Chapter One

The child as a language learner

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

✔ **describe** developmentally appropriate instruction.

✔ **identify** examples of cognitive, emotional, physical, and moral development in children.

✔ **explain** ways to learn about children's development and interests.

✔ **distinguish** between language acquisition and language learning as it relates to children.

✔ **describe** techniques for finding out about the needs and interests of young learners.

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of some of the issues related to children's overall development as well as their language development. We will begin with information about developmentally appropriate instruction and three major areas of children's development: social-emotional, cognitive, and physical. We will then move to suggestions for learning about children's development and interests. Then the distinction between language acquisition and language learning is provided. Finally, ways to make input comprehensible and to support children's language development are discussed.

2. What is developmentally appropriate instruction?

Experienced early childhood professionals encourage **caregivers** and teachers of young learners to provide **developmentally appropriate instruction.** (For the purposes of this book, young learners are defined as children between the ages of 5–12.) By the very nature of your job as a teacher of young learners, you must be aware of children's basic physical and psychological needs. Teachers of young learners should provide the care necessary to meet these needs so that they can thrive and focus on learning. In other words, teachers of young learners have two jobs: to provide care and to provide instruction. In order to provide the best possible instruction, you need to adjust educational experiences to meet the developmental stages of the individual child. It is important to give children challenges that they are developmentally ready to meet.

It is never too late to learn, but sometimes it is too early.

For example, a child who cannot recognize the numbers between 1 and 100 is not ready to do multiplication. A child who has developed strong oral-language skills in her native language is better prepared to begin reading than a child who has not. A young learner who can comprehend a sequence of events is better prepared to understand a story than a child who cannot.

Developmentally appropriate practices

In addition to educators, doctors specializing in child development also encourage caregivers to adjust to a child's individual stages and rates of development. Children require and deserve professionals who interact with them in appropriate ways based on the child's **social/emotional, physical, cognitive,** and **moral development** (Brazelton and Greenspan, 2000). Children develop emotionally, morally, physically, and cognitively at different rates. One child may not be bothered when he is accidentally pushed by another child, while a different child may burst into tears when children look at him in a mildly negative manner. Some children will understand the necessity to share food and toys, while others will believe that if it is theirs, they should keep it. One child may be able to hop at a very early age, while another may struggle for years with the skill. There are children who will quickly grasp sound-symbol relationships, whereas it will take others a longer period of time to comprehend this concept.

By being aware of what children can and can't do developmentally, teachers are better able to provide appropriate learning experiences for their young learners. As a teacher, I try to look beyond a child's age and observe her development to determine what she can and can't do. This makes it possible for me to give my young learners tasks which are within their reach, tasks where they will succeed and experience success. This success gives them the confidence to attempt tasks which are progressively more difficult.

Attributes of development

Figures 1, 2, and 3 on pages 4 and 5 highlight attributes of development in three areas: social/emotional, cognitive, and physical development. The attributes are observable and can help you become more aware of different aspects of individual children's development. Figures 1-3 are guides to help you develop a greater sense of your young learners' individual development. If you are aware of your students' strengths as well as areas where they may need a little extra help or assistance, it will be easier for you to plan appropriate instruction.

Attributes of Emotional/Social Development

Is usually in a positive mood

Is not excessively dependent on adults

Usually copes with rebuffs adequately

Has positive relationships with one or two peers; shows the capacity to really care about them and miss them if they are absent

Displays the capacity for humor

Does not seem to be acutely lonely

Approaches others positively

Expresses wishes and preferences clearly; gives reasons for actions and positions

Asserts own rights and needs appropriately

Is not easily intimidated by bullies

Expresses frustrations and anger effectively and without escalating disagreements or harming others

Gains access to ongoing groups at play and work

Enters ongoing discussion; makes relevant contributions to ongoing activities

Takes turns fairly easily

Shows interest in others; exchanges information with and requests information from others appropriately

