



Through the Pandemic and Beyond

Best practices for our kids and their development

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Child Development



Definition:

- ▶ Child development refers to the sequence of physical, language, thought and emotional changes that occur in a child from birth to the beginning of adulthood.
- ▶ It is strongly influenced by genetic factors (genes passed down from biological parents), events during prenatal life, and environmental factors
- ▶ Nature AND Nurture
- ▶ Often referred to as stages of development, look for certain predicted milestones within a fairly predictable timeline

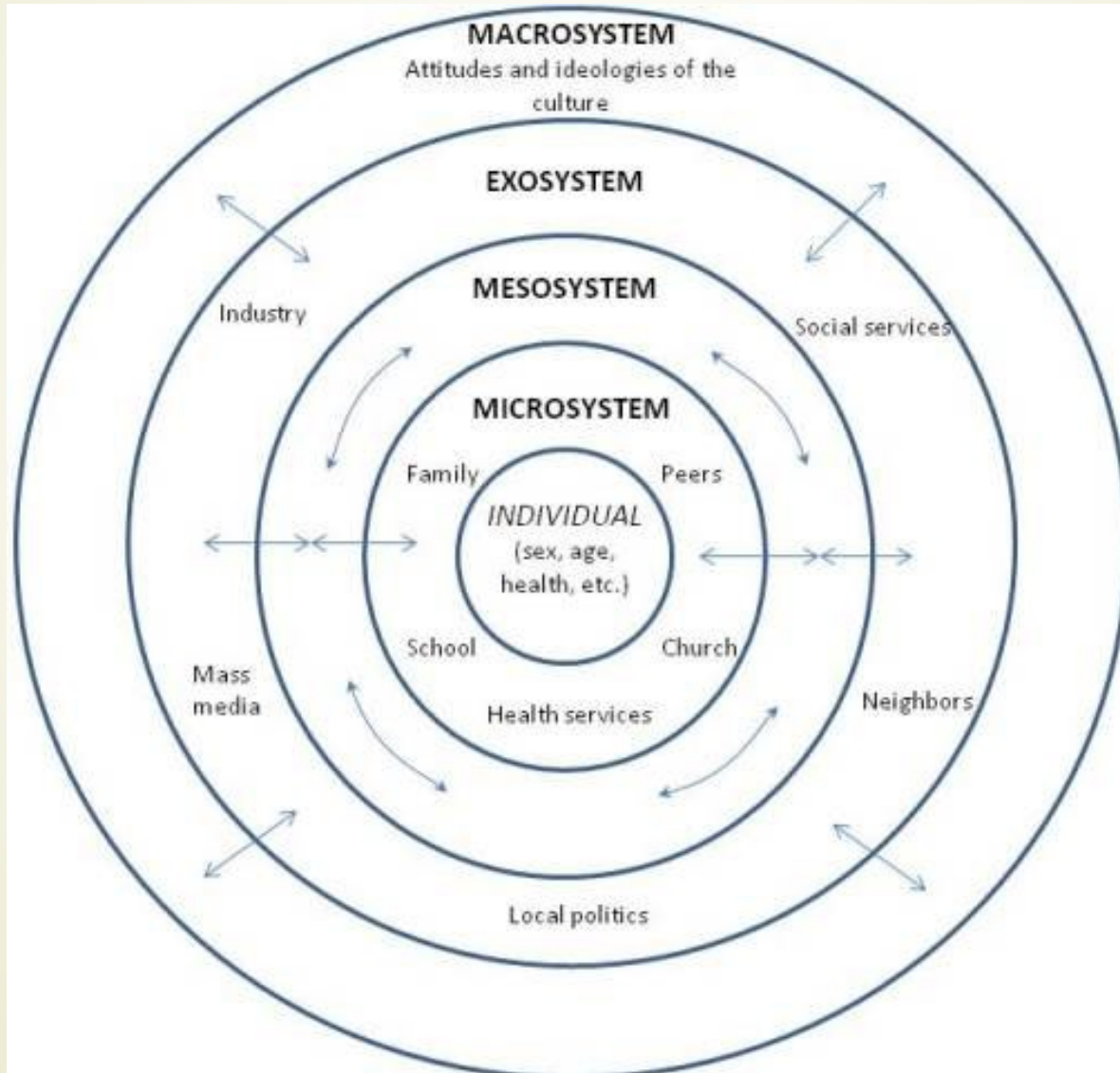
Development Includes



- Physical skills: fine motor (finger) skills and gross motor (whole body) skills
- Speech and Language: understanding and using language, reading and communicating
- Cognition: the ability to learn and problem solve
- Sensory awareness: registration of sensory information for use
- Social interaction: interacting successfully with others
- Emotional regulation: mastering self control

