Developmental Transitions in Individuals' Roles in Their Communities

A central question in developmental psychology has been to identify the nature and timing of people's transitions from one phase of development to the next—from infancy to childhood through adulthood. In ethnographic accounts in many communities, researchers have also documented stages or phases of development identified by the people they study. For example, in the Navajo model of development, the infant's first laugh is recognized as a major transition, as explained by a Navajo mother:

At two or three months they have the First Laugh ceremony... Whoever makes the baby laugh then has to give a big feast for the baby. [This person] puts on the feast for the baby, in his place. This makes sure that the baby will be generous, and happy, and jokeful, and so that he will communicate well. The baby's first laugh is really when he becomes a person. (Chisholm, 1996, p. 173)

Developmental transitions are commonly portrayed by researchers as belonging to individuals, as in the stages of cognitive development described by Piaget. However, transitions across childhood can also be considered cultural, community events that occur as individuals change their roles in their community's structure. Often, developmental phases are identified in terms of the person's developing relationships and community roles. For example, development to maturity in the Navajo model is a process of acquiring knowledge to be able to take responsibility for oneself and others. When asked about the goal of development, one Navajo replied:

Being a leader of the people is the highest form of development, like its goal. The whole thing is responsibility—taking care of things. First you just learn to take care of yourself. Then some things, then some animals, then your family. Then you help all your people and the whole world. Talking real well is when you're ready to help the people, talking real well in front of big crowds of people, then you're ready to start helping. (Chisholm, 1996, p. 171)

Following the pre-stage of infancy, the Navajo model distinguishes the following stages across the life span (according to Chisholm, 1996, building especially on Begishi's scheme):

1. One becomes aware (2–4 years, with the first indicators of self-discipline)
2. One becomes self-aware (4–6 years, with awareness of one's own thought and will)
3. One begins to think (6–9 years, initiating appropriate, respectful contributions)
4. One's thought begins to exist (10–15 years, carrying out responsibilities without needing help or supervision and understanding one's place within the larger scheme)
5. One begins to think for oneself (15–18 years, fully able to manage one's own affairs)
6. One begins thinking for all things (17–22 years, mastery of every aspect of the responsibilities of adult life)
7. One begins to think ahead for oneself (22–30 years, the successes of one's life are manifested in one's children, and one may begin to take responsibility for others' welfare)
8. One begins to think ahead for all things (30+ years)

Many communities mark developmental transitions with ceremonies. Some transition ceremonies mark valued events and achievements, such as the first smile, first communion, graduation, or onset of menstruation. Others recognize age-based passages, such as the quinceañera ceremony and celebration for Mexican and Mexican American girls at age 15 (see figures 5.1, 5.2, and 5.3).

In this chapter, I first examine the contrast between distinguishing phases of life in terms of chronological age or events and achievements valued by the community. Then I consider cultural values related to "rate" of development. The chapter then describes transitions from infancy through
adulthood and considers how communities value and mark changes of developmental status with specialized events, often differentiating roles by gender. These cultural practices often bring individual development explicitly into relation with social and cultural expectations, marking the transitions not only for individuals but for generations.

Age as a Cultural Metric for Development

Time elapsed since birth has become a defining characteristic of individuals and an organizing principle for people’s lives in some communities. The centrality of this measure, and its connections with schooling, are apparent in the observations of a very young 20th-century British girl (3 years to months) who announced to her preschool teacher:

CHILD: Do you know, my baby’s one now.
STAFF: Your baby’s coming here when she’s older.
CHILD: She’ll go to playgroup when she’s two, though.
STAFF: Will she?
CHILD: Yeah. Because when you’re two you go to . . . When I was two
I went to a playgroup.
OTHER CHILD: So did I.
CHILD: That shows you, that people go to playgroup when they’re
two.
STAFF: Why do they go to a playgroup?
CHILD: Because they’re not old enough to go to school.

STAFF: I see. And how old were you when you came here, then?
CHILD: Three or four.
STAFF: Three or four. Then what happens when you’re five?
CHILD: You go . . . When I’m five I’ll only . . . I’ll go to a . . . I expect
I won’t come to here any more.
STAFF: Where will you be, then?
CHILD: Be! In a different school, of course. (Tizard & Hughes, 1984,
pp. 99–100)

In contrast with this ordering of life according to years since birth, in many communities age is not tracked (e.g., Harkness & Super, 1987; Mead,
1935; Rogoff, Sellers, Pirogotta, Fox, & White, 1975; Werner, 1979). In the
words of Minnie Aodla Freeman, reporting on a twenty-first birthday celebra-

F I G U R E 5.1
Helen Soto's first communion, 1944 (Mexican American.) Photo
and caption from Los Angeles Public Library.

