Understanding Infant and Toddler Development*

[Introduction]
Hi, my name is Eva. In this course, we are going to focus on child development from birth to 36 months of age. During this course, we will provide you with ideas for creating experiences that encourage children’s development in a variety of areas. Keep in mind that few children follow the stages exactly as described. Some develop faster and others slower. Stages of development may overlap, with children learning new behaviors while continuing old ones. Development is a complex process that unfolds throughout an individual’s lifetime.

[Learning Objectives]
Before we begin, let’s take a moment to review the learning objectives for this course. Once you have completed this course, you will be able to

- Describe why it is important to study infant and toddler development,
- Explain how to promote healthy brain development,
- List and describe key domains of development,
- Identify behaviors children may exhibit as they grow and develop,
- Implement developmentally appropriate activities that facilitate development in each of the domains, and
- Identify signs that a child is not progressing as well as he/she should, and may need referral to specialized services.

[Why Study Infant/Toddler Development?]
Every child is different. Two children born on the same day grow at different speeds and in different ways. Children may be different from one another in many ways and for many reasons. Some children are born with brown eyes, while others are born with blue eyes. Some children may have long fingers and toes, while others have shorter digits. These are inborn, biological characteristics which make children different. Other differences develop based on a child’s environment, or the world around her. This includes differences in mothers’ diets during pregnancy, the healthcare children receive, how much parents talk to their children, and many more experiences. No one knows which is more important - heredity or environment; both play a part in making each child an individual.
Research indicates that the first three years of life are crucial for physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development. It is during these first years that we lay the foundation for future relationships, begin building brain structures that will support learning, and develop the physical abilities we need to be mobile and independent throughout life.

Studying development can help us identify and understand children’s unique developmental patterns and needs so that we can create experiences and environments to stimulate their growth in all areas. Having a full understanding of child development also makes it easier to identify children who may not be progressing as they should. The earlier we detect potential problems, the sooner we can help refer children to specialized services. In short, studying development can allow us to change children’s lives for the better.

**[Brain Development]**

The brain is a marvelous machine that needs to be stimulated in order to grow to its full potential. We know that by age 3, about 85 percent of the brain's core structure is wired (eXtension, 2010).

The typical cell in the brain is called a neuron. For our purposes, the neuron has three basic parts: cell body, axon, and dendrites. The axon is a long rope-like structure that sends information to other cells while the dendrites receive information from other cells. (Sousa, 2006) During early brain development, brain cells connect to one another, creating pathways of communication. These connections form between the dendrite of one cell and the axon of another. Brain development is a very complex process, because each cell has the ability to connect with many other cells at once.

Connections between brain cells form when information, in the form of electrical signals, is passed from one cell to another. To a certain extent, these connections do not form by themselves. While the core connections between different regions of the brain are formed based on genetic characteristics, the fine tuning of brain development requires a little something extra. This something extra, called a “stimulus”, comes from the experiences a baby has in the world around him. Generally speaking, a stimulus involves one or more of the five senses: hearing, smelling, seeing, feeling, and tasting. Sensory experiences cause neurons in the specific regions of the brain to “fire”, or send out electrical signals. These signals are received by other cells, and connections are formed.

**[Critical Periods]**

Research tells us that the brain must receive stimuli in order to build networks within particular areas of the brain within a certain span of time. The timing of these windows varies from child to child, and for different skills. Children who do not receive appropriate stimuli during these time frames can have skill deficits throughout life. These time frames are called critical periods.

For example the critical period for vocabulary development is approximately 6 months to 6 years of age, while the critical period for motor development is approximately birth to age 8. (Sousa, 2006) Critical periods for other skills, such as mathematical ability or emotional function, are more difficult to identify because they are actually larger skill sets which encompass individual
abilities. For example, researchers might one day find that one’s ability to understand algebraic functions develops in a different critical period than one’s ability to understand parts-of-a-whole, such as fractions and decimals.

Some skills, abilities, and functions do not appear to be subject to critical periods at all, at least as far as modern research can tell, and just because a child’s age does not match up to the average critical period for a skill or skill set does not mean he or she cannot benefit from stimuli in that area. Providing lots of different stimuli in the form of engaging experiences tailored to the child’s interests and needs offers the best opportunity for optimal development of a given child’s brain.

