Why Are the First Few Years So Important for Physical Development?

What is physical development?

Physical development is separated into two parts, growth and development (Health, Social Care and Children's Services, 2013). 'Growth is the increase in size', including height and weight, 'development is increase in complexity' including the tasks or movements the child can actually do (Sheridan, 1975, p.12).

Babies change so much in the first few years of their life. They go from chubby little new-borns to miniature people, with their own personalities. Each with their own rate of learning and developing but all equally as special.

(Baby to School Age, no date)

It only feels like yesterday I was a new mum and scared of what was coming next but dreaming about what my son would be like when he was older. All of a sudden, I have a twelve, ten and a five-year-old to contend with and wished I could have those snuggly new-born moments again.

Stages and milestones

As a new-born baby, movement is limited, and physical development starts out with parents or caregivers carrying and supporting the baby. Whilst doing this, the new-born is gaining strength and getting used to gravity (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, 2020a).

Although the physical movement is minimal as a new-born, their senses start to develop straight away, all developing from the moment they are born (Welsh Government, 2020a).

At around one month, a baby makes jerky arm and leg movements, still trying to learn control (Sheridan, 1975). Some babies can turn their head to the voice of their parent or caregiver (Child Mind Institute, 2020). I can remember this special moment for all three of my children and although it wasn't completely focussed, it was just wonderful to know they wanted to see who was talking to them.

By three months, a baby can support their own head and maybe even attempt to roll over (Virtual Lab School, 2020). Their movements with their hands are becoming more controlled and they can reach for, grasp and shake a rattle (Welsh Government, 2020b).

(Tummy Time, 2015)

Between three and six months, the infant will develop in so many ways. Physically, they can roll around, pull themselves up and maybe even stand (Department of Health and Human Services, 2020). Their fine motor skills are also becoming more controlled, swapping objects between each hand, perhaps throwing objects to get a reaction (NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, 2020b).

Six to nine months is where things start to get more interesting, you could say, the trouble starts. With infants learning to crawl, climbing, reaching for everything in sight (Public Health Wales, 2015)., this is a time for investing in some good childproofing equipment in your home.

Nine to twelve months are another busy few months, along with the excitement of a first birthday, there are also plenty of new physical developments. Balance is now starting to become obvious with the child being able to sit from standing without plonking (Public Broadcasting Service, 2020).

(Standing and playing, 2018)

After a year, babies become toddlers and continue their fast pace development. When a child reaches school age, the foundation phase framework continues to support physical development and takes into consideration any potentially barriers (Welsh Government, 2015).

Barriers to development

There are several factors that could impact a child's development, these could include:

- Biological and genetic issues
- Nutrition
- Parenting Style
- Home environment

(Just-Health, 2020)

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1987, cited in McLeod, 2020) state that a child is unable to survive without the basic physiological needs, including food, drink and shelter. If these are missing, a child might not physically develop or progress as expected.

This would be monitored throughout the first 5 years by a health visitor and then the school nurse would take over the basic health checks, such as weight and height. If there are any major concerns, then it might be necessary for social services to become involved for the child's welfare, for example safeguarding visits.

As a first-time mum, I was always wanting my eldest son to hurry to the next stage. Unfortunately, after my second son was born, I became guilty of comparing my two boys. I noticed my middle son's development was much slower than what I had experienced with my eldest son. I consulted my health visitor, who thankfully, reassured me that it was normal for children with older siblings to be lazier. By my third child I was quite the opposite, I had learned not to take these moments for granted and to enjoy the milestones whenever they happened, as all children grow and develop at different times (Virtual Lab School, 2020).

(Personal Photo, 2019)

Can Play Really Help You Learn?

What is play?

(Children enjoying free play, 2018)

Play England (2020) have described play as 'what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way, and for their own reasons.' Play is an international language and can be undertaken with others or alone.

According to Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of The Child (1989, Save the Children, 2020) every child has the 'Right to Play'.

I would be surprised if there were many parents or caregivers who haven't enjoyed watching their children play. Between my three children, I have watched and been part of many ways in which they play. None are wrong but they are certainly different.

As well as being fun, play has many other benefits, specifically the area of cognitive development (Ginsburg, 2007). Cognitive development can be described as the 'development of internal metal processes' (Gray and MacBlain, 2015).

What is cognitive development?

Help Me Grow (2020) have stated that cognitive development is 'how children think, explore and figure things out'. It is how children learn to understand their world and the most effective way of starting this is through play (Play Scotland, 2020).

The Foundation Phase Framework (Welsh Government, 2015) suggests that play is a vital tool in which our young children develop not only cognitively, but socially, emotionally and physically too. Children develop their cognitive ability by learning through first-hand experiences with play providing the perfect opportunity (Welsh Government, 2015).

(Children cooking together, no date)

For example, through role play children are using all forms of development (Bergen, 2002). By

pretending to be a chef enables the child to demonstrate what they already know and allows them to imitate using imagination. It aids in physical development by using different motor skills and control. Emotional and social development are also promoted by sharing and compromising with others. This one scenario proves the impact, advantages and importance of play to any developing child and can be linked to Piaget's constructivist theory.