F I G U R E 5.2
Tom Chong holding his grandnephew, Dean Brian Tom, at the traditional
celebration of the child’s first month of life, 1956. Tom is their family name; as an
older Chinese immigrant with a Chinese given name, Tom Chong put his family
name first, according to Chinese custom, but the baby’s American given name is
first and his family name last (Chinese American). Photo and caption from Los
Angeles Public Library.
Everybody talked and laughed to each other while I stood in front of the cake, not knowing what to say. I tried to look at each one of them and wondered how many knew that Inuit don’t celebrate birthdays, that we don’t reckon maturity in terms of years. (1978, pp. 36–37)

In the 1970s in the Mayan community where I worked, mothers’ estimates of their children’s age usually differed by a year or two from municipal birth records. When I asked the mothers how old they themselves were, they often said, “I don’t know, what do you think? 40? Or maybe it’s 50.” It didn’t matter to them.

When I began working in this Mayan town, I was surprised to note that on meeting a child, adults’ next question after “What is your name?” was not “How old are you?” but “Who are your mother and father?” Instead of a focus on identity as defined by individuals’ progress on a timeline, as is habitual in middle-class European American conversations, the Mayan questions suggest a focus on identity as defined by social relationships and place in the community.

Instead of using time-since-birth as a measure of development, people in small communities like this Mayan town may use relative seniority. People who have known each other all their lives are likely to know who is senior to whom, which may matter for issues of responsibility and privilege. For example, in the local Mayan language, there is one term for older sister and another for younger sister; a female is obliged by the language to distinguish these—there is not a general term for sister that can be used by females. (A similar system applies for males’ reference to older/younger brothers.)

Researchers interested in tracking ages can get a pretty good idea of how old people are by investigating who is senior to whom (and whether a person experienced some notable historical event, such as an earthquake or a drought). In addition, people around the world are aware of physical changes across the life span. Sometimes these are used as markers of development, as when the onset of menstruation marks a new phase in female development. Losing baby teeth occurs at a regular enough time in childhood that Western researchers sometimes use this as a substitute for age if they need time-since-birth measurements in communities in which age is not known or recorded. This change is also used as a marker of development in some other communities:

The Ngoni [of Central Africa] believed that children who had lost their first teeth, and acquired their second, had reached a new stage in their development. The obvious gaps in their mouths were filled, and this might happen between the ages of six-and-a-half and seven-and-a-half, and some of the children might be rather small and slight for their age. Socially, because they had their second teeth, and because it was a sign of physical change recognized for everyone, the Ngoni adult would regard these children as ready for a different kind of life. (Read, 1968, p. 46)

Even in the United States, using time-since-birth as a marker of human development is a rather recent habit. Before the middle of the 1800s, there was little reference to ages in diaries or in expert or popular writing (Chudacoff, 1989). Before the end of the 1800s, people often did not know or have records of their birthdate. It was not until the 20th century that Americans commonly referred to ages and began to celebrate birthdays regularly (see figure 5.4). Cards printed specifically for birthdays did not appear until the 1910s, and not until the 1930s did the birthday dirty “Happy Birthday to You” appear (when it became a hit in a Broadway play). Soon, birthdays became a major industry, and popular culture commonly referred to age norms (for example, popular songs referring to “sweet sixteen” as a time when a person is supposed to first fall in love).1

1The emphasis on age continues in the United States, with age-grading in many institutions, marketing of toys and movies, publications for specific age groups (e.g., Seventeen magazine), laws, and advice books.
The focus on age as a way to divide the life stream is thus a recent practice, speaking in terms of the history of humanity, now widespread in the industrialized United States and Europe. It fits with other aspects of industrial society's developing priorities and practices, specifically the goal of efficient management of schools and other institutions, modeled on the newly developed factory system, with its division of labor and assembly line:

