Child development perspectives

Practice Guideline on Child Development

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The applicable Code and Standards in this section:

RECEs:

- support children in developing coping skills, regulating their behaviour and interacting positively with others (Standard I: C.4).
- are knowledgeable about child development theories and understand that children's development is integrated across multiple domains and within a variety of contexts and environments (Standard II: B.1).
- understand that children are capable and enthusiastic learners with unique personalities, skills, and interests (Standard II: B.4).
- respond to the uniqueness of individuals and groups of children. They identify appropriate strategies, access the necessary resources and design curriculum to ensure full participation of all children, taking into account ability, cultural and linguistic diversity and Indigenous identity. They provide all children with opportunities for engagement, exploration and expression (Standard II: C.4).

Exploring child development perspectives, debates and gaps

To best support children, it's important to understand the general pattern of child development. While the sector is moving away from the term *developmentally appropriate practice* (DAP), there are certain characteristics that are *likely* to be shared by children of similar ages, such as the use of language, their minds and bodies. Understanding these broad patterns, and while also viewing development with a perspective that children are unique, can help you co-create environments that are responsive, stimulating and inclusive.

> Margo Greenwood says that many Indigenous perspectives are grounded in the idea that people see and interpret the world in unique ways, including through different world views and cultures. Yet, "colonialism maintains a single social order or world view, thereby suppressing the diversity of other human world views" (2005, p. 553).

Remember, each child will progress and learn in their own way and at their own rate and pace. This means it's incredibly important for RECEs to co-create environments in which the unique "gifts of each child are nurtured." For many Indigenous families, this is deemed a "highly valued skill" in educators (de Leeuw & Greenwood, 2017 as cited in Toulouse 2018, p. 5).

As critical thinkers and ongoing learners, you should regularly reflect on child development and learning theories. As you do so, consider what is missing when children and their families are viewed through western perspectives. They may not account for diversity in beliefs, values, race, bodies, disability, gender, gender identity, familial status and structure, immigration status, socio-economic status, spirituality and religion.

There are clear gaps as the majority of views and approaches — and therefore published research — is through a western lens, meaning there's a strong need for additional research led and informed by First Nations, Metis, Inuit Peoples and racialized communities (NAEYC, 2020, pp. 3-4). Read more here: [Developmentally Appropriate Practice](#) (NAECY, 2020).

Begin engaging in conversations with children, families and colleagues about the ways that children may develop skills at different times in their life based on what's valued, what they believe, what they're exposed to and interested in. Rather than seeing the child as something to mold and create according to dated theories, work in partnership with families to co-create experiences that challenge children in ways that are most meaningful to them.

Expanding your knowledge about child development offers insights into the similarities and differences among children. It also provides insights into whether children are:

- growing and learning;
- feeling some frustrations or challenges;
- experiencing great interest and engagement; and/or
- not interested or their needs* aren't being met.

*Remember that children's needs are informed by your beliefs about the child as well as a range of social, cultural and historical influences, including the child's family and community. Reflect on the notion of children's needs and think of a time when you believed a child needed something to support their development. Consider why you thought that and what the outcome was.

Now take a moment to consider the following ways that some children develop:

- Physical: crawl before they walk; walk before they run; or drink before they chew.
- Language: coo or babble before they use words; use single words before using sentences; speaking before they begin reading and writing.
- Social and emotional: develop relationships with immediate family before extended family; and extended family members before friends outside of the family.
- Cognitive: Children develop attention, memory, judgment and symbolic thinking at increasing levels.

But what if we consider that, for a period of time or a lifetime, some children will experience the following:

- Physical: crawl and don't walk, use a wheelchair, braces or a prosthetic limb or a feeding tube or oxygen.
- Language: communicate non-verbally using sign language. Avoid or do not make eye contact. Are French or English language learners.
- Social and Emotional: develop relations with immediate and extended family simultaneously, or don't have relations with extended family at all. Perhaps they view friends as family. For example, Toulouse (2018) tells us that many Indigenous children have significant people in their lives who may not be biologically related to them, such as "traditional clan members, Elders, or close friends" who take on the roles of auntie and uncle.
- Cognitive: their social and physical environment does not allow the child to be a creative problem-solver. Children think with an older sibling or family member before forging their own ideas.

These are just some examples of why linear developmental trajectories can be problematic and set children who don't adhere to them apart, 'othering' them from the dominant group or their typically developing peers.

Despite the decades of research in the field of childhood studies to re-conceptualize developmental approaches, developmental theory and developmentally appropriate practices still highly influence early childhood education practice (Janmohamed, 2010; Langford, 2010; Osgood & Robinson, 2017). While it may be easy to rely on checklists that provide quick references to where children should be, this approach can be limiting and prevent you from seeing the dynamic aspects of children and families. For example, their lived experiences, what they value or care about and what they find meaningful to them in terms of their child's well-being, health and development.

Child development is not a universal pattern or template that emerges on a specific timetable. Thinking about childhood in this linear way does not acknowledge the complexities of childhood and limits of western theories of child development. By remaining open and truly observant, RECEs can reflect on the intricacies of childhood and envision a wide range of developmental possibilities.

> For a cross-cultural perspective of child development, watch the movie Babies (2010). This film shows the commonalities and differences in babies and families around the world. Reflect on the feelings and thoughts it evokes. These reflections can also be shared and discussed in your community of practice or with colleagues during a team meeting.

As families socialize their children in ways that are meaningful to them, early childhood programs need to be aware of knowledge as articulated by Indigenous communities (Little Bear, as cited in Greenwood, 2005). Angela James (2020) says that educators should pay attention by practising "wakefulness" when implementing culturally relevant practices that acknowledge and act upon Indigenous Peoples' values and beliefs.

Some ways this can be approached, as adapted by Angela James (2020):

- Demonstrate a strengths-based and respectful image of Indigenous families;
- Regard families as the first teachers;
- Realize the critical importance of developing a sense of self and identity;
- Honour Elders, places, peoples and histories;
- View spirituality as an extension of culture; and
- Cultivate intergenerational learning spaces and relationships.

You can add your thoughts and reflections in the space below.

Download the Pause and Reflect on:

- What you've learned about child development (Word | PDF)
- The meaning of 'typical' development (Word | PDF)
- Your lived experiences (Word | PDF)