[Pruning]

Over time, some connections between neurons are used more often than others. Connections which are used regularly tend to become stronger over time, while connections which are not used tend to be “pruned”, or cut off. Pruning may sound like a harsh process, but it actually allows the exchange of information between brain cells to become more efficient. Without pruning, basic functions like seeing, moving, and thinking would be more difficult for the brain to carry out.

Since the connections used most frequently become the strongest, it is important to provide stimuli for infants which keep all the important connections in the brain active. Every experience, from seeing movement and tasting a new food to hearing talking, singing, or instrumental music, provides a stimulus which strengthens certain connections between neurons. A variety of positive sensory experiences, in the context of warm, responsive relationships with caregivers, promote the best possible brain development for infants and toddlers.

[Domains of Development]

As the brain grows, infants and toddlers acquire all sorts of new abilities, from walking to talking, and from empathy to reasoning skills. Children develop in three primary areas called domains. They are the physical domain, the cognitive domain, and the social emotional domain.

The physical domain, as you might expect, involves things such as body weight, height, and overall health of a child. It also includes gross motor skills, such as sitting upright and walking, and fine motor skills, such as grasping objects and hand-eye coordination.

The cognitive domain, also known as the thinking domain, refers to how we think and how we learn. Language development, reasoning skills, and problem-solving are all a part of this domain.

The last domain is social emotional. This domain includes the ability to create and maintain relationships, and the ability to experience and regulate emotions. Development in this domain relies heavily on responsive relationships with adult caregivers, which set the stage for healthy development, not just in the social emotional domain, but in all areas of an infant’s or toddler’s growth.
We will discuss each of the domains of development in greater detail shortly, but first, let’s discuss some general principles of development.

**[Developmental milestones]**

When parents take their child to the pediatrician’s office, the doctor might ask questions such as: "Is she crawling? How about walking?” or, “Can you tell me some of her favorite words?” These questions all refer to developmental milestones, or markers, that children reach at approximate ages, which can indicate whether or not the child is developing to his or her full potential. It might help to think of developmental milestones as a general road map of development. However, we must use extreme caution when talking about specific ages by which children should be exhibiting certain behaviors. Each child develops skills and abilities at different rates due to differences in environments, genetics, opportunities, and cultures. It is not uncommon for children to reach milestones before or after the average age.

**[The Course of Development]**

Development in one area usually brings development in another area, but development in one area may be faster than in another (for example, physical development may be faster than cognitive or social development). Interaction between the areas of development is continuous, so that a delay in one area may cause a spurt or delay in another area. Both natural maturation and environmental factors influence the rate and success of a child’s development.

Development is gradual and continuous. Children do not learn how to talk overnight, for example. They have to hear sounds, try making their own sounds, match sounds to names of things, and so forth. Although it may look as though children are growing in spurts, their growth is actually ongoing.

Children develop in a sequence: first the head, then the trunk, arms, legs, hands, and finally, the feet. Babies learn to use their mouths, eyes, and ears before they can grasp objects. They learn how to use their hands before their feet.

Development occurs in patterns. Patterns are the process by which actions become organized. For example, babies are organizing their eye movement with their hand movement when they look at what they are holding. Still, it might be several months before their eyes and hands work together efficiently.

Another natural aspect of development is that it is uneven and fluctuating. Babies sometimes begin to learn one skill and then slow that development while concentrating on another. A baby may spend time creeping and then appear ready to crawl, but then slow that behavior in order to work on grasping objects.

Development goes from general to specific responses. For example, babies learn to move their whole bodies before they can control their arms or legs.
Babies are born with certain tendencies in personality and development, called temperament. Some babies are quiet and want to sleep all the time. Others are demanding and physically active. Rather than pushing babies into doing things, parents and caregivers can recognize and adapt to the baby’s temperament.

Now that we have a good grasp on how development occurs in general, let’s examine infant and toddler development in each of the domains – physical, cognitive, and social/emotional – in greater detail.