Negotiates and compromises with others appropriately

Does not draw inappropriate attention to self

Accepts and enjoys peers and adults of ethnic groups other than his or her own

Figure 1 Attributes of Emotional/Social Development

Attributes of Cognitive Development

Can follow one-step instructions

Can follow two-step instructions

Can follow three-step instructions

Understands the concept of symbols such as numbers and letters

Is interested in academic content

Likes reading or being read to

Likes playing with words, numbers, or abstract symbols

Figure 2

Grasps concrete and/or abstract concepts easily

Can make connections between different concrete concepts

Can make connections between abstract and concrete concepts

Can make connections between different abstract concepts

Comprehends concrete and/or abstract cause and effect relationships

Can recognize patterns

Can follow a sequence of events

Can classify concrete pictures, objects, and/or abstract concepts

Figure 2 Adapted from Attributes of Cognitive Development

**Attributes of Physical Development —
Fine Motor and Gross Motor Skills**

Demonstrates muscle control when using scissors

Demonstrates muscle control when using fat crayons, pencils, or markers

Demonstrates muscle control when holding chop-sticks, spoons, forks, or
    knives

Demonstrates muscle control when using skinny pencils, markers, or crayons

Demonstrates muscle control when using paintbrushes

Demonstrates the muscle coordination necessary to throw or kick a ball

Demonstrates the muscle and hand-eye coordination necessary to catch a ball

Demonstrates muscle control and foot-eye coordination necessary to kick a
    ball when rolled

Demonstrates hand-eye coordination necessary to hit a ball when thrown
    as in tennis, baseball, or volleyball

Is able to skip, hop, run, jump, and dance or move to music

Figure 3 Attributes of Physical Development
(Figures 1–3 adapted from McClellan and Katz, 2001)

Inconsistent development

A specific child does not develop in all areas at the same rate. Children
who are considered to be intellectually gifted are also often considered to be
emotionally young. A child may learn to read at a very early age and have
developed advanced cognitive skills but behave in ways that are viewed as
emotionally and socially immature.

Think of a child you know. The child may be a student you have now or someone in your family. Describe one or more of the children you listed. Be sure to give examples of their physical, cognitive, and social/emotional development.

Example:

Child: Anwar is five years old.
Social/Emotional Development: He uses words and not tears or fists to tell others that he is upset.
*Cognitive Development: He can follow two-step instructions such as put your crayons away and line up.*
Physical Development: His printing is a little bit messy. He has trouble staying on the line or in the square when he prints.

Share your answer with a classmate or colleague.

3. Learning about children's development and interests

To tailor teaching experiences to meet the developmental needs of individual students, you need to first become familiar with your students. Not only is it important to be aware of your students' development, it is also necessary to know what they find interesting. Although interest as a component of motivation has not been a source of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, it is what comes to mind when teachers think of motivation (Cook, 2001). This is especially true of teachers of young learners who are acutely aware that children who are interested and engaged in the specific lesson are less likely to be disruptive. Many experienced teachers are aware that some children who have been diagnosed with attention deficit disorders can attend to an activity for an extended period of time if they find the activity or task to be interesting. By knowing what interests your students, you will be able to create engaging and motivating English lessons.
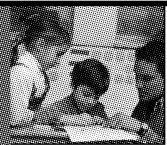
1. Watch a children's cartoon in English or your native language.
2. Try to determine what age child it is created for as well as whether it is intended more for boys or girls.

Explain to a colleague or classmate how you decided on your answers.

Ways to learn about children's development

There are many ways to learn about children's development and interests. Observing children both in and out of the classroom is a good way to start. You can watch children as they interact with their peers, other teachers, and their parents. By watching their interactions, you are able to look at their development from an emotional and social perspective. The types of conversations that children have can also shed light into their cognitive development. As you watch children play games or engage in sports activities, try to observe their physical development. Are they clumsy or well coordinated? Do they enjoy physical activities or avoid them?

Looking at children and the ways that they interact with their peers both in and out of the classroom can be very informative. It is useful to observe whether children are part of the in-group or whether they are shunned when members of teams are chosen or when children are asked to work with others in pairs or groups. To observe a child's social development, watch how he interacts with his peers and with adults. For example, is he truly interacting with his peers? Is there give and take, or is he being dominated by them? For some children who are shunned, this will be a source of concern, a source of emotional pain, whereas for other children, there will be little concern. Being aware of this aspect of social/emotional development will be helpful when asking children to work with one another.

