ECE: CHILD DEVELOPMENT



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Licensing

1: Analyzing the Development of Children Ages Three to Eight

1.1: Developmental Domains

1.2: Inter-Relationship of Developmental Domains

1.3: The Impact of Heredity on Development

1.4: Developmentally Appropriate Practice

2: Summarizing Child Development Theories

2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development

2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

3: Analyzing Health and Physical Development of Children

3.1: The Progression of Health and Physical Development

3.2: Relating Abilities to Physical Developmental Skills

3.3: Strengthening Gross and Fine Motor Development

3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

3.5: Applying Physical Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

3.6: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Health and Physical Development

3.7: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Health and Physical Development

4: Analyzing the Social and Emotional Development of Children

4.1: The Progression of Social and Emotional Development

4.2: Identity Formation in Early Childhood

4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

4.4: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Social and Emotional Development

4.5: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Social and Emotional Development

5: Analyzing the Language Development and Communication of Children

5.1: The Progression of Language Development and Communication

5.2: Methods to Promote Language Development

5.3: Multilingual Learners

5.4: Applying Language Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

5.5: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Language Development and Communication

5.6: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Language Development and Communication

6: Analyzing the Approaches to the Learning of Children

6.1: How Approaches to Learning Impact Individualization in Development

6.2: Influences of Family, Society, and Culture on Childhood

6.3: Strategies that Support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

6.4: Applying Approaches to Learning Theories to Early Childhood Practice

6.5: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Approaches to Learning
6.6: Environmental Rating Scales Related to Approaches to Learning

7: Analyzing the Cognitive Development and General Knowledge of Children
7.1: The Progression of Cognitive Development and General Knowledge
7.2: Theories of Cognitive Development
7.2.1: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development
7.2.2: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development
7.2.3: Information Processing
7.3: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Cognition and General Knowledge
7.4: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Cognition and General Knowledge

8: Analyzing the Effect of Trauma on the Development of Children
8.1: Brain Growth and Functions
8.2: Impact of the Environment and Toxic Stress on Brain Development
8.3: Critical Periods of Brain Development
8.4: The Impact of Family Mental Health on Child Development
8.5: The Impact of Trauma-Informed Care on Development

Index
Glossary
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1: ANALYZING THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AGES THREE TO EIGHT

1.1: Developmental Domains

1.2: Inter-Relationship of Developmental Domains

1.3: The Impact of Heredity on Development

1.4: Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Course Competency: Analyze the Development of Children Ages Three to Eight

Introduction

To effectively support young children, early childhood professionals must understand the complex and dynamic nature of development during the early childhood years. Children ages three to eight experience significant growth across multiple developmental domains, including social, emotional, cognitive, creative, communication, and physical development. Understanding these areas of development provides a foundation for observing children's growth, planning meaningful learning experiences, and responding to individual needs.

In this chapter, you will examine the major developmental domains and explore how growth in one area influences and supports growth in others. You will also investigate the role of heredity and environmental influences in shaping development and consider how children actively participate in their own learning and growth. Finally, you will learn about the principles of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) and how these principles guide early childhood educators in creating responsive, engaging, and supportive learning environments.

Through these topics, you will develop the knowledge and skills necessary to analyze the development of children ages three to eight and apply this understanding to early childhood education practice.

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1.1: Developmental Domains

Introduction

Early childhood educators make decisions every day about how to respond to children, arrange environments, and plan meaningful experiences. Understanding child development provides a foundation for these decisions. It helps educators recognize what children are learning and consider how to support their continued growth.

This section introduces developmental domains—the broad areas used to describe children's growth—and connects them with Wisconsin's Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WI ELDGs). These ways of organizing development help educators study particular aspects of growth while remembering that every child develops as a whole person.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 1.1: Describe developmental domains.

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Identify the domains of development for young children from birth through age eight.
- Compare domains of development to the *Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WI ELDGs)*.
- Identify the Learning and Development Areas of the WI ELDGs.

Child Development

Have you ever watched a toddler or preschooler explore and wondered: What are they learning? How are they thinking? How can I support their growth? Studying child development helps educators understand changes in children's abilities and participation over time.

Early childhood educators use developmental knowledge alongside information about individual children, families, and communities to make informed teaching decisions. Understanding development helps educators plan meaningful experiences, respond to children's strengths and needs, and support learning across interconnected areas (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).



Image 1.1.1: Child walking (Andreas is licensed under CC by 1.0).

How Development Unfolds

Children reveal their developing abilities during everyday experiences. An infant reaches for a rattle, a toddler stacks blocks, and a preschooler comforts a friend. These moments provide opportunities for educators and families to notice how children move, communicate, think, express themselves, and relate to others.

Developmental domains are broad categories used to describe aspects of children's growth and learning. Frameworks organize and name these categories in different ways. For example, NAEYC discusses physical, cognitive, social and emotional, and linguistic development, along with approaches to learning, while emphasizing their interconnections (NAEYC, 2020).

For this textbook, development is discussed using five categories:

1. **Physical:** growth, health, and movement
2. **Social and Emotional:** relationships and emotional regulation
3. **Communication:** language and expression
4. **Creative:** artistic expression and imagination
5. **Cognitive:** thinking and problem-solving

Wisconsin's Early Learning Frameworks

Early learning frameworks help educators and families connect developmental knowledge with observation, planning, and support for children's learning.

Wisconsin is revising the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards (WMELS). The updated framework will be titled the Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WI ELDGs). As of October 2026, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) reports that the updated guidelines are undergoing leadership review before publication. Until further notice, professionals should continue using WMELS and accessing WMELS training (DCF, n.d.).

The WI ELDGs organize learning and development into six interconnected **Learning and Development Areas**:

1. **Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development**
2. **Social and Emotional Development**
3. **Language, Communication, and Literacy**
4. **Approaches to Learning**
5. **Cognition and General Knowledge**

6. **Family and Community Partnerships**

These areas help educators organize observations and plan meaningful support for children and families. They are interconnected rather than separate categories of learning. Family and Community Partnerships emphasizes the relationships and contexts that support children's development across the other areas.

Two Lenses for Understanding Children's Development

Developmental domains and the WI ELDGs provide two related ways of thinking about children's growth and learning. Developmental domains are broad categories used in child development science to describe patterns of growth. The Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WI ELDGs) provide a framework educators can use to observe, support, and plan for children's learning and development.

These two systems are related, but they are not one-to-one matches. Instead, they provide different lenses for understanding the same whole child. The image below illustrates how developmental science and Wisconsin's early learning framework work together to support children's development.



Figure 1.1.1: **Same Child, Different Lenses.** Developmental domains and the WI ELDGs provide different but related ways of understanding and supporting the development of the whole child. (OpenAI, 2026)

Developmental domains help educators describe aspects of children's growth, while early learning frameworks help organize expectations and guide planning. Educators use these resources alongside observations and knowledge shared by families to support the whole child (NAEYC, 2020; DCF, n.d.).

Key Takeaway

This textbook discusses development using five categories: physical, social and emotional, communication, creative, and cognitive development. These categories help organize information about growth, but children develop as whole individuals. Wisconsin's Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WI ELDGs) organize children's growth into six interconnected Learning and Development Areas that support a whole-child approach to learning and development. In the next section, you will explore how these areas work together to support children's growth through everyday experiences.

Vocabulary Alert: Domains vs. Learning and Development Areas

Developmental Domains: A common term in child development science for broad aspects of growth and development, such as physical, social-emotional, communication, creative, and cognitive development.

Learning and Development Areas: The organizational structure used in the Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WI ELDGs) to support observation, planning, and teaching.

Why are the terms different? Developmental domains come from child development science, while Learning and Development Areas are part of Wisconsin's early learning framework. Both help educators understand children, and neither should be viewed as a set of isolated compartments. Children develop as whole individuals, with growth in one area influencing growth in others.

Exercise 1.1.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What are the five developmental domains used in this textbook?
2. What are the six WI ELDGs Learning and Development Areas?
3. How do developmental domains differ from Wisconsin's Learning and Development Areas?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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OpenAI. (2026). *Same child, different lenses* [AI-generated image].

Wisconsin Department of Children and Families. (n.d.). *Wisconsin's early learning and development guidelines revision project*. Retrieved October 16, 2026, from Wisconsin ELDG revision project

Answers

Exercise 1.1.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Physical, Social and Emotional, Communication, Creative, and Cognitive development.
2. Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development; Social and Emotional Development; Language, Communication, and Literacy; Approaches to Learning; Cognition and General Knowledge; and Family and Community Partnerships.
3. Developmental domains are categories used in child development science. Learning and Development Areas are Wisconsin's framework for supporting and documenting children's learning and development.

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1.2: Inter-Relationship of Developmental Domains

Introduction

In Section 1.1, you learned about developmental domains and Wisconsin's Learning and Development Areas. These categories help educators organize information, but children use many developing abilities together during everyday experiences. Playing with a friend, exploring materials, or participating in a familiar routine can involve movement, communication, emotions, imagination, and thinking at the same time.

This section explores how development in one area influences development in others and why educators use a whole-child approach when observing children and planning experiences.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 1.2: Summarize the inter-relationship of all developmental domains.

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Explain how growth in one developmental domain can influence growth in other domains.
- Describe how play, relationships, and everyday experiences support development across multiple areas.
- Explain how the WI ELDGs reflect a whole-child approach to learning and development.

Development is Integrated

There are two ways of organizing information about children's development: **developmental domains** from child development science and **Learning and Development Areas** in the Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guidelines (WI ELDGs).

These categories help us describe and organize development, but children do not develop in separate compartments.

Physical, social and emotional, communication, creative, and cognitive development continually influence one another. Growth in one domain can support growth in several others. For example, when a preschooler works with another child to build a block tower, the child may:

- Use fine-motor coordination to place the blocks,
- Communicate ideas with a peer,
- Negotiate and cooperate,
- Imagine what the structure will become, and
- Plan, test ideas, and solve problems.

One experience can support development in several domains at the same time. The image below shows how one activity supports learning and growth in many areas of development simultaneously.



Figure 1.2.1: **One Activity, Many Areas of Development.** Building with blocks can simultaneously support physical, social and emotional, communication, creative, and cognitive development. (OpenAI, 2026b).

The block-building example illustrates two important ways that development is interconnected. First, children use skills from several developmental domains during a single experience. Second, growth in one domain can support growth in another. For example, as children's communication skills grow, they may become better able to negotiate with peers, explain their ideas, and solve problems together (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Development unfolds through these ongoing interactions among children, people, materials, and environments. The WI ELDGs reflect this same whole-child understanding. Although Wisconsin organizes learning using L**earning and Development Areas** rather than **developmental domains**, that framework also emphasizes that children's learning and development are interconnected. The next figure shows how these areas work together to support the whole child.



Figure 1.2.2: **Interconnected Learning and Development.** The WI ELDGs emphasize that children develop as whole individuals, with learning experiences often supporting multiple Learning and Development Areas simultaneously. (OpenAI, 2026a).

Connecting the WI ELDGs Learning and Development Areas

In Section 1.1, you were introduced to the six WI ELDGs Learning and Development Areas. Here, the focus is on how these areas connect during children's everyday experiences.

For example, when children build a block tower together, they coordinate movements, communicate ideas, cooperate, and solve problems. They also use approaches to learning, such as curiosity, persistence, and flexibility. Family and community partnerships can enrich the experience when educators incorporate children's home languages, family knowledge, or photographs of familiar community buildings.

Educators can use the Learning and Development Areas to notice different aspects of an experience while planning for the whole child. One meaningful experience may support several areas at the same time.

Play Connects Development Across Multiple Areas

Play is one of the most powerful ways young children learn. During play, children naturally use skills and knowledge from multiple developmental domains at the same time (NAEYC, 2020).

Consider a group of children creating a **restaurant in the dramatic-play area**.

- They carry dishes, pour pretend drinks, write or draw orders, and manipulate play food and utensils, supporting **physical development**.
- They talk with one another, take orders, explain ideas, and use new vocabulary, supporting **communication development**.
- They decide who will be the cook, server, customer, or cashier; take turns; cooperate; and solve disagreements, supporting **social and emotional development**.
- They pretend to cook meals, invent menu items, create roles, and imagine different restaurant experiences, supporting **creative development**.
- They count food items, sort materials, match orders, decide how much pretend money to use, remember customers' requests, and solve problems that arise during play, supporting **cognitive development**.

Families can extend the experience by sharing favorite foods, recipes, restaurant experiences, home languages, or cultural traditions related to meals. Educators might incorporate these ideas into menus, signs, props, or conversations in the dramatic-play area. This connects children's classroom play with their family and community experiences and reinforces a whole-child perspective on development (NAEYC, 2020).

Through one meaningful play experience, children have opportunities to practice **physical, social and emotional, communication, creative,** and **cognitive skills.** The same restaurant experience can also be viewed through several **WI ELDG Learning and Development Areas**. This demonstrates why educators should look at children's experiences as a whole rather than separating learning into isolated categories.

Relationships Support Development Across All Areas

Responsive relationships are a foundation for learning and development. Children learn through interactions with caring adults, family members, and peers. A relationship that appears to support one aspect of development often supports several others as well. For example, when an educator engages children in conversation during mealtime:

- Language and communication skills are strengthened,
- Social connections are built,
- Children practice turn-taking and self-regulation,
- Curiosity and thinking are encouraged, and
- Family experiences and cultural backgrounds can be recognized and valued.

A simple conversation can therefore support children's communication, social-emotional, and cognitive development at the same time. Relationships also help children feel secure enough to explore, communicate, take reasonable risks, persist when something is difficult, and interact with others. This is another example of the **inter-relationship of developmental domains** (NAEYC, 2020).

The Role of Family and Community Partnerships

Children do not develop only within the classroom. They develop within families, cultures, neighborhoods, early childhood programs, schools, and communities. Family culture, language, values, traditions, experiences, and relationships influence children's learning and development. Educators can better support children when they learn from families and build respectful, two-way partnerships (NAEYC, 2020).

NAEYC identifies reciprocal partnerships with families and community connections as an essential area of developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2020).

Family and community partnerships may include:

- Learning about family goals and priorities,
- Sharing information between home and the early childhood program,
- Incorporating children's home languages and cultural experiences,
- Connecting families with community resources,
- Inviting families to contribute knowledge and experiences, and
- Supporting children and families during transitions.

Family and community partnerships describe relationships and collaborative practices among adults rather than a skill an individual child develops. These partnerships help educators connect learning experiences with children's family knowledge, languages, cultures, and communities (NAEYC, 2020).

Key Takeaway

Developmental domains identify different aspects of children's growth, but the domains are **interconnected**. Physical, social and emotional, communication, creative, and cognitive development continually influence one another.

Children do not experience development one domain at a time. Through play, relationships, routines, exploration, and other meaningful experiences, they often develop across several domains simultaneously.

The WI ELDGs provide another way to organize and support children's learning and development. Their Learning and Development Areas reflect the same important whole-child idea: **children grow, learn, and develop as integrated human beings.**

Although developmental areas are interconnected, children do not all develop in identical ways. The next section examines how heredity interacts with experiences and environments to contribute to individual differences.

Vocabulary Alert: Whole-Child Approach

Whole-Child Approach: A way of understanding development that recognizes that children's physical, social-emotional, communication, creative, and cognitive growth are interconnected.

A whole-child approach considers the child within relationships, experiences, family, culture, and community rather than viewing individual skills in isolation.

Exercise 1.2.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What does it mean to say that developmental domains are interrelated?
2. **Critical Thinking:** Give an example of an experience, other than those described in this text section, that could support development in several domains at the same time. Explain how.

3. How does play demonstrate the inter-relationship of developmental domains?
4. How do relationships support development across multiple domains?
5. How do the WI ELDGs reflect a whole-child approach?
6. Why are Family and Community Partnerships important to children's learning and development?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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OpenAI. (2026a). *Interconnected learning and development* [AI-generated image].

OpenAI. (2026b). *One activity, many areas of development* [AI-generated image].

Answers

Exercise 1.2.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Development in one domain can influence and support development in other domains. Children's physical, social-emotional, communication, creative, and cognitive development do not occur independently.
2. **Answers will vary.** For example, children building a fort may use physical skills to carry and arrange materials, communication skills to share ideas, social and emotional skills to cooperate, creative skills to imagine what the fort will become, and cognitive skills to plan and solve problems. Many everyday experiences can support several developmental domains at the same time.
3. During play, children naturally use many skills at once. They may move, communicate, cooperate, imagine, think, plan, and solve problems within a single experience.
4. Relationships provide children with opportunities to communicate, build social connections, regulate emotions, explore ideas, solve problems, and feel secure enough to learn.
5. The WI ELDGs organize learning and development into interconnected Learning and Development Areas and recognize that children's experiences often support several areas at the same time.
6. Children develop within families and communities. Family culture, language, values, experiences, relationships, and community resources influence children's development and can strengthen learning across many areas.