**[Physical Development Defined]**

Child development expert Dr. Laura Berk defines physical development as, “Changes in body size, shape, appearance, functioning of body systems, perceptual and motor capacities, and physical health.” When a baby is born, his internal systems, such as breathing and eating, are already functional. However, infants need proper nutrition, appropriately stimulating environments, and lots of care from loving adults for the best possible physical development to take place. Physical development is rapid in infancy and toddlerhood. Let’s take a closer look at physical development in each of these stages.

**[Infant Physical Development]**

Most of a child’s basic physical milestones are achieved during the first year and a half of life. During these months, growth and development take place in many important ways.

- **Weight.** At birth, the average weight of a full-term infant ranges from 5¾ to 10 pounds. By the end of the first year, the weight of the infant may have tripled.

- **Height.** At birth, the average length of a full-term infant ranges from 18 to 22 inches. The average length of a newborn is about 20 inches. By the end of the first year, the baby’s length increases by about 50 percent.

- **Teeth.** At birth, all twenty baby teeth and a few permanent teeth are developing. The first tooth, usually a lower front one, generally makes an appearance around seven months. By fifteen months, additional teeth erupt, making chewing easier.

- **Vision.** Infants are able to see light, dark, and color from birth. A newborn sees objects best if they are between 8 to 12 inches away. In the months ahead, the infant gains the ability to see detail in his environment.

- **Taste.** The sense of taste is present at birth and develops quickly. Within two weeks, the infant learns to tell the difference between sweet and bitter. During the first year, the number of taste buds increases. By 14 months, the infant can have specific likes and dislikes related to foods and their flavors.

- **Smell.** The sense of smell is present at birth. Infants can identify people by their odors. The infant begins to identify and have preferences for smells as the months pass.
- **Hearing.** Infants can hear before birth. Sounds heard in the womb are the mother’s voice, heartbeat, and digestive noises. After birth, infants tend to prefer low frequency, rhythmic sounds such as humming or gentle singing. By 3 weeks of age, infants recognize that voices go with particular people. By 5 months, infants can distinguish between the lower voice of a father and the higher voice of a mother.

- **Reflexes.** Infants are born with certain behaviors called reflexes. Most reflexes disappear between 3 and 6 months. The most important of these reflexes are associated with breathing and feeding. Sneezing, coughing, yawning, or short quick breaths can be a reflex reaction that the infant uses to increase the oxygen content in the blood or to clear breathing passages. Rooting, or moving the head when the cheek is touched, and sucking are ways that the infant has of searching for food. In the early weeks after birth, crying is a reflex that alerts parents to unmet needs infants may have.

**[Supporting Infants’ Heads]**

Remember, children develop from top to bottom: starting at their head and neck, then shoulders, and then down to their knees and toes. At birth, an infant has a very difficult time holding up his head and neck, because the neck muscles are not strong enough to support the head. By around 4 months of age, most infants are able to lift their heads while lying on their backs.

It is critical that you know how to pick up an infant properly to avoid injuring the child. If the baby is lying on his back, slowly and carefully slide your hand under his neck and then under his lower back. Gently lift the child up to your shoulder altogether as one unit, never allowing the head to hang and lag behind. If the child is lying on his stomach, carefully roll the child over on his back and follow the directions we just discussed. The following video shows the correct way to support an infant’s head.

**[Suggested Activities to Promote Infant Physical Development]**

As babies grow, they learn about their environments through their movements. Kicking, flailing, pulling, reaching and grasping are all actions that help them interact with the world. The ability to move is dependent upon muscle growth, and muscles take time to develop.

Throughout infancy, children gain large and small motor skills. We develop large motor muscles such as our quadriceps and biceps, and then smaller motor muscles. Rolling, crawling, and creeping occur as infants develop skill in using large muscles. Grasping and picking up objects are signs of small muscle skill growth.

