Stages of Emotional Development

Stanly Greenspan identifies six stages of emotional development that infants and toddlers progress through.

The Listening Mothers™ curriculum provides context to the first three stages in the group sessions and provides the space to practice mindful strategies with the purpose of strengthening that foundation.

The three stages highlighted in curriculum are:

- Self-Regulation and Interest in the World (0-3 Months) Session Two
- Falling in love and Appreciating Relationships (2-7 Months) Session Three
- Developing Intentional Communication (3-10 Months) Session Five

Stage One: Self-Regulation and Interest in the World (0-3 Months)

Greenspan says the first task of baby is to feel calm and relaxed, not overwhelmed by their environment. The second is to become interested in the world through using senses: taste, touch, smell, sound, sight. As a baby is able to feel relaxed, they are better able to take in their environment. The mother is initially the auxiliary regulator for her baby: her soothing voice, self-control, gentle touch and sharing of the world around them help set the tone of Self-Regulation. This allows the baby to stay relaxed and practice using their senses, learning how to use cues in the external environment to Self-Regulate.

Stage Two: Falling in Love and Appreciating Relationships (2-7 Months)

A child begins to make the distinction between their mother, father and other individuals. They begin to let their parents know they are special; baby’s face brightens when their mother or father enters their field of vision, they begin to smile and look at them in the eye and shake with enthusiasm when they are near. As humans, we need social experiences to learn our culture and to survive. Parents set the foundation and babies begin to understand that warmth and love are possible and that relationships with people can be joyful. This foundation is nurtured through millions of daily interactions, primarily with their parents, as every glance, every smile, every tickle, every question build on their sense of who they are. Through these interactions, babies can further cognitive, intellectual, and social skills. A child who has learned this with their parents has built a foundation for their later capacity to think, move and talk as well as to continue learning about loving relationships throughout their life.

Stage Three: Developing Intentional Communication (3-10 Months)

When a baby falls in love with their parents, they begin to realize their actions have an impacts; when they express feelings or intentions, their caregiver responds. This is the beginning of dialogue. Two-way communication is essential for all human interaction. It also allows babies to learn about themselves and about the world. Experiences in two-way communication form the basic sense of intentionality allowing them to form a true sense of who they are or see that the world is logical.
Stage Four: Emergence of Organized Sense of Self (9-18 Months)

Once a child understands the fundamentals of two-way communication, their responses to actions evolve as they string together individual gestures for a more complex response. Children begin to use their ever growing vocabulary to express feelings and intentions. Children begin to find a sense of self and realize they don’t have to respond exactly as their parents. They can be creative with the number of communication skills they are mastering. Children learn from observing the complexity of their parent’s gestures to ascertain a sense of safety, approval, acceptance and respect. They begin to form patterns of expectations. By 18 months, most children have mastered reading non-verbal cues. 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.

Stage Five: Creating Emotional Ideas (18-36 Months)

As children master the ability to engage others through emotions and behaviors, they learn to form mental pictures and substitute thoughts and ideas for actions or behaviors. They not only experience emotions but experience the idea of an emotion and begin to put them into words or imaginary play. They begin to understand and imagine that symbols stand for things they can use in a concrete activity such as an empty box as a pretend bathtub, or the word ‘mad’ means the flood of frustrating feelings they’ve just experienced. Eventually they are able to use ideas to meet their needs. Parents can help children navigate this stage by modeling appropriate expression of emotions in both words and nonverbal behavior.

Stage Six: Emotional Thinking: The Basis for Fantasy, Reality and Self-Esteem (30-48 Months)

A child at the emotional thinking stage begins to build bridges between the individual play activities and the emotional silos that occur in stage five; connecting the thoughts, ideas and play. For example a child in stage five (creating emotional ideas) may dress up a doll, see a crayon and begin scribbling, then see a drum and bang on a drum. A child in stage six (emotional thinking) more logically connects the silos in their imagination and may use the crayons to scribble an imaginary invitation, prepare refreshments for a tea party for their dressed up doll or perform a drumming solo for their doll. A child in stage six begins to understand space and time, can begin answering what, when were and why questions and present an opinion becoming more verbal.