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1.3: The Impact of Heredity on Development

Introduction

In Sections 1.1 and 1.2, you explored what areas of development change as children grow and how those areas are interconnected. Children also differ from one another in many ways. Some of those differences are influenced by **heredity**, or the biological information passed from parents to children through genes.

In this section, you will explore how heredity contributes to development and why genes work together with children's experiences and environments rather than determining development by themselves.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 1.3: Describe the impact of heredity on development.

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Define heredity and explain the role of genes in development.
- Describe how inherited characteristics and genetic predispositions can influence development.
- Explain how heredity and environment interact to shape children's development.

Heredity and Development

Heredity refers to the biological information passed from one generation to the next through genes. Genes are sections of DNA that contain instructions that contribute to how the body grows and functions. Children inherit genetic information from their biological parents. This genetic inheritance contributes to individual differences among children (National Library of Medicine, 2024).

Heredity can influence many aspects of development. Genetic factors contribute to individual differences, including tendencies related to temperament, activity level, attention, and emotional responses. Environmental influences also contribute to how these characteristics develop (National Library of Medicine, 2022). Genetic variations can also increase susceptibility to certain health conditions without guaranteeing that those conditions will occur (National Library of Medicine, 2021).

Note

However, inherited characteristics do not develop independently from a child's experiences and environment.

This is an important distinction: Genes influence development, but they do not act as a fixed blueprint for exactly how a child will develop.

Nature and Nurture Work Together

A long-standing question in child development has been whether children's characteristics are primarily the result of **nature** or **nurture**.

Nature refers to heredity and biological influences.

Nurture refers to environmental influences and experiences.

Researchers today generally view development as the result of an ongoing interaction between heredity and environment. Genes and environmental influences do not operate separately; they continually work together as development unfolds (National

Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Consider a child's physical growth. Genetic factors contribute to possible patterns of growth, but nutrition, health, physical activity, stress, and other environmental conditions can also influence development.

The figure below illustrates how heredity and environment continually interact as the whole child develops.



Figure 1.3.1: **Heredity and Environment Work Together.** *Heredity contributes biological characteristics and developmental possibilities, while relationships, experiences, opportunities, and environments also influence development. These influences continually interact as the whole child develops.* (OpenAI, 2026)

Genetic Predispositions Are Not Guarantees

A **genetic predisposition**, also called genetic susceptibility, is an increased likelihood of developing a particular condition based on a person's genetic makeup. A predisposition increases the likelihood of an outcome but does not guarantee it. Other genetic factors and environmental influences may also affect whether the condition develops (National Library of Medicine, 2021).

> Note
>
> A predisposition does **not** mean that a particular outcome will definitely occur.
>
> **That means development usually cannot be explained by saying:** "This happened because of the child's genes."
>
> or
>
> "This happened because of the child's environment."

Instead, development reflects a continuing interaction among biological characteristics, experiences, relationships, and environments.

Heredity Influences the Whole Child

In the previous section, you learned that developmental domains are interconnected. Because children develop as whole individuals, hereditary influences may affect multiple aspects of development. Biological characteristics can influence how children move, explore, respond to experiences, interact with other people, and participate in learning. At the same time, children's relationships and experiences influence how their abilities and characteristics develop over time.

Imagine two children who approach a new climbing structure differently. One child quickly begins climbing while another

watches for several minutes before trying. Their behavior cannot automatically be explained as “genetic” or “environmental.” Each child's development reflects many interacting influences, including biological characteristics, previous experiences, relationships, opportunities, and the immediate environment. For early childhood educators, this means avoiding assumptions that a child's current abilities or behavior represent fixed limits.

Epigenetics: One Way Biology and Environment Interact

Epigenetic processes are one way environmental influences can affect gene activity. **Epigenetics** concerns changes that affect how genes work without changing the underlying DNA sequence. These processes are part of normal development and can also be influenced by environmental exposures and behaviors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025).

For example, nutrition during pregnancy can influence epigenetic patterns in the developing child. Epigenetics helps explain one connection between biological processes and environmental conditions. It does not mean that every experience changes gene activity or that educators can determine a child’s epigenetic patterns by observing behavior.

The Prenatal Environment

Environmental influences begin before birth. Conditions during pregnancy can affect biological development. For example, prenatal nutrition can influence epigenetic patterns, illustrating how environmental conditions and biological processes are connected during development (CDC, 2025).

> Note
>
> The important lesson for child development is not the specific molecular process.
>
> **It is this**: Children's development begins with biological inheritance, but development is shaped through continuous interactions between biology and experiences.

What This Means for Early Childhood Educators

Early childhood educators do not need to determine whether a child's behavior or ability comes from heredity or environment. Instead, educators should recognize that:

- Children enter learning environments with different biological characteristics and developmental possibilities,
- Inherited characteristics should not be used to assume fixed limits on a child’s learning or participation,
- Development reflects interactions between heredity and experience,
- Supportive relationships and environments remain important for every child, and
- Children should not be labeled according to assumptions about what they are naturally capable of doing.

This connects directly to the whole-child perspective. Children develop through interconnected biological, relational, and environmental influences rather than through a single cause (NAEYC, 2020).

Key Takeaway

Heredity contributes to children’s development, while experiences, relationships, opportunities, and environments also shape developmental pathways.

Genetic influences differ across characteristics and conditions. A genetic predisposition increases the likelihood of an outcome without guaranteeing it. Epigenetic processes provide one way that environmental conditions can influence gene activity without changing the DNA sequence.

For early childhood educators, the central responsibility is to understand each child’s strengths and needs and provide responsive relationships, meaningful experiences, and appropriate support.

Vocabulary Alert: Heredity and Development

Heredity: Biological information passed from one generation to the next through genes.
Genes: Sections of DNA that carry biological instructions that contribute to growth and functioning.
Nature: Heredity and other biological influences on development.
Nurture: Environmental influences and experiences that affect development.
Genetic Predisposition: An increased likelihood of developing a particular condition based on a person's genetic makeup; it does not guarantee that the condition will occur.
Epigenetics: The study of how biological and environmental conditions can affect how active particular genes are without changing the DNA sequence itself.

Exercise 1.3.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What is heredity?
2. Name two ways heredity can influence development.
3. Why does a genetic predisposition not guarantee a particular developmental outcome?
4. How do heredity and environment work together to influence development?
5. What does epigenetics help us understand about heredity and environment?
6. Why should early childhood educators avoid viewing children's inherited characteristics as fixed limits?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 1.3.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Heredity is the biological information passed from parents to children through genes.
2. Genetic factors can contribute to differences in physical growth and maturation, temperament, activity level, responses to stimulation, and susceptibility to some health or developmental conditions.
3. A genetic predisposition increases the likelihood of a condition but does not guarantee it. Other genetic factors and environmental influences can also affect whether the condition develops.
4. Genes and environmental experiences continually interact. Children's development reflects both biological characteristics and their experiences, relationships, and environments.
5. Epigenetics shows that environmental and biological conditions can influence how genes are expressed without changing the underlying DNA sequence.
6. Heredity influences development but does not determine a child's developmental outcome. Experiences, relationships, opportunities, and environments also contribute to development.

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1.4: Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Introduction

In sections 1.1–1.3, you explored developmental domains, how development is interconnected, and how heredity and environment influence children's growth. Early childhood educators use this knowledge when deciding how to teach, what experiences to provide, and how to respond to individual children. **Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP)** provides a framework for making those decisions. You will examine the three core considerations and six areas of practice that help educators turn developmental knowledge into intentional, responsive teaching.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 1.4: Describe elements of developmentally appropriate practice.

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Define developmentally appropriate practice.
- Describe the three core considerations that guide developmentally appropriate decision-making.
- Describe the six areas of practice identified in NAEYC's DAP guidelines.
- Explain how educators use DAP to respond to individual children, families, and contexts.

What is Developmentally Appropriate Practice?

The **National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)** describes developmentally appropriate practice as an approach that promotes each child's optimal development and learning through strengths-based, play-based, joyful, and engaging experiences. DAP is a framework for **intentional decision making**, not a particular curriculum, activity, or teaching method (NAEYC, 2020).

Developmentally appropriate educators use professional knowledge to decide what experiences, environments, materials, interactions, and teaching strategies will best support the children they teach.

DAP recognizes that children share some common patterns of development while also being unique individuals whose development occurs within families, cultures, languages, communities, and broader social contexts. NAEYC organizes this decision-making around three core considerations: **commonality, individuality, and context** (NAEYC, 2020).

Key Idea

Developmentally appropriate does not simply mean “appropriate for the child's age.”

Educators consider what is generally known about children's development **and** what they know about the individual child **and** the contexts in which that child lives and learns.

Three Core Considerations of DAP

1. Commonality: What Do We Know About Child Development and Learning?

Commonality refers to current research and professional understanding about processes of child development and learning that apply broadly to children. This includes recognizing that development and learning always occur within social, cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts (NAEYC, 2020).

This knowledge helps educators anticipate what types of experiences are likely to support children's growth and learning. It includes understanding that development occurs across interconnected areas and that children benefit from active engagement, relationships, play, exploration, communication, and meaningful learning experiences (NAEYC, 2020).

For example, an educator planning an investigation of apples might provide real apples for children to examine, smell, compare, count, cut, taste, describe, and use in play. Books and photographs can extend the investigation, while direct experiences give children additional ways to explore the concept.

Knowledge of child development helps the educator make an informed starting decision—but it is only **one** part of DAP.

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2. Individuality: What Do We Know About This Child?

Children of the same age do not develop, learn, communicate, or participate in exactly the same ways.

Individuality refers to the unique characteristics and experiences of each child, including the child's strengths, interests, abilities, prior experiences, approaches to learning, language, preferences, and developmental needs. NAEYC emphasizes knowing each child both as an individual and as a member of a family and community (NAEYC, 2020).

Educators learn about individual children through relationships, conversations with families, observation, children's work, documentation, and assessment.

Consider an art experience in which children cut and attach pieces of paper to create a collage. One child may comfortably use scissors independently. Another child may tear paper, use adaptive scissors, receive assistance, or work with pre-cut pieces.

If the learning goal is to explore materials and express ideas through collage, children can work toward that shared goal in different ways. The educator adapts materials and assistance so each child can participate meaningfully. If the goal specifically involves cutting skills, the educator provides appropriate tools and support for practicing those skills.

This is developmentally appropriate because **one size does not fit all**.

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3. Context: What Do We Know About the Child's Family, Culture, and Community?

Children's development does not occur apart from the world around them.

Context includes the social, cultural, linguistic, family, community, and historical circumstances in which development and learning occur. Families' values, languages, traditions, experiences, expectations, and ways of interacting contribute to children's development and learning (NAEYC, 2020).

For example, expectations about children's communication with adults, independence, participation in groups, or ways of showing respect may differ among families and communities. An educator who understands these differences is less likely to interpret unfamiliar behavior as a problem simply because it differs from the educator's own expectations.

Educators cannot learn everything about a child's context simply by observing the child. **Reciprocal relationships with families are essential.** Families provide knowledge about their children, priorities, languages, experiences, traditions, and communities that educators could not know otherwise. NAEYC specifically emphasizes families' expertise about their own children (NAEYC, 2020).

Educators also need to reflect on the contexts and assumptions that **they themselves** bring to teaching (NAEYC, 2020).



Figure 1.4.1: **Three Core Considerations of Developmentally Appropriate Practice.** Educators consider commonality, individuality, and context together when making intentional decisions that support children's development and learning. (OpenAI, 2026)

Putting the Three Considerations Together

Imagine that you are planning an art experience for a group of preschoolers. An educator who implements developmentally appropriate practice might consider:

Commonality: What do I know about young children's fine-motor development, creativity, exploration, attention, and use of art materials?

Individuality: What do I know about each child's interests, abilities, experience with the materials, communication, and support needs?

Context: What do I know about the children's families, cultures, languages, experiences, and ways of expressing themselves?

The educator then uses all three sources of knowledge to design the experience.

Some children may cut paper while others tear it. Children might choose from a variety of materials rather than create identical products. Materials can connect to children's experiences, families, and communities. The educator observes how children participate and adjusts support as needed.

DAP is Intentional and Responsive Rather than One-Size-Fits-All.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice is not a single teaching method, nor does DAP mean that educators simply allow children to play all day without planning or teaching. It also does not mean that young children should spend most of their time receiving direct instruction.

NAEYC describes effective teaching as including a range of approaches, including **self-directed play, guided play, adult-guided experiences, and direct instruction**. Educators decide which approach is appropriate based on the child, the learning goal, and the situation (NAEYC, 2020).

For example, an educator might:

- Allow children to explore blocks independently,
- Join the play and ask a question that extends children's thinking,
- Model how to use a new tool,
- Introduce a new vocabulary word,

- Demonstrate a specific skill, or
- Directly explain information when doing so supports children's learning.

Play remains central to early childhood learning, but **play and intentional teaching are not opposites**. High-quality early childhood programs use both in thoughtful ways (NAEYC, 2020).

Six Areas of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

The three core considerations guide educators' decisions across many aspects of their work. NAEYC organizes its DAP guidelines into **six interrelated areas of professional practice** (NAEYC, 2020).

1. Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners

Educators build an environment in which children feel that they belong, are respected, and are valued for the strengths they bring. Positive relationships among children, educators, and families provide a foundation for learning and development (NAEYC, 2020).

2. Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections

Educators build respectful, two-way relationships with families. Families share important knowledge about their children, while educators share information about children's experiences and learning. Educators also recognize and make connections with the communities in which children and families live (NAEYC, 2020).

3. Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children's Development and Learning

Educators gather information about children's strengths, interests, learning, and development. Observation, documentation, children's work, family information, and appropriate assessment help educators understand children's progress and plan next steps (NAEYC, 2020).

4. Teaching to Enhance Each Child's Development and Learning

Educators intentionally choose teaching strategies that respond to children's development, abilities, languages, interests, experiences, and learning goals.

Teaching may include self-directed play, guided play, conversations, modeling, scaffolding, questioning, demonstrations, and direct instruction when appropriate (NAEYC, 2020).

5. Planning and Implementing an Engaging Curriculum to Achieve Meaningful Goals

Educators plan learning experiences with meaningful goals in mind. Curriculum should support development across interconnected areas while building children's knowledge, skills, interests, and understanding.

Educators use what they learn through observation and assessment to make decisions about what children are ready to explore next (NAEYC, 2020).

6. Demonstrating Professionalism as an Early Childhood Educator

Developmentally appropriate practice requires professional knowledge and judgment. Educators continue learning, reflect on their practice, collaborate with families and colleagues, use ethical practices, and make intentional decisions based on knowledge of children and development.

The six areas are not separate responsibilities. They work together to support high-quality teaching and learning (NAEYC, 2020).

DAP Does NOT Mean “No Academics”

Young children can learn mathematics, science, literacy, social studies, the arts, and other academic content through developmentally appropriate experiences. Educators identify meaningful learning goals and provide engaging opportunities for children to build knowledge and skills (NAEYC, 2020).

For example, an educator might invite preschoolers to investigate which objects roll down a ramp. Children predict what will happen, test different objects, compare results, and describe what they notice. The educator introduces useful vocabulary, such as *roll, slide, steep,* and *distance*, and helps children record their findings through drawings, photographs, or dictated observations.

This experience brings together science, mathematics, and literacy. Children investigate motion, compare how far objects travel, and communicate their ideas. The educator intentionally supports academic learning while responding to children’s questions, abilities, and interests.

When planning academic learning experiences, educators consider:

- Is the experience appropriately challenging?
- Are children actively engaged?
- Does it build on what children already know and can do?
- Are there different ways for children to participate?
- Does the teaching approach fit the children and the learning goal?

Developmentally appropriate academic learning combines meaningful goals with play, exploration, conversation, and intentional teaching (NAEYC, 2020).

What This Means for Early Childhood Educators

Developmentally appropriate practice requires educators to know **child development** and to know **the children they teach**.

Note

When making a decision, an educator can ask:

- What do I know about **child development and learning**?
- What do I know about **this individual child**?
- What do I know about **this child's family, culture, language, community, and experiences**?

Then the educator uses that knowledge to make intentional decisions about relationships, environments, materials, curriculum, teaching strategies, assessment, and family partnerships (NAEYC, 2020).

DAP is not a checklist of activities that are always appropriate or always inappropriate.

A practice is **developmentally appropriate** because of how well it responds to the children, the learning goal, and the context in which learning occurs.

Key Takeaway

Developmentally appropriate practice is intentional decision-making based on commonality, individuality, and context.

Educators use knowledge of child development and learning, knowledge of each individual child, and knowledge of children's

social and cultural contexts when deciding how to support learning.

