



## Key messages

- Every child is a unique individual whose development usually follows predictable patterns.
- Rates of development vary from child to child and from time to time.
- Many factors affect a child's development, for example, low birth weight, a recent move or their family being under stress.
- Each child's personal story is important and is the starting point for supporting their development and learning.
- Where there are concerns about a child's development always talk to parents and seek help from other professionals.

## What Child Development means

Child Development highlights the crucial importance of a wide range of factors that affect the individual pathway along which each child in the Early Years Foundation Stage develops. This covers the time from their birth until the end of August following their fifth birthday.

A child's growth, development and learning are interrelated in complex ways from the moment of conception all the way through infancy to early childhood and beyond.

## Why Child Development is important

Experiences during the early years strongly influence a child's future development. This means that the care and education that babies and young children receive to support their growth, development and learning must be of high quality and appropriate to their individual needs.

### What is meant by growth?

- Growth is the increase in size, weight and form of a child's body from conception onwards.
- Although there are many differences between babies, for example, in terms of their size at birth, in general their growth pathways are similar.
- The baby's brain at birth contains many more neurons (nerve cells) than the adult brain, but it weighs only one quarter as much. While it is normal for many neurons to die during the early years, the growth of connections between the remaining neurons is massive and continues through to adolescence.
- After birth the baby continues to grow steadily in size and weight, and the body develops very rapidly in the first three years.

### What is meant by development?

- Development is the process from conception to birth and beyond, in which the body, brain, abilities and behaviour of the infant, child and adult become more complex, and continue to mature throughout life.

- Development involves cognition, memory, attention, language and communication as well as feelings, relationships and physical skills.
- The baby's brain is not simply a fixed structure which develops in a genetically pre-determined way; it depends on external stimulation to develop.
- Babies' development and learning is affected by their interaction with people around them.
- Early relationships strongly influence how children develop, and having close, secure relationships, known as attachments, to their carers, is very important for their healthy development.

### What is meant by learning?

- Learning is the acquisition of knowledge, abilities and skills; early learning is closely linked with growth and development.
- This complex process results from children's own experiences such as 'play, exploration, everyday talk and social interactions with peers and siblings' (POST, 2000, p.9).
- Learning is also powerfully influenced by interactions between the child and a 'more skilled other', such as an adult or a more able child, who supports their learning.
- Language and thinking are closely connected: when children talk they learn how language works and about ideas and concepts such as how other people feel, what they believe, how the physical world is organised and about everyday concerns.

## Effective practice in relation to Child Development

1. Obtain an accurate picture of the child and their family prior to admission and keep clear records which are regularly shared with the family and updated with them.

Gather information about the child's:

- Particular needs – whether and how the child likes to go to sleep; whether and when a child might want a special comforter; the food the child is familiar with and what other foods they are able or not able to eat; whether the child is in nappies, learning to use the toilet or toilet trained; special words for bodily functions.
- Family – who are the significant people in a child's family; whether these people are with the family at the time; their names and how they are known to the child; the language of the home and any information about specific cultural requirements or practices which could affect the child; any information which helps practitioners to know, understand and support the family better.
- Health – whether the child is generally well, or has any specific medical issues, special needs or disabilities; whether their health has been a concern in the past and how practitioners can support the child; any current or ongoing health-related issues that will require professional support from the multi-agency team.
- Development and learning – how parents feel their child is developing and learning; what they want at this time for their child; whether they have any concerns; what they can tell the setting about their child's current interests, their communication, their relationships, their emotional and social development, their physical development and what their child likes to do.

- Wider information – any other information that will help practitioners to make more appropriate provision for the child; whether other professionals are already involved with the family for any reason; whether the family has recently moved; whether the family are in need of further support because of health, housing, financial concerns, or other circumstances affecting their well-being; whether the child has attended or does attend any other settings; what plans have been made to make and keep contact between settings.

In addition:

- Create dated records with the family that show relevant, clear information about the child's growth, development and learning.
  - Talk to the family and any professionals involved with them at regular intervals, recording any further information, as relevant.
  - Be aware of developmental progression and be alert to delays or differences that may be important, and always discuss any concerns with parents.
2. Be aware of the variation in children's developmental paths, ensuring that this is considered in the light of their individual experiences, strengths and needs.
- Recognise that when young children's needs are met, they grow, develop and learn at their own rate and in their own time because their development is individual to them.
  - Support children during this period by being responsive to and interested in all aspects of their growth, development and learning.
  - Meet children's emotional and social needs for comfort, companionship, reassurance, praise and recognition by providing an environment in which the young child can feel secure to play and learn at their own rate.
  - Encourage children to communicate, to play, to learn, to express their feelings and to learn the rules that help them to keep safe at all times. Be aware that while all children need similar support, because of different circumstances some children may be more vulnerable than others.
3. Build on the information you have to understand the child's story and use this information as the starting point for supporting the child's development and learning.
- Maintain contact with families and with other professionals so that information is accurate and up-to-date.
  - Think about the child's all round development – their physical and mental well-being; their responses to the experiences on offer in the setting; their relationships with family members, practitioners, other children; their communication. Identify their strengths and any areas for support. Give them space and freedom to express their needs, hopes and fears.
  - Involve parents in the process of understanding and supporting their child's development.
  - Identify any concerns about a child's development with parents and, with their permission, seek further advice.

