

Functional Emotional Developmental Capacities Through the Lifespan

The sixteen Functional Emotional Developmental Capacities identified in the Developmental Individual Differences Relationship (DIR) based model.

This table was predominantly compiled from 'The First Idea, Chapter 2: Intellectual Growth and Transformations of Emotions' (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004) and 'The Clinical Interview of the Child, Chapter 1: Conceptual Foundations' (Greenspan & Greenspan, 2003)

**Ages listed represent average neuromajority development.*

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Capacity 1 Regulation and Interest in the World

(First learned at 0-3 months)*

This is the capacity to be regulated, calm enough and alert enough for the task at hand.



Capacity 2 Engaging and Related

(First learned at 2-7 months)*

This is the capacity to become attached, develop relationships and be intimate.



Capacity 3 Intentionality and Purposeful Communication

(First learned at 3-10 months)*

This is the capacity to send and receive emotional signals; it does not necessarily involve words. This capacity involves the classic 'serve-and-return' interaction.



Capacity 4 Problem Solving and Sense of Self

(First learned at 9-18 months)*

This is the capacity to negotiate longer and longer chains of interactions with another, to explain and expand on our communicative-affective signals because we begin to understand that we are separate from the other and their experience is different.



Capacity 5 Creating Symbols and Using Words and Ideas

(First learned at 18-48 months)*

Using ideas to create emotionally meaningful symbols and ideas. Communicating with words that represent sensation and emotion. Creativity and imagination are evident in play. Words begin to be used instead of actions.



Capacity 6 Building Bridges, Emotional Thinking, Logical to Abstract

(From 40 months)*

Symbols begin to be connected together logically, reflection begins to emerge. Reality testing occurs and fantasy-versus-reality is differentiated. Storytelling is flexible and ideas are connected. Following the rules begins to make sense, as you understand the 'why' of cause and effect.



Capacity 7 Multi-causal and Triangular Thinking

(Rapid growth between 4 and 7 years)*

The capacity to understand indirect relationships, multiple causes and begin hypothesizing accordingly (maybe, perhaps). The range of tolerable emotional experience thus increases.



Capacity 8 Emotionally Differentiated, Gray Area Thinking

(Rapid growth between 6 and 10 years)*

Can reflect on degrees of experience, and the influence of time on responses and experience.



Capacity 9 Internal Standard and Growing Sense of Self

(Pre-teen, puberty, and early adolescence)*

Reflection on action improves – the individual is increasingly able to reflect on past behaviors and reflect on whether they are satisfied with their own responses. At this stage, reflection in action begins to increase and by process of an internal moral compass is increasingly able to inhibit impulsive responses to situations.



Capacity 10 An Expanded Sense of Self

(Early and middle adolescence)*

Greater appreciation of the world and new levels of reflection are emerging, culture and society are incorporated into thinking, and appreciation of experience expands.



Capacity 11 Reflecting on a Personal Future

(Late adolescence and early adulthood)*

Becoming emotionally invested in one's future, thus we see the full development of probabilistic thinking. Appreciation for and engagement in social, political, economic, and cultural ecologies increases. The personal narrative of past, present, and future emerges and becomes increasingly cohesive. The range of tolerable emotional experience thus increases.



Capacity 12 Stabilizing a Separate Sense of the Self

(Early adulthood)*

The capacity to carry a stable sense of self internally as you move towards adulthood looks different in different cultures. Personal beliefs may be different from those of childhood and heritage. The personal narrative of past, present, and future become more independent and reflective.



Capacity 13 Intimacy and Commitment

(Adult life)*

The capacity to engage in relationships with increasing intimacy and deepening respect for unique differences. Emotional immediacy is replaced by a longer-term investment in goals and commitments. Longer-term political and religious values may begin to consolidate.



Capacity 14 Creating a Family

(Adult life)*

The increasing capacity to view events and feelings from other perspectives, even when emotions are heightened and intense. Caring for others increases, commonly through the process of raising children, and new dimensions of feelings develop. This responsiveness to others generalizes to views of the local and broader systems and cultures and these can now be appreciated without threatening our own internal standards and beliefs.



Capacity 15 Changing Perspectives on Time, Space, the Cycle of Life, and the Larger World

(Middle age)*

Ideally, during this stage, relationships with a life partner and children have deepened and this further increases the appreciation for differences in perspective and experience. One's perspective of time is changing – as the lifetime becomes measurable and finite – and reality-based experience and wisdom are increasingly appreciated over fantastical goals or aspirations. Reflective range and levels of consciousness increase and thus the tolerable range of emotional experience. This includes thinking about the cycle of life and death in a new emotional manner.



Capacity 16 The Wisdom of the Ages

(The later stages of aging)*

Broadening wisdom, freedom from self-centered thinking, and practical concerns associated with earlier life stages can mean that this stage brings with it a richer and fuller comprehension of the cycle of life. An individual might achieve new dimensions of insight, wisdom and with these an entirely new level of reflective awareness regarding the self, family, relationships, and the world.

The FEDCs are descriptors of the invisible development of our social emotional capacities over the lifespan. Although listed in a linear fashion and with average neuro-majority ages provided, it is important to remember that all individuals develop in their own time and that those with neuro-divergent brains often develop in non-linear trajectories. Additionally, each stage's hallmarks may look very different from one individual to another. Equally crucial for the clinician is to remain curious and open, not imposing neuromajority or cultural standards but instead challenging internal biases as they arise. Validation and honoring of neurodivergent communication styles and self-regulatory strategies is essential for supporting an individual to flourish. Therapeutic supports should only be provided in a respectful, developmental, and sensory-informed manner.