Ecological Systems Theory

Uri Bronfenbrenner



Pandemic Influences on Development



- ▶ We must be very cautious in making interpretations or drawing conclusions from what we know right now
- ▶ It will take years of study to fully understand how the pandemic influenced development
- ▶ Some effects may be long lasting while many likely are not
- ▶ While we have preliminary data on how the pandemic influenced development across the early lifespan, we still do not know the full reasons **why**
- ▶ Aggregate data (averages) does not necessarily provide any meaningful information regarding your situation, school district, child, etc.
- ▶ We've seen some developmental dips in the pandemic that at first glance look drastic, but are not necessarily predictive of long-term problems

Caregiver and Child Mortality from COVID-19



- ▶ From April 1st 2020 to June 30th 2021 more than 140,000 children in the United States under 18 lost a parent, custodial grandparent, or grandparent caregiver who provided the child's home and basic needs
- ▶ Approximately 1 out of 500 children in the United States
- ▶ Racial and ethnic disparities, with children of racial and ethnic minorities accounting for 65% of those who lost a primary caregiver
- ▶ 588 deaths of children 0-4 years of age
- ▶ 956 deaths of children 5-18 years of age

Pandemic Influences on Development, young children



- ▶ Neurodevelopmental diagnoses at age 1 significantly more common among infants exposed in-utero to COVID-19, particularly if exposed in the 3rd trimester
- ▶ Pandemic born babies scored significantly lower than those born before the pandemic on group of tests that measure development -language, puzzle solving, motor skills, babies from low-income families experienced the largest drops
- ▶ Children between ages of 8 months and 3 years in the United Kingdom, language and executive functioning skills were stronger if they had received group care during the pandemic, benefits more pronounced among children from lower income backgrounds

Pandemic Influences on Test Scores, Reading and Math



- ▶ United States National Assessment of Educational Progress-averages across the country
 - ▶ 450K 4th and 8th graders across the country in 10K schools
 - ▶ 26% of 8th graders proficient in math, down from 34% in 2019
 - ▶ 36% of 4th graders proficient in math, down from 41% in 2019
 - ▶ **Reading continued downward trend that had begun before the pandemic**
 - ▶ **Students are still performing better in math than they did 30 years ago**

Social and Emotional Influences



- ▶ Increase in child and adolescent mental health concerns has trended for several years, pandemic blew the doors off
- ▶ Fall 2020 hospitalizations for suicide attempt or self-injury rose 41.7% in children's hospitals across the country
 - ▶ 43.8% among adolescents
 - ▶ 49.2% among girls
- ▶ Feelings of loneliness and isolation continued a longstanding trend
 - ▶ In 2017 Dr. Vivek Murthy (current Surgeon General) made the argument that loneliness is a public health crisis

Loneliness



- ▶ Mixed feelings of sadness, missing someone/something, lack of comfort, irritation, anxiety
- ▶ Feeling humiliated or ashamed
- ▶ Shame is a paralyzing emotion, hijacks reason, logic, decision making and emotional regulation
- ▶ Shame does not allow us to trust ourselves or others, or show compassion, vulnerability or genuineness

Taking care to take care

- ▶ There is a shame epidemic parallel to the loneliness epidemic intersecting with the COVID epidemic
- ▶ Parents are siloed and caught in a cycle of conflicting information, comparison, judgment, criticism and expectations
- ▶ Teachers and schools are in society's crosshairs, judged unfairly and targeted
- ▶ Caretakers can't drink from an empty cup, care for your own emotional needs
- ▶ We have a desperate need to listen to each other from a place of non-judgement and basic respect, and we have an obligation to teach our children these skills



Supporting Development




- ▶ Goal at each stage of development is to produce healthy, age-appropriate independence across physical skills, education, relationships and emotional development
- ▶ General trend is to overdo for children while simultaneously denying or not acknowledging their feelings
 - ▶ Pulls for extremes in parenting (overly permissive to overly punitive)
 - ▶ “Giving in” when a child is at the height of discomfort
 - ▶ Lack of consistency creates confusion and chaos
- ▶ **We need to get comfortable with children experiencing appropriate distress and discomfort, otherwise we exacerbate anxiety**



Supporting Development Emotional Regulation



- ▶ Emotional regulation is a skills that develops across the lifespan and a healthy foundation can be created in childhood
 - ▶ Ability to identify the feeling you are experiencing, acknowledge the feeling you are experiencing, and make a choice about your behavior in a moment to moment manner
 - ▶ Feelings are not designed to tell us what to do, they are designed to tell us what to pay attention to
 - ▶ Big feelings do not equal big actions
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Supporting Development Discipline as a practice