Children's treasures

Paying attention to children's belongings, the treasures they carry around, is another good way to learn about their interests and development. What children put in their book bags can be a real eye opener. A boy who carries miniature basketballs in his pencil case will most likely have a special interest in basketball. A child who always carries notebooks and pencils with pictures of horses may do so because horses are her favorite animal. A six-year-old who carries and reads books without any pictures has probably developed advanced cognitive skills.

A simple survey

Another way to learn about children's development and interests is by asking them to take simple surveys. Jayne Moon (2002) advocates using surveys as a way to gather information about the learning process from children themselves. Depending on their age, English level, and literacy level, children can answer simple written questions with words and/or pictures.

The reproducible survey on pages 19 and 20 is designed to help you, as a teacher, discover children's perceptions of what they can do both in and out of the classroom. Children are asked to complete sentences about different activities they do at home and school. They are asked specifically to describe

what they like to do, what is easy and hard for them to do, as well as who helps them do things which they find to be difficult.

Children who are able to read and write in English can write their responses on the survey. For children who possess literacy skills in their native language, but not in English, you may wish to translate the form into the children's native language. Children who are not able to read and write in English or their native language can dictate their responses to a teacher and draw pictures on the survey.

Obtaining the best results from the survey

Often, when a teacher models a task such as completing an item from the survey, the students merely copy the teacher's example. For instance, if I modeled Number 1 from the survey (At home, I like to _____.) by saying that at home I like to read, all of the students in my class might give the same response. When asking children to give personal or personalized information, it is useful to give an example that they cannot copy so that they will not simply replicate what you have said (Yedlin, 2003). If I provide a model which is impossible for children to replicate, then they are more likely to provide their own content. However, I need to make sure that children are able to understand the language that I use. Therefore, when I give an example, I am careful to use the vocabulary that children have been taught. For example, I might say, "At home, I like to cook dinner for my friends" or "At school, it is hard for me to open the classroom door with my key."

I chose an example from my own life because children enjoy learning about their teachers' real grown-up interests. In the second example, I chose something that my students have observed so that they are more likely to comprehend the example. When I give the second example, I would also show children the classroom door key to help them understand what I am talking about.

Example 1

5. It used to be hard for me to tie my shoes, but now it is easy.

In Example 1, the response indicates that the child has developed the hand-eye and fine motor skills necessary to tie her own shoes.

Talking to children about their surveys

Not only can you look at children's surveys, you can also talk to them about their responses. It is best to do this on a one-to-one basis when the other children are writing, drawing, or doing other independent work. From both psychological and cultural standpoints, it may not be a good idea to discuss children's responses to the survey in a large group setting. Instead, you can very easily walk around and quietly speak to children about their responses.

Look at Luis's response to Number 10. Seven-year-old Luis has drawn a picture of himself and another boy working together.

Example 2
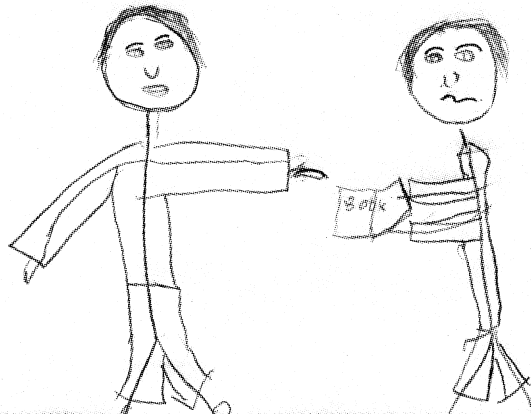
10. I like to have Marco help me when it is hard for me to do something.

In Extract 1, the teacher is able to determine how and why Marco can help. This simple exchange illustrates how Luis understands that he needs extra support and who, among his classmates, can provide that support. As with all extracts in this book, T stands for *teacher* and S stands for *student*.

Extract 1

> *T:* Luis, who can help you at school?
>
> *S:* Marco.
>
> *T:* Why do you think Marco can help you at school?
>
> *S:* Because he is really, really good at spelling, and I'm bad at spelling.
>
> *T:* Well, spelling may be hard for you, but you are good at drawing.
> (Teacher looks and smiles at one of Luis's pictures on the wall.)

> **S:** *Yeah.* (Luis smiles.)
>
> **T:** *No one can do everything perfectly.* (Luis continues to smile and to look at his picture on the wall.)

