relationships. This new ability increases a child's sense of reality.

**Caregivers' role: HELP TO ELABORATE IDEAS** Your role as the listener and encourager of new ideas is now broader. While still keeping an ear to missing links in your child's logic—when he jumps from topic to topic or makes a statement that is not contingent on an earlier one—help your child elaborate his ideas—ones about interests, emotions, or actions. Ask lots of supportive questions that show interest. Be a good interviewer, not a teacher testing for the right answer. Foster his debating skills. When his emotions seem to skew the reality of the situation, ask reassuring questions that address the emotions and help him consider all the factors, which, with multi-causal thinking, your child can now keep in mind.

**What to look for:** If your child has reached this milestone, you will see that for the most part, he will have several answers to clue you in to what he is thinking. He will stay on topic and elaborate a bit. He will begin to understand consequences, helping to both plan his own actions and heed your reprimands. He will begin to look forward to events that are off in the future. He will have a greater aware of his emotions.

If a child has problems at this stage, you may see that: he struggles with giving more than one answer to the 'W' questions, especially 'why' questions. He may find it harder to stay on a topic and answer specific questions if he doesn't make the bridges between his mental images. He may be less creative in his play and more imitative. **WATCH FOR:** Missing links in conversations.

**Why it is important:** With greater logic between ideas, children can begin to figure out the specific emotions that relate to particular social skills—being nice to friends, sharing, developing a little bit of empathy—and to cope with difficult situations. This fits with their establishing a sense of internal values and understanding what they think. Of course, strong logical thinking supports all academic areas.

**“The ability to understand how present acts relate to the future ones makes consequences rather than fear the basis for controlling impulses. It also contributes to the development of the abilities to concentrate, plan, and work towards goals that are essential for success in school.”** (Growth of the Mind, p. 85)



## **Stage 8: Comparative and Grey Area Thinking (develops between 6 and 10 years)**

**What it is:** Logical connections now become more nuanced and subtle. Children can solve problems in new ways because first they can compare options and soon they can see degrees of difference along multiple factors. Things are no longer simply good or bad, but often have good and bad properties that require logic and applying one's emerging set of values to make decisions and solve problems.

**Caregivers' role: ENCOURAGE MAKING COMPARISONS** You can help your child to compare different options or preferences. Once he is comfortable with that, you can help him figure out what factors go into making a decision so that he can examine the degrees of difference between them. He can determine their importance and rank them. You can help him think through applying this more sophisticated way of thinking across all dimensions, including emotions—how going to his favorite park makes him happy but the long trip there makes him impatient. Having debates will give your child a chance to practice appreciating and applying these nuances and shades of gray.

**What to look for:** If a child has reached this milestone, he can begin to make comparisons between things, such as whether he prefers to play with this friend or that one. He will work well in a group as he has some appreciation of others' feelings and can see more options for solving problems. Being able to see degrees of difference, he will begin to understand that in difficult situations—working out options with friends, for instance—being flexible is helpful.

If a child has problems at this stage, he may be more polarized in his thinking. When asked if he prefers A or B, he makes a choice but when asked why, he doesn't use 'er' words—better, nicer, faster—but rather simply that he likes it. He may be more rigid in how he does things, that is, there is only one right way to do it.

**Why it is important:** Comparative and gray area thinking increases a child's logical abilities and increases his understanding of reality. It gives him the thinking skills to measure his experience against those of another person. He can now understand ambiguity and conflict in situations and feelings.

**"In some areas of life, we must have all-or-nothing rules, such as not hurting someone else, but those areas are very few. Intellectual life, as well as emotional life, exists in the gray zone. When children are younger—three- and four-years old—we expect all –or-nothing thinking and its associated negativism and stubbornness because the child is able to think in terms of only two choices: my way or the highway. Understanding degrees of difference helps that earlier thinking level give way to reason, debate, negotiation, and compromise." (The Learning Tree, p.65)**

## **Stage 9: Reflective Thinking (develops after 9 years and continues to develop throughout life)**

**What it is:** Now a child can begin to judge himself. He can question if his actions and feelings were appropriate in a particular situation. As this ability improves, he will gradually develop more objectivity and insight about what he has said or done and why. He can also think through measures for correcting his actions and working with his feelings. His complexity and depth of understanding of himself and his environment will grow over time. It is part of an inner dialogue that will continue to expand and become richer throughout his whole life.

**Caregivers' role: ENJOY DEBATING WITH YOUR CHILD** Your respect for your child's opinions will support his offering them. But respect does not have to mean agreement. Healthy discussions between you and your child bolstered by facts will give him confidence to explore new ideas and shape his opinions. Without being judgmental you can ask him to examine his actions or moods. If his ability to reflect is weakened by a stressful situation, you help him climb back up to a reflective posture by offering the security of a strong relationship and gently asking questions that help him re-integrate his islands of thought.

**What to look for:** If your child has reached this milestone, he can begin to consider two different perspectives—his and yours or his and one of his friends. He can have thoughtful discussions about his experiences that include some understanding of his role. Appreciating that not everyone reacts the same to something, he can draw inferences about another's opinions and understand the factors underlying differences between him and the other person. His debating skills, especially when he disagrees with one of your rules, will put you to the test.

If your child has a problem with this stage, he may not be able to put limits on his own behavior. He will have a hard time understanding other's feelings as well as his own. His moods may be less stable. He may not see different ways of solving a problem. He may be more polarized in this thinking. **WATCH FOR: Rigid thinking-everything being right or wrong**

**Why it is important:** Self-reflection allows teenagers, and all of us, to refine our internal set of values, or internal standard, which guide our decisions and actions. From it they come to appreciate why others may react differently than they do or why some actions succeed and others fail. They can balance their curiosity about life with judgment based on their internal standard. They can develop a broad view of the situation and how they fit into it.

**"The broader children's academic and learning experiences, the more they can apply reflective abilities in intellectual areas. The wider their social circles, the easier it will be for them to reflect on their choices of friends. One can't really become a good reflective thinker without swimming about in different subjects and different worlds. By challenging your child to try new books, hobbies, friends, sports, and musical instruments and to express her opinions on each, you will encourage a truly reflective thinker."** (The Learning Tree, p.71)