Awareness of age and the age grading of activities and institutions were part of a larger process of segmentation within American society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These periods marked an era in which science, industry, and communications influenced people's lives in revolutionary ways. New emphases on efficiency and productivity stressed numerical measurement as a means of imposing order and predictability on human life and the environment. Scientists, engineers, and corporate managers strove for precision and control through the application of specialization and expertise. These same endeavors were applied to human institutions and activities—schools, medical care, social organizations, and leisure. The impetus for rationality and measurement also included the establishment of orderly categories to facilitate precise under-
The naming of a child marks the beginning of personhood in Cameroon (West Africa). Children serve a spiritual function, connecting with ancestors who have left the world of the living but have not gone far. Pregnancy denotes God's approval of the ancestors' wish to send a representative into the community through this couple (Nsamenang, 1992). The infants are not regarded as belonging to this world until they have been incorporated into the world of the living through naming, usually when the umbilical stump falls off (about the seventh day after birth). Before naming, the newborn is believed to belong more to the spirit world than the material world and could be "taken away" (that is, die) at any time. Children who die before naming are suspected of being "spirit" children, and in some communities are buried without mourning and are not considered as having lived. Naming is thus an occasion for rejoicing in the child's remaining with the world of the living—an initiation into the human community. Because infant mortality is high, a week is a critical period for "assessing God's willingness and final decision regarding the parents' worth for his precious gift" (p. 142). Other local socially marked transitions include the onset of smiling, beginning to talk, social maturity in being trusted to run errands and conduct oneself well, the appearance of secondary sex characteristics, marriage, parenthood, and death.

Around the world, distinctions in stages of development are often defined in terms of the child's beginning to participate in the family or community in a new way. For example, European American middle-class families often distinguish when an infant first makes a social smile or begins to talk—important transitions in infants' relations with their caregivers. Subsequent European American developmental transitions often center on children's participation in a key societal institution—school: preschooler, elementary age, high schooler. Other common U.S. transitions are tightly age-governed, but also mark new types of involvement in community activities, such as ages at which young people are allowed to drive a car, vote, and drink.

Other ways of delineating stages of development also do so with reference to children's relations to other people and the community. Margaret Mead referred to four major age grades:

"Lap children" spend most of their time on someone's lap or in their physical presence.
"Knee children" stay near the knees of a caregiver or move in an area that is closely monitored by caregivers.
"Yard children" roam more widely but stay close to home.
"Community children" go beyond the home and participate in other community institutions, such as school or market.

These phases of development identify children's changing relations with others in their communities (Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

**Rates of Passing Developmental "Milestones"**

There is a great deal of variation in how soon children reach developmental "milestones," such as beginning to smile, sit, walk, talk, and be responsible for various aspects of family life:

[Middle-class U.S. children] may be highly precocious verbally, in some cases speaking in full sentences by the age of 2 according to their parents. These children become adept at imaginative play and at competing for the attention and praise of parents and other adults.

Typically, however, these children will also frustrate their parents by slow developmental progress in relation to household responsibilities.

(Harkness & Super, 1992, p. 389)

Such variation is partially based on what is valued in children's cultural communities. For example, European American middle-class families stress the early development of verbal articulateness and assertiveness, whereas Italian signs of maturity focus on sensitivity to the needs of others and graciousness in entering and exiting social situations (Edwards, 1994).

Differences in communities' values and expectations underlie varying parental efforts to help children learn skills (Bril & Sabatier, 1986; Super & Harkness, 1997). African infants routinely surpass U.S. infants in their rate of learning to sit and to walk, but not in learning to crawl or to climb stairs (Kilbride, 1980; Super, 1981). This may be because African parents provide experiences for their babies that are intended to teach sitting and walking. Sitting skills are encouraged by propping very young infants in a sitting position supported by rolled blankets in a hole in the ground. Walking skills are encouraged by exercising the newborn's walking reflex and by bouncing babies on their feet. But crawling is discouraged, and stair-climbing skills may be limited by the absence of stairs.

In some communities, walking sooner is valued; in others, it is not desired. In Wogo, New Guinea, infants were not allowed to crawl and discouraged from walking until nearly 2 years of age so that they know how to take care of themselves and avoid dangers before moving about freely. An infant who showed an interest in moving about would be immediately picked up or put firmly in a corner. Toward the end of the second year, children learned to walk well within two or three days:

No one seems to think that active encouragement of any kind is necessary. When I told the natives how we coax our babies to stand at a
much earlier age, they admitted that such methods might be suitable where there was no fireplace or veranda from which to tumble, but they openly laughed at me for speaking of "teaching" children to walk. A child walks of its own accord, they said, once it has reached the appropriate stage of growth; I would be saying next that trees had to be instructed in how to bear fruit. (Hogbin, 1943, p. 302)

In contrast, learning how to talk in Wogo was regarded as requiring instruction. Wogo mothers imitated infants' babbling and repeated words to infants while feeding them. Names of objects were taught by pointing at something and saying its name over and over until the child repeated it:

As she prepares the meal, for example, [the mother] may say, "This is a pot (bwarba), pot, pot. I am putting food into a pot, pot, pot. You say it: 'pot, pot, pot.' Now, what is this—a pot, pot, pot." Other persons present take up the lesson in their turn, remarking, "Yes, a pot, pot, pot. Your mother puts food into the pot, pot, pot." "Pot, pot, pot," replies the child. "Yes, pot, pot, pot," echo the adults. (p. 303)

Guatemalan Mayan mothers reported that their children learned to walk and talk by watching others or with encouragement; few reported teaching the children to help them achieve these milestones. Mothers from a tribal farming community in India often simply shrugged when asked whether and how they taught their toddlers appropriate behavior or etiquette or said simply that children "just learn" (see Seymour, 1999).