To encourage physical growth from birth to 4 months old, it is important for caregivers to engage in many interactions with infants throughout the day. Brush your finger against his cheek and watch for his response. Move a favorite toy slowly in front of his face. Provide supervised “tummy time” while the infant is awake. Tummy time is a brief period each day in which the child is laying on his stomach, which helps strengthen the neck muscles. During this time, lie on your stomach facing the child and make funny faces, sing to him, or talk to him. This encourages him to try to look at you.
Infants 4 to 8 months old are very active. They love to put things into their mouths, "talk," interact with adults in their environment and play by themselves for short periods of time. Infants are primarily developing larger muscles at this age. Place a desired object just out of an infant’s reach to help her stretch and strengthen her neck and back muscles.

Between 8 and 12 months, infants are getting ready to walk and talk. Because each infant develops at a unique rate, some babies may walk at 9 months while others may not start walking until well after the first birthday. Look for ways to support growth at this age through games. Take turns stacking blocks or hide a doll behind another toy for the child to find.

The following video shows an infant during tummy time. Notice how the caregiver interacts with the infant.

[Toddler Physical Development]

Physical development during the toddler stage is slower than during infancy. Toddlers are building strength and fine motor skills.

- Height and Weight. An average two-year-old is 32 inches tall and weighs 28 pounds. Height ranges from about 31½ to 36 inches, and weight from about 23½ to 35 pounds.

- Teeth. Most baby teeth are cut during the toddler years. Although these will later be replaced by permanent teeth, caring for baby teeth is important. These teeth are needed for chewing, speaking, and holding space in the child’s mouth for permanent teeth.

- Hand Preference. Most toddlers use their right and left hands for equal amounts of time. Some toddlers have a preference for one hand. If a toddler uses one hand more than the other, the preference should be allowed. The transition to preferring one hand much more than the other usually occurs during the third year.

- Toilet Training. Toilet training is usually begun around age 2. It has been said that girls are easier to train than boys, but in fact, girls are simply ready sooner, though this may not be true for all girls. Toilet training is more successful when started around 18 to 24 months of age, because, before this age the toddler’s muscles are not ready to function in retaining and releasing when the toddler desires. Bowel control usually comes before bladder control. Bladder control develops in three stages: First, children become aware that they have urinated or wet themselves. Second, they become aware that they are wetting. Finally, they become aware that they are about to wet. Work closely with parents to ensure toilet training is consistent at home and in child care.

[Suggested Activities to Promote Toddler Physical Development]

Toddlers are full of energy and enjoy exploring every aspect of their environments. This can sometimes challenge caregivers’ ability to keep toddlers engaged in safe, appropriate activities. A 1-year-old child is becoming more independent. Under close supervision, encourage the child to do things that you have previously done for her. For example, instead of turning the page in a
book yourself, ask the child to do it. Let him choose which toy to use. Remember, though, to always supervise toddlers, and set clear boundaries for safety.

By 2 years of age, toddlers are trying to accept limitations, gain independence, and understand the world. Children this age are very engaged in their environments. They often enjoy using their gross motor skills in activities like climbing, running, and throwing. Provide lots of opportunities for physical play. Two-year-olds are also tuning their fine motor skills through tasks like buttoning, zipping, and drawing. While it may take children longer than adults to do fine motor activities, it is crucial for their development to attempt these tasks on their own.

Now let’s watch a video showing the toddler’s increased ability to use fine motor skills. Fine motor tasks, which are generally easy for adults, can be challenging for toddlers.

[Cognitive Development Defined]

Let's move on to the next domain: cognitive development. Cognitive development is defined as “changes in intellectual abilities including: learning, memory, reasoning, thinking, problem-solving, creativity, and language development.” (Berk, 2008 p.1) In other words, how children develop the ability to think, learn and reason.

[The Importance of Play for Cognitive Development]

Cognitive development, in a sense, refers to an individual’s ability to know and understand the world. The thinking of children is different from the thinking of adults. The developmental pathway to a more adult way of thinking occurs in stages as the child grows and has more experiences with his environment.

During play experiences, infants and toddlers learn about their worlds and make discoveries through lifting, poking, mixing, touching, and exploring objects. Play gives infants and toddlers information about the world to build new understandings. Play helps infants and toddlers develop thinking skills.

Like physical development, cognitive development progresses differently for infants than it does for toddlers. Now let’s take a look at how cognitive development takes place for each age group.