## Child Development and developmental stages

### Birth–11 months

Even before birth, babies are finding out about the world and the people in it. They are aware of sights, sounds and movement within moments of being born; they know the sound of their mother's voice and have a drive to make contact with her and other family members. Very soon motor skills begin to develop which help them steady their heads and necks and gain increasing control of their bodies, arms and legs as they reach out, move and stretch.

Babies thrive on warm and consistent love and care and they enjoy being with people. Babies quickly become emotionally attached to the person who cares for them most, such as a parent or grandparent, and those they see regularly, such as siblings, family members or carers.

Babies communicate from the start through crying, looking intently at people who are close, vocalising or grunting contentedly. They scan faces and search to make eye contact or turn to a familiar sound, such as their mother's or their carer's voice. Babies' smiles and laughter show their pleasure at new or familiar things and their varied cries signal their different needs and feelings. When babies' needs are met they learn to expect that somebody will be there to feed them when they are hungry, or comfort them when they are frightened or in pain. They also thrive emotionally when they are treated as a special person in their family or in a childcare setting.

### 8–20 months

Babies' interest in people develops rapidly and they begin to share attention with carers, pointing to things that interest them, showing increasing curiosity in everything around them. Building on their communication skills, a child now begins to develop a sense of self and is more able to express their needs and feelings. At first, sounds, gestures and a few simple words are used. Later, with encouragement and plenty of interaction with carers, common everyday things, people and wishes are named, and a child's vocabulary grows very quickly during this period. Increasing mobility opens up new opportunities for exploration, exercising muscles at the same time as supporting cognitive development.

Access to safe and interesting environments, indoors and outside, with age-appropriate resources, motivates a child to find out about new things. During this period children continue to develop coordination and physical abilities through action. With growing autonomy, this is a time when a child can start to learn the beginnings of self-control, and how to relate to other people. Special people with whom a child now has a positive attachment can help to encourage the child to develop their social skills.

### 16–26 months

A child in this phase is usually full of energy and needs opportunities which support their growing independence and sense of adventure. Growing physical strengths and skills mean that a child needs active times for exercise, and quiet times for calmer activities. Playing with other children is an important new area for learning. This helps a child to better understand other people's thoughts and feelings, and to learn how to get along with others, though this takes time and support from adults. Encourage exploration and simple self-help to build a sense of self-confidence as children begin to do small things independently, such as pulling off a sock or scooping food with a spoon.

A child is also learning about boundaries, such as not touching something that will harm them, or having to wait for another child to come down a slide before they can get on to it; they also experience, and learn how to handle, frustration. Children's play supports their development in many areas, for example, toys that take apart and fit together encourage problem-solving and simple planning, while pretend play helps a child to learn about a range of possibilities. Children now enjoy a range of songs, rhymes, stories and movement and their communication skills rapidly expand. Adults are, and continue to be, an important source of security and comfort.

## 22–36 months

In this phase, a child's language is developing rapidly and their talk is focused on the here and now. Joining in conversations with a child becomes an important way for them to learn new things and to begin to think about past, present and future. Developing physical skills mean that the child is now usually beginning to walk, climb and run, and they like to join in active play with other children. Children benefit from help in learning about dangers and safe limits as their increasing independence leads to new and sometimes challenging experiences.

Fine motor skills develop throughout early childhood, and making marks and using a variety of materials are important and enjoyable steps towards literacy. During this time children enjoy a range of books, stories, rhymes and songs. Increasing self-help and independence develop, when children are supported and encouraged by adults, in areas such as eating, dressing and toileting. Praise for new achievements helps to build the child's self-esteem and children love to be able to do things for themselves.

## 30–50 months

While at first they may play alongside other children, joint play such as make-believe, construction and games helps a child learn the important social skills of sharing and cooperating during this period. Children also enjoy helping adults in everyday activities, such as setting the table, sorting washing, shopping, making food or tidying things away. This growing autonomy is finely-balanced with the need to comply with the rules and expectations of adults, which can be frustrating for children as they begin to assert their independence.

Language is now much more complex, and children use longer sentences, and conversations with adults become a focus for information, guidance and reassurance. Children still need the comfort and security of special people in their lives. Close, warm relationships with carers form the basis for learning, such as when an adult encourages a child to make healthy choices in food and exercise or shows them how to plant a seed, or tend a plant or care for an animal. Concern for others, empathy for others' feelings and recognition of differences in views are now significant. At this time the child is also becoming much more aware of their own family and friends and of belonging to a wider community. Literacy and numeracy can develop rapidly with the support of sensitive, knowledgeable adults and the provision of a variety of interesting materials and activities.

## 40–60+ months

The child is now building a much stronger sense of their own identity and their place in a family, community, culture and the wider world. Carers can support the child further to recognise the importance of social rules and customs, to show understanding and tolerance of others, to learn how to deal with their feelings, and manage their own behaviour. Learning and playing in small groups helps to foster the development of social skills and children's friendships become more important.

The child becomes better able to think ahead, plan and undertake more challenging activities with a wider range of materials for making and doing. The child learns effectively through shared experiences with more able peers and adults. Drawing, creating and representing their ideas leads children to engage in literacy and problem-solving, reasoning and numeracy. The child's developing understanding of cause and effect can be encouraged by introducing a wider variety of equipment, media and technologies, including personal computers, programmable toys and everyday technology in the home, together with experiences that highlight the seasons, the passage of time, living and growing things and their own development.

## References

POST (2000) Early Years Learning, Report 140, The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, London.