In contrast, middle-class mothers in the United States and Turkey reported trying to advance the pace of their children's development, instructing them in walking, talking, or helping around the house (Rogoff et al., 1993). These mothers appeared to be concerned with developmental milestones and to consider themselves responsible for the children's rate of development. One U.S. mother, who had devised an extensive curriculum of games to teach her 17-month-old to read letters and to count, specified her child's progress in terms of Piagetian stages of cognitive development.

Age Timing of Learning

The question of how quickly children can reach developmental "milestones" was referred to as "the American Question" when I studied at Jean Piaget's Swiss institute. In Piaget's developmental theory, the sequence of stages in the development of thinking was important, but not the age at which new developments occurred. Nonetheless, for years American researchers tried to demonstrate Piagetian stages at earlier ages than the approximate ages that Piaget and his colleagues had identified. Indeed, this was one of the main thrusts of American researchers' response to Piaget's theory.

Concern with being "on time" (or "behind time" or "ahead of time") in daily life appeared in the United States during the 1870s, when standardized measurements became central in the new industrial system (Chudacoff, 1989). Before that, clocks and watches were rare and often not accurate, and people's activities were coordinated by the rhythms of daily life. The regular working hours of factories and the schedules of railroads and streetcars introduced standardized time to regulate people's activities.

By the 1890s, concern with scheduling extended beyond the hours of the day to the years of life, as experts delineated norms for the ideal age timing of life events, prescribing what it meant for an individual's experiences and achievements to be on time (or ahead or behind). Within a few decades, in the early 1900s, the interest in prescribing norms for the age of achievement of particular developmental milestones extended to concerns about characterizing individuals in terms of their degree of "retardation" (or "backwardness") versus "normal" development.2

When schooling became compulsory, a standard starting age was required to enforce the schooling laws and catch truants. This allowed schools to move students through the grades in age "batches" given the same instruction. School officials prioritized grouping on age-based "maturity" rather than on progress in learning school subjects (Chudacoff, 1989). In France and the United States, organizing instruction into stages for batch instruction also helped administrators supervise teachers (Anderson-Levitt, 1996).

The growing concern with timing of development stemmed in large part from educational administrators' alarm over the extent to which children were "behind" the grades in school that were designated for them. Such lags challenged the bureaucratic efficiency of age-grading for organizing schoolchildren (Anderson-Levitt, 1996; Chudacoff, 1989).

Mental Testing

Consistent with concerns about children being behind their expected level, mental testing developed about the same time that age-graded classes became common. Efforts to determine "mental age" were based on work in developmental psychology, especially in France and the United States. In France, Alfred Binet and colleagues were the first to develop tests of intel-

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2Likewise during this time, individuals increasingly made reference to their age in describing themselves and others, using age as a guidepost or making comparative statements relative to age norms (e.g., commenting on being "very tall for my age"; Chudacoff, 1989, p. 119).
lectual level, as a practical tool for schools of the early 1900s to sort out children who needed "special" education.

The effort to quantify "intelligence" reflected the era's (and societies') use of age as a systematic way of sorting people for the new compulsory schooling and more "efficiently" processing batches of students through the grades (Anderson-Levitt, 1996; Chudacoff, 1989). Mental age was determined by creating norms using test items that could be distinguished by age across childhood. The Intelligence Quotient was soon invented to compare tested mental age to chronological age (with 100 indicating that the mental and chronological ages are the same, designated as "normal" IQ).³ “Americans, particularly, became obsessed with defining and measuring mental age, and their efforts to do so riveted age norms and developmental schedules in the public consciousness more tightly than ever before” (Chudacoff, 1989, p. 79).

Ironically, Jean Piaget, whose stage theory of child development has been so influential in developmental psychology, began his career working on intelligence testing in Binet's laboratory (Anderson-Levitt, 1996). He became interested in going beyond the number of items a child got wrong on a test of intelligence to understand the basis of children's differing conceptions of phenomena across stages of mental development.