These three considerations guide six interrelated areas of practice:

1. Creating a caring, equitable community of learners
2. Engaging in reciprocal partnerships with families and fostering community connections
3. Observing, documenting, and assessing children's development and learning
4. Teaching to enhance each child's development and learning
5. Planning and implementing an engaging curriculum to achieve meaningful goals
6. Demonstrating professionalism as an early childhood educator (NAEYC, 2020).

The goal is to create learning experiences that are **strengths-based, play-based, equitable, meaningful, joyful, and responsive to each child** (NAEYC, 2020).

Vocabulary Alert: Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP): A framework for making intentional teaching decisions that promote children's development and learning.

Commonality: Knowledge from research and professional understanding about processes of child development and learning that apply broadly to children.

Individuality: The characteristics and experiences that make each child unique and influence how educators can best support that child's development and learning.

Context: The social, cultural, linguistic, family, community, and historical circumstances in which development and learning occur.

Strengths-Based: An approach that recognizes and builds on children's abilities, interests, knowledge, experiences, and potential.

Play-Based Learning: Learning supported through meaningful play, exploration, interaction, choice, and active engagement.

Intentional Teaching: Purposeful decisions educators make about interactions, environments, materials, experiences, and teaching strategies to support children's learning.

Exercise 1.4.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What is developmentally appropriate practice?
2. What are the three core considerations of DAP?
3. What is meant by **commonality**?
4. How is **individuality** different from commonality?
5. Why is **context** important when making teaching decisions?
6. What are the six interrelated areas of practice identified in NAEYC's DAP guidelines?
7. Why does developmentally appropriate practice require more than knowing a child's age?
8. Give one example of how an educator could adapt an experience based on a child's individuality.
9. Why does DAP not mean choosing between play and academic learning?

Answers available at the end of this section.

References

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020). *Developmentally appropriate practice* [Position statement]. NAEYC DAP position statement

OpenAI. (2026). *Three core considerations of developmentally appropriate practice* [AI-generated image].

Answers

Exercise 1.4.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Developmentally appropriate practice is a framework educators use to make intentional decisions that support children's optimal development and learning.
2. The three core considerations are commonality, individuality, and context.
3. Commonality refers to research and professional knowledge about processes of child development and learning that apply broadly to children.
4. Commonality considers what is generally known about development and learning. Individuality focuses on the unique strengths, abilities, interests, experiences, preferences, and needs of a particular child.
5. Children develop within families, cultures, languages, communities, and social environments. Understanding these contexts helps educators make decisions that are meaningful and responsive to children and families.
6. They are:
    1. Creating a caring, equitable community of learners
    2. Engaging in reciprocal partnerships with families and fostering community connections
    3. Observing, documenting, and assessing children's development and learning
    4. Teaching to enhance each child's development and learning
    5. Planning and implementing an engaging curriculum to achieve meaningful goals
    6. Demonstrating professionalism as an early childhood educator
7. Children of the same age differ in their strengths, abilities, interests, experiences, cultures, languages, and developmental needs. Educators must consider commonality, individuality, and context together.
8. During a collage activity, one child might cut paper with scissors while another tears paper, uses adaptive scissors, receives assistance, or chooses pre-cut materials. Both children can participate in the experience while developing skills.
9. Academic knowledge and skills can develop through meaningful play, exploration, conversation, and intentional teaching. For example, a ramp investigation can support science, mathematics, and literacy together. Educators select teaching approaches based on the children and the learning goal (NAEYC, 2020).

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2: SUMMARIZING CHILD DEVELOPMENT THEORIES

2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

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2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

Introduction

Child development theories help explain how children grow, learn, behave, form relationships, and interact with the world around them. Early childhood educators study theories not simply to remember the names and ideas of theorists, but because theoretical knowledge can help them better understand children and make intentional decisions about teaching.

In this section, you will explore how child development theories are used in everyday early childhood practice. In Section 2.2, you will examine specific theoretical perspectives in greater detail.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 2.1: Describe how child development theories are used in early childhood settings.

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Explain why child development theories are useful to early childhood educators.
- Describe how theoretical knowledge can inform observation and understanding of children's development and behavior.
- Describe how theories can influence teaching practices, learning experiences, relationships, guidance, and learning environments.
- Explain how educators use theoretical knowledge as one source of information when making intentional decisions about children.

Theories Help Educators Understand Children

A **theory** is an organized explanation that helps us understand how or why something happens. Child development theories provide frameworks for thinking about how children develop and learn. Theories can be thought of as **lenses**. A lens helps us focus our attention on particular details. In the same way, a developmental theory may help an educator think more carefully about children's thinking, relationships, behavior, interactions, or experiences.

For example, imagine a three-year-old who insists, "I do it myself!" while trying to zip a coat.

An educator could simply view the child as being stubborn. Knowledge of child development, however, might lead the educator to recognize that young children are developing independence and learning to complete tasks for themselves. Instead of immediately taking over, the educator might give the child time to try and provide assistance only when it is needed. The theory does not provide a script telling the educator exactly what to say or do. Instead, theoretical knowledge helps the educator **interpret what is happening and make a more intentional response**.

Key Idea

Child development theories do not provide recipes for teaching. They provide ways of understanding development that can help educators make informed decisions.

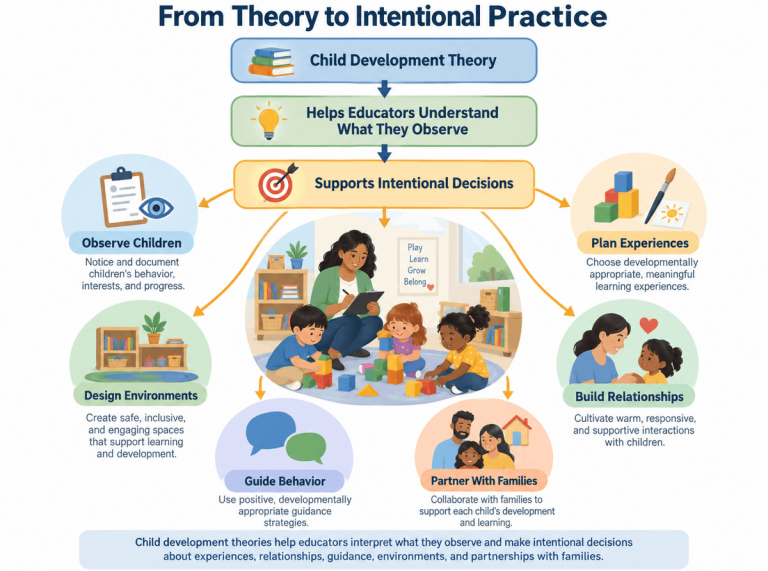


Figure 2.1.1: Child development theories help educators interpret what they observe and make intentional decisions about experiences, relationships, guidance, environments, and partnerships with families. (OpenAI, 2026a)

How Educators Use Child Development Theories

Theoretical knowledge can influence many parts of an early childhood educator's work. Educators use ideas about children's development when they observe children, plan experiences, interact with children, guide behavior, arrange environments, and build relationships with families (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Understanding and Observing Children

Observation is an important part of early childhood education. Educators observe children to learn about their abilities, interests, relationships, approaches to learning, and development. Theoretical knowledge can help educators think about what they observe (NAEYC, 2020).

For example, an educator might notice a child repeatedly filling a container with blocks, dumping them out, and filling it again. Rather than viewing the behavior as meaningless repetition, the educator may recognize that the child is exploring ideas such as quantity, space, cause and effect, and how objects behave. Another child may stand near a group of children playing before gradually joining them. Knowledge about social development may help the educator recognize that observing others can be part of learning how to participate in a group.

Theories can help educators ask questions such as:

- What might this child be learning?
- What skills is the child practicing?
- What experiences may be influencing this behavior?
- What does the child seem ready to try next?
- What kind of support might help the child participate successfully?

Theories help educators look beyond the behavior they see and consider the development and learning that may be occurring.

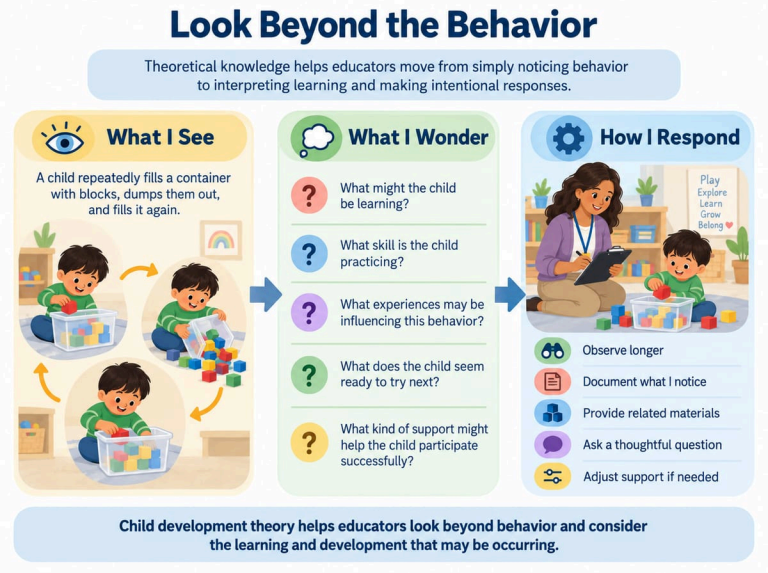


Figure 2.1.2: Looking Beyond the Behavior. Theoretical knowledge can help educators move from simply noticing a child's behavior to considering the learning and development that may be occurring. (OpenAI, 2026b)

Planning Learning Experiences

Theories also influence how educators plan experiences for young children. Many developmental perspectives emphasize that children are active participants in learning. This supports early childhood practices that give children opportunities to explore, manipulate materials, investigate ideas, solve problems, communicate, and learn through meaningful experiences (NAEYC, 2020).

For example, children investigating water might:

- Pour water into different containers,
- Compare which containers hold more or less,
- Experiment with funnels and tubes,
- Predict which objects will sink or float,
- Describe what they observe, and
- Work with other children to solve problems.

Instead of simply telling children information about water, the educator creates opportunities for children to investigate and construct understanding through experience.

Other theoretical ideas emphasize the importance of interaction and support from more knowledgeable people. An educator may respond by asking questions, demonstrating a strategy, providing a hint, or giving temporary assistance, sometimes called scaffolding, when a child encounters something challenging. For example, a child may be working on a repeating pattern but not know what should come next. The educator might say, "Red, blue, red, blue. What do you notice?" The educator provides enough support to help the child continue thinking without completing the task for the child (NAEYC, 2020).

Building Relationships

Developmental theories have also helped educators understand the importance of relationships. Young children learn and develop through interactions with caring adults and other children. Responsive relationships can help children feel secure, communicate their needs, explore their surroundings, and participate in learning.

In an early childhood setting, educators support relationships when they:

- Respond to children's communication and emotions,
- Provide comfort when children are distressed,
- Create predictable routines,

- Greet children and families warmly,
- Listen to children's ideas,
- Encourage children to express feelings and needs, and
- Build trust through consistent interactions.

Theoretical knowledge helps educators recognize that relationships are not separate from learning. **Relationships are one of the contexts in which development and learning occur** (NAEYC, 2020).

Supporting Independence and Participation

Theories about children's social and emotional development have influenced practices that encourage children to participate actively in everyday routines. Instead of completing tasks for children whenever something is difficult, educators can provide opportunities for children to try, make choices, contribute to the classroom, and gradually develop independence.

For example, children might:

- Pour their own water,
- Choose materials,
- Put away belongings,
- Help prepare snack,
- Select a book,
- Decide how to approach an art experience, or
- Help solve a problem with a peer.

The educator considers what the child can currently do and what amount of assistance will support continued growth. This does not mean expecting every child of the same age to perform the same tasks independently. Educators also consider each child's abilities, experiences, and support needs (NAEYC, 2020).

Guiding Children's Behavior

Theories of learning have also influenced approaches to guidance. Children learn from what happens around them. They notice how adults respond to behavior, and they observe and imitate what other people do. This means educators need to think carefully about both **what they respond to** and **what they model**.

For example, an educator might say:

"Jamal, you put the markers back in the basket when you finished. That helps us take care of our classroom."

The educator draws attention to a helpful behavior rather than focusing only on behavior that needs correction. Educators also model the skills they want children to develop. An adult who wants children to use respectful language, manage frustration, care for materials, or solve disagreements calmly should demonstrate those behaviors during everyday interactions. Children learn not only from what adults tell them to do, but also from what they see adults and other children doing (NAEYC, 2020).

Designing the Learning Environment

Theoretical ideas about how children learn can also influence classroom environments. An environment designed for active learning might provide children with opportunities to:

- choose and manipulate materials,
- investigate real objects,
- move throughout the environment,
- communicate with other children,
- work independently and collaboratively,
- make decisions,
- solve problems, and
- engage in meaningful play.

Materials that children can see, reach, select, use, and return independently can support participation and growing independence. The arrangement of the environment therefore reflects beliefs about how children learn. A classroom in which children spend most of their time waiting for adults to tell them what to do reflects a different view of learning than a classroom in which children are encouraged to explore, communicate, make choices, and participate actively (NAEYC, 2020).

Understanding Children Within Families and Communities

Development does not occur only within the early childhood classroom. Children develop within families, cultures, languages, communities, and other environments. Theoretical perspectives that consider these influences remind educators that children's behavior and development cannot always be understood by looking only at what happens at school.

Imagine that a child rarely speaks during large-group activities. Before interpreting the child's limited participation as evidence of a communication difficulty, an educator gathers additional information about:

- the languages the child uses,
- how the child communicates in other settings,
- the child's comfort level in groups,
- previous experiences in early childhood programs,
- family expectations about children's communication with adults, and
- situations in which the child communicates most comfortably.

Families provide important information about children's experiences, strengths, languages, interests, routines, and ways of interacting. Understanding the child's broader context helps the educator avoid making assumptions based only on classroom behavior (NAEYC, 2020).

Theory is One Source of Professional Knowledge

Child development theory is an important foundation for early childhood practice, but educators do not make decisions based on theory alone.

Educators also consider:

- What they know about child development,
- Observations of the individual child,
- The child's strengths and interests,
- Information from families,
- Cultural and community contexts,
- Assessment information,
- Early learning guidelines and professional standards, and
- The goals of the learning experience.

Theory helps educators think about what they observe, but it should not be used to place children into rigid categories or assume that every child will develop in exactly the same way. This connects to developmentally appropriate practice from Section 1.4. Educators use professional knowledge while also considering the individual child and the contexts in which development and learning occur (NAEYC, 2020).



Figure 2.1.3: **Theory Is One Source of Professional Knowledge.** Early childhood educators combine child development theory with observation, knowledge of the individual child, families, culture and community, early learning guidelines, and learning goals when making intentional teaching decisions. (OpenAI, 2026c)

From Theory to Practice

Consider a child who is trying to build a tall block tower. The tower falls several times, and the child begins to become frustrated. The educator's knowledge of child development may influence several decisions.

The educator might:

- Allow the child time to experiment rather than immediately showing the solution,
- Ask a question such as, "What could make the bottom stronger?"
- Demonstrate one strategy if the child needs additional support,
- Encourage the child's persistence,
- Invite another child to share an idea,
- Provide different sizes or shapes of blocks, or
- Observe what the child tries next before deciding whether additional help is needed.

The educator does not need to stop and identify a particular theory before responding. Over time, ideas from child development theories become part of the professional knowledge educators use to make intentional decisions.

Key Takeaway

Child development theories help early childhood educators understand how children grow, learn, behave, interact, and respond to their environments.

Educators use theoretical knowledge when they:

- Observe and interpret children's behavior,
- Plan learning experiences,
- Build responsive relationships,
- Support children's independence,
- Guide behavior,
- Design learning environments, and
- Understand children within their families and communities.

Theories do not tell educators exactly what to do. They provide a foundation for thinking about development and making intentional teaching decisions.

In Section 2.2, you will examine several theoretical perspectives and explore how each offers a different lens for understanding children's development. Section 2.3 then examines how research evidence can inform teaching decisions.

Vocabulary Alert: Theory and Practice

Theory: An organized explanation used to help understand how or why development and learning occur.

Theoretical Perspective: A particular way of explaining or understanding development.

Application: Using knowledge or ideas to inform decisions and actions in a real-world setting.

Scaffolding: Temporary assistance that helps a child complete a task or develop a skill, with support adjusted or reduced as the child becomes more capable.

Modeling: Demonstrating a behavior, skill, or strategy that children can observe and potentially imitate.

Intentional Teaching: Purposeful decisions educators make about interactions, environments, materials, experiences, and teaching strategies to support children's learning and development.

