



Session 2

Child development

Child development describes the process in which children grow and develop the important physical, emotional, and intellectual processes needed to reach adulthood. Starting school is a critical stage in a child's development.

Brain development

Young children have limited ability to think and reason. They can't link their feelings, thoughts and behaviours. Their brains are very sensitive to experience. Early experiences and environments have a very strong influence on the development of children's brains. Positive interactions with mother, father, siblings, grandparents, and friends help young children to learn to walk, talk, manage their behaviour and emotions, share and solve problems. This can be supported by providing children with:

- A safe and secure environment in which children can learn and explore without fear.
- Lots of opportunities for a child to repeat and practice new skills. This helps to strengthen connections in the brain.
- Regular play.
- Talk and interaction.
- Praise and positive encouragement.
- Support as they experiment with new experiences.
- Realistic expectations, including allowing children to progress at their own pace.



Social and emotional development

Specifically, children need to be supported in developing:

- Self-awareness, including a sense of their own identity, confidence and an understanding of their own feelings.
- Social awareness, an appreciation of the differences between people, respect, tolerance and understanding of others.
- Self-management, which is the ability to do such things as manage and regulate emotions, set and complete goals, use time effectively.
- Responsible decision making, including choosing wisely and understanding fairness.
- Relationship skills such as communication, listening, cooperating, sharing, making friends and resolving conflict.





Social and emotional development is just as important and necessary to life success, as brain development. This type of development relies heavily on the experiences of a child, and the child's relationships. Parent modelling of appropriate behaviours and responses is one of the most significant ways that children develop socially and emotionally.

Physical development

Good physical development is supported with the following:

- Healthy eating habits.
- Physical activity and recreation.
- Good sleep habits and plenty of rest.

Development can be disrupted if children are exposed to trauma and toxic stress. Disrupted development has a strong impact on learning and the ability to succeed at school.

Types of trauma

Trauma can seriously interrupt a child's school routine and the processes of learning. It can result from many experiences, including:

- Child abuse (physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional abuse or exposure to family violence).
- Corporal punishment and humiliation. This can lead to poor academic achievement and attachment, mental health issues and even substance abuse.

Mandatory reporters such as school staff have a responsibility to notify the relevant authorities if

they suspect a child is being abused, experiencing family violence or harmful punishment.

Stress

The three types of stress identified by Harvard University's Centre on the Developing Child are:

- Positive stress, which is a normal part of life.
- Tolerable stress, which can be overcome with support from parents and family.
- Toxic stress, which happens when a child experiences frequent, significant, prolonged problems such as child abuse or family violence, without adequate support from an adult. This chronic stress disrupts a child's brain development and other systems.

Children may show stress by taking risks, acting out, being aggressive or disruptive, crying, physically or mentally withdrawing, regressing into childish behaviours, or being unwilling to participate in family and school activities, as well as other factors.

Helping children cope with stress

Parents can assist children in managing stress by:

- Regularly spending calm and relaxing time with their children.
- Listening to their children and encourage them to talk about their feelings and worries (this will not make the fear and worry bigger!).
- Encouraging physical wellbeing (good eating habits, lots of exercise and sleep).





- Avoiding being critical and negative towards a child.
- Providing a safe and nurturing family life.
- Encouraging and praising children as often as possible.
- Showing an active interest in their children's activities.
- Monitoring their children's access to media and technology.
- Avoiding over-scheduling children and ensuring children have plenty of unstructured play and relaxation time.
- Avoiding placing unrealistic expectations on children.



Promoting positive mental health

Children need nurturing, affectionate and secure relationships with adults and a positive relationship with at least one parent. Having a sense of connectedness to the community or school is also helpful in maintaining good mental health, as is involvement in social and peer groups. Parents can also help their child towards positive personal achievements, with a focus beyond just academic success.

Ensuring an open and communicative home environment is very important. If children are encouraged to speak to their parents about worries or concerns, they are more likely to do so, giving parents a valuable opportunity to connect and identify issues early on.

Getting help

Where stress or mental health issues are a concern, parents should seek professional help for their child. Speak with the school counsellor, or the family doctor who can provide parents with referrals to specialist services. Community health centres also provide free child and family counselling, assessments and mental health services.





Family Focus Activity 2

Family movie night

Spending time together relaxing as a family is an important part of family life, but something that children may not do too often with parents, particularly as they get older. Sometimes even getting everyone in the same room at the same time is a challenge!

This activity is an easy one, particularly for families that may have had a rough week or that are experiencing conflict. It doesn't require much communication but is all about togetherness and relaxation.



Materials Required

Family movie (mainstream TV channels often run family movies on a Friday or Saturday night. Movies can also be hired or streamed. You could also make an occasion of it and take a trip to the cinema).

Snacks (fruit, popcorn, drinks or a special treat).

A suitable space where all family members can fit to watch the movie.

Instructions

Pick a night where everyone is home and everyone is free. It can even be a school night provided that children can be in bed on time.

Let family members know a couple of days in advance that the family movie night will be taking place, and when. This gives everyone a chance to look forward to the time together.

Family movie night should take place after dinner so that there are no rumbling tummies!

All devices including phones and tablets are banned from family movie night.

Pre-warn family members in the early evening about the time that family movie night will start.

Gather family members together at the scheduled time and inform family members that other than bathroom stops everyone should stay together in the room to enjoy the movie together.

Lights off, press play and enjoy the movie!