Development as a Racetrack

The "American Question" is based on a racetrack metaphor for development, assuming that children who pass the milestones of infancy and childhood earlier will be more successful in adulthood:

Teachers' use of "ahead" and "behind" as the idiom of achievement makes going to school sound like running a race, and the racetrack metaphor fits well. The contestants all begin from the same starting place, that is, at the same age; they all take off at the same point in time, the beginning of the school year; they all move along the same linear path, that is, through the stages or grades of the curriculum. (Anderson-Levitt, 1996, p. 70)

Teachers in the United States and France routinely refer to children's progress along a linear dimension measured now in months, such that children in the same school class are seen as being "ahead" or "behind" expected performance (Anderson-Levitt, 1996). Relevant to such judgments is whether their birthdate falls early or late in the year assigned to a particular grade level. Children who are slower in following predefined stages of learning to read (on the teachers' schedule) are regarded as failing or likely to become failures.

Many parents and politicians in the United States, like many teachers (and developmental psychologists), conceive of development in this unidimensional way, assuming that the timing of passing milestones translates to life success or failure. They impose a single straight path onto the inherently more complex dimensions and directions of human development.

In valued domains, middle-class U.S. parents often emphasize the rate of their children's development in comparison with other children (e.g., "advanced," "way ahead"). Such descriptions of children's comparative rate of development were not found in an East African community (Harkness & Super, 1992a). Anglo-Australian mothers expressed concern that instruction might be left until it was "too late," and most reported teaching their preschoolers the alphabet. Their concern with timing contrasted with Lebanese-Australian mothers, who were less likely to teach preschoolers the alphabet and indicated that if a general willingness to learn is sustained, skills can be learned when needed (Goodnow, Cashmore, Cotton, & Knight, 1984). Now, among some middle-class European American families, hopes for precocity (and fears of delay) push academic training and high expectations for learning into infancy, despite lack of evidence that early achievement of milestones offers any inherent advantage.

In some communities, infants are not expected to rapidly understand the ways of those around them, and adults are comfortable that infants will learn when they are ready if not pushed against their will. Infants' development is not conceived as progressing past a linear sequence of milestones in accord with a timeline. Their efforts are not expected to follow the same rules or linear form of progress as their elders; instead, they are accorded a unique social status.

According Infants a Unique Social Status

In some communities, infants and toddlers are accorded a unique social status in which their acts and responsibilities are regarded as being of a different sort than those of older children and adults. As such, they are not simply "immature" and needing to quickly learn how to behave by the rules of social behavior. They are in a period of moratorium in which they are not expected to follow the same rules and are not hurried to do so.

In such communities, babies and toddlers are expected not to be capable of understanding how to cooperate with the group; they are regarded

³Since the origins of mental testing a century ago, many problems in the assumptions and procedures of such testing have surfaced. Nonetheless, mental testing and chronological age remain common bureaucratic tools for sorting individuals for various educational and career opportunities.
as incapable of intentionally harming or mistreating others. So there is no sense in hurrying them to follow the rules. They are patiently given their way until they leave infancy and are regarded as capable of intentional acts and of understanding how to cooperate. In the meantime, they are accorded a privileged status in the family (Hewlett, 1992; Martini & Kirkpatrick, 1992; Mosier & Rogoff, 2002).

For example, in the Guatemalan Mayan community of San Pedro, when children under about age 2 want something, other people give it to them. Once when I brought gifts to the children of a Mayan friend, her 4-year-old came back a few minutes later without his toy helicopter, crying, "The baby wanted it." His mother responded, "Good for you, you gave it to him." Because his 1-year-old brother was too young to understand how to share, the right thing for a big brother to do was to support the baby in learning how to be a member of the group by respecting his wishes.

Such treatment of infants and toddlers has been termed "indulgent" by researchers from communities in which children are seen as willful from the start (Blount, 1972; Briggs, 1970; Harkness & Super, 1983; Joseph, Spicer, & Chesky, 1949). In middle-class European American families, 1-year-olds and 5-year-olds may be held to the same rules, with explicit concern for equality. They are often expected to take turns with desirable objects. Although probably given more support and leniency in following the rules than an older child, the toddler’s acts are interpreted as willful and needing correction to follow the mature form. Infants’ and toddlers’ development is supported by holding them to proper behavior so they will understand it.

Contrasting Treatment of Toddlers and Older Siblings

To examine differences in the family status of toddlers, Mosier and Rogoff (2002) visited Mayan and middle-class European American families with a 1-year-old and a 3- to 5-year-old. The middle-class European American children often tussled over desirable objects, and their mothers tried to get them to negotiate dividing the property and to consider each other’s equal rights. A mother would say “Why don’t you give your brother a turn now and then it will be your turn” or “You’ve had it for a long time now, give it to your sister.” Although mothers were a little more lenient with the 1-year-olds, they tried to get them to follow the same rules as the older children.