Exercise 2.1.1

Check Your Understanding

1. Why are child development theories useful to early childhood educators?
2. Why can a theory be described as a lens for understanding children's development?
3. How can theoretical knowledge influence what an educator notices while observing children?
4. Give one example of how theories about active learning can influence the experiences educators provide.
5. How can theoretical knowledge influence an educator's relationships with children?
6. Why is modeling important when guiding children's behavior?
7. Give one example of how theoretical ideas can influence the design of an early childhood environment.
8. Why is it important for educators to consider children's families, cultures, and communities when interpreting behavior?
9. Why should theory be considered one source of professional knowledge rather than a set of rules for teaching?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 2.1.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Theories help educators understand children's development and provide ideas that can inform observation, planning, interactions, guidance, environments, and other teaching decisions.
2. A theory helps focus attention on particular aspects of development and provides a way of interpreting what an educator observes.
3. It can help the educator look beyond a child's immediate behavior and consider what the child may be learning, practicing, communicating, or experiencing.
4. An educator might provide hands-on materials that allow children to explore, experiment, make predictions, and solve problems rather than only listening to information.
5. It can help educators recognize the importance of responsive, dependable relationships and interactions in supporting children's development and learning.
6. Children learn by observing other people. Educators therefore demonstrate the behaviors, communication, and problem-solving strategies they want children to develop.
7. Educators might place materials where children can reach and use them independently, provide areas for collaborative play, or offer open-ended materials that encourage exploration and problem-solving.
8. Children's development and behavior are influenced by experiences and expectations across many settings. Classroom observations alone may not provide a complete understanding of the child.
9. Theories provide useful ways of thinking about development, but educators must also consider the individual child, family and cultural context, observations, assessment information, professional guidelines, and the particular situation.

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2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development

Introduction

In Section 2.1, you learned that child development theories help educators understand children and make intentional decisions about teaching. Different theories emphasize different influences on development.

Some theories focus on biological maturation. Others emphasize relationships, learning experiences, thinking, social interaction, or the environments surrounding children.

These different ways of explaining development are called **theoretical perspectives**.

No single theory explains every aspect of child development. Each theory focuses attention on particular parts of development and provides a different lens for understanding children. The theories introduced in this section will be revisited in greater depth throughout later chapters.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 2.2: Identify diverse theoretical perspectives on child development.

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Identify major theoretical perspectives used to explain child development.
- Match major theorists with the theoretical perspectives associated with their work.
- Summarize the central ideas of each theoretical perspective.
- Recognize key concepts and vocabulary associated with major child development theories.
- Connect theoretical perspectives with developmental domains and Wisconsin Early Learning and Development Guideline (WI ELDG) Learning and Development Areas.
- Explain why multiple theoretical perspectives are useful for understanding the whole child.

Different Perspectives Help Explain Development

Human development is complex. Children grow physically, think and solve problems, communicate, build relationships, express emotions, create, explore, and participate in families and communities. Because development involves many interacting influences, theorists have approached child development from different perspectives.

Several important ideas should be kept in mind as you study theories:

- No single theory explains everything about children's development.
- Each theory focuses on particular aspects or influences on development.
- Theories may build on, expand, or challenge ideas proposed by earlier theorists.
- Theories differ in their research support. Some remain useful primarily for understanding the history of developmental thought, while particular claims have been revised or challenged by later research.

A theoretical perspective can therefore be thought of as a **lens**. Looking through a different lens changes what receives the most attention.

Key Idea

Theoretical perspectives provide different ways of explaining development. One theory might emphasize biology, another relationships, another learning experiences, and another the child's surrounding environment.

Connecting Theories to Developmental Domains and the WI ELDGs

Throughout this section, each theory is connected to the developmental domains introduced in Chapter 1 and to related WI ELDG Learning and Development Areas. These are **connections rather than official classifications**. Most theories influence our understanding of more than one aspect of development, and children always develop as whole individuals.

Maturational Perspective: Arnold Gesell

The **maturational perspective** emphasizes the role of biological growth and developmental readiness. Arnold Gesell proposed that children's development tends to unfold in an orderly sequence as biological maturation occurs. Although individual children may develop at different rates, certain abilities generally emerge in a predictable order (Gesell, 1940).

Gesell's perspective emphasizes developmental sequences, readiness, and the idea that development cannot simply be rushed. For example, children generally develop control of the larger muscles of the body before developing the refined hand control required for writing. A child must also develop sufficient balance, strength, and coordination before mastering more complex physical movements.

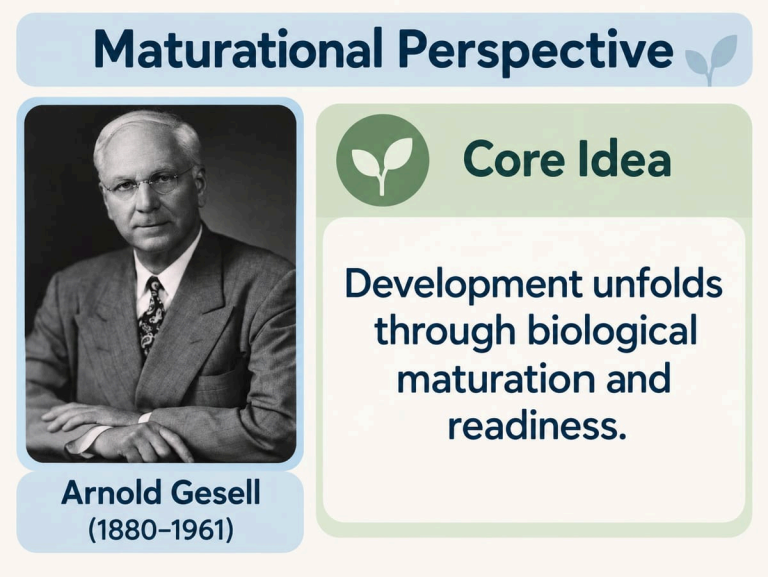


Figure 2.2.1: **Arnold Gesell and the Maturational Perspective.** Gesell's maturational perspective emphasizes biological growth, developmental readiness, and the idea that development unfolds in an orderly sequence over time. (Gesell Image is in the Public Domain. Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026c.)

Key Ideas

- Biological maturation contributes to development.
- Development generally follows an orderly sequence.
- Children may reach developmental milestones at different times.
- Readiness is important when considering what children are prepared to do.
- Development should not be rushed simply because an adult wants a child to demonstrate a particular skill.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domains: Physical; Cognitive

WI ELDG Connections: Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development; Cognition and General Knowledge

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Psychodynamic Perspective: Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud developed one of the earliest influential theories of personality development. Freud's **psychodynamic** perspective emphasized early childhood experiences and proposed that behavior can be influenced by unconscious thoughts, needs, and motivations." He believed that experiences during the early years could have long-lasting effects on personality and behavior.

Freud described three parts of personality:

- **Id:** associated with biological urges and immediate gratification.
- **Ego:** considers reality and helps manage impulses.
- **Superego:** represents internalized values, rules, and expectations.

Freud also proposed a **psychosexua**l theory of development that included five stages: oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital. Many specific aspects of Freud's theory have been criticized and are difficult to test scientifically. However, his emphasis on early childhood experiences influenced many theories that came after him (Paris et al., 2019).

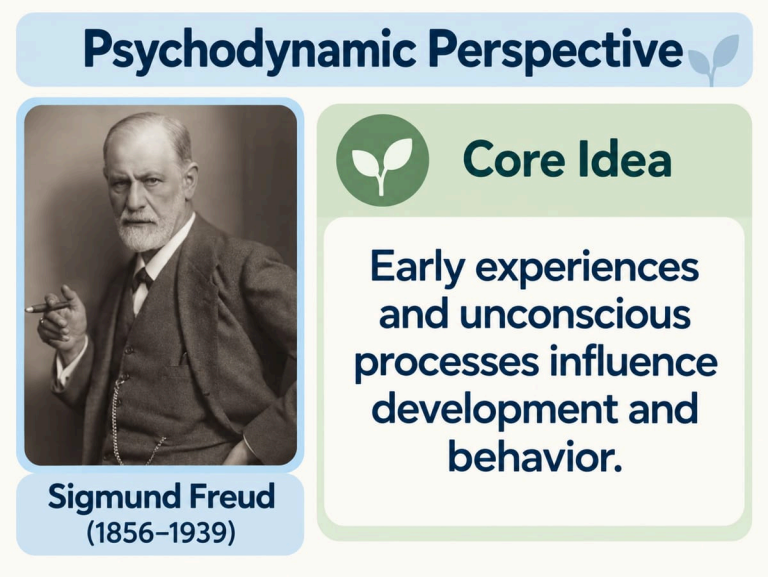


Figure 2.2.2: **Sigmund Freud and the Psychodynamic Perspective.** Freud emphasized the influence of early experiences and unconscious processes on development and behavior. (Freud Image(opens in new window) is in the public domain. Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026k.)

Key Ideas

- Early experiences can influence later development.
- Behavior may be affected by unconscious processes.
- Freud proposed that personality develops through stages.
- His ideas influenced many later theories of development.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domain: Social and Emotional

WI ELDG Connection: Social and Emotional Development

Psychosocial Perspective: Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson expanded on some of Freud's ideas but placed much greater emphasis on relationships, social experiences, culture, and conscious development. Erikson's **psychosocial theory** proposes that people encounter important social and emotional

challenges throughout life. Relationships and social experiences contribute to children's developing sense of self, independence, confidence, and competence (Paris et al., 2019).

Erikson described eight stages across the lifespan. Four are especially relevant to childhood.

Table 2.2.1: Psychosocial Theory

Stage	Approximate Period	Central Developmental Concern
Trust vs. Mistrust	Infancy	Developing trust through consistent care
Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Toddlerhood	Developing independence
Initiative vs. Guilt	Preschool years	Initiating activities and trying new ideas
Industry vs. Inferiority	School age	Developing competence and accomplishment

Source: Summary of Erikson's childhood stages based on Paris et al. (2019).

These stages highlight children's developing trust, independence, initiative, and feelings of competence.

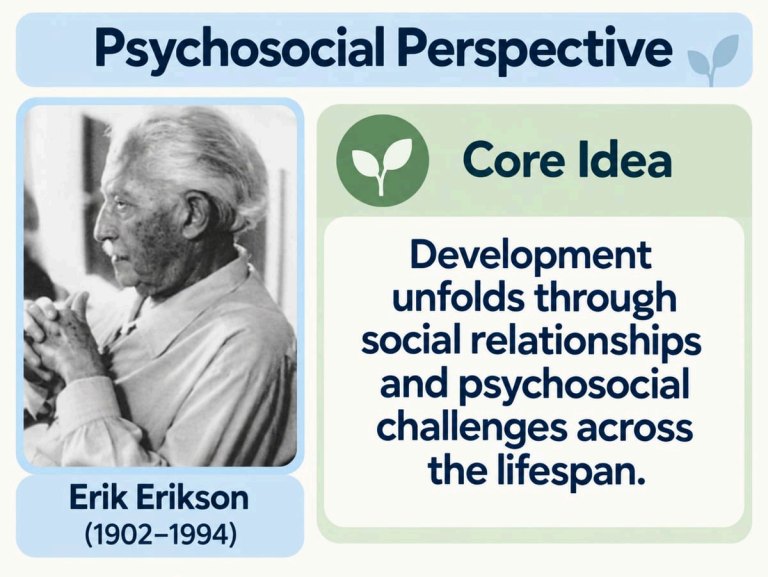


Figure 2.2.3: **Erik Erikson and the Psychosocial Perspective.** Erikson emphasized relationships, social experiences, and psychosocial challenges across the lifespan. (Erikson Image(opens in new window) is in the public domain. Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026d.)

Key Ideas

- Relationships contribute to social-emotional development.
- Children develop an increasing sense of self.
- Different periods of development involve different psychosocial challenges.
- Independence, initiative, and competence develop through experiences and relationships.
- Development continues across the lifespan.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domain: Social and Emotional

WI ELDG Connections: Social and Emotional Development; Family and Community Partnerships

Humanistic Perspective: Abraham Maslow

The **humanistic perspective** emphasizes human needs, growth, and the development of individual potential. Abraham Maslow proposed that people have both basic needs and growth needs. His theory is often represented as a hierarchy in which basic physical and safety needs support movement toward belonging, competence, and personal growth (Maslow, 1943).

For young children, these needs might include:

- Food and rest,
- Physical and emotional safety,
- Dependable relationships,
- A sense of belonging,
- Opportunities to experience success, and
- Opportunities to develop confidence and competence.

A child who is extremely hungry, frightened, exhausted, or insecure may have difficulty focusing on exploration and learning. These needs can operate at the same time. The hierarchy should not be interpreted as a rigid sequence in which every lower need must be completely satisfied before learning, belonging, or personal growth can occur (Maslow, 1943).

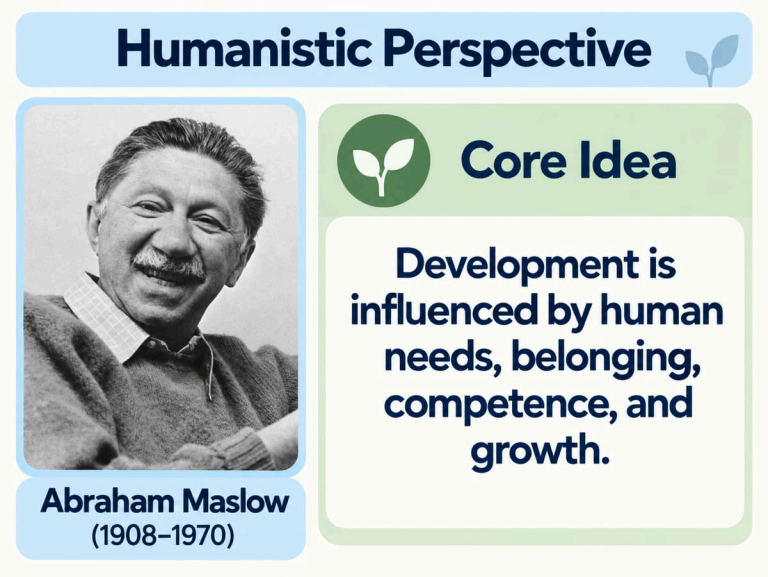


Figure 2.2.4: **Abraham Maslow and the Humanistic Perspective.** Maslow emphasized human needs, belonging, competence, and growth. (Maslow image is in the Public Domain. Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026a.)

Key Ideas

- Human beings have physical, emotional, and growth needs.
- Basic needs can influence children's ability to participate and learn.
- Relationships and belonging are important.
- Children benefit from opportunities to experience competence and growth.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domains: Physical; Social and Emotional

WI ELDG Connections: Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development; Social and Emotional Development; Approaches to Learning

Attachment Perspective: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth

The **attachment perspective** emphasizes the importance of children's early emotional relationships with caregivers. John Bowlby proposed that attachment has a biological and evolutionary function. Mary Ainsworth expanded the study of attachment through observations of relationships between young children and caregivers (Paris et al., 2019).

Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of early caregiver relationships, sensitive periods, and children's need for security. Young children often use a familiar caregiver as a source of comfort and security. When children feel safe and supported, they may be more willing to explore their surroundings, interact with others, and return to the caregiver when they need reassurance (Paris et al., 2019).



Figure 2.2.5: **John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth and the Attachment Perspective.** Bowlby and Ainsworth emphasized the importance of early, responsive caregiver relationships in supporting children's emotional security, exploration, and development. (The Bowlby-Ainsworth Award image is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0(opens in new window). Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026h.)

Key Ideas

- Early caregiver relationships are important influences on development.
- Young children seek comfort and security from familiar caregivers.
- Responsive relationships support children's sense of security.
- Security can support exploration and participation.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domain: Social and Emotional

WI ELDG Connections: Social and Emotional Development; Family and Community Partnerships

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Behaviorist Perspective: Pavlov, Watson, and Skinner

The **behaviorist perspective** focuses on observable behavior and how experiences influence behavior. Behaviorists studied how associations, environmental events, and consequences can change what people do.

Several theorists contributed to this perspective.

Ivan Pavlov: Classical Conditioning

Ivan Pavlov demonstrated **classical conditioning**, in which an organism learns to associate one stimulus with another. In Pavlov's well-known experiments, dogs learned to associate a signal with the arrival of food. Eventually, the signal itself produced a response that had originally occurred when food was presented. Classical conditioning helps explain how some automatic or emotional responses can become connected with particular experiences (Paris et al., 2019).

John B. Watson

John Watson applied behaviorist principles to human behavior. He argued that experiences and conditioning could strongly influence children's behavior. His well-known Little Albert experiment attempted to demonstrate that an emotional response such as fear could become associated with an object through conditioning (Paris et al., 2019).

