

Child development

As an educator, the relationships you build with children helps shape their learning and development and supports their mental health and wellbeing.

Healthy child development

Child development refers to the physical, social, emotional and cognitive changes that occur in the early childhood years from birth to school age.

Early experiences shape children's development and can have a lasting effect on mental health and wellbeing. While families are the first and most important influence on children's development, educators also play an important role in supporting and promoting healthy child development.

Key areas of development in the early years

Brain development

Our brains develop throughout our lives, starting in utero and continuing through childhood into young adulthood. The brain develops gradually, with lower and more primitive areas developing first (that is, those parts of the brain that regulate body functions such as breathing, heart rate and temperature).

This is followed by the higher cerebrum developing, which is responsible for more complex functions such as organisational and planning skills.

The early years are critical for brain development because of the rapid growth of neural connections. It's estimated that during the first few years of life, more than one million neural connections form every second. These connections provide pathways of communication between neurons which supports our functions and behaviours.

Experiences, personal connections and relationships during the early years have the greatest impact on brain development, more than at any other time. This is when the brain is most sensitive to stimulation from the environment. Positive relationships and welcoming learning environments promote children's development, while early negative experiences may impact a child's developmental progress.

Social development

Social development comes from learning the values, knowledge and skills that enable children to relate to others well. This kind of learning is passed on to children through social relationships within the family and community, and with other significant adults who teach and care for them.

Through their relationships with others, children build a sense of who they are and where they "fit" in the world. Children's ability to understand others and take their needs and views into account develops over time. Young children are naturally self-focused. They often play beside, rather than with other children and tend to think that everyone sees things the same way they do. In early primary school, children learn that others may perceive things differently from them.

As thinking skills develop, children are more able to understand another person's point of view and to appreciate multiple ways of looking at the same event or situation.

Emotional development

Emotional development involves learning about feelings and emotions, understanding how and why they happen, recognising one's own

feelings and those of others, and developing effective ways of managing them.

The first emotions observed in babies often include joy, anger, sadness and fear. Later, as children begin to develop a sense of self, more complex emotions like shyness, surprise, elation, embarrassment, shame, guilt, pride and empathy often emerge. As children develop, the things that provoke their emotional responses change, as do the strategies they use to manage them.

Cognitive development

Cognitive development refers to growth in a range of thinking and learning skills, including language, attention, planning, problem-solving and memory.

Although children are born with some inherited tendencies, they need an environment that stimulates learning and development to reach their learning potential. Most children tend to develop skills for thinking and learning in a predictable sequence (for instance, children start to tell stories by looking at pictures in a book before they learn to recognise words).

Motor skills

Motor skills refer to specific movement skills that children develop to carry out everyday activities.

Fine motor skills involve the smaller hand muscles and are important for performing everyday tasks (such as using pencils and scissors, doing up buttons and tying shoelaces).

In contrast, gross motor skills use the large muscles of the body that enable us to stand, walk and run, throw and catch a ball, and ride a bike.

Sensory motor skills

Sensory motor skills help us take in information from our physical senses (for example, vision, smell and touch) and integrate it with motor movements to complete actions. For example, a child hears an instruction and then carries out the action. These skills are needed for a wide range of tasks and are important for learning and development. A well-integrated sensory

motor system helps with self-regulation, play, self-confidence, self-care skills and academic learning.

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Learn more about social and emotional learning (SEL) and teaching for resilience in the [Learning Resilience](#) domain.

Development milestones

Each child develops at a different rate. The pace of development is influenced by inherited tendencies and the experiences and opportunities children are exposed to. Some developmental milestones across childhood often include:

Babies

- Development of head control and early gross motor skills such as rolling over and sitting.
- Visual areas of the brain develop, leading to full binocular vision.
- Significant growth in the areas associated with learning and memory.
- Language circuits strengthen.
- Increase in sensory motor skills.

Toddlers

- Rapid development of motor skills.
- Significant increase in language abilities – vocabulary often quadruples between ages one and two.
- Increased ability to complete more complex tasks.
- Greater capacity for complex thought and cognitive flexibility.
- Starting to take an interest in other children, playing near or beside them.

Preschoolers

- Greater sophistication in language abilities.
- Greater capacity to manage emotions.
- Greater skills in reasoning and understanding of complex ideas.

- More interest in playing with other children and learning to share and take turns.

