Definition: infancy from *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*

From the Latin *infantia*, which translates as *inability to speak*. This criterion, however, is seldom used and the definition of the stage of infancy depends on who is doing the defining. In law, infancy is often considered to last 18 or 21 years; in developmental psychology, the first year of life is the typically cited period; in layperson's terms, it may be up to 2 or 3 years.

**Summary Article: infancy**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

Stage of human development lasting from birth to approximately two years of age. The hallmarks of infancy are physical growth, motor development, vocal development, and cognitive and social development.

**Physical Growth**

The first year is characterized by rapid physical growth. A normal baby doubles its birth weight in six months and triples it in a year. During that time, there is great expansion of the head and chest, thus permitting development of the brain, heart, and lungs, the organs most vital to survival. The bones, which are relatively soft at birth, begin to harden, and the fontanelles, the soft parts of the newborn skull, begin to calcify, the small one at the back of the head at about 3 months, the larger one in front at varying ages up to 18 months. Brain weight also increases rapidly during infancy: by the end of the second year, the brain has already reached 75% of its adult weight.

Growth and size depend on environmental conditions as well as genetic endowment. For example, severe nutritional deficiency during the mother's pregnancy and in infancy are likely to result in an irreversible impairment of growth and intellectual development, while overfed, fat infants are predisposed to become obese later in life. Human milk provides the basic nutritional elements necessary for growth; however, in Western cultures supplemental foods are generally added to the diet during the first year.

The newborn infant sleeps almost constantly, awakening only for feedings, but the number and length of waking periods gradually increases. By the age of three months, most infants have acquired a fairly regular schedule for sleeping, feeding, and bowel movements. By the end of the first year, sleeping and waking hours are divided about equally.

**Motor Development**

Development of motor activity follows a fairly standard sequence. The infant learns to lift its head, to turn over on its back, and to develop the muscular coordination for refined, visually directed hand movements and for sitting, crawling, standing, and walking, generally in that order. Motor development proceeds more rapidly than actual physical growth by the beginning of the second year. Bowel and bladder control is sometimes possible after 18 months. However, many normal, healthy infants show delayed response in one or several developmental activities, or may apparently skip a stage altogether.

**Vocal Development**

An infant's early crying sounds are largely limited to frontal vowels, such as in "dada," and a few
consonants; the remaining vowel and consonant sounds gradually appear, first produced in a babbling manner, and the first meaningful words may appear at ten months. By the end of the second year, the infant’s active vocabulary may reach 250 words. One of the key reasons infants can produce more sounds is the developing larynx, or voice box, which “descends” between the ages of 1 1/2 to 2 years. Thus, as the infant’s vocal tract develops, the wider the range of sounds. See voice.

Cognitive and Social Development

Studies indicate that certain cognitive processes, the order of which is largely biologically controlled, begin as early as two months after birth. Up to six months of age, differences in motor and conceptual development are generally independent of the infant's rearing conditions and culture, but by one year of age, cultural differences affect intellectual development. From the early months on, the infant forms attachments to those who care for him or her, and on the basis of their behavior, begins to develop expectations of gratification, e.g., adult responses to cries of distress. Social smiling appears early, and by the latter part of the first year the baby may depend on the presence of familiar faces and become apprehensive in the presence of strangers.

Bibliography

See the many studies by child psychologist J. Piaget; Kagan, J. et al., Infancy: Its Place in Human Development (1978);
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