

“Act Your Age”: The Vineland Adaptive Behavioral Scales

Children who have experienced trauma often become quite a parenting puzzle post-placement. One minute parents are receiving a “normal” adolescent attitude, and the next the teen is off playing kick ball with the five-year-olds in the neighborhood—and enjoying it! Mid-way into the game, Mom or Dad interrupts the play and on the way back home a lecture ensues that includes statements like, “You need to act your age!” or “You need to make friends your own age!”

Adopted children with histories of abandonment, [neglect](#) and [abuse](#) also revert to baby talk and enjoy playing with toddler toys at much older chronological ages. There are kids who break every toy they receive, don’t seem to have the capacity to sit and play for any period of time, or there are those who simply just sit or are “bored” the majority of the time. These kids haven’t developed any interests and so, they cannot occupy their time.

Is your room clean yet?

Chores are another area of difficulty in many adoptive families. A common parent report is that cleaning a bedroom has “taken hours” and even at that, the room remains full of clutter! Garbage cans stay at the end of the driveway, pets sit next to empty dishes, last night’s dinner dishes are found in the cupboard still greasy and so on!

One reason such difficulties occur is because *there is a difference between the adoptee’s chronological age and his social and emotional age—the age at which the child is actually functioning*. The [Vineland Adaptive Behavioral Scales](#) is an assessment administered by Psychologists, Social Workers, Counselors, Developmental Pediatricians and other qualified professionals. It measures the discrepancies between the child’s actual age and the age at which the child is functioning, on a daily basis, in the following areas:

Communication

- *Receptive*: How the individual listens and pays attention, and what he or she understands
- *Expressive*: What the individual says, how he uses words in sentences to gather and provide information.
- *Written*: What the individual understands about how letters make words, and what he or she reads and writes

Daily Living Skills

- *Personal*: How the individual eats, dresses and practices personal hygiene
- *Domestic*: What household tasks the individual performs
- *Community*: How the individual uses time, money, the telephone, the computer, job skills, etc.

Socialization

- *Interpersonal Relationships*: How the individual acts with others
- *Play and leisure time*: How the individual plays and uses leisure time
- *Coping Skills*: How the individual demonstrates responsibility and sensitivity to others

Below are Betty's scores on the Vineland. Betty moved to her adoptive home at age 3. Her early years were spent with her birth mom. During residence in her birth home, Betty was neglected—she was often left alone. Frequently, her birth mom left her in the care of “friends.” Upon removal from her birth home, it was apparent that Betty had suffered physical abuse. Betty's adoptive family is comprised of her Mom, Dad and her three brothers: Paul, age 12, Robert, age 9 1/2 and Matt, age 7. At the time she was adopted, she was described as a “good fit” for this family because she was sandwiched between Paul and Robert. It was believed that the three would grow up having lots of fun. Unfortunately, because of Betty's pre-adoptive history her development has remained delayed for years!

Her Vineland was administered when she was the *chronological age 11 years, and 1 month old*:

Communication

- *Receptive*: 1 year, 9 months
- *Expressive*: 5 years, 11 months
- *Written*: 6 years, 3 months

Daily Living Skills

- *Personal*: 5 years, 11 months
- *Domestic*: 7 years, 7 months
- *Community*: 7 years, 9 months

Socialization

- *Interpersonal Relationships*: 1 year, 11 months
- *Play and Leisure Time*: 3 years, 2 months
- *Coping Skills*: 2 years, 3 months

Overall, Betty functions between and the ages of approximately 2 years old to 8 years old! There are no areas in which Betty's scores match her chronological age of 11 years old!

This is important information for Betty's parents and siblings. The Vineland scores allow her mother, father and brothers to adjust their expectations. For example, in the area of play and leisure, Betty functions as a 3-year-old. The family members can now ask themselves, “What is play like with a pre-schooler?” Certainly, young children haven't grasped playing fair, taking turns, losing graciously, etc. This helps to explain why board games have always been difficult for Betty, and why Betty isn't always a fun playmate!

Betty's personal daily living skills—how the individual eats, dresses and practices personal hygiene—are the equivalent of about a 6-year-old. This is a discrepancy of five years given Betty's chronological age of 11! This is quite an area of conflict in Betty's family. Betty's hair is always dirty and she frequently has a body odor. Such difficulties make sense when we realize that parents must still help school-age children with these tasks. Again, the Vineland can help Betty's family understand that their expectations of Betty's performance in this area must be adjusted.

Let's think about Betty in relation to her brothers. Paul and Robert have “outgrown” Betty developmentally. As typical children they are functioning at their chronological ages of 12 and

91/2. Matt, also an appropriately developing 7-year-old, has surpassed Betty in most areas. In reality, Betty is really the youngest child in the family! This certainly isn't what Betty's parents expected at the time of their adoption!

We have been administering the Vineland Adaptive Behavioral Scale, [at our office](#), for four years. Scores like Betty's are quite common among our clients. Additionally, patterns of developmental delays are apparent at very young ages in both international and domestic adoptees. So, *post-adoption*, the Vineland is a helpful tool. It allows each family member to understand the "[mixed maturities](#)" (Cogen, 2008) presented by their adopted son, daughter, brother or sister. Phrases such as "act your age" take on a much different meaning when Vineland scores are presented to parents and siblings. It helps clarify treatment goals that lend to developmental growth. Certainly, administration throughout a course of therapy demonstrates whether or not services are effective.

Developmental Growth is a Priority Pre- and Post Adoption

However, the Vineland would make a wonderful *pre-adoptive* tool as well. The family could enter the adoption understanding the "younger ages" at which their prospective child is functioning. Thus, the entire adoptive family enters the adoption with more realistic expectations of the new family member. Parents, brothers, sisters and professionals could identify the best parenting tools and therapeutic interventions to help the traumatized "grow up" and to integrate into the family successfully.