B. F. Skinner: Operant Conditioning

B. F. Skinner focused on **operant conditioning**, which examines how consequences influence whether a behavior is likely to occur again. Skinner emphasized **reinforcement**—a consequence that increases the likelihood that a behavior will occur again (Paris et al., 2019).

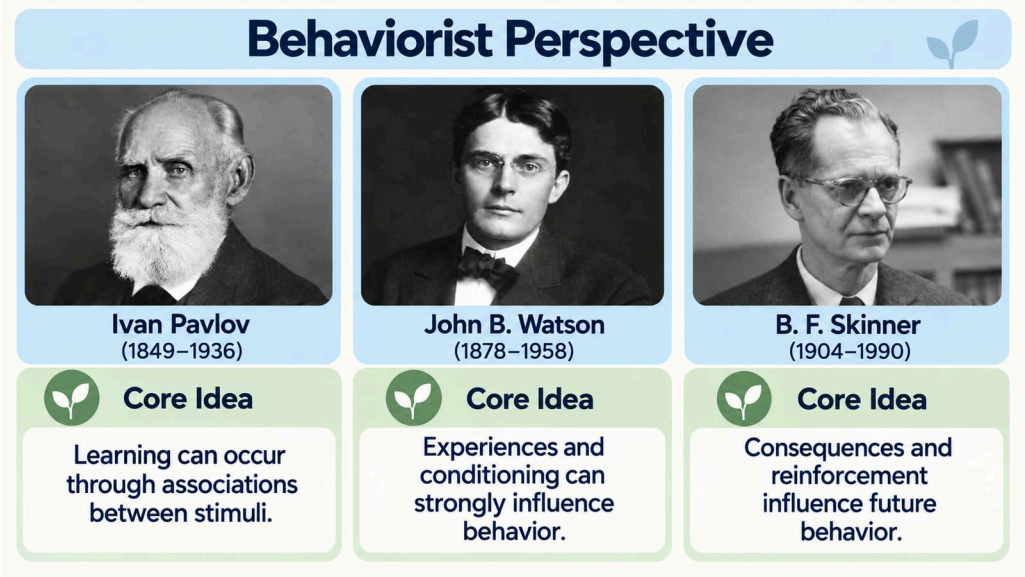


Figure 2.2.6: **Pavlov, Watson, and Skinner and the Behaviorist Perspective.** Pavlov, Watson, and Skinner contributed different explanations for how experiences, associations, conditioning, consequences, and reinforcement influence behavior. (Pavlov Image is in the Public Domain, Watson Image is in the Public Domain, Skinner Image CC BY 3.0(opens in new window). Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026j.)

Key Ideas

- Behavior can change through experience.
- Associations can influence responses.
- Consequences influence future behavior.
- Reinforcement increases the likelihood of behavior.
- Behaviorists focus primarily on observable behavior.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domains: Social and Emotional; Cognitive; Communication

WI ELDG Connections: Social and Emotional Development; Approaches to Learning; Language, Communication, and Literacy

Social Learning Perspective: Albert Bandura

Albert Bandura expanded thinking about learning by demonstrating that children do not need to experience every consequence themselves in order to learn. Children frequently learn by **watching and imitating other people**. This is called **observational learning** or **modeling** (Bandura, 1986).

A child might watch another child put materials away and then copy that behavior. Children also observe how adults communicate, respond to frustration, solve problems, interact with others, and approach new experiences.

In his later social cognitive theory, Bandura emphasized reciprocal influences among personal factors, behavior, and the environment. Children's thoughts and expectations influence their actions, while their actions and surroundings also influence one another (Bandura, 1986).

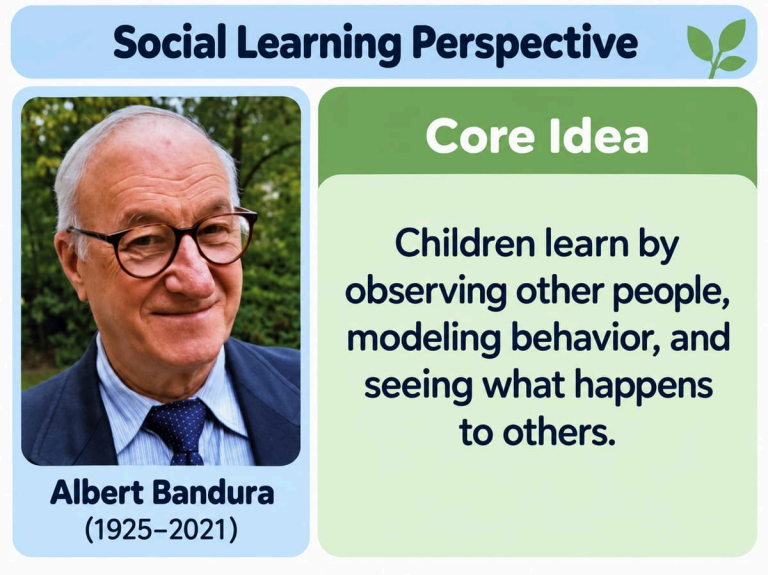


Figure 2.2.7: **Albert Bandura and the Social Learning Perspective.** Bandura emphasized that children learn through observation, modeling, and by seeing the consequences of other people's behavior. (Albert Bandura Image(opens in new window) is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0(opens in new window). Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026b.)

Key Ideas

- Children learn by observing other people.
- Modeling and imitation are important forms of learning.
- Children can learn by watching what happens to other people.
- Children and their environments influence one another.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domains: Social and Emotional; Cognitive; Communication

WI ELDG Connections: Social and Emotional Development; Approaches to Learning; Language, Communication, and Literacy

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Cognitive-Constructivist Perspective: Jean Piaget

Jean Piaget focused on how children's thinking develops. Piaget proposed that children are **active constructors of knowledge**. Children do not simply absorb information from adults. They explore, experiment, organize experiences, and develop increasingly complex understandings of the world.

Piaget used the term **schema** to describe a mental structure or category children use to organize knowledge. Two processes help children adjust their thinking as they encounter new experiences. **Assimilation** occurs when a child interprets a new experience using an existing schema. **Accommodation** occurs when the child changes an existing schema or creates a new one because the new experience does not fit what the child already understands (Paris et al., 2019).

Piaget also proposed four stages of cognitive development.

Table 2.2.2: Constructivist Theory

Stage	Approximate Age
Sensorimotor	Birth–2
Preoperational	2–7
Concrete Operational	7–11
Formal Operational	About 12 and older

Source: Summary of Piaget's cognitive-developmental stages based on Paris et al. (2019).

These ages are approximate descriptions within Piaget's theory rather than deadlines or diagnostic criteria. Children's performance varies with experience, task demands, and context. The sensorimotor and preoperational stages are especially important in early childhood. Young children learn through their senses and actions and gradually become able to represent ideas through language, images, gestures, and pretend play.

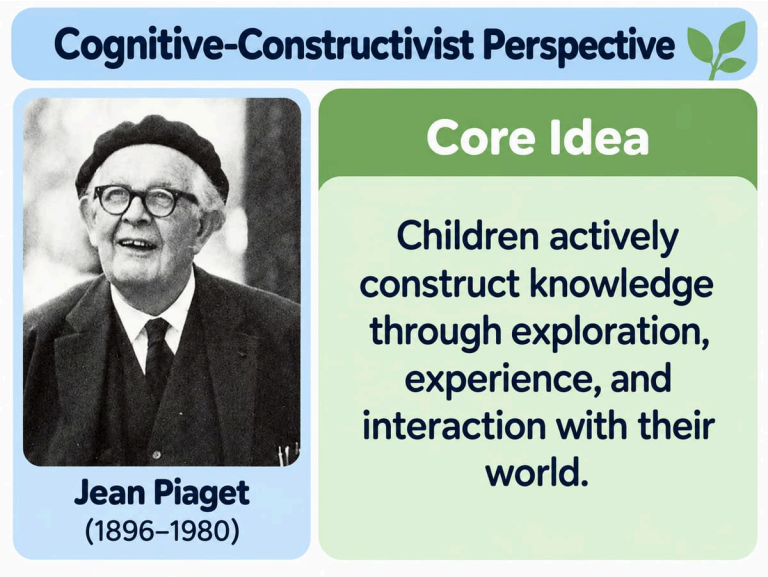


Figure 2.2.8: **Jean Piaget and the Cognitive-Constructivist Perspective.** Piaget emphasized that children actively construct knowledge through exploration, experience, and interaction with their world. (Piaget image is shared under a CC BY-SA (opens in new window)license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by LibreTexts. Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026g.)

Key Ideas

- Children actively construct knowledge.
- Thinking changes as children develop.
- Schemas organize knowledge.
- Assimilation and accommodation help children make sense of new experiences.
- Piaget proposed stages of cognitive development.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domains: Cognitive; Physical

WI ELDG Connections: Cognition and General Knowledge; Approaches to Learning; Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development

Sociocultural Perspective: Lev Vygotsky

Lev Vygotsky also studied cognitive development but placed greater emphasis on **social interaction and culture**. Vygotsky proposed that children develop knowledge through interactions with adults and more capable peers. Learning occurs through social interaction and is gradually internalized by the child (Paris et al., 2019).

Two important concepts are associated with Vygotsky.

Zone of Proximal Development

The **zone of proximal development (ZPD)** is the range between what a child can currently do independently and what the child can accomplish with appropriate assistance (Paris et al., 2019)..

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is temporary support provided to help a child accomplish something that would be difficult to do alone. The term *scaffolding* was introduced by later researchers to describe a type of support consistent with Vygotsky's ideas about learning within the zone of proximal development (Wood et al., 1976).

The support may include:

- Modeling,
- Asking a question,
- Giving a hint,
- Demonstrating one step,
- Providing a reminder, or
- Working alongside the child.

As the child becomes more capable, the assistance can be reduced. This means providing assistance when it is needed and gradually stepping back as the child becomes more independent.

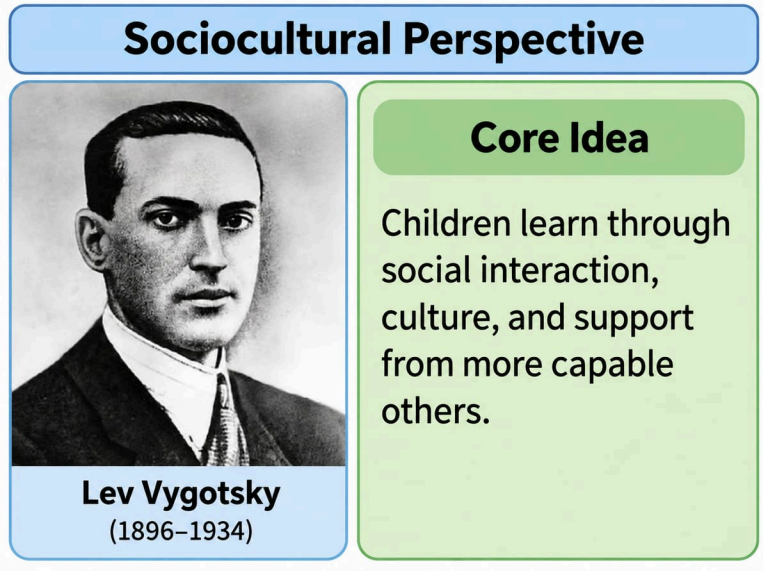


Figure 2.2.9: **Lev Vygotsky and the Sociocultural Perspective.** Vygotsky emphasized that children learn through social interaction, culture, and support from more capable others. (Vygotsky image is liscensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026i.)

Key Ideas

- Learning occurs within social and cultural contexts.
- Interaction with adults and peers supports development.
- Children can accomplish more with appropriate assistance.
- Scaffolding supports learning within the zone of proximal development.
- Culture influences what and how children learn.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domains: Cognitive; Communication; Social and Emotional

WI ELDG Connections: Cognition and General Knowledge; Language, Communication, and Literacy; Approaches to Learning

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Information Processing Perspective

The **information processing perspective** examines how people take in, attend to, process, store, and retrieve information. These processes are sometimes described as input, processing, storage, and retrieval.

From this perspective, developmental change can involve improvements in:

- Attention,
- Memory,
- Perception,
- Processing speed,
- Strategy use, and
- Problem solving.

A preschooler, for example, may be able to remember only a few directions at once. As attention, memory, and experience develop, the child may become able to follow more complex sequences (Cowan, 2014).

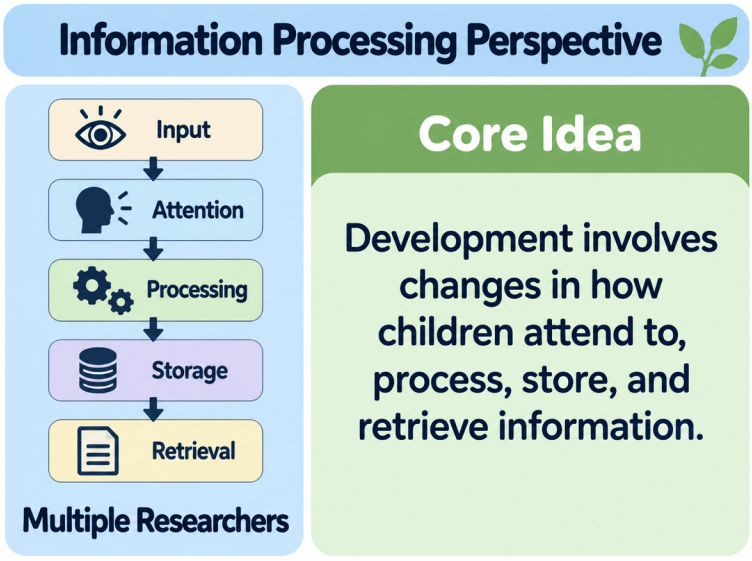


Figure 2.2.10: **Information Processing Perspective.** The information processing perspective examines how children attend to, process, store, and retrieve information, and how these abilities change with development and experience. (Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026f.)

Key Ideas

- Children receive information through their experiences.
- Attention determines what information receives focus.
- Memory allows information to be stored and retrieved.
- Information-processing abilities change with development and experience.
- Children may differ in how they attend to and process information.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domain: Cognitive

WI ELDG Connections: Cognition and General Knowledge; Approaches to Learning

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Multiple Intelligences: Howard Gardner

Howard Gardner proposed the theory of **multiple intelligences**, suggesting that human abilities are broader and more varied than a single general measure of intelligence. Gardner's theory emphasizes that individuals may demonstrate strengths in different ways and that human ability cannot be represented by only one narrow measure.

Gardner identified several areas of intelligence, commonly including abilities related to:

- Language,
- Logical and mathematical thinking,
- Music,
- Movement,
- Spatial understanding,
- Understanding other people,
- Understanding oneself, and
- Understanding the natural world.

These areas summarize Gardner's proposed intelligences (Gardner, 1999).

In early childhood settings, this perspective can encourage educators to recognize that children may demonstrate knowledge and strengths through different kinds of experiences. For example, one child might communicate an idea through drawing, another through building, another through movement, another through storytelling, and another through music. This perspective connects especially well with children's **creative development** and their individual **approaches to learning**. Multiple intelligences should not be interpreted as fixed “learning styles” or as a reason to teach a child only through one preferred type of activity.

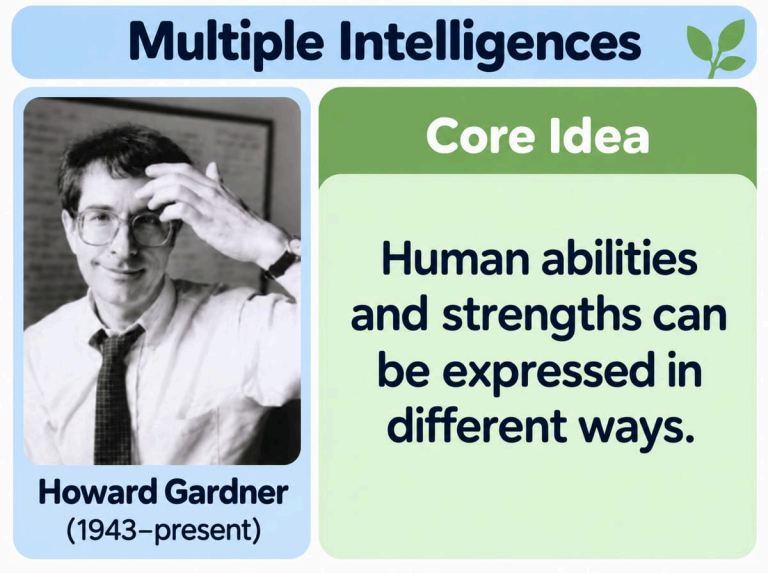


Figure 2.2.11: **Howard Gardner and Multiple Intelligences.** Gardner proposed that human abilities and strengths can be expressed in different ways rather than measured through only one narrow form of intelligence. (Image by Interaction-Design.org(opens in new window) is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0(opens in new window). Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026e.)

