

Childhood Development: Early Childhood

Janhavi Pawar

Manager – Curriculum Design and Content, Magic Bus India Foundation

Abstract: This chapter examines the complexities of early child development research. After an overview of the functions and limitations of developmental theory and research in relation to early childhood education, the chapter focuses on two educationally relevant areas: the development of cognitive essentials, specifically children's representational thinking, self-regulation, and planning, and the development of emotional competence, specifically emotional security and emotion regulation.

I. Development in the Early Years

Early childhood development is the key to a full and productive life for a child and to the progress of a nation. Early childhood is a critical stage of development that forms the foundation for children's future well-being and learning. Research has shown that half of a person's intelligence potential is developed by age four and that early childhood interventions can have a lasting effect on intellectual capacity, personality, and social behaviour. Failure to invest in ECD can result in development delay and disability as well as inhibit the optimal development and performance of children throughout their lives.

The purpose of ECD is to protect the child's rights to develop his or her full cognitive, emotional, social and physical potential. The approach promotes and protects the rights of the young child to survival, growth and development. Experiences from ECD programmes around the world demonstrate the promise for children's well-being and for that of their families and communities¹.

The study of childhood development is a thoroughly analysed field. As children progress through the first five to seven years of life, a number of developmental stages occur. During this time, there are variations in development that can affect a child's behaviour. These variations, in turn, are influenced by a host of factors. Further, determining whether or not that behaviour is normal depends on a number of considerations. According to Schor (2000), most children have basic desires for recognition, success, acceptance and unconditional love. There are a number of reasons why certain children are able to master the early stages of development while others seem to lag or have behavioural or emotional problems. Some of these variations in development are natural and arise from the different paces at which children develop. In these cases, a child that apparently is developing more slowly may not in fact be experiencing a problem or exhibiting an abnormal behaviour pattern.

II. Motor Skills

Motor skills are essentially actions that enable people to move the muscles in their bodies. "Greater" motor skills relate to the movement of the arms, legs, feet and the entire body in general. The development of these skills is seen as children begin to crawl, then walk, and then by running and jumping. "Fine" motor skills, on the other hand, are smaller actions such as being able to grasp objects with the hands, and to use the lips and tongue to taste objects. While there are differences between boys and girls, children attain these developmental benchmarks at different rates and acquire these skills at their own paces.

III. Communication Styles

Boys and girls also display different styles of communication. While boys tend to be more adversarial, girls tend to be agreeable and more likely to have empathy. Girls tend to externalize positive emotions and internalize sadness and anxiety (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013), whereas boys appear to have a harder time expressing emotions, in particular anger. Many teachers claim that boys can be more troublesome than girls. This can be seen by the fact that boys are more likely to shout, to be stubborn, to argue and to seek attention. In so doing they also are likely to disrupt others. Such behaviour usually causes a teacher to react negatively. The gender of the teacher can also be important in light of the fact that the majority of teachers of childhood-aged students are women. For Mercurio, "boys need to master an environment in which they feel tested." But the challenge for girls is to "find a voice ... while guarding against the danger of fracturing relationships and being cut off from them" (Mercurio, 2003 p. 256).

IV. Cognitive Development

Young children are not only growing physically during early childhood, but they are also growing mentally. Children of this age continue to advance their skills in observing and interacting with the world around them. They also make tremendous leaps in how they process, store, and use

information. Quantifying cognitive change is a bit tricky. We do not count the number of new neurons or measure the amount of connections between synapses and come up with averages for different ages. Rather, we rely on theories, such as Piaget's stages of cognitive development, Erickson's psychosocial stages, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to give us a way to understand and to measure children's mental and social development and progression. According to Piaget, children in the Preoperational stage of development build on skills learned and mastered during the Sensorimotor stage². During this stage, young children's play becomes increasingly imaginary and filled with fantasies. As children develop cognitively, their play will move from simple make-believe to plots involving more characters and scenarios, games with sophisticated rules, etc. According to Piaget, playing isn't just fun; it is an important part of brain development.

V. Social and Emotional Development

Sharing, making friends, paying attention, expressing emotions, and dealing with challenges successfully are

critical to lifelong learning, success, and happiness. Social and emotional development involves several interrelated areas of development, including social interaction, emotional awareness, and self-regulation.

Below are examples of important aspects of social and emotional development for young children.

Social interaction focuses on the relationships we share with others, including relationships with adults and peers. As children develop socially, they learn to take turns, help their friends, play together, and cooperate with others.

Emotional awareness includes the ability to recognize and understand our own feelings and actions and those of other people, and how our own feelings and actions affect ourselves and others.

Self-regulation is the ability to express thoughts, feelings and behaviours in socially appropriate ways. Learning to calm down when angry or excited and persisting at difficult tasks are examples of self-regulation.

	Prenatal	0 – 1 years	1 – 3 years	3 – 6 years
Motor Development				
Emotional Development				
Social Development				
Vocabulary				
Math/ Logic				

Social and emotional development begins in the earliest moments. Infants learn through social interactions with the adults who care for them and most are born with the ability to read basic social cues.³ For example, in the first hours of life, infants turn their heads toward their parents' voices. Later in infancy, most babies learn to look to where adults are looking or pointing and then begin imitating simple actions and sounds during interactions with caregivers. For some children with developmental delays or disabilities, milestones may come a little later or children may need extra support to enhance their social and emotional development. Supporting all young children's early social interactions helps them begin to understand their world and open the door for the earliest learning experiences. Children with a strong social and emotional

foundation are more likely to graduate high school, go to college, and fare better on measures of overall wellness.^{4, 5} The research tells us that the relationship between children, their families, and other adults in their lives is critical to children's healthy social and emotional development.^{6, 7, 8}

VI. Conclusion

As this article has shown, children continue to grow and to change in amazing ways as they move from toddlerhood to school-age. They gain the ability to run and to climb stairs independently, as well as to cut with scissors and to grip a writing tool. Cognitively, young children learn how to think symbolically, which leads to make-believe play, and their language explodes and matures. Emotionally, children learn how to express their own feelings and to feel reflective

empathy. Socially, they begin to cultivate relationships with peers as well as deepen family relationships. Morally, they begin to understand "right" versus "wrong," and to understand they have the choice about which way to go.

Citations

- [1] UNICEF (2001) State of the World's Children, UNICEF, New York, 2001.
- [2] <https://www.simplypsychology.org> › Jean Piaget
- [3] Brazelton, T. B. & Cramer, B.G. (1991): The Earliest Relationship: Parents, Infants and the Drama of Early Attachment. Accessed at <https://www.scribd.com/document/295987111/T-Berry-Brazelton-TheEarliest-Relationship-Parents-Infants-and-theDrama-of-Early-Attachment>
- [4] Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2015). How Children's Social Competence Impacts their Wellbeing in Adulthood. Available online: <http://www.rwjf.org/en/library/research/2015/07/how-childrens-social-competence-impacts-their-well-being-inadu.html>
- [5] Jones, Damon E., Mark Greenberg, and Max Crowley. (2015). Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness. *American Journal Public Health*, 105(11), 2283–2290.
- [6] Brazelton, T. B. & Cramer, B.G. (1991): The Earliest Relationship: Parents, Infants and the Drama of Early Attachment. Accessed at <https://www.scribd.com/document/295987111/T-Berry-Brazelton-TheEarliest-Relationship-Parents-Infants-and-theDrama-of-Early-Attachment>
- [7] Cassidy, J. (2008). The nature of the child's ties. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford Publications.
- [8] John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).