



Kids Central, Inc.

Orientation & Training Division

EDUCATION COMPONENT

Module: 1

Topic: Nurturing Children

In this module, participants learn how to tune in to children by learning important child development principles, recognize how to meet the individual child's developmental needs, and sharing nurturing practices with other staff and parents.

Outcomes

As a result of completing this module, participants will be able to:

- * Identify their specific role in influencing children's development
- * Identify children's basic developmental needs
- * Apply basic child development principles in their work with children

Key Concepts

- * Talk with parents and other staff about individual children and sound child development practices
- * All adults have an important role in nurturing children. Important child development principles including the following:
 - o Development is interrelated and sequential and influenced by multiple factors, such as temperament, health, nature, culture, and family.
 - o Developmental domains - physical, cognitive, social, and emotional - interrelated.
 - o Children have unique ways of thinking and looking at the world.
 - o Children developing trust, independence, and self-concept.
 - o Children construct their own knowledge.
 - o Young children must be provided with caring supervision and safe environment based on their stage of development.

* Adult expectations must be guided by knowing individual children as well as general information about development.

* Successful Head Start programs build upon the strengths of children and families in their program *and* upon shared understanding of child development by the staff.

* Early childhood is usually defined by the following are categories/stages:

- o Young infants (birth to eight months)
- o Mobile infants (eight to sixteen months)
- o Toddlers (eighteen months to three years)
- o Preschoolers (three to five years)

Background Information

Childhood is a very special time and valuable for its own experiences. It is not simply a way station or preparation for adult like. It is a time when children figure out and take stock of their world - a time when adults play a vital role in confirming that the world is a safe and welcoming place.

Adults teach children, whether they plan to or not, and adults have the opportunity to nurture children and help them along in their growing up. Adults can begin by tuning in to children, reflecting on what childhood is like, and considering individual children in their personal and professional lives. Adults have many opportunities to nurture infants and children who are at various ages and stages: young infants (birth to eight months), mobile infants (eight to eighteen months), toddlers (eighteen months to three years), and preschoolers (three to five years).

Tuning in to children requires a basic understanding of child development. Generally speaking, **children develop in a predictable sequence:** crawling before walking, babbling before speaking, and playing alone before playing with others. With nurturing, caring adults and safe, stimulating environments, children can grow and develop into progressively more competent beings.

Children vary greatly in their individual development. Therefore, skilled adults must observe children carefully to appreciate the uniqueness of each child's strengths and abilities. The interplay of several key influences on development contributes to individual differences among children.

Influences on Development

Some key influences on a child's development are:

Health

Temperament

Culture

Family

Adequate nutrition, rest, and medical attention are just a few of the variables that contribute to a child's overall **health**: a major factor in growth and development. Clearly, a child's physical development depends on good health, but health plays a role in other aspects of development as well. A child who is hungry or ill is less likely to lose herself in play, focus on an interesting experience, or join enthusiastically in a game.

A child's **temperament** - shy or outgoing, active or quiet, easily upset or more calm - also plays a role in development. Temperament influences both the choices a child makes as well as the child's basic response to given situations.

Children are conditioned by **culture** and by **family**. The values and expectations of those around growing children powerfully influence development. Issues ranging from physical movement to gender roles are strongly impacted. This is one reason to be cautious when describing any *universal* way that development unfolds.

Four Developmental Domains

Children develop in four areas, **physical, cognitive, social, and emotional**. Skilled early childhood staff observe that *development in each of these domains is interrelated* and occurs simultaneously. A child on the playground is using muscles (physical), figuring out how to climb higher (cognitive), bringing other children to watch (social), and feeling ambivalent about climbing higher (emotional). It is useful to think about the different domains in order to understand the different ways children develop, but in reality activities always overlap. There is no such thing as a purely physical or purely cognitive experience for a child. Physical activity requires thought; thought is accompanied by interaction; and both build competence and positive self-concept.