Key Ideas

- Human abilities can be expressed in different ways.
- Children may demonstrate different patterns of strengths.
- Learning experiences can provide multiple ways to explore and express ideas.
- Children's abilities should not be understood through only one narrow measure.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domains: Creative; Cognitive

WI ELDG Connections: Approaches to Learning; Cognition and General Knowledge

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Ecological Systems Perspective: Urie Bronfenbrenner

Urie Bronfenbrenner emphasized that children cannot be fully understood apart from the relationships, environments, communities, cultures, and historical circumstances surrounding them. His **ecological systems theory** identifies several interconnected systems that influence development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Microsystem

The **microsystem** includes the settings and relationships that directly involve the child, such as family, peers, teachers, childcare or school, and immediate community experiences.

Mesosystem

The **mesosystem** refers to connections among the child's microsystems. For example, communication and relationships between a child's family and early childhood program form part of the child's mesosystem.

Exosystem

The **exosystem** includes settings that influence the child's life even though the child may not directly participate in them. For example, a caregiver's workplace policies can influence the amount of time or flexibility a family has available.

Macrosystem

The **macrosystem** includes broader cultural values, beliefs, expectations, laws, and social systems.

Chronosystem

The **chronosystem** recognizes that development occurs over time and within a particular historical period. Together, these five interconnected systems emphasize that development must be understood within a larger social, cultural, and historical context (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

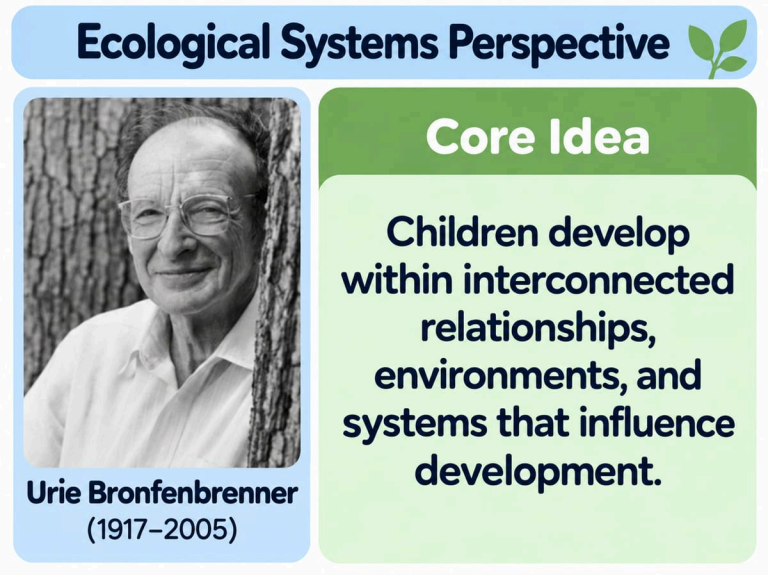


Figure 2.2.12: **Urie Bronfenbrenner and the Ecological Systems Perspective.** Bronfenbrenner emphasized that children develop within interconnected relationships, environments, and broader systems that influence development. (Image by Marco Vicente González is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0(opens in new window). Graphic design: OpenAI, 2026l.)

Key Ideas

- Development occurs within interconnected systems.
- Family, school, community, and culture influence children.
- Relationships among systems also matter.
- Social institutions can indirectly influence development.
- Development occurs within a historical and cultural context.

Primary Connections to Development

Developmental Domains: All developmental domains

WI ELDG Connections: Family and Community Partnerships and, through children's relationships and experiences, all Learning and Development Areas

Same Child, Different Theoretical Lenses

Imagine a four-year-old named Mateo who stands near a group of children building with blocks but does not join the play. Different theoretical perspectives might draw attention to different aspects of the same situation.

Table 2.2.3: Theoretical Perspectives Offer Different Views

Perspective	What Might This Perspective Help Us Consider?
Maturational	What developmental abilities or readiness may be emerging?
Psychodynamic	Could earlier emotional experiences be influencing the child's response?
Psychosocial	How might confidence, initiative, or feelings of competence be involved?
Humanistic	Does the child feel physically and emotionally safe and that they belong?
Attachment	Does the child feel secure enough to explore and interact with others?
Behaviorist	What previous experiences or consequences might be influencing participation?
Social Learning	What social behaviors has the child observed other children model?
Cognitive-Constructivist	What is the child learning through observing the materials and other children's actions?
Sociocultural	Could support from a peer or adult help the child enter the play?
Information Processing	What information is the child attending to, remembering, and processing?
Multiple Intelligences	What kinds of materials or forms of participation might connect with the child's strengths?
Ecological Systems	What family, classroom, cultural, or community experiences might influence participation?

Note. These questions illustrate possible applications of theoretical perspectives; they are not diagnostic conclusions about the child.

None of these perspectives provides a complete explanation by itself. Each lens draws attention to something different about the child and the child's experiences.

Comparing Theoretical Perspectives

Table 2.2.4: Theoretical Perspectives Comparison

Perspective	Major Theorist(s)	Primary Focus
Maturational	Arnold Gesell	Biological maturation and readiness
Psychodynamic	Sigmund Freud	Early experiences and unconscious processes
Psychosocial	Erik Erikson	Relationships, sense of self, and psychosocial challenges

Perspective	Major Theorist(s)	Primary Focus
Humanistic	Abraham Maslow	Human needs, belonging, competence, and growth
Attachment	John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth	Early relationships and emotional security
Behaviorist	Pavlov, Watson, Skinner	Learning through associations and consequences
Social Learning	Albert Bandura	Learning through observation and modeling
Cognitive-Constructivist	Jean Piaget	Children's active construction of knowledge
Sociocultural	Lev Vygotsky	Social interaction, culture, and supported learning
Information Processing	Multiple researchers	Attention, memory, processing, storage, and retrieval
Multiple Intelligences	Howard Gardner	Different ways abilities and strengths may be expressed
Ecological Systems	Urie Bronfenbrenner	Interconnected environmental systems surrounding the child

Sources: Summarized from Bandura (1986), Bronfenbrenner (1994), Cowan (2014), Gardner (1999), Gesell (1940), Maslow (1943), and Paris et al. (2019).

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review, 50*(4), 370–396. Original article

Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 17*(2), 89–100. Article DOI

Theories Are Different Lenses, Not Separate Children

It can be tempting to ask which theory is the "correct" explanation of child development. Development is too complex to be completely explained by one perspective.

The same child's development may simultaneously involve:

- Biological maturation,
- Early emotional experiences,
- Responsive relationships,
- Physical and emotional needs,
- Consequences and previous learning,
- Observation of other people,
- Active exploration,
- Social interaction,
- Attention and memory,
- Individual strengths,
- Family experiences,
- Cultural expectations, and
- Broader community and social influences.

Educators consider these perspectives alongside observations, information from families, and knowledge of each child's individual and cultural context when making teaching decisions (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

These perspectives help educators generate questions; they do not establish why a particular child behaves in a certain way.

Educators check their interpretations through continued observation, family conversations, and other appropriate information. Studying different theoretical perspectives allows educators to consider these multiple influences. As you continue through this text, these theories will appear again when you examine children's physical, social-emotional, communication, creative, and cognitive development in greater depth.

Key Takeaway

Child development theories provide different explanations for how and why children grow, learn, behave, form relationships, and interact with their environments.

Different perspectives emphasize biological, cognitive, social, emotional, cultural, learning, and environmental influences. **No single theory explains the whole child. Together, theoretical perspectives provide different lenses for understanding development.**

Vocabulary Alert: Theoretical Perspectives

Theoretical Perspective: A particular way of explaining or understanding development.

Maturation: Biological growth and developmental change that unfold as a child develops.

Psychodynamic: A perspective emphasizing early experiences and unconscious processes.

Psychosocial: Development involving interactions between psychological development and social relationships.

Humanistic: A perspective emphasizing human needs, individual potential, and growth.

Attachment: An emotional bond between a child and caregiver.

Classical Conditioning: Learning through associations between stimuli.

Operant Conditioning: Learning in which consequences influence the likelihood of behavior.

Reinforcement: A consequence that increases the likelihood that a behavior will occur again.

Modeling: Learning by observing and potentially imitating another person's behavior.

Schema: A mental structure or category used to organize knowledge.

Assimilation: Interpreting a new experience using an existing schema.

Accommodation: Changing an existing schema or creating a new one in response to new information.

Zone of Proximal Development: The range between what a child can accomplish independently and what the child can accomplish with appropriate assistance.

Scaffolding: Temporary assistance that supports a child's learning and is adjusted as the child becomes more capable.

Information Processing: A perspective examining processes such as attention, memory, processing, storage, and retrieval.

Multiple Intelligences: Gardner's proposal that human abilities can be demonstrated across several different areas rather than through one single form of intelligence.

Ecological Systems: Interconnected relationships and environments that influence development.

Exercise 2.2.1

Check Your Understanding

1. Why are there multiple theoretical perspectives on child development?
2. What does Gesell's maturational perspective emphasize?
3. What did Freud propose about the influence of early childhood experiences?
4. What are the four stages in Erikson's theory most closely associated with childhood?
5. What does Maslow's humanistic perspective emphasize?
6. Why are attachment relationships important in Bowlby and Ainsworth's perspective?
7. How does classical conditioning differ from operant conditioning?
8. What is observational learning according to Bandura?
9. What does Piaget mean when he describes children as active constructors of knowledge?
10. What is the difference between assimilation and accommodation?
11. What are the zone of proximal development and scaffolding?
12. What does the information processing perspective examine?
13. What does Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences propose?
14. What are Bronfenbrenner's five ecological systems?
15. Why is it useful to consider more than one theoretical perspective when trying to understand a child?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 2.2.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Development is complex. Different theories focus on different influences, such as biology, relationships, learning experiences, thinking, culture, individual strengths, and environments.
2. It emphasizes biological maturation, developmental sequences, and readiness.
3. Freud proposed that early experiences and unconscious processes could influence later personality and behavior.
4. Trust vs. Mistrust, Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, Initiative vs. Guilt, and Industry vs. Inferiority.
5. It emphasizes human needs, including physical and safety needs, belonging, competence, and opportunities for growth.
6. Responsive and dependable caregiver relationships can provide children with emotional security that supports exploration and development.
7. Classical conditioning involves learning associations between stimuli. Operant conditioning involves learning from the consequences that follow behavior.
8. Observational learning occurs when children learn by watching and potentially imitating other people.
9. Children build understanding through exploration, experience, and interaction with their environments rather than simply receiving information.
10. Assimilation involves fitting a new experience into an existing schema. Accommodation involves changing an existing schema or creating a new one.
11. The zone of proximal development describes what a child can accomplish with assistance but cannot yet do independently. Scaffolding is the temporary support provided to help the child succeed.
12. It examines processes such as attention, memory, processing, storage, and retrieval of information.
13. It proposes that human abilities can be demonstrated across different areas rather than being represented by only one form of intelligence.
14. Microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.
15. No single theory explains every part of development. Different perspectives highlight different biological, cognitive, social, emotional, cultural, and environmental influences that contribute to the development of the whole child.

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2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

Introduction

Child development research is useful to educators when they can understand **how evidence was gathered, what the evidence suggests, and how that evidence can inform—but not automatically dictate—teaching decisions.**

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 2.3: Relate child development research methods and findings to teaching practice.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify common research methods used to study child development.
- Explain how research methods influence the kinds of conclusions researchers can make.
- Interpret child development research findings cautiously and within context.
- Relate research findings to decisions about early childhood environments, interactions, and teaching practices.
- Explain why teachers should combine research evidence with knowledge of individual children, families, and cultural contexts.

Why Research Matters to Early Childhood Educators

Early childhood educators make decisions every day about environments, materials, routines, interactions, curriculum, and responses to children's behavior. Those decisions should not be based only on tradition, personal preference, or statements such as *“we've always done it this way.”*

Research provides educators with evidence about how children develop and learn. However, research does not provide a single formula for teaching every child. Educators must understand both **what research tells us** and **how that knowledge applies to the individual children, families, and communities they serve** (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Connecting research to teaching practice involves several steps. Educators consider how information was gathered, what researchers found, what those findings mean, and how the findings might inform decisions about teaching.



Figure 2.3.1: **Aligning Research to Practice.** Child development research provides evidence that educators interpret and consider when making intentional teaching decisions. *(OpenAI, 2026a)*

The following example shows how this process might look for an early childhood education student.

Research to Practice Example: Play

📖 **Research**
An early childhood education student reads a research article about play for a college course and discusses the article with the instructor and classmates.

📊 **Findings**
The research describes ways that play can support children's language, social interaction, problem-solving, and self-regulation (NAEYC, 2020).

💡 **Interpretation**
During field experience, the student discusses the findings with the cooperating teacher. Together, they consider what the research might mean for the children in their classroom.

👩‍🏫 **Teaching Practice**
The student and cooperating teacher decide to strengthen the play environment by providing open-ended materials, adding props that encourage conversation and pretend play, allowing longer periods of uninterrupted play, and observing how children respond.

The important point is that research **informs** teaching practice rather than automatically determining it. Educators still consider the children they teach, the classroom context, family and cultural perspectives, and the goals of the learning experience when making decisions.

How Do Researchers Study Child Development?

Researchers use a variety of methods to learn about how children grow, learn, behave, communicate, and interact with others. Each research method provides a different kind of information. Some methods help researchers observe children in everyday settings, while others allow researchers to compare groups or test whether one factor influences another.

Understanding basic research methods helps early childhood educators evaluate where child development knowledge comes from and **how thoughtfully research findings should be considered in teaching practice.**

The approaches below describe different aspects of research and can be combined. For example, a longitudinal study might use

observations, interviews, and standardized assessments. A study may also examine correlations among the information collected. Longitudinal and cross-sectional designs describe when and from whom information is gathered, while observations, interviews, and assessments describe ways of collecting information.

Naturalistic Observation

Researchers observe children in their everyday environments without deliberately changing what is happening.

Can help researchers learn:
How children behave, interact, communicate, play, or solve problems in authentic settings such as classrooms, homes, or playgrounds.

Limitation:
Researchers can identify patterns in behavior, but they usually cannot determine that one factor directly caused another (Paris et al., 2019).

Structured Observation

Researchers observe children in a planned setting or situation designed to encourage a particular behavior or response.

For example, children might be given the same problem-solving task so researchers can compare how they respond.

Can help researchers learn:
How children respond to the same situation or task under similar conditions.

Limitation:
Children may behave differently in a structured research setting than they would in their everyday environment (Paris et al., 2019).

Interviews and Surveys

Researchers ask children, family members, teachers, or other adults questions about experiences, behaviors, attitudes, or development.

Interviews may allow participants to explain their answers in detail, while surveys often gather information from larger groups.

Can help researchers learn:
What people think, believe, remember, or report about children's development and experiences.

Limitation:
Responses may be influenced by memory, interpretation, or what participants think is the “right” answer (Paris et al., 2019).

Case Studies

A case study involves an in-depth examination of one child, family, classroom, or small group over time.

Researchers may use observations, interviews, records, assessments, and other sources of information.

Can help researchers learn:
Detailed information about complex or unusual experiences that may be difficult to study with large groups.

Limitation:
Findings from one child or a small number of participants may not apply to all children (Paris et al., 2019).

Standardized Assessments and Measures

Researchers may use assessments or other measures that are administered and scored in a consistent way.

These tools can be used to examine areas such as language, cognition, motor development, behavior, or social-emotional development.

Can help researchers learn:
How children's performance compares across individuals or groups when the same measure is used.

Limitation:
An assessment provides information about particular skills or behaviors at a particular time. It does not provide a complete picture of the child, and results may be influenced by language, culture, experience, or testing conditions (NAEYC, 2020).

Experiments

In an experiment, researchers deliberately change an independent variable and measure its effect on an outcome, called the dependent variable. In a randomized experiment, participants are assigned to conditions by chance. Random assignment and appropriate controls help researchers evaluate whether the manipulated factor caused differences in outcomes (Paris et al., 2019).

Can help researchers learn:
Whether there is evidence that one factor may cause a change in another.

Limitation:
Experiments involving children must follow strict ethical guidelines, and some questions cannot or should not be studied experimentally.

Research involving children requires safeguards appropriate to the study, including review of risks and provisions for parental permission and children's assent when required (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.).

Correlational Studies

Correlational research examines whether two or more factors are related.

For example, researchers might study whether the amount of shared book reading children experience is related to their vocabulary development.

Can help researchers learn:
Whether variables tend to occur together or are associated with one another.

Limitation:
A correlation does **not** show that one factor caused the other (Paris et al., 2019).