[Infant Cognitive Development]

In the earliest period of cognitive development, infants’ learning comes primarily from sensory experiences, and children often create their own learning opportunities as their natural reflexes – designed to ensure their basic needs are met – cause reactions in the world around them. Then, infants move through a series of stages during which they interact more with their environments, become more intentional in their actions, and develop a stronger sense of cause-and-effect processes. Infants quickly progress from relying on survival-based reflexes to making clear choices to bring about desired results.
[Infant Language Development]

Infants learn to understand language before they begin to speak it. Language is a part of nearly everything infants experience. Although infants do not speak at first, they do communicate in many ways. Communication begins shortly after birth when the infant realizes crying brings comfort, food, love, and all the other needs the infant relies on adults to provide. Infants quickly learn to prefer voices over the sounds of objects, such as rattles, because voices become associated with adults who meet the infants’ needs. Infants then begin babbling and cooing as their mouth and jaw muscles develop.

There are many variations in language development during infancy. One infant may use words and simple sentences much earlier than his peers, while another may show little interest in speaking until much later. Some variations in language development may be due to one or more of the following factors:

1. Age and Maturation. Generally, the older infant has had more experiences and can remember and reason when associating an idea or a word.
2. Gender. Language skills often develop more quickly in girls, and – at all ages during childhood – girls are generally ahead of boys in language ability.
3. Intelligence. Usually, highly intelligent infants speak earlier and more skillfully.
4. Hearing. Hearing defects can cause delayed language development or language difficulties. Infants must be able to hear sounds and words so they can imitate language.
5. Models. Infants raised by persons who do not speak or who speak very little may fall behind other children in speech development. An adult model who can provide the language stimulation the infant needs can be offered when parents cannot do so.
7. Variety of Experience. Having a variety of experiences provides children with both the will to speak and with new ideas, knowledge, and perceptions about which to speak.
8. Tension. Anxiety can hinder the quantity and quality of speech.

Caregivers of infants should make an effort to talk and play with them each day, to name objects with which they are playing, to describe activities that are taking place, and to talk with them about events that occur each day. In addition to talking, provide infants with cloth or board books to explore. Reading and talking to children helps them understand the grammar and structure of our language.

In this video, watch how the caregiver responds to the infant’s early attempts at communication through babbling.

[Toddler Cognitive Development]

During the toddler years, the child makes great gains in cognitive development. Toddlers learn to picture objects, places, people, and events in their minds. Because they have mental images, they are able to act and reason in ways not possible during infancy.
Parents and caregivers of toddlers can encourage cognitive development by reading stories to children, by providing time for outdoor play, and by answering toddlers’ questions in a simple manner. Talking and doing things together are wonderful ways to expand the toddler’s thoughts about her world.

[Object Permanence]

Around 18 months, children begin to recognize a concept called “object permanence”. Object permanence is the understanding that objects still exist, even when we cannot see them. For example, while playing peek-a-boo a child who has not yet developed an understanding of object permanence might cry, thinking you have actually left her by herself. A child who has developed this concept, on the other hand, will probably try to pull the cloth away to find you. She realizes that you are not gone, you are just hiding!

[Independence]

For adult caregivers and for toddlers themselves, this age is filled with joy, laughter, and at times, anger and frustration. Many changes are taking place in the life of the toddler. Toddlers are seeking independence, yet they want to know that adults (parents and providers) are available for security and comfort. They want to explore their worlds, yet they want their adult caregivers to provide information or assistance as needed.

This behavior can be challenging, but toddler independence is actually a good thing! Through chances to do things for themselves, and with proper encouragement and supervision from adults, toddlers learn problem solving and self-help skills.

[Repetitive Behaviors]

During the learning process, toddlers tend to try the same actions over and over in a variety of contexts. For instance, an infant in a high chair might bang his spoon on his bowl, causing a sound. Then, he might bang the spoon on the high chair, the tray, or anything else within reach, trying to elicit more sounds. Through this experience, he learns that the same action can have different effects depending on when, where, and how it is done. This stage in development can be particularly trying for parents and child care providers. It is important to realize that toddlers exhibit these behaviors as part of a systematic approach to exploring their environments. These behaviors are not specifically intended to elicit attention or to annoy adult caregivers.