In contrast, in the Mayan families, 3- to 5-year-old siblings usually treated 1-year-olds as having a privileged status that allowed them not to follow the usual social rules. The older siblings seldom grabbed things from the toddler, and they usually voluntarily handed over an object if the toddler wanted it. They usually asked the toddler’s permission for access to a desirable object, and if the toddler said no, the 3- to 5-year-old would not insist. (Sometimes, the older children cleverly found ways to get the toddlers to allow them to play together, so that the older child could also play with the object.) The Mayan mothers did not often need to intervene to get the older siblings to let the toddler have their way, and they did not refer to turn-taking. Occasionally, they reminded the older child to let the toddler have the object because a toddler “does not understand.”

The Mayan mothers reported that toddlers are not old enough to do things on purpose; they cannot break things on purpose or understand that hitting or pulling hair hurts. This idea is illustrated by an incident in which a hefty 15-month-old walked around bonking his brothers and sisters, his mother, and his aunt with the stick puppet that I had brought along. The adults and older children just tried to protect themselves and the little children near them, they did not try to stop him. (When the little guy got close to me, I took the puppet out of his hand, and he gave me an indignant look. His mother hurriedly gave him a wink that meant I was just teasing, and he relaxed. What I had done was socially inappropriate—I had forced him to stop what he was doing.) When I asked local people what this toddler had been doing, they commented:

“He was amusing people; he was having a good time.”
Was he trying to hurt anybody?
“Oh no. He couldn’t have been trying to hurt anybody; he’s just a baby. He wasn’t being aggressive, he’s too young; he doesn’t understand. Babies don’t do things on purpose.”

In contrast, most of the middle-class European American mothers reported that their toddler was capable of breaking things on purpose. For example, several mothers said that their toddler destroys other children’s toys or rips their artwork on purpose, although they “know better.” (Ironically, observations suggested that the Mayan toddlers may have been more aware of and in tune with the actions and meanings of the group than were the middle-class European American toddlers; Rogoff et al., 1993.) The treatment of toddlers in the two communities seems to be based on different assumptions about how children learn to become responsible members of their community.

Continuities and Discontinuities across Early Childhood

In the Mayan approach, allowing toddlers not to follow the rules is based on the idea that their will should be given respect like that of any other person. Between the ages of 2 and 3, the age at which a new sibling is often born into the family, Mayan children are regarded as beginning to understand how to cooperate with the group. Then they change status from ba-
bies who have unchallenged access to what they want, to people who understand how to cooperate and do not insist on access. They can then respect the wishes of their new little sibling.

This transition involves discontinuity in the specific rules of sharing from infancy to childhood. It contrasts with the consistency in application of rules to toddlers and older children found in the European American middle-class community.

At the same time, the Mayan practices involve continuity in respecting others' autonomy, even for infants, who do not yet understand community ways. This is consistent with the deep respect for individual autonomy that prevails in this community and in some other communities in which infants are accorded a special status. The toddlers are regarded as learning how to cooperate by having their wishes respected, even though they are not regarded as capable of doing the same for others.

The pattern in Japanese child rearing may be related. Japanese mothers emphasize letting their small children grow up naturally, allowing their childish behavior. It is commonly believed that, with development, obstreperous conduct will naturally disappear. Through the mother's empathy toward the child and encouragement of the child's empathy toward her own and others' feelings, with time, the child brings his or her conduct in line with cultural norms. "It is implied that social rules cannot be enforced unless the child is subjectively ready to understand and accept them or to comply with them voluntarily" (Lebra, 1994, p. 263).

An Inuit infant who is given her way rather than having to follow the same rules as an older child may seem indulged or spoiled from a middle-class European American perspective (Briggs, 1970). But Minnie Aodla Freeman explained the difference from an Inuit perspective:

[Non-Inuit people] who have gone north and lived in the settlements, who do not understand Inuit home life or believe in our way of child-rearing, think that Inuit children are spoiled.