Note

Correlation Is Not Causation: When two things are related, it does **not** necessarily mean that one caused the other. Other factors may help explain the relationship.

Longitudinal Research

Longitudinal studies follow the same children or group of participants over an extended period of time.

Researchers may collect information repeatedly across months or years.

Can help researchers learn:
How development changes over time and how earlier experiences may be related to later outcomes.

Limitation:
These studies can take many years to complete, and some participants may leave the study before it ends (Paris et al., 2019).

Cross-Sectional Research

Cross-sectional studies compare children of different ages or groups at the same point in time.

For example, researchers might compare the language abilities of groups of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds.

Can help researchers learn:
How groups of different ages or characteristics compare at one point in time.

Limitation:
Because researchers are comparing different groups rather than following the same children over time, differences may reflect experiences or characteristics other than age alone (Paris et al., 2019).

Why This Matters for Teaching

Early childhood educators do not need to become research scientists, but they do need to understand enough about research to ask important questions:

- How was the study conducted?
- Who participated in the study?
- What did the researchers actually find?
- What are the limitations of the study?
- How might the findings apply to the children and families I work with?

Understanding the research method helps educators decide how much confidence to place in a finding and how thoughtfully it should be applied to teaching practice.

Table 2.3.1: Research Methods Comparison

Research Method	Helps Researchers Learn	Key Limitation
Naturalistic observation	Behavior in real settings	Cannot usually show cause and effect
Structured observation	Responses under similar conditions	May not reflect everyday behavior
Interviews/surveys	Experiences, beliefs, and reports	Responses may be biased or inaccurate
Case study	Detailed information about one case	May not generalize
Standardized measures	Comparable information across children/groups	Does not capture the whole child
Experiment	Possible cause-and-effect relationships	Not all questions can be tested experimentally
Correlational study	Relationships between variables	Correlation does not prove causation
Longitudinal study	Change over time	Time-consuming; participant loss
Cross-sectional study	Differences between groups at one time	Does not show individual change over time

Sources: Research-method summaries based on Paris et al. (2019); assessment considerations based on NAEYC (2020).

From Research Findings to Teaching Decisions

Research findings can help early childhood educators make more informed decisions, but a research finding should not be applied to every child or classroom in exactly the same way. Educators need to think carefully about **what was studied, how the study was conducted, what the researchers actually found, and how those findings might relate to their own teaching context.** A simple way to think through research is to ask four questions.



Figure 2.3.2: **Four Questions for Connecting Research to Teaching.** Early childhood educators can interpret research more thoughtfully by asking four questions: What was studied? How was it studied? What did researchers find? What might this mean for teaching? (OpenAI, 2026c)

1. What Was Studied?

Begin by identifying the focus of the research.

Ask:

- What question were the researchers trying to answer?
- What area of development or learning was being studied?
- Who participated in the study?
- What were the ages of the children?
- Where did the study take place?

These details matter because findings from one group of children or one setting may not apply in exactly the same way to another group. For example, a study of preschool children in a laboratory setting may provide useful information, but an educator should still consider whether the findings fit the children and setting in their own classroom.

2. How Was It Studied?

Next, consider the research method.

Was the information gathered through:

- Observation?
- Interviews or surveys?
- Assessments?
- A case study?
- An experiment?
- A correlational study?
- A longitudinal or cross-sectional study?

The research method affects the kinds of conclusions that can be made. For example, an experimental study may provide stronger evidence about cause and effect than an observational study. An observation may provide rich information about children's behavior in a natural setting, but it may not explain exactly why that behavior occurred.

3. What Did the Researchers Find?

Focus on the actual findings, not only the title, headline, or summary of the study.

Ask:

- What patterns or differences did the researchers identify?
- Were the findings consistent for all children?
- How strong was the evidence?
- Did the researchers identify limitations?

It is important to distinguish between **what the study found** and **what someone thinks the findings mean**. A research finding may suggest a relationship or pattern without proving that one factor directly caused another. Remember that a relationship between two factors does not necessarily mean that one caused the other.

4. What Might This Mean for Teaching?

Finally, consider how the research might inform teaching practice.

Ask:

- Does this finding support something I already observe in children?
- Could it influence how I arrange the environment?
- Could it affect the materials or experiences I provide?
- Could it change how I interact with children?
- Does it suggest something I should observe more closely?
- How does this fit with what I know about the individual children and families I work with?

Research should **inform** professional decision-making, not replace it. Early childhood educators combine research findings with knowledge of child development, observation of individual children, family and cultural perspectives, and the needs of the classroom (NAEYC, 2020).

Example 2.3.1

Applying the Four Questions: Pretend Play

The following hypothetical example illustrates how an educator might interpret research; it does not summarize a particular published study. Suppose researchers observe that preschool children use more complex language during extended pretend play with peers.

An educator might think through the finding this way:

- **What was studied?** Children's language during pretend play.
- **How was it studied?** Researchers observed children while they played.
- **What did researchers find?** Children used more complex language during sustained pretend play.
- **What might this mean for teaching?** The teacher might provide longer periods of uninterrupted play, add open-ended props, and observe whether children use more language during those experiences.

The teacher would not conclude that pretend play is the best approach for every child or every learning goal. Instead, the research becomes one source of evidence that helps guide intentional teaching decisions.

Connecting Research-Informed Practice to DAP

In Section 1.4, you learned that **developmentally appropriate practice** (DAP) involves three core considerations: commonality, individuality, and context. These considerations help educators connect research evidence with knowledge of the children and families they serve (NAEYC, 2020).

Research can provide important information about how children develop and learn, but research alone does not determine what a teacher should do. Educators bring research together with what they know about the individual child and the child's social and cultural context.

Bringing the Three Together

Developmentally appropriate teaching draws on three important sources of knowledge:

- **COMMONALITY: Knowledge of child development and learning** — what research and professional knowledge suggest about how children typically grow, develop, and learn.
- **INDIVIDUALITY: Knowledge of the individual child** — what the educator knows about a child's strengths, interests, needs, experiences, language, temperament, and approaches to learning.
- **CONTEXT: Knowledge of social and cultural context** — what the educator knows about the child's family, culture, language, community, values, and experiences.

Together, these three sources of knowledge help educators make **intentional teaching decisions** that are informed by research and responsive to the children they teach (NAEYC, 2020).

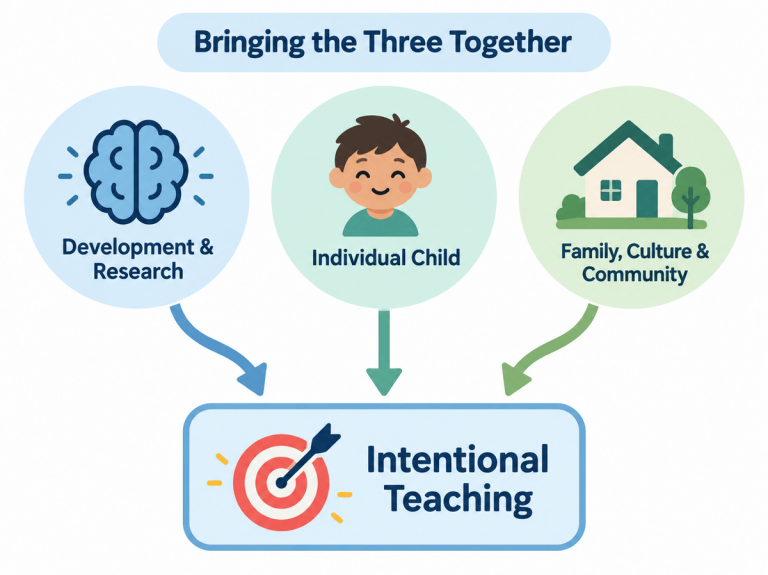


Figure 2.3.3: **Bringing the Three Together.** Developmentally appropriate teaching combines knowledge of child development and research, the individual child, and the child's family, culture, and community to guide intentional teaching decisions. (OpenAI, 2026b)

Examples of Research Informing Practice

Child development research has contributed to what educators know about many aspects of development and learning. The following examples show how research findings can inform decisions about early childhood environments, relationships, and teaching practices.

Research findings do not provide one response that will be appropriate for every child. Educators consider research alongside what they know about individual children and their family, cultural, linguistic, and community contexts.

Play and Learning

Research on play has helped educators understand that play can support many areas of children's development and learning. Through play, children have opportunities to communicate with others, solve problems, use imagination, explore ideas, practice social skills, and build knowledge about the world around them (NAEYC, 2020).

What might this mean for teaching?

An educator might:

- Provide sufficient time for meaningful play
- Offer open-ended materials that can be used in different ways
- Create opportunities for children to interact and solve problems with peers
- Add materials and props that encourage language, imagination, and exploration
- Observe children's play to learn more about their interests, thinking, and development
- Join children's play intentionally when adult support could extend learning

Research on play does not mean that every learning experience should look the same or that teachers simply step back and allow children to play without planning. Instead, research can help educators make intentional decisions about how play is supported within the learning environment.

Relationships and Attachment

Research on attachment and early relationships has shown that young children benefit from consistent, responsive, and caring relationships with the adults who care for them. These relationships can help children develop a sense of security and support their social-emotional development (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

In early childhood settings, teachers and caregivers are important relationship partners. The way adults respond to children's needs, emotions, and attempts to communicate can influence how safe and supported children feel in the environment.

What might this mean for teaching?

An educator might:

- Respond consistently and sensitively to children's needs
- Establish predictable routines
- Spend time building trusting relationships with individual children
- Acknowledge and support children's emotions
- Use warm, respectful interactions throughout the day
- Communicate and collaborate with families

Research on attachment does not mean that teachers replace children's primary caregivers. Instead, it reinforces the importance of providing dependable, responsive relationships within early childhood settings.

Brain Development and Early Experiences

Research on brain development has helped educators better understand that the brain changes as children grow and that early experiences are connected to development. Researchers use methods such as brain imaging and other measures to study how the brain develops and responds to experiences.

For early childhood educators, the most important message is not that a particular activity can “build a better brain.” Rather, research supports the importance of responsive relationships, meaningful experiences, exploration, interaction, and opportunities to practice developing skills (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

What might this mean for teaching?

An educator might:

- Provide hands-on and meaningful learning experiences
- Give children opportunities to explore and make choices
- Allow time for children to investigate ideas and solve problems
- Provide responsive interactions and supportive relationships

- Offer repeated opportunities to practice developing skills
- Provide varied experiences rather than expecting all children to learn in exactly the same way

Brain research can inform teaching, but educators should be cautious about claims that a particular toy, program, app, or activity will produce a specific change in a child's brain.

Stress, Adversity, and Supportive Environments

Research has also examined how stressful and adverse experiences can affect children's development and well-being. At the same time, supportive relationships and stable environments can serve as important protective factors for children (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Early childhood educators may not know everything a child or family has experienced. Their role is not to diagnose trauma, but they can create environments that are safe, predictable, responsive, and supportive.

What might this mean for teaching?

An educator might:

- create predictable routines and expectations
- build warm, responsive relationships
- support children's social-emotional development
- provide a physically and emotionally safe environment
- respond to behavior with curiosity rather than immediate judgment
- work in partnership with families
- connect families with appropriate resources when additional support is needed

Research on stress and adversity reminds educators that children's behavior may be influenced by experiences beyond the classroom. Supportive teaching practices can help create consistency, connection, and a sense of safety for all children.

Key Takeaways

- Child development knowledge comes from systematic research using methods such as observation, interviews, assessment, experiments, and longitudinal and cross-sectional studies.
- Different research methods answer different kinds of questions and have different limitations.
- A research finding should be interpreted within the population, setting, and methods used in the study.
- Correlation does not necessarily demonstrate causation.
- Research findings can inform decisions about environments, relationships, curriculum, interactions, and teaching strategies.
- Effective teachers combine research evidence with knowledge of child development, individual children, families, cultures, and contexts.
- Research-informed practice requires educators to remain curious, reflective, and willing to adjust their teaching as new evidence becomes available.

Vocabulary Alert: Research to Practice

Correlation
A relationship between two or more variables. Correlation does not necessarily mean that one variable caused the other.

Causation
A cause-and-effect relationship in which a change in one factor produces a change in another.

Naturalistic Observation
Observing children in their everyday environments without deliberately changing what is happening.

Structured Observation
Observing children in a planned situation designed to encourage a particular behavior or response.

Longitudinal Research
Research that follows the same participants over an extended period of time.

Cross-Sectional Research
Research that compares different groups at the same point in time.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)
Teaching that considers child development and learning, the individual child, and the child's social and cultural context.

Exercise 2.3.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What are two methods researchers use to study child development?
2. Why can researchers not conclude causation from every study?
3. What questions should you ask before applying a research finding to your classroom?
4. How can a child development research finding influence a teaching decision?
5. Why should research findings be considered alongside knowledge of individual children and their family and cultural contexts?
6. Choose one research finding discussed in this section. Explain one teaching decision it might inform and one factor an educator should still consider before applying it.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 2.3.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Researchers may use methods such as **naturalistic observation, structured observation, interviews and surveys, case studies, standardized assessments, experiments, correlational studies, longitudinal studies, and cross-sectional studies**. Any two are acceptable.
2. Not every research method is designed to show cause and effect. Some studies only show that two factors are related or that certain patterns occur. Other factors may also help explain the relationship.
3. Educators should ask: What was studied? Who participated? How was the study conducted? What did the researchers actually find? What were the limitations? How well do the findings fit the children, families, and setting in my classroom?
4. A research finding can help an educator make intentional decisions about the environment, materials, routines, interactions, curriculum, or teaching strategies. For example, research on play might influence a teacher to provide more open-ended materials or longer periods of uninterrupted play.
5. Research describes patterns or findings from particular groups, but children do not all develop and learn in exactly the same way. Educators also need to

consider each child's strengths, needs, experiences, language, family, culture, and community when making teaching decisions.

6. **Example answer:** Research on play suggests that play can support language, social interaction, problem-solving, and self-regulation. A teacher might respond by providing more open-ended materials and longer periods of uninterrupted play. Before making that decision, the teacher should also consider the interests, developmental needs, and experiences of the children in the classroom.

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3: ANALYZING HEALTH AND PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

3.1: The Progression of Health and Physical Development
3.2: Relating Abilities to Physical Developmental Skills
3.3: Strengthening Gross and Fine Motor Development
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
3.5: Applying Physical Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
3.6: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Health and Physical Development
3.7: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Health and Physical Development

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3.1: The Progression of Health and Physical Development

Introduction

From ages three to eight, children experience important changes in **physical growth, health, brain and nervous system development, and motor abilities**. Although development follows generally predictable patterns, the timing and pace of these changes vary from child to child.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 3.1: Describe the progression of health and physical development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Describe** patterns of physical growth and health from ages 3–8.
- **Describe** the progression of gross- and fine-motor development from ages 3–8.
- **Explain** how brain and nervous system development contributes to increasing physical control and coordination.
- **Recognize** individual variation in the timing and progression of physical development

Physical development during early and middle childhood involves gradual changes in children's bodies, health, strength, coordination, and ability to use their bodies. Although children develop at different rates, physical development generally follows recognizable patterns. Skills become increasingly coordinated, controlled, precise, and complex as children mature and gain experience.

When studying physical development, it is important to focus on **progression rather than a checklist of exact ages**. A developmental progression describes the general direction in which abilities develop. Individual children may reach particular milestones earlier or later, and development may be influenced by health, opportunities for movement, experience, culture, environment, and individual characteristics.

Physical Growth from Ages 3–8

During the preschool years, children continue growing in height and weight, although growth is slower than during infancy. Body proportions gradually change as the arms, legs, and torso lengthen and the body becomes less toddler-like. Children of the same age can differ noticeably in height, weight, and build, so general growth patterns should not be treated as targets for every child (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2012).

Appetite may also vary as growth and activity patterns change. Educators support children through predictable eating routines and nutritious food choices while recognizing individual differences in appetite and growth (Paris et al., 2019).