[Toddler Language]

The toddler is a talker! Toddlers may be speaking in words and gestures at 18 months, or they may be using simple sentences. By 36 months, the average toddler understands and can use between 200 and 800 words. Language is used as a tool for toddlers to make sure their needs are met. They use language to seek information, to think aloud, to secure what they want, to reason, and to share stories or thoughts with others.

Toddler caregivers can encourage language development by listening to and talking with toddlers, describing food, play, or any new experience to the toddler, and by sharing stories or
books about familiar or new ideas. Toddlers listen to and imitate the people most important to them.

Notice how the toddler in this video puts together simple sentences to convey ideas.

**[Social Emotional Development Defined]**

The final domain of development is the social emotional domain. The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning defines social emotional development as: the developing capacity of the child from birth through 5 years of age to form close and secure adult and peer relationships, to experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways, and to explore the environment and learn – all in the context of family, community, and culture.

Infants and toddlers are not small adults. They think and act differently. They are driven by their emotions and have short attention spans. Infants and toddlers cannot always be expected to share, or to exercise self-control when experiencing strong emotions. As children mature physically and intellectually, and as they learn from the consequences of their behavior, they become capable of expressing emotions in more appropriate ways.

Infants and toddlers are different in terms of their capacities for social interactions and emotional regulation and expression. Now we will examine the patterns of social emotional development for each.

**[Infant Social Emotional Development]**

Just as an infant follows a sequential pattern of physical development, an infant also follows a sequential pattern of emotional development.

After the first few months of infancy, infants experience a wider range of emotions. An infant’s behavior is a reflection of his emotional state at any given time. Examples of the emotions infants experience are:

- **Fear.** Infants are generally frightened by loud noises and sudden movements. By 15 months of age, some infants are afraid of dark rooms, high places, pain, animals, or strange persons, places, and objects. Fears are short-lived when parents and other caregivers are understanding and realize that the infant needs reassurance during a frightening experience.

- **Anger.** Infants show displeasure when they are wet, hungry, or otherwise physically uncomfortable. Sometimes, infants become upset when adult attention or company is lacking! Infants demonstrate anger through loud, intense crying.

- **Curiosity.** Infants are curious. This is the time when the “little explorer” seems to be getting into everything that can be reached. An infant may examine objects using his hands and mouth or by throwing, pounding, or stepping on them. Curiosity is important for overall development, even beyond infancy.
Joy. Before 6 months, an infant is happy when she feels secure and physically comfortable. After 6 months, infants get pleasure from exercising skills, cooing, babbling, creeping, pulling up, and walking. Regardless of age, infants’ joy is more exuberant when an important adult is near.

Affection. To show affection, an infant might gaze at an adult and smile. After 6 months, infants may reach for adults’ faces and mouths. Long before this time, the infant has begun to recognize the faces of mother, father, and other primary caregivers. After 12 months, affection is shown by hugging, kissing, touching, and cuddling.

Crying. From the first week of life, infants cry due to hunger, cold, pain, being undressed, or having their sleep interrupted. Over the next several months, they begin to cry when they are lonely or frightened. If caregivers respond quickly to babies’ cries early in infancy, these babies tend to cry less as older infants.

Smiling. A baby’s smile is a way babies can endear themselves to their parents and other caregivers. The smile first appears early, at about one week, and is associated with a full stomach. At one month, smiles are directed toward people. It is not until about 3 ½ months that babies smile more to familiar faces than unfamiliar ones.

[Infant-Caregiver Attachment]

According to child development expert Dr. Laura Berk, attachment is “the strong, affectionate tie that humans have with special people in their lives that leads them to feel pleasure and joy when interacting with them, and to be comforted by their nearness in times of distress.”

This definition underlies the importance of establishing and maintaining warm, caring relationships with children in your care. To build strong bonds with infants in your care, interact with them frequently and respond to their signals of distress, such as crying, quickly and appropriately. Crying is an infant’s way of letting you know they have an unmet need. If the infants in your care can trust you to meet their needs, they come to trust others in future relationships.