[When I visited a non-Inuit home in Ottawa]. I could not help but notice the treatment of the children by the parents. One child asked, "Who is that girl?" She was answered with whispers and told to leave. Instead of being proud that the child was curious, instead of considering the way the child used her words, the parents silenced her immediately. To my people, such discipline can prevent a child from growing mentally, killing the child's sense of interest. "Is it very cold where she comes from? Did she live in an igloo before she came here?" Shh! the mother was cautioning. "Go outside! Don't do that! Move away!" How I wanted to pick up the child and say, "It is not very cold where I come from because we wear warm clothes." But words like "don't," "no," "move" were to me like talking to a dog who was eating from some other dog's dish or who did not obey commands given during sled travel. My culture tells me that the word no leads to disobedient children who become very hard to handle later on. (1978, p. 22)

In middle-class European American communities, the end of infancy is expected to involve a sudden appearance of contrary behavior—the "terrible twos" (Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000; Wener, 1982). This transition is interpreted as indicating the appearance of autonomy and separateness. It is expected by parents, discussed in magazines, and expounded on by child-rearing experts. For example, a Boston mother and father described their 20-month-old as having entered the "stage" of "terrible twos," which they characterized as being obstinate, negative, and needing independence. They gave this example:

FATHER: When you put her in a car seat, you don't know whether she's gonna straighten out and not allow you to strap her in, or whether . . . She's pretty strong.
MOTHER (GESTURING): Two handed, right before they slide down, because with the polyester snowsuit on, they slide right off. Then you give them a karate chop in the middle . . .

What causes that behavior? Well, you're really sort of chaining them down, and it's exactly what they don't want to have happen, at this age. Because they have no control, they . . . you are forcing them to do something, and there's no way around it, they've gotta do it. And the more you force them into it . . .

FATHER: You can't trick them, because they know that the ultimate is that they get tied into the car seat, or that's my feeling.

MOTHER: And it seems like once she's in there, she is totally resigned to it, and she's fine. But just getting into it, is wicked. Why is control such an issue at this age? Well, I guess it's that whole stage of development, where they have to branch out, and do whatever it is they're going to do on their own, so they're testing everything. The first thing she says all the time is "I'll do it, I'll do it, I'll do it." Because they're not babies any more. (Harkness et al., 1992, p. 168)

In contrast, in many communities, such a transition to negativism and obstinacy around age 2 is not observed or expected (Hewlett, 1992; Rothbaum et al., 2000). For example, Zinacantecan infants in Mexico do not go through this transition; instead, they are watchful and observant, seeking contact with mothers who until then had treated them with a special status.
now reserved for a new baby (Edwards, 1994). Rather than asserting control and independence from their mother, they change their status from mother's baby to a child of the courtyard children's group—a child who acts as a responsible caregiver to the new baby and helps with household tasks.

**Responsible Roles in Childhood**

As children leave the toddler years, in many communities they begin to contribute to the work of their family (Harkness & Super, 1992a; Levin, 1990; Martini & Kirkpatrick, 1992; Nsamang, 1992). In colonial times in the United States, girls of 4 years knitted stockings and mittens and girls of 6 spun wool on a spinning wheel they could reach only by standing on a footstool (Ogburn & Nimkoff, 1955). Mayan children in the Guatemalan town I have worked in began to make a real contribution to household work by age 4 to 6 years—tending infants, delivering messages and running errands around town, and helping with meals and agricultural work. They were valuable and competent assistants by 8 to 10 years—making meals, weaving, supervising the household or family shop in the parents' absence, and tending crops (Rogoff, 1978; see figure 5.6).

**Figure 5.6**
A Mayan 10-year-old boy splitting the family firewood.

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**Onset of Responsibility at Age 5 to 7?**

In many parts of the world, age 5 to 7 years is an important time of transition in children's responsibilities and status in their community. Western, bureaucratic society shifts its treatment of children at this age, and has done so for centuries, viewing these children as becoming able to tell right from wrong, to participate in work, and to begin serious education in institutions outside the family (White, 1976). Developmental research often notes a discontinuity in skills and knowledge at about age 5 to 7 years (White, 1965), which happens to be the age when children begin school in the United States. In Europe, historically, children took on adultlike work status at about this age:

In the Middle Ages, at the beginning of modern times, and for a long time after that in the lower classes, children were mixed with adults as soon as they were considered capable of doing without their mothers or nannies, not long after a tardy weaning (in other words, at about the age of 7). They immediately went straight into the great community of men, sharing in the work and play of their companions, old and young alike. (Ariès, 1962, p. 411)

Descriptions of age transitions in many communities focus on this age. For example, when they lost their first teeth and began to get their second ones, Ngoni (Central African) children were expected to show independence and were held accountable for discourtesy. They stopped playing childish games and started skill training. The boys left the women's domain and entered dormitories and a system of male life (Read, 1968).