Jean Piaget's stages of cognitive development theory (1952, cited in McLeod, 2018), has four stages. They detail cognitive development throughout the ages, with a child usually progressing as they get older, reaching optimum intelligence in adulthood (Gray and MacBlain, 2015). Essentially, children gain a certain level of understanding, through play they gain further information and learn more.

What are the barriers to cognitive development?

Although still used in today's learning environments, this theory can be criticized for not taking fully into consideration barriers to development. These could include:

- Adverse childhood experiences
- Poverty
- Single parent households
- Special Educational Needs
- Disability
- Parental involvement

(NSPCC, 2020)

Schools are trying to balance out the negative impacts from external factors by providing a safe and happy environment in order for our children to thrive. Play in Foundation Phase is aimed to promote each area of development as well as creativity, curiosity, imagination, attainment and well-being (Foundation Years, 2011). By playing with our children, we, as parents are aiding in their development. Children do not need all the newest toys to play with to have fun. In my opinion, sometimes having too many toys can over

(Technology Babysitter, 2019)

stimulate a child and have reverse affects. Many parents don't have the time or the inclination to play with their children now, down to a combination of factors, so use technology as a babysitter, potentially meaning younger children are missing out on free play causing a negative impact on their mental health (Lester and Russel, 2008).

Is technology a tool or a distraction?

As my two older children have grown more towards their teenage years, the way they play has changed and more recently, they have begun to play less often. They are now more fascinated with playing on their consoles in their bedrooms and instead of meeting their friends at the park, they just speak to them via social media.

The impact of technology has meant less children are playing outdoors and physically engaging with other children (Allen, 2019). However, Gray and MacBlain (2015) suggest technology has aided development by making it more social. As a parent, I feel that there are many pros and cons with technology. Technology can offer a challenge to children and provide a platform for children who are socially anxious but can also hinder a child's language skills, from experience, my children will often communicate in text speak or emojis.

Ultimately, as long as children are happy, playing and having fun, whether online or in the garden, with their friends (real or imaginary), they are still developmentally progressing, that is all that matters.

(Happy Children, no date)

Does Where You Live Really Make a Difference to Social Development?

What is social development?

'Social development refers to the process by which a child learns to interact with others around them' (Scan of North Virginia, 2020). Social skills start to develop from birth and continue to grow with the child (Morin, 2020), depending on where you live, could determine the depth of your social development.

(Personal Photo, 2020)

Living in a rural area has so many positives. There are more natural spaces to explore, less pollution and smaller schools. I feel less hyper about my children running around, this could be due community spirit, by which I mean everyone knows everyone.

There is also the benefit of having a lower crime rate in rural neighbourhoods compared to urban areas (Office for National Statistics, 2019), this probably due to a smaller population, which makes it feel safer. We take it for granted that we are able to leave the front door unlocked and allow the kids to play out in the street with their friends. However, it is not all positive.

Living in the back end of beyond can, to some extent, limit a child's development and as they get older, their options. Although children benefit from the beauty of the countryside and open spaces, it can make them less streetwise and potentially mean they are not as culturally aware of the world. For example, when visiting family in London, my children are not always aware of the dangers or used to the hustle and bustle. This shows that children from rural areas maybe lacking in certain parts of their social development.

Thankfully, as children get older, they gain exposure to different aspects of the social world that have not yet been explored, potentially from social media (Yamamichi, 2011), the news or travelling.

(Multimedia Influence, 2019)

How does social development influence your life?

Social development has an impact in all stages of life (Committee for Children, 2016). These include, but are not limited to:

- Friendships
- Decision making
- Managing emotions
- Communication skills
- Having empathy
- Personality

(Scan of North Virginia, 2020)

Bandura's social learning theory (1977, cited in Gray and MacBlain, 2015) suggests that children learn through experience and observation of others. Depending on the surrounding environment, this could be either a positive or a negative influence.

What affects social development?

Social development links to the nature versus nurture debate (McLeod, 2018), as it not just your genes that determine the rate of your development, (whether cognitively, physically or socio-emotionally). Sheridan (1975) argues that environment determines how successful one can be in reaching potential.

In my opinion, where you live, who you live with and who you are exposed to can have a major developmental impact, not only socially but emotionally, physically and cognitively too.

Religion, culture and special educational needs are just a few aspects that could affect your child's social development, along with the major influence of your family's socio-economic status (Browne and Millington, 2015).

(Toxic Parenting, 2019)

Children that encounter adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in their early childhood, are more likely to have a delayed social development, thus impacting relationships and even educational attainment (Smith, 2018). Children who have negative experiences, may also be less inclined to

socialise due to insecurities, potentially leading to further effects on their mental health and well-being.

If a child lives in poverty, they are more likely to face hardships which directly impact their educational attainment, including social development (White, 2018). Their parents may not be able to afford for them to go on outings with their friends or on school trips, if this continues long term, it could potentially cause isolation.

I believe that if a child has positive parental involvement, lives in a nice area with safe spaces to play and has a range of friends, it is less likely they will have negative social experiences.