[Infant Social Behavior]

At birth, infants are limited in their ability to respond to others. Social behavior begins when the infant can tell the difference between people and objects.

At first, adults are more important to the infant than other children are, because adults care for the infant. At 2 months of age, infants cry when left alone. In later months, infants enjoy playing near adults.

Although primarily interested in adults, the infant has a limited social interest in other children. Near the first birthday, the infant becomes friendlier and more interested in playing near other children. Infant interactions are likely to be brief and often end with one child becoming upset.
The infant’s favorite playmates are his principal caretakers. Infants enjoy playing simple games like pat-a-cake and peek-a-boo, and interacting playfully with an infant teaches her about communication. Infants are fascinated with repetitive play.

Sharing an adult (i.e., a parent or caregiver) or a toy is extremely difficult for the infant. The infant does not yet understand sharing and may look upon any toy or object as “mine,” whether the infant is at home or at the child care center.

[Suggestions to Promote Infant Social Emotional Development]

You can do many things to strengthen an infant’s social emotional growth from birth to 4 months old. Focus on using affection when interacting with the infant – use soft touches, speak in a gentle manner, make eye contact and smile. By doing this consistently, you are helping instill a sense of safety and security.

Infants from 4 to 8 months old exhibit a strong mother-child bond. Caregivers working with infants this age must be sensitive to the child’s attachment to his parent or primary guardian. If the infant shows distress when separating from his parent, nurture him. Showing consistent affection and warmth to the infant helps him trust you.

Infants between 8 and 12 months still need lots of affection and close contact to caregivers. However, as the child transitions from an infant to a toddler, you will see signs of a growing desire for independence.

The caregiver in this next video follows the infant’s needs and responds to the infant’s signals, promoting a strong, healthy relationship.

[Toddler Social Emotional Development]

Toddlers’ personalities are developing. Toddlers may say “no” frequently, and may often insist on taking on tasks by themselves. Compared to infants, toddlers have an increased ability to express themselves. They may offer toys to other children but they still have a hard time sharing. One remarkable development during toddlerhood is a growing awareness of other people’s emotions, which leads to empathy.

The toddler shows emotions in simple and direct ways. Toddlers may appear to be independent one moment, yet helpless the next. Though they want to do things for themselves, they have not yet learned to complete all tasks safely or effectively. Toddlers experience emotions such as:

- Fear. Toddlers can be fearful of strangers. They can also become anxious over separation from parents. Some fears a toddler might have are realistic and helpful (fear of a cat’s sharp claws), while others seem unrealistic and baffling to adults (fear of being flushed down a toilet). Adults can help toddlers cope with fears by talking with toddlers about what scares them. Offering security and hugs and being physically near also can be great aids to overcoming fears.
- Anger. When toddlers become frustrated with activities or people, they are likely to express themselves through an angry outburst, often called a tantrum. Tantrums are best
handled by calm and tolerant adults. Eliminating the cause of a toddler’s frustration, removing the toddler from the situation, or diverting the toddler’s attention with toys or games are ways to lessen the child’s anger or frustration. Talking about the problem after a calming down period helps teach a toddler ways to deal with frustrating situations.

- Curiosity. The toddler is filled with curiosity about the world. Toddlers explore everything they can get their hands on. Their attention spans are short and their activities may be unfinished before they move on to other interests. They are happiest when they can freely explore the environment and the toys in it.

- Self-Confidence. Toddlers need to feel confident of their abilities. Although they do not always succeed in their tasks, they need to feel that they are doing well in some of their endeavors. You can help by praising and reinforcing toddlers in their play. Children who feel good about their abilities become enthusiastic learners. They enjoy themselves and their discoveries. They master skills and feel confident that they can try new challenges.

[**Toddler Social Behavior**]

Toddlers are more capable of responding to others than infants. Toddlers may still find it difficult to share playthings, space, or people, but as they near 3 years old, their behavior becomes more social. Possessiveness and grabbing of toys gives way to sharing and playing with others, at least for short periods of time.