Notice the teacher begins the conversation by asking Luis who helps him at school. When Luis states that he is *bad* at spelling, the teacher is careful to mention—in a matter-of-fact way—something that he does well with a concrete example. Children often need to be reminded that what is easy for one person may be very difficult for someone else.
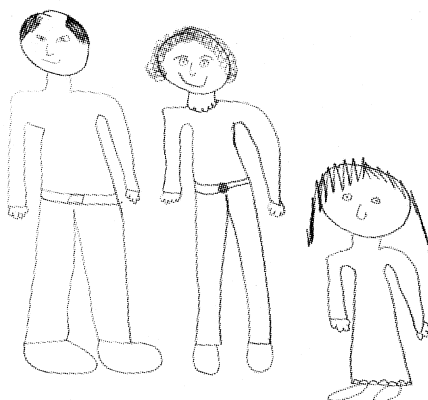
Children's work

Examining children's work, including the drawings and writings that they do on a daily basis, is a good strategy for learning about their growth, development, and interests. Educators and art therapists examine children's drawings in an effort to determine their social/emotional and cognitive development (Levick, 1998). You can look at the facial expressions that children put on the people in their drawings as an indication of their social and emotional development. For instance, I would be concerned when all of the people that a child draws are frowning. Also, children who are younger and less developed cognitively, generally include less detail in their drawings. For example, they may not draw eyebrows or fingers.
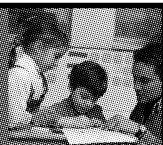
Elicit or gather pictures of people drawn by children ages 5 to 12. Examine the emotional expressions on the faces of the people in the pictures. Look at the level of detail of the people. For example, you may want to look at this picture done by a five-year-old girl.

What can you deduce about the child's social, emotional, and cognitive development? Share your deductions with a colleague or classmate.

Talking and Writing Box

Another way to learn about children's interests is by having them create a Talking and Writing Box. The Talking and Writing Box is a small box that children cover with pictures that interest them. They use the box to carry items related to their English-language class. Children create a Talking and Writing Box at the beginning of the year and then use it throughout the year as a basis for speaking and writing activities. In Chapter 3, we will discuss speaking activities that use the Talking and Writing Box. In Chapter 5, you will be given suggestions for writing activities using the Talking and Writing Box.

Materials: A shoe box (or a box the size of a shoebox) for each student, magazines, newspapers and other pictures, scissors, and glue sticks.

Creation of the boxes

1. Have students gather 30–40 pictures that are meaningful to them. Students should be certain to include pictures of food, objects, toys, animals, plants, and people.

2. Have students cut out their pictures and paste them on the outside of their boxes. They first cover the outside of their boxes and then the inside of their boxes.

Figure 4 How to make a Talking and Writing Box

1. Think about your current or potential teaching situation. Consider the students' ages, the number of students in the class, whether the students can read and write in either their native language, English, or both. What are three of the most practical ways to learn about these students' development and interests?

2. What are advantages and disadvantages of each way?

Share your answers with a classmate or colleague.

4. Children's language learning and acquisition

Even though they are related, children's language skills development is separate from their overall development (Freeman and Freeman, 2004). In fact, one of the indicators of cognitive development is language development. Family members, caregivers, and teachers of young learners are acutely aware of the importance of language development.

Krashen (1987) has examined language development and has differentiated the process of **language acquisition** from the process of **language learning**. Language acquisition is the natural process used to develop language skills in a child's native language. The home environment for acquiring a native language is often different from the classroom environment used to teach a second or foreign language. When a child is acquiring their native language at home, the focus is on the message being conveyed rather than the form or correctness of the language. For example, when a native English-speaking child says the word, "Muma" instead of "Mama," her mother would applaud the effort and not worry that the pronunciation was not perfect. When a five-year-old is telling a story about something exciting that took place at camp, his grandmother would focus on what he was talking about rather than how he was saying it.

The term *language learning* is often used to describe the more formal approach to language instruction. Language learning usually refers to the language instruction that takes place in a classroom. Focus is usually on the form of the language rather than on the message being conveyed. For example, in a language-learning classroom, you might see children learning phonics rules–hopefully using a game-format.