Ethnographies of 50 communities around the world (from the Human Relations Area Files) indicate a widespread change at about age 5 to 7 years in the onset of responsibilities and expectations of children:

It appears that in the age period centering on 5–7 years, parents delegate (and children assume) responsibility for care of younger children, for tending animals, for carrying out household chores and gathering materials for the upkeep of the family. The children also become responsible for their own social behavior and the method of punishment for transgression changes. Along with new responsibility, there is the expectation that children between 5 and 7 years begin to be teachable. Adults give practical training expecting children to be able to imitate their example; children are taught social manners and inculcated in cultural traditions. Underlying these changes in teachability is the fact that at 5–7 years children are considered to attain common sense or rationality.

At this age also, the child's character is considered to be fixed, and
he begins to assume new social and sexual roles. He begins to join with
groups of peers, and participate in rule games. The children’s groups
separate by sex at this time. Concurrently, the children are expected to
show modesty and sex differentiation in chores and social relationships
is stressed. All of these variables indicate that at 5–7 the child is
broadly categorized differently than before this age, as he becomes a
more integral part of his social structure. (Rogoff et al., 1975, p. 367)

What seems to happen at about age 5 to 7, as reflected in the ethnog-
graphic literature, is that children begin to be responsible and teachable.
However, at about age 8 to 10, parents often count on children to under-
stand and to help, with competence and responsibility (Sellers, 1975).

The expectations for children of age 5 to 7 (or any other age) have
some general basis, but it is important not to accord too much specificity to
age expectations for particular activities. Although many communities in
the survey of 50 ethnographies showed impressive regularities in children’s
beginning responsibilities at age 5 to 7 years, some had shifts outside that
age range (Rogoff et al., 1975). In addition, the apparent regularities may
have come partially from the Western ethnographers’ expectations; most of
them had to estimate ages because in most of the communities, people did
not know their age.

It is important not to give too much weight to specific age expectations
because the age at which children begin to contribute to specific activities is
strongly related to the sort of supports and constraints offered by their
community, as described in Chapter 1. Impressive variations occur in the
age at which children are expected to carry out complex, culturally valued
activities, such as being responsible for infants or handling knives or fire
safely, depending on how these activities and children’s roles are structured
in their communities. The ages of accomplishment are highly related to the
opportunities children have to observe and participate in the activities and
cultural values regarding development of particular skills.

**Maturation and Experience**

Sometimes, child development experts in the United States regard adults in
other communities as irresponsible if young children handle dangerous ma-
terials or tend infants, because they assume that young children can’t do
such things. However, middle-class U.S. families also expect children to do
some things that are seen as inappropriate or even dangerous in other
places, such as sleeping by themselves from the first months of life (Morelli
et al., 1992) or engaging in school-like discourse or beginning to learn to
read in the toddler years (Heath, 1983).

Many activities that a community may treat as having a “natural” point
of transition are only natural given the assumptions and the circumstances
and organization of that community. Instead of assuming that age tran-
sitions are inherent to children’s biological maturation, independent of cir-
cumstances, it is reasonable to ask how children in a particular community
become responsible enough to take care of themselves in the ways expected
and supported in that community. The impressive changes that come with
biological maturation are accompanied by powerful changes in communi-
tywide expectations and opportunities for children’s participation in the ac-
tivities valued in the community.

For example, in middle-class communities, the role of a particular cul-
tural institution—formal schooling—is so central that its contributions to
children’s developmental transitions are often overlooked. Researchers com-
monly interpret children’s age as a measure of maturation plus generic ex-
perience with the world (Wohlwill, 1970). Differences in development
often are considered to be differences in the rate of maturation along a nat-
ural developmental time course, perhaps sped up or retarded by generic en-
vironmental circumstances. Such an approach overlooks the near complete
association of age with the specific experience of schooling in nations where
school is compulsory (Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 1979).
This is despite the fact that common age labels in the United States specif-
ically refer to children’s schooling—preschoolers and school-age children.

Many changes that occur in middle childhood in the United States
may be largely a matter of having learned the skills or ways of doing things
that are promoted in this institution. Because the ubiquitous role of school-
ing is usually overlooked, there is little basis for determining how matura-
tion and experience work together to produce many of the transitions in
middle childhood that are commonly described in developmental psychol-
ogy research.

**Adolescence as a Special Stage**

Some observers have argued that certain phases of development treated in
middle-class communities as “natural,” such as adolescence, are cultural in-
ventions unique to certain cultural conditions (Hollingshead, 1949; Sara-
swathi, 2000). Nonetheless, some transition time is usual between child-
hood and adulthood. A delay between the onset of puberty and adulthood
appears to be universal for boys in nonindustrial societies. They are rarely
deemed marriageable before their late teens, apparently due to the time
needed to show sufficient responsibility to provide for a wife and children
(Schlegel & Barry, 1991). Girls may marry as early as 13, but in a majority