The toddler is at first only mildly interested in other children. Toddlers may enjoy watching peers more than interacting with them. Because the toddler does not yet know how to play with other children, interactions with peers do not last long. As toddlers near three years old, they begin to enjoy the company of other children and may even be able to share playthings briefly.

Through play, the toddler learns about the world. Toddlers practice their skills through climbing, exploring, stacking, opening and closing, and throwing activities. They repeat activities often until they learn new ways of completing tasks. During this time, toddlers move from imitating others to creating new, yet simple, themes for themselves (i.e., driving a truck, talking on the telephone, going to the park).

Sharing is still somewhat difficult at 15 months. However, by the time toddlers reach 3 years old, they begin to share for short periods of time. Trading toys back and forth is easier for the older toddler, although there are still times when the older toddler refuses to share and wants to play alone with toys or other people.

[Suggestions to Promote Toddler Social Emotional Development]

You can serve as a role model for toddlers and demonstrate ways to talk, share, and take turns. You can also reinforce the toddler’s attempts in social development by praising his attempts at interacting with others.

Provide opportunities for two toddlers, rather than more than two, to interact in the classroom. Toddlers are more likely to engage in successful social interactions in pairs than in larger groups.
Encourage toddlers to try things independently, providing encouragement and, when necessary, support. If a toddler does become frustrated or upset, try redirecting the child to another activity or toy. When tantrums occur, and they inevitably will, offer a cooling down period and then talk with the child about her feelings.

In the following video, you will see a typical interaction between toddlers. Watch how the caregiver encourages the interaction.

[Developmental Delays]

It is important for caregivers to recognize signs of developmental delay in the children in their care. However, as we have learned, each child develops at his/her own pace. Some infants may walk at 10 months, while others may not take their first independent steps until well after their first birthday. Recognizing signs of cognitive delays (specifically language and communication delays) can be even more difficult than identifying physical delays. It is relatively easy to tell if a child is reaching for objects, crawling, and walking. Cognitive delays may not be as obvious. Some children are naturally quiet, shy, or slower to socialize with others. This does not necessarily mean they are delayed – they may just have a calmer temperament or personality.

This can make recognizing signs of developmental delays difficult, particularly in caring for the youngest of children. Sometimes, however, a child may not have reached a particular milestone even long after the average age. This can be an indicator that a child has a developmental delay. This is one of the main reasons it is so important to understand normal development for infants and toddlers, to help us recognize when something is not quite right.

So what should you do if suspect a delay? Follow your childcare program’s procedure for addressing these concerns. In most cases, this will involve talking openly and respectfully with the child’s parents. Discuss what you have seen (or not seen) with the child in your care. Early identification of developmental delays is crucial, and the earlier delays are noted, the better. Suggest that parents alert the child’s healthcare provider to concerns you, and possibly the parent, have for the child’s overall development. While it’s not easy to talk to parents about this subject, it is in the best interest of the child.

Early intervention services are available to parents with questions or concerns about their child’s development. In Texas, the Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) contracts with agencies to provide early intervention services in every county. To find the number in your area, call 1-800-628-5115. You can also visit their website at www.dars.state.tx.us/ecis

[Bringing it All Together]

During this module, we have talked about the ways infants and toddlers grow and change. Caregivers need to understand the processes of infant and toddler development in order to tailor their practices to children’s unique needs.

Here are the major messages we would like you to “take home”.
• Children grow and change drastically between birth and age 3, and children in different stages of development have different needs,
• Healthy brain development requires a variety of appropriate sensory experiences.
• Children develop in three primary domains: physical, cognitive, and social emotional,
• Infants and toddlers need caregivers who can identify and meet their needs, provide new and familiar experiences, and offer encouragement and comfort in order to grow in all domains of development, and
• A child who reaches important milestones much later than same-age peers might be experiencing a developmental delay, and need referral to specialized services.

Thank you for your participation in this course, and for your desire to provide loving care for very young children in child care.

References


eXtension (2010). *Your 4 Month Old Baby*. Available at http://www.extension.org/pages/Your_4_Month_Old_Baby


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