It is important to note that even native speakers spend time learning about their language. When it comes to language acquisition and language learning, it doesn't need to be an either-or situation. The focus can be on the message conveyed *and* the form of the language being used.

1. When you were a child between the ages of 5 and 12, what things did you talk about with your family? Did you talk about your favorite doll, toy, or pet? Who did you talk to? Were the conversations mostly focused on form such as correct grammar or meaning?

2. At school, what types of things did you learn about your native language? For example, did you learn about uncommon grammatical constructions?

Share your answers with a classmate or colleague.

5. Making input meaningful to learners

As a teacher, it is important that your students are presented with language that they can understand. **Comprehensible input** is input which is a little bit above the learner's language level but understandable (Krashen, 1986). Although the language is slightly above the learner's level, it is nevertheless meaningful and understandable because of the **context** and other support provided with the input. It is important for you, as a teacher, to provide young learners with different types of input. For example, if you are telling a story about a family, you could use puppets and change your voice as you become each character. You could use a deep voice as you become the father, a higher voice for the mother, and a softer voice for the baby.

As a teacher, there are many different ways that you can make input comprehensible. Here are some suggestions:

- Set the stage. Provide context. For example, if you are going to talk about farm animals, you may want to put up a bulletin board of a scene with pictures of cows, chickens, horses, and other animals.
- Build schema by relating a new topic to the students' prior knowledge and experiences.
- Provide a variety of input. Be sure to provide visual, auditory, and tactile input. Use props, realia, and pictures. Feely boxes (boxes with tactile items inside that children can feel and touch, such as items that are hard, soft, fury, smooth, metal, etc.) and headphones at listening centers are often neglected but good sources of input.
- Make the classroom language rich with environmental print such as labels on the wall, posters with words, and children's books.
- Model each instruction as it is given. Be sure to give only one instruction at a time so that children can directly link the instruction with the actual directions.

- Use language while you are performing different actions. For example, if you are opening a child's thermos, you could say, "I am opening your thermos for you. It is really hard."
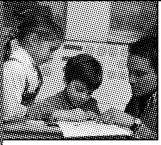

1. Think about teaching a lesson on farm animals (cows, donkeys, horses, and chickens) to five-year-old students. Brainstorm ways to make the content comprehensible.
2. How could you introduce the topic?
3. What kinds of visuals could you use? What kinds of sound effects could you use? What kinds of hands-on materials such as toy animals could you use?
4. What type of bulletin board display could you and/or your students make?

6. Supporting children's language acquisition and learning

In addition to making sure that the input is comprehensible, there are many different ways that children's language acquisition and learning can be supported. According to Vygotsky (1978), children's language learning is advanced through social interaction and experiences based on the context or situation. Vygotsky (1962) explains that adults provide children with the language (permanent meanings of words), not with the thinking itself. Nevertheless, adults can support children as learners by modifying interactions to foster both intellectual and language development.

Support can be given to a child within the child's **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky has defined the ZPD as the area of support provided so that a child can accomplish a task she couldn't do on her own. In other words, without that ZPD, a child would be unable to complete a given task independently. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1978) have used the term "**scaffolding**" to describe the type of support that can be given through interaction within a child's ZPD. The type of scaffolding that is effective is not the same for all cultures and is only effective when it takes into account the child's culture (Berk & Winsler, 1995). In some cultures, a parent or other adult will provide the support necessary for a child to complete a task. In other cultures, it is more likely that a brother or sister, or someone who is closer in age to the child, will provide the support needed to complete the task. Learning this type of information will help you in different ways. For example, it will make it easier for you to advise children who they can go to when they need assistance with homework.
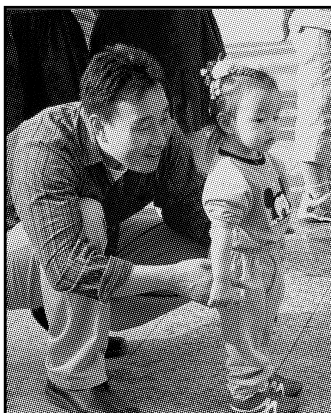
The father provides scaffolding for his daughter learning how to walk.

Look at Extract 2 below. Note that the teacher uses the social interaction between herself and her student as a way to provide scaffolding.