Interacting with children requires that an adult respect and remember that children have unique ways of thinking. Young children do not think like little adults, nor should they. Children are very literal (if you have *sharp eyes*, they might poke you). They think objects are alive (dolls must not be smothered). They assume that if two things happen at once, one caused the other (honking makes the car go; lightening makes it rain). Children are trying very hard to make sense of the world, deciding into which categories things go. (He cannot be a daddy; he is a police officer.) Their thinking processes need to be encouraged and delighted in, not corrected.

Children's Developmental Goals

Most adults recognize children's basic physical needs such as warmth, shelter, and adequate nutrition. Equally important are other developmental needs that must be met so that children can accomplish the important tasks of early life. Children are **developing trust** and learning that they can count on people and feel safe. They are **learning to be independent**, to think for themselves, and to make choices. Also, they are learning to feel good about themselves, to feel like competent beings who can make a difference, construct their own knowledge, and care for others. They are **building a positive self-concept**.

Children develop a sense of **trust** when the adults who care for them let them know that they are valued human beings. This leads to positive feelings about themselves and the rest of the world. A sense of trust allows children to explore the world, try out new things, and interact with other children and adults.

A sense of **independence** allows children to do things for themselves and make decisions. Their sense of trust in adults and in their environment allows them to feel safe enough to try new things.

A **positive self-concept** comes from a child's growing sense of competence through experiences and interaction with significant people in their daily lives. Children acquire this competence when they explore an interesting environment in which their concerns and interests are taken seriously on a day-to-day and minute-to-minute basis. An important role for adults is to provide a stimulating environment and to interact respectfully with children. This kind of setting does more to foster a positive self-concept than do reams of paper detailing trivial attributes of what makes a child special.

Child development principles help adults understand and appreciate the growth of children. Adult interventions are helpful if they focus on developmental goals: building trust, promoting independence, and encouraging a positive self-concept. These long-term goals take children much further than short-term goals such as mastering how to use crayons or memorizing songs.

How Children Learn

When children **construct their own knowledge**, they make their own assumptions based on what they already know. They seek experiences that fit with where they are developmentally and put their own ideas about how the world works.

Children do not learn by sitting quietly as vessels to receive knowledge; they learn by vigorous, adventuresome **interaction with others** and with their environment. This happens mainly through play because children's natural curiosity causes them to observe, explore, and experiment with the people and things around them. Therefore, environments need to be safe, stimulate their needs, and be staffed by adults who value language, experimentation, exploration, and inquisitive behavior.

Using Developmental Milestones Correctly

The sequential, developmental stages or milestones that mark children's development can be useful. Such information helps adults have appropriate expectations for children. When expectations are too high (for example, expecting a two-year-old to trace letters), the result can be a frustrated child and adult. When expectations are too low (for example, continuing to feed a child who is easily able to take finger foods), development can be hindered. However, adults can learn what to expect from children by accurately and objectively observing them. The process of observing individual children - seeing what they can do easily and what they are trying to learn - is vastly superior to *only* checking a child's progress against a developmental chart or list. The age-related milestones are useful to staff because they serve as a point of reference against which staff can evaluate a particular child's progress. It is important not to pigeonhole a child or to make assumptions about what she can or cannot do based *only* on age.

In fact, focusing on the accomplishment of age-specific milestones, which can be culturally weighted, tends to highlight what is missing rather than what has been done. Instead, if you think about who *this child* is and what *she* can do, then you will be on the right track to accommodating diverse expressions of development and recognizing and building on the child's strengths.

Sharing Information

In addition to knowing and implementing child development principles, an important goal for Head Start staff is to share these principles and understand how they work with other staff and parents. This means having the information, the confidence, and the ability to explain your goals for children and how they are being met. When all adults share a sound and common philosophy about nurturing, the outcome for children can only be positive.

Finally, it is vital to remember that Head Start programs positively influence the development of children through their families. This means supporting parents in their primary role and helping them as they nurture their children. You can best accomplish this by focusing on the unique strengths of each parent and family. By noting what each family can offer, you have a starting place for establishing your relationship with them and, more importantly, supporting their relationship with their child.