I feel that wherever you live, there will be pros and cons. Children will still look to their parents to set an example and be good role models but ultimately, we are not with our children all of the time. There are and will always be situations that are out of our control.

As a mum, I always try to make sure I listen to my children read, go to their football games and be involved in their lives as much as they allow me to be, much to my twelve year olds horror! They have always participated in various extracurricular activities and have friends from different schools and areas. Some of their friends aren't so lucky.

(Happy Family, no date)

Has your routine gone out of the window?

What are routines?

Routines are ‘activities that happen at about the same time and in about the same way each day’, they can provide a sense of stability and aid in emotional development (Zero to Three, 2020).

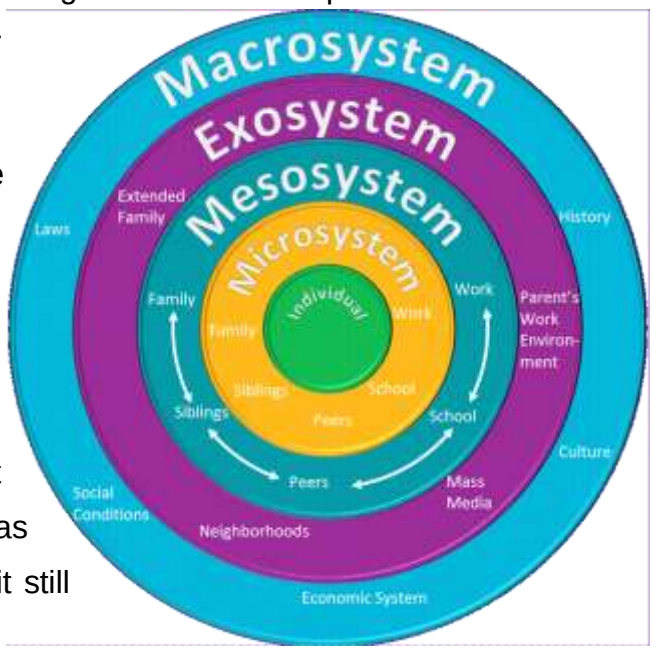
The wave of Covid-19 has meant that the dreaded lock down has taken over our family routine. My children, who are normally ready to go to bed at their individual bedtimes, are now wondering why they even need to have a bedtime at all, this adding strain to the family relationships.

(Angry About Life, 2016)

Not only are our children facing dramatic changes to their daily routines, they are also aware that we, as parents, are more stressed. This results in further negative impact on their well-being, behaviour and emotional development (McQuillan and Bates, 2017). Children’s Services (2013) describe emotional development as ‘feelings for and about other people, objects, situations and experiences.’

Bronfenbrenner

Bronfenbrenner’s bio-ecological theory (1979, cited in Gray and MacBlain, 2015) shows how external factors can filter through and have an impression on the life of a child, whether in physical, cognitive or socio-emotional development.



All factors have an inward link to the next and although they may not directly affect the child, they can still have an indirect influence on their development.

The macrosystem, is the stage that seems the furthest from the child, but as it’s the part that shapes the country, it still needs to be taken into consideration.

It includes the economy, government, law and the decisions behind the global pandemic, for example, school closures.

The exosystem, is more local to the child and impacts their community and extended family. The current pandemic has meant their situation is different to normal. For example, at the moment, children are not able to cannot visit extended family or go to the park.

The mesosystem is the interaction with exosystem and microsystem.

The microsystem has a complete and direct impact. This is essentially a child's home and school life, including immediate family and friends. In this unprecedented time, children are having to adjust to change, including new or changed routine and home-schooling. Ultimately, Bronfenbrenner's system explains how the outside world can change what is happening with a child's life and development (Swick and Williams, 2006).

(Daily Routine Board, 2019)

Malatras, Israel, Sokolowski and Ryan (2016) conducted research that suggested, if a routine continued through a period of change, the children would transition better, causing less trauma to the child. Some of the routine that children have is out of our control (, for example, with lock down, my children are not able to be collected from school by their grandparents as there is no school!

Currently, we are unable to even visit extended family, we have been keeping in touch with grandparents and other close relatives via video call, thank goodness for technology! Unfortunately, however, my youngest son does not understand why he cannot go to play at their house or give them a cuddle. According to Save the Children (2020), this separation is impacting millions of children throughout the world, with the lack of routine and physical

(Virtual Grandparents, 2017)

contact causing negative effects on their well-being and with my son, his anxiety is presenting itself in his behaviour.

Behaviour can be described as the way you act, whether alone or towards others. It can be heavily influenced by external factors, such as friends and recently, I have my noticed my children using it as a reaction. My children, like others, often find it hard to express themselves vocally so have let out their frustration through their behaviour.

Covid-19 has affected parts of everything, from the economy shutting down to the impact it has on a single child. No-one has been left untouched by this. Personally, I am hoping that life can return to some form of normal, which would mean we are back to a routine, with less chaos.

(The Face of Emotion, 2017)

Every child will experience a vast range of emotions, especially during change, but it is learning how to recognise the emotions that is important. Children who are aware of how they are feeling, can also learn to empathise with others and ask for the support themselves (Kids Matter Australia, 2015).

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