- ▶ Discipline versus Punishment
- ▶ If you wait until you are angry you are less effective
- ▶ Your tone of voice and body language reveal your intention
- ▶ Your child knows when you are not going to follow through
- ▶ Your child internalizes your voice
- ▶ Not every moment is teachable



Supporting Development Reflecting Feelings



- ▶ Before commenting on behavior, acknowledge the feeling **BEHIND** the behavior
 - ▶ “I can see something upsetting happened”
 - ▶ “You look very happy at the moment!”
 - ▶ “Oh boy, it looks like you are feeling really frustrated”
 - ▶ “Seems like a lot of strong feelings are happening right now”
 - ▶ “ I can see you feel very social right now!”
 - ▶ “You are so excited it is hard to sit still!”
 - ▶ “This dinner has made you quite disappointed”

Hint: children will tell you if you get it wrong

Hint: Do not ask what the child is feeling

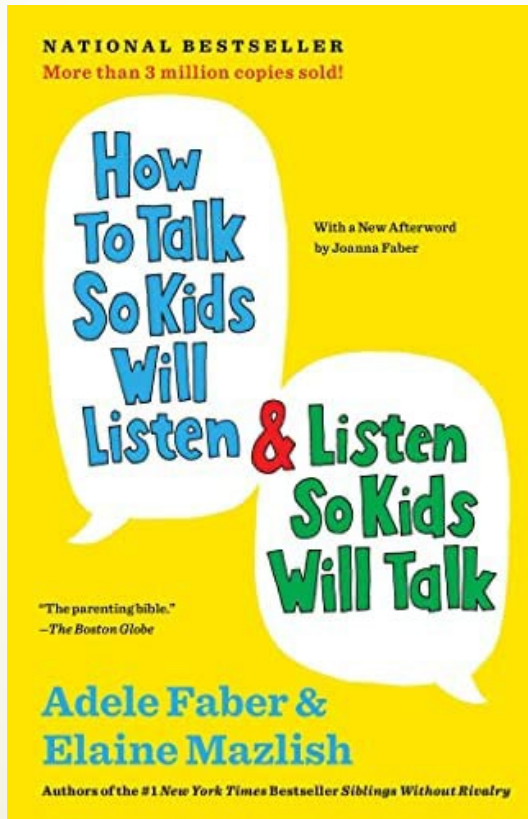
Supporting Development Feelings



- ▶ Denying a feeling or try to convince a child otherwise teaches a child not to pay attention to their feelings or share them
(this is the opposite of helping develop emotional regulation)
- ▶ “Yes, but....”
- ▶ “You are so lucky to have food, think of all the starving kids in (insert country here)”
- ▶ “It’s really okay because...”
- ▶ “No, you don’t really feel that way”
- ▶ “ Don’t use the word (fill in the blank), it’s inappropriate”
- ▶ “I can’t believe you feel that way after everything I do for you”

Supporting Development

When you acknowledge a child's feelings you create access to emotional regulation through limit setting, structured choices, giving a child a chance to do the right thing, and consequences as needed



Supporting Development Managing Anxiety



- ▶ Anxiety is an emotional experience on a continuum ranging from stress to paralyzing fear
- ▶ Anxiety has a biological feedback system
- ▶ Anxiety is contagious
- ▶ Stress response is a normal part of our lives
- ▶ You cannot learn to manage anxiety if you are never allowed to manage it successfully, either by being overwhelmed (PTSD) or totally protected (bubble wrapped)
- ▶ Bubble wrapping your child keeps them “safe” in the short term, and makes them fragile in the long term

Supporting Development Managing Anxiety



- ▶ Children may go through periods of anxiety without it becoming an anxiety disorder, even though at the time their behavior looks disordered
- ▶ The type of support we provide depends upon the needs of the child
- ▶ We can very easily reinforce and create anxious responding in our children
 - ▶ Denial, ignoring, not listening
 - ▶ Overly attentive, solicitous, soothing at a not ideal time

Supporting Development Managing Anxiety



- ▶ We can teach children to successfully manage anxiety
 - ▶ Reflect the feeling
 - ▶ Help them identify where they feel it in their body
 - ▶ Help them understand the biological and emotional sensations are a **normal response**
 - ▶ Sometimes very strong feelings happen when we don't expect it because that part of our brain can't tell the difference between being chased by a lion or standing in a line at Wegmans
 - ▶ Help them understand that the physical feelings will go away over time and will not last forever
 - ▶ Give them agency to help themselves through cultivating awareness of thinking patterns, physical interventions, appropriate distraction and self-talk