Primary school

From age 5

- Large vocabulary of 2,000 words or more; learning as many as 5-10 new words each day.
- Can make simple decisions on their own (for example, deciding what shoes to wear).
- Can memorise basic information (such as an address and phone number).

From age 8

- Increased problem-solving ability.
- Can understand and carry out instructions with multiple steps.
- Increased ability to focus on one thing at a time.
- Beginning to think in more hypothetical, creative and abstract ways.
- Increased attention span; able to stay focused on completing a task (such as a school assignment).

The importance of play

Play is crucial for children's learning and development. Play helps children make sense of their world, providing them with opportunities to practise what they have seen around them. Play helps them to learn new ways of thinking and doing things. Much of children's early learning about social relationships and how to express and manage their feelings takes place through play. Children's play is quite sophisticated and requires a range of skills.

When you think about a group of children playing "cooking" in the home corner, there are many skills needed for them to participate. They activate their:

- memory (for example, of how the adults around them cook in the kitchen)
- language (for example, communicating effectively with their peers)

- sensory motor skills (for example, manipulating objects and putting them in the appropriate space)
- self-regulation, planning and organisation (for example, working out how they will play, how they are expected to behave in their roles and being mindful of others)
- learning (for example, how to cooperate with others)
- attention (for example, being focused and engaged in the play for an extended period).

The importance of relationships

Relationships with families, communities and educators influence children's development and learning.

From the time they're born, children rely on the adults around them to meet their physical and emotional needs. When caregivers provide nurturing care, children learn that their actions such as crying or cooing lead to a response.

Relationships also give children models of how to interact with others in their environment. They learn new skills by watching those around them and practising what they learn through their play and behaviour.

The interactions between a child and their caregiver has been described as 'serve and return' and they provide the foundation for healthy brain development. When caregivers respond appropriately to an infant or young child's needs, the neural pathways responsible for communication and social skills are formed and strengthened. Therefore, consistent warmth and responsiveness by caregivers and community can help children's brains develop in an optimal way.

Children's sense of safety comes from warm, responsive and trusting relationships, as well as nurturing, predictable and calm environments. When children feel safe it helps them feel confident to explore their environment, try new things and feel supported in their attempts to develop new skills.

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Learn about childhood belonging and connectedness in the [Connect](#) module.

What can you do to support children's development?

As an educator, you have many opportunities to promote healthy development in everyday interactions with children. Here are just a few ideas:

- You support positive social and emotional development when you model respect and consideration and encourage children to be similarly respectful in all their relationships.
- Show your willingness to listen and consider children's feelings.
- Show you are interested by commenting on what you see them doing, without judging or adding your own suggestions.
- Help children think through and solve the day-to-day difficulties they encounter. Ask questions that encourage children to put themselves in someone else's shoes. Questions like "How would you feel if...?" encourages them to recognise others' feelings and perspectives.
- Observe what friendship skills the child might still need to learn (for example, if a child is feeling left out or excluded). Coach children in the skills they need to develop and provide them with feedback.
- Help children to manage their behaviour by being clear about rules or expectations and guiding them to manage strong emotions like anger or frustration.
- Build [purposeful and positive, culturally respectful relationships](#) with First Nations families and communities in your learning community.
- Use the [BETLS Observational Tool](#) to help you gather and document the development and wellbeing of each child. Become familiar with the signs of potential developmental concerns. Maintain close relationships with

families so they feel comfortable discussing any concerns they have regarding their child's development or behaviour.

- Talk to children about nutritious eating habits and incorporate this into the curriculum. Let children see you preparing, eating and enjoying nutritious food.
- Ensure children have plenty of time and space for active play, both inside and outside. And get involved yourself.

What if you have concerns about a child's development?

Observing and monitoring each child's development is important to identify whether children are meeting developmental milestones. Early identification of concerns, and the implementation of early intervention strategies if required, is important to minimise the impact of developmental delays on children's learning and future progress.

If you have concerns, you could raise these with your wellbeing team and approach the child's family to discuss them. Be sure to approach the discussion with the family with [sensitivity and care](#). Keep in mind that these discussions can be challenging - consider the timing, setting, and your existing relationship. For example, is there someone else in the team that would be better placed to have this discussion?

Talk with the child's family about visiting their general practitioner (GP) or a pediatrician. The child may need a referral to specialists such as an occupational therapist, speech therapist, psychologist or physiotherapist.

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Learn more about social and emotional development in the [Learning Resilience](#) domain

Bibliography

Visit [Child development](#) for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