This extract is an example of a teacher using her knowledge of her student's interest to provide the scaffolding necessary for the child to answer a question. The teacher is aware that Mi Li may be able to recognize the names of animals even though she may not be able to come up with the words on her own. The teacher also models the language—a complete sentence using Mi Li's information.

Extract 2

T: *Mi Li, what do you like to do on weekends?*

S: *Play.*

T: *Who do you like to play with?* (Waits a full 10 seconds. Remembers the picture that Mi Li drew playing with her kitten.) *Do you like to play with your dog or your cat?*

S: *My cat.*

T: *Good. You like to play with your cat.*

Wait Time

Many teachers make the assumption that when you ask a question you shouldn't wait too long for students to respond or they will get frustrated. Actually the opposite is true. Incorporating **wait time** into your teaching is very important. One way to provide children with support is to increase the amount of time that you wait for them to respond to a question. Sometimes it takes children up to five to ten seconds to access the information being asked for by the teacher.

It is not always necessary for the teacher to provide the scaffold or support for their students. Look back at Extract 1 on page 9. Luis, who is having trouble with phonics, was aware that one of his classmates would be able to help him with spelling. Luis may or may not be aware that the teacher has a lot of other children to help, but in this case he does know who, in addition to the teacher, can provide him with the support.

1. Teachers are not the only people who help children to learn. When you were a child, who, besides your teachers, helped you learn? What did they help you to learn? Think of four people who taught you something when you were a child. For example, my grandmother taught me how to make an omelet.

2. Was the relationship between yourself and the person who helped you important? Why or why not? For instance, was the person a family member? Was he a favorite teacher? What was the relationship like? Was it supportive?

Share your answers with a classmate or colleague.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed the issues of younger learners' development and then turned to their language development within the context of overall development. The ways that children develop emotionally, cognitively, and physically were discussed as well as ways to observe children's development and to learn about their interests. I then presented basic concepts related to the development of language skills. Finally, I showed how teachers can use knowledge of the child to make language learning developmentally appropriate.
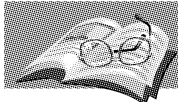
Further Readings

Berk, L. E. and A. Winsler. 1995. *Scaffolding Children's Learning: Vygotsky and Early Childhood Education.* Washington D.C.: NAEYC.

This book helps teachers and caregivers provide young learners with the support (scaffolding) that they need to achieve a wide variety of educational outcomes both large and small.

Tomilinson, C. A. 1999. *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development).

This very helpful book provides teachers with practical suggestions for setting up a classroom to meet the developmental needs of all learners.

Walter, T. 1996. *Amazing English: How-To Handbook.* Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

This book is aimed at teachers of young learners and provides succinct information about second language acquisition. There are numerous charts which help to illustrate some of the most appropriate, child-centered, second language acquisition research.
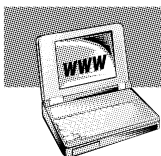
Helpful Websites

The Child Development Institute
(www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/index.htm)

A helpful web site for teachers and parents interested in learning more about children's development in different areas.

National Association for the Education of Young Children
(www.naeyc.org)

This is the web site of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). NAEYC, with 100,000 members, is a professional organization for educators working with young children. NAEYC advocates the use of developmentally appropriate practices and strives to advance the profession of education for young learners.
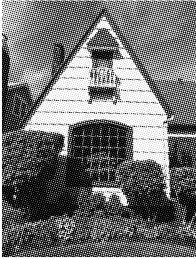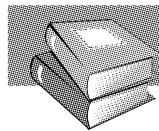
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Name: _____   Date: _____

Complete each sentence. Draw a picture to go with each sentence.

At Home	At School
1. I like to _____.	**2.** I like to _____.
3. It is easy for me to _____.	**4.** It is easy for me to _____.
5. It is hard for me to _____.	**6.** It is hard for me to _____.

Name: _____   Date: _____

Complete each sentence. Draw a picture to go with each sentence.

At Home	At School
7. It used to be hard for me to_____, but now it easy.	**8.** It used to be hard for me to_____, but now it is easy.
9. I like to have _____ help me when it is hard for me to do something.	**10.** I like to have _____ help me when it is hard for me to do something.