Module 6 Chapter 2: Child Development

Chapter 2 Overview
This chapter introduces fundamentals of healthy child development.

Abuse and neglect disrupt development in the accomplishment of childhood tasks. Conversely, developmental issues may also contribute to abuse and neglect. Typical developmental tasks, such as self-feeding or toilet training, can result in conflict between children and their caregivers.

Understanding the milestones and appropriate tasks of each development stage helps you educate families about typical developmental abilities and establishing realistic expectations for their children. This gives you a foundation to accurately assess developmental concerns. Accurate assessments lead to better case planning and improved outcomes for children and families.

Principles of Development
Development is:
- An on-going and dynamic process
- Directional – from the top down and from the inside out. For example, the neck strengthens before sitting or crawling begins; and, large muscle control develops before small muscle control.
- A process of stages
- Cumulative – the quality of a person’s skills depends on other learned skills, and when those skills were taught and learned.
- Affected by variables of heredity and environment.

Heredity refers to genetics, including temperament, that are not in our control. Environment refers to both internal and external stimuli.

Internal stimuli are physiological responses to external information. External environmental influences on development include prenatal, social/cultural, emotional, physical, and learning experiences.

Developmental Domains
Development is typically categorized and assessed in four domains:
- Physical/sensory
- Cognitive
- Social
- Emotional.

Development in any domain affects, and is affected by, development in all of the other domains.

Physical/Sensory Domain
Physical development is the development of the body’s structure, including muscles, bones, and organ systems:
- Sensory development - growth of the sensation and perception organ systems
Motor development - growth and maturity of muscle systems and actions
Nervous system development for coordination of perception and movement.

Sensory development includes vision, hearing, taste, touch, and smell, and the coordination and integration of input from these systems by the central nervous system.

Motor activity depends upon muscle strength and coordination.
- Gross motor activities such as standing, sitting, walking, and running, involve the large muscles of the body.
- Fine motor activities, including speech, vision, and the use of hands and fingers, involve the small muscles of the body.

Both large and small muscle activities are controlled and coordinated by the central nervous system.

Cognitive Domain
Cognitive development includes thinking, perception, memory, reasoning, concept development, problem-solving ability, and abstract thinking.

Language, with its requirements of symbolization and memory, is one of the most important and complicated cognitive activities.

Language and speech are differentiated in that language is a cognitive activity, while speaking is a motor activity. Language and speech are controlled by different parts of the brain.

Social Domain
Social development includes interactions with other people, and involvement in social groups.

The earliest social task is attachment. Other social tasks include development of relationships with adults and peers, assumption of social roles, adoption of group values and norms, adoption of a moral system, and eventually assuming a productive role in society.

Emotional Domain
Emotional development encompasses personality traits and individual characteristics such as personal identity, self-esteem, and the ability to enter into reciprocal emotional relationships.

Emotional development also includes mood and affect – feelings and emotions – that are appropriate for one's age and for the situation.

Brain Development
Brain development, also called neurodevelopment, is the foundation for development in the four domains. That’s because the brain is responsible for everything we do.

The brain begins developing and organizing in utero, and continues at an explosive rate through about age three. Experiences in infancy and early childhood profoundly influence brain
development. Of all the experiences throughout life, early experiences have the most powerful and enduring effects on brain organization and functioning.

Optimal brain development depends on positive and nurturing experiences at critical and sensitive periods of neurodevelopment. Conversely, children raised with chaos and unpredictability develop neural systems and functional capabilities reflective of the disorganization of their environment.

Nurturing experiences are provided by caregivers attuned to reading and responding to cues. An attuned caregiver senses the child’s need and meets that need appropriately for the child’s developmental level. A caregiver not attuned to a child’s needs does not respond to need cues, or responds inappropriately.

**Attachment**
In order to develop healthy social and emotional attachments to others, children must receive optimal caregiving experiences in the first years of their lives. Attachment begins in infancy and becomes a cornerstone of trust.

Attachment concerns often play a large role in families you work with. When developmental issues are a concern, assessing attachment can help put the pieces together.

**Normal Developmental Milestones**
What developmental milestones are considered healthy? Georgetown University has developed the most comprehensive documents outlining stages of healthy development we have found.

From the website, print and carefully review the Bright Futures documents from the Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development before continuing in this chapter. Minnesota child welfare workers have permission to copy and distribute these tools to families. These documents include:
- “What to Expect & When to Seek Help: A Bright Futures Tool” for:
  - Infancy
  - Early Childhood
  - Middle Childhood
  - Adolescence
- “When to Seek Help: A Bright Futures Referral Tool for Providers”

Use these documents to help you ask questions and gain insight into child and family strengths and needs during assessment and on-going case work.

**Summary**
Development is fundamental to childhood. In fact, it is the very reason for the process of childhood.
Children who are significantly delayed in development, but not yet identified as such, could be experiencing delays because of poverty, neglect or abuse, or some other factor. Knowing what developmental activities fall into healthy ranges – and when to be concerned – can help you assess needs, educate families and refer to appropriate services.
Next Steps
The Module 6, Chapter 2 Transcript is available from the website along with:
  • The “What to Expect & When to Seek Help” *Bright Futures* documents
  • Patterns of Attachment
  • Understanding the Effects of Maltreatment on Brain Development.

Consult with your supervisor regarding any questions you have about this chapter.

Remember to check the website and print the documents labeled for classroom use. You will need to bring those documents to class with you.

When you are ready, begin Chapter 3.