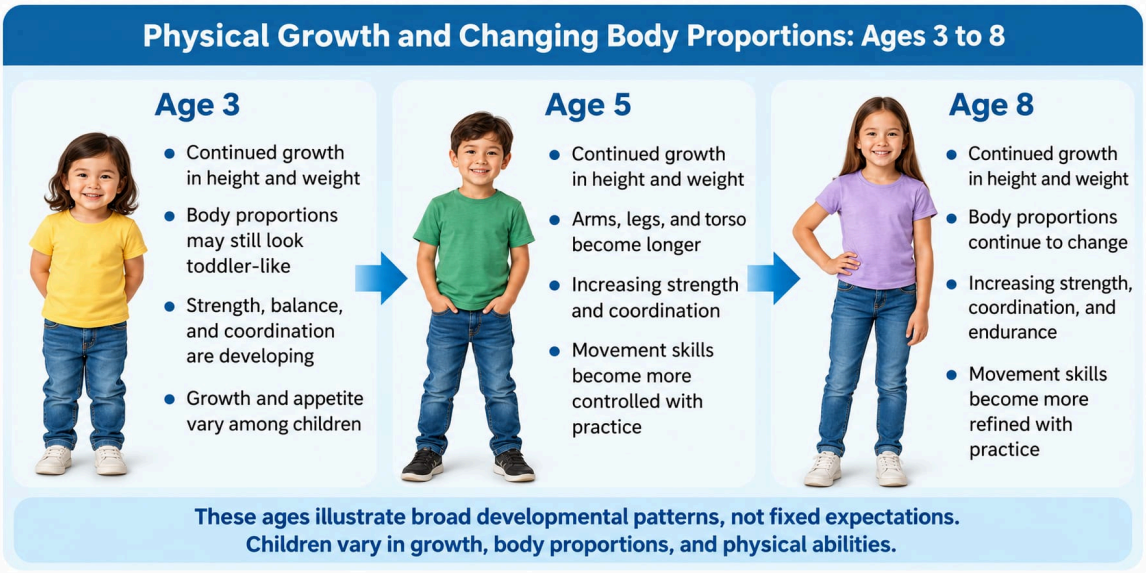


Figure 3.1.1: Physical growth and changing body proportions from ages 3 to 8. These examples illustrate general patterns and individual variation. (OpenAI, 2026a)

During the early elementary years, children continue to grow and refine their movement skills. Strength, balance, coordination, and endurance generally improve, although abilities vary considerably among children. Motor development reflects interacting influences, including physical maturation, health, experience, and opportunities for practice (Paris et al., 2019).

Brain development also continues beyond early childhood. Brain size should not be confused with maturity: the neural systems involved in planning, attention, movement, and self-regulation continue developing over many years.

Brain and Nervous System Development

As children grow, the **brain and nervous system continue to mature**, supporting greater control and coordination of the body. These changes help children become increasingly able to plan movements, coordinate different parts of the body, respond more quickly, and control their actions.

Myelination, the process of forming a protective coating around nerve fibers, continues throughout childhood. Myelination helps messages travel more efficiently through the nervous system. At the same time, connections within the brain continue to develop. Together, these changes support improvements in movement, coordination, and reaction time.

The **prefrontal cortex**, an area of the brain involved in planning, attention, and self-control, also continues to mature. The **corpus callosum**, which connects the brain's two hemispheres, develops as well, supporting communication and coordination between different areas of the brain (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

As the brain and nervous system develop, children generally become better able to:

- maintain balance while moving;
- coordinate their eyes, hands, and bodies when throwing and catching;
- combine movements when running, jumping, climbing, and skipping;
- control the small hand and finger movements needed for drawing, writing, cutting, and using tools; and
- complete self-care tasks such as dressing and managing fasteners with increasing independence.

Brain maturation is only part of this progression. **Experience and practice also matter.** Children strengthen and refine physical skills through repeated opportunities to move, play, manipulate materials, use tools, and practice increasingly complex movements (Paris et al., 2019).

Developmental Connection

A child's improving ability to catch a ball, use scissors, write, or button a coat reflects both **maturation and experience**. As the brain and nervous system develop, repeated opportunities to practice help movements become more coordinated, accurate, and efficient.

Gross-Motor Development

Gross-motor skills involve the use of the large muscles of the body for movements such as running, jumping, climbing, balancing, throwing, and catching. During early and middle childhood, gross-motor development generally progresses toward greater **strength, balance, coordination, control, and complexity of movement**.

During the preschool years, children become increasingly steady and controlled in basic movements such as running, jumping, and climbing. Balance improves, and children become better able to stop, change direction, and coordinate different parts of the body during movement.

As children approach the early school years, they become increasingly able to **combine movements into more complex sequences**. Movements such as hopping, skipping, throwing, catching, and kicking generally become smoother and more coordinated. Increased strength and endurance also allow children to participate in physical activity for longer periods of time.

By the early elementary years, gross-motor development is increasingly characterized by the **refinement of previously developed skills**. Children typically demonstrate greater accuracy, speed, agility, balance, and coordination as they use movement skills in increasingly complex activities (Paris et al., 2019).

Developmental Progression, Not a Deadline

Physical development follows general patterns, but children do not develop every skill at the same age or rate. Developmental progressions help educators understand the **general direction of development** rather than establish deadlines for when individual children should master particular skills.

Fine-Motor Development

Fine-motor skills involve the use of the small muscles of the hands and fingers to control and manipulate objects. During early and middle childhood, fine-motor development generally progresses toward greater **control, coordination, precision, and complexity of movement**.

During the preschool years, children gain increasing control over their hands and fingers. They become more precise when manipulating objects and using tools such as crayons, pencils, eating utensils, and scissors. Activities such as drawing, building, dressing, and completing other everyday tasks become increasingly controlled as children's fine-motor skills develop.

As children approach the early school years, their movements become more accurate and coordinated. They are increasingly able to complete tasks that require smaller, more precise movements, such as forming letters and shapes, cutting along lines, managing clothing fasteners, and manipulating small objects.

By the early elementary years, fine-motor development is increasingly characterized by the **refinement of previously developed skills**. Children generally demonstrate greater precision, speed, and control when writing, drawing, using tools, handling materials, and completing self-care tasks (Paris et al., 2019).

Developmental Progression, Not a Deadline

Fine-motor development follows general patterns, but children do not develop every skill at the same age or rate. Developmental progressions describe the **general direction of development** rather than establish deadlines for when individual children should master particular skills.

Health Across Early and Middle Childhood

Health and physical development are closely connected throughout early and middle childhood. As children grow, changes in **nutrition, sleep, physical activity, stamina, and self-care** support their developing bodies and increasing independence.

Children need nutritious foods to provide the energy and nutrients necessary for growth and activity. During early childhood, growth is slower than it was during infancy, and appetite may vary from day to day. As children move into the early school years, continued growth and increasing activity contribute to their ongoing nutritional needs.

Sleep and rest also remain important throughout childhood. As children grow, their sleep patterns and needs gradually change, while adequate sleep continues to support physical growth, energy, attention, and participation in daily activities.

Children also develop greater **strength and stamina** across these years. They become increasingly able to participate in active play and other physical activities for longer periods of time.

At the same time, children become more independent in **personal care routines**. Tasks such as eating, dressing, toileting, washing hands, brushing teeth, and managing personal belongings increasingly shift from adult assistance toward greater independence.

Together, these changes reflect an important part of the progression of health and physical development: children generally become **stronger, more physically capable, and increasingly independent in caring for their bodies** as they move from early to middle childhood (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Individual Variation in Physical Development

Physical development follows general patterns, but **children do not all develop at the same rate or reach physical milestones at the same age**. Differences in growth, coordination, strength, motor skills, and independence are expected during childhood.

A child's physical development reflects many interacting factors, including **maturation, inherited characteristics, health, nutrition, experiences, and opportunities for movement and practice**. As a result, two children of the same age may demonstrate different physical abilities while both are developing within a typical range (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Developmental progressions help educators understand the **general direction in which development occurs**, rather than provide a rigid timetable for when each child should demonstrate a particular skill. Looking at development over time provides a more complete picture than focusing on a single skill or age-based expectation.

Recognizing individual variation does not mean overlooking concerns. When a child loses a previously demonstrated skill or shows persistent difficulty participating in everyday activities, educators document their observations, communicate respectfully with the family, and follow program procedures for connecting the family with appropriate support (NAEYC, 2020).

Putting the Progression Together: Ages 3–8

The chart below summarizes broad patterns in physical growth, movement, and self-care across ages three to eight. The examples illustrate a general progression rather than requirements for every child at a particular birthday. Individual development reflects health, experience, access to appropriate supports, and opportunities for movement and practice.

General Patterns of Health and Physical Development: Ages 3–8				
Age range	**Physical growth**	**Gross-motor development**	**Fine-motor development**	**Health and self-care**
3–4 years	Continued growth; body proportions gradually become less toddler-like	Increasing control when running, climbing, jumping, and balancing; developing throwing and catching skills	Increasing control when building, drawing, using utensils, and exploring scissors and fasteners	Participates in eating, dressing, toileting, and hygiene routines with varying amounts of assistance
5–6 years	Continued growth and increasing strength	Combines movements with improving balance and coordination; practices hopping, skipping, throwing, and catching	Increasing precision when drawing, forming letters, cutting, and managing clothing fasteners	Increasing participation and independence in daily routines; continues to need reminders, supervision, or assistance
7–8 years	Continued growth and increasing strength and endurance	Refines movement skills with greater control and coordination during games, active play, and other activities	Refines writing, drawing, tool use, and manipulation of small objects	Greater independence in familiar self-care routines, with support matched to individual needs
These age bands provide illustrative examples, not a screening checklist. Skills overlap across age ranges and vary with health, experience, opportunities for practice, and access to appropriate supports.				

Figure 3.1.1: General patterns of physical growth, gross- and fine-motor development, and self-care across ages 3–8. Age bands are illustrative, not a screening checklist (OpenAI, 2026b). Accessible text version of Figure 3.1.2

Vocabulary Alert: Gross Motor vs. Fine Motor

Gross-motor development: Development involving the **large muscles of the body** and whole-body movements, such as running, jumping, climbing, balancing, throwing, and catching.

Fine-motor development: Development involving the **small muscles of the hands and fingers** and increasingly precise movements, such as drawing, writing, cutting, manipulating small objects, and managing clothing fasteners.

Remember: *Gross* and *fine* describe the **type and scale of movement**, not how important or difficult the skill is. Both develop throughout childhood and become increasingly controlled, coordinated, and complex.

Exercise 3.1.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What general changes in physical growth occur as children progress from early to middle childhood?
2. How does gross-motor development generally progress from ages 3 to 8?
3. How does fine-motor development generally progress from ages 3 to 8?
4. How does maturation of the brain and nervous system contribute to children's developing physical abilities?
5. What changes in health, stamina, and self-care typically occur as children move from early to middle childhood?
6. Why should developmental progressions be viewed as general patterns rather than rigid age-based deadlines?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 3.1.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Children continue to grow steadily in height and weight while their body proportions become more mature. They generally become taller and leaner and develop greater strength and endurance.
2. Gross-motor development progresses from basic large-muscle movements toward greater balance, strength, coordination, control, and complexity. Movements such as running, jumping, climbing, throwing, and catching become smoother and more coordinated.
3. Fine-motor development progresses toward greater control, coordination, precision, and efficiency. Children become increasingly skilled at tasks such as drawing, writing, cutting, manipulating small objects, using tools, and completing self-care tasks.
4. As the brain and nervous system mature, communication within the nervous system becomes more efficient. This supports children's increasing ability to plan and control movements, coordinate different parts of the body, and respond more quickly and accurately.
5. Children generally develop greater strength and stamina and can participate in physical activity for longer periods. Their nutrition and sleep continue to support growth and development, while they become increasingly independent in personal-care routines such as eating, dressing, toileting, and hygiene.
6. Children develop at different rates. Developmental progressions describe the **general direction of development**, but the timing of particular skills can vary based on factors such as maturation, health, experiences, and opportunities for movement and practice.

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3.2: Relating Abilities to Physical Developmental Skills

Introduction

Children's physical skills depend on multiple developing abilities working together. A child who runs, catches a ball, uses scissors, writes, dresses independently, or participates in active play relies on combinations of **strength, balance, coordination, body awareness, motor planning, and fine-motor control**. Understanding these underlying abilities helps educators look beyond whether a child can complete a skill and consider **what abilities support successful performance**.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 3.2: Relate abilities to specific physical developmental skills.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Identify** abilities that contribute to gross- and fine-motor skills.
- **Relate** specific physical developmental skills to the abilities needed to perform them.
- **Explain** how multiple abilities work together during everyday movement, play, and self-care tasks.
- **Analyze** a physical task to identify the abilities a child uses to complete it.

From Developmental Progression to Individual Skills

In Section 3.1, you examined how health and physical development progress from ages three to eight. This section focuses on the abilities children combine when performing particular physical skills.

The next step is to look more closely at **what makes specific physical skills possible**. A physical skill is rarely the result of just one ability. Instead, children rely on several developing abilities working together.

For example, kicking a ball may appear to be one simple skill, but successfully kicking requires a child to:

- Maintain **balance** while standing on one foot,
- Use **strength** to move the kicking leg,
- Coordinate different parts of the body,
- Use **body awareness** to position the body,
- Visually locate and track the ball, and
- Plan and time the movement needed to make contact with the ball.

The same is true for fine-motor skills. Cutting with scissors, for example, requires more than being able to open and close the scissors. A child must control the small muscles of the hand and fingers, coordinate both hands, and use visual information to guide the movement of the scissors along the paper.

Understanding the abilities that contribute to a physical skill helps educators look beyond simply asking, **“Can the child do it?”** Instead, educators can consider **which abilities the child is using and how those abilities work together to support the skill**. This provides a more complete picture of a child's physical development and helps educators plan experiences that support continued growth.



Figure 3.2.1: Many Abilities Work Together to Create a Physical Skill. Physical skills depend on multiple abilities working together, including strength, balance, coordination, body awareness, motor planning, visual-motor coordination, bilateral coordination, and fine-motor control. (OpenAI, 2026a)

Vocabulary Alert: Ability vs. Skill

The words **ability** and **skill** are related, but they do not mean the same thing when discussing physical development.

An **ability** is an underlying capacity that helps a child perform a physical task. Examples include **strength, balance, coordination, body awareness, motor planning, visual-motor coordination, bilateral coordination, and fine-motor control**.

A **skill** is a physical action or task a child performs, such as **running, catching a ball, climbing, cutting with scissors, buttoning a coat, or pouring a drink**.

Most physical skills depend on **several abilities working together**. For example, catching a ball is a skill that requires abilities such as balance, bilateral coordination, body awareness, motor planning, and visual-motor coordination.

Think of it this way: Abilities are what help make the skill possible.

Abilities That Support Physical Developmental Skills

Physical developmental skills depend on several abilities working together. These abilities develop over time and help children control their bodies, coordinate movements, interact with objects, and complete everyday tasks. Although each ability can be described separately, children typically use **multiple abilities at the same time** when performing a physical skill.

For example, climbing playground equipment requires strength, balance, coordination, body awareness, and motor planning. Cutting with scissors requires fine-motor control, bilateral coordination, and visual-motor coordination. Understanding these underlying abilities helps educators recognize the complexity involved in even seemingly simple physical tasks.

Children draw on overlapping abilities when performing physical tasks; for example, scissor use involves hand strength, hand-eye coordination, and coordination between the two sides of the body (East Cheshire NHS Trust, n.d.).

Strength

Strength is the ability of muscles to produce and maintain the force needed for movement and stability. Children use strength throughout the body during both gross- and fine-motor activities. Large-muscle strength supports activities such as climbing,

jumping, pushing, pulling, and carrying. Strength in the hands and fingers helps children manipulate objects and tools, open containers, and participate in drawing and writing activities.

Balance

Balance is the ability to maintain a stable body position while remaining still or moving. Children use balance when standing on one foot, walking along a narrow surface, climbing stairs, kicking a ball, hopping, and changing direction while moving. As balance improves, children are able to perform increasingly complex movements with greater control.

Coordination

Coordination is the ability to organize movements of different parts of the body so they work together effectively. Coordination is involved in many physical skills, including running, jumping, throwing, catching, and skipping. More complex physical activities often require children to coordinate several movements in a particular sequence or at the same time.

Bilateral Coordination

Bilateral coordination is the ability to use both sides of the body together in a coordinated way. Sometimes both sides perform similar movements, as when catching a large ball with two hands. In other activities, each side performs a different role. For example, when cutting with scissors, one hand operates the scissors while the other holds and turns the paper. Climbing, dressing, tying shoes, and many playground activities also depend on bilateral coordination.

Body Awareness

Body awareness is an understanding of where the body and its parts are in relation to one another and the surrounding environment. Body awareness helps children position and move their bodies effectively. Children use it when moving through a crowded space, imitating movements, reaching for an object, throwing a ball, climbing, and dressing themselves.

Motor Planning

Motor planning is the ability to plan, organize, and carry out the movements needed to complete a physical task. It is especially important when children encounter a new or unfamiliar movement. For example, moving through an obstacle course requires a child to determine how to climb over, crawl under, move around, or step across different obstacles. Motor planning is also involved in activities such as climbing playground equipment, learning a new dance movement, or completing a sequence of actions during a game.

Visual-Motor Coordination

Visual-motor coordination is the ability to use visual information to guide physical movement. The eyes provide information about an object, space, or target, while the body responds with an appropriate movement. Children use visual-motor coordination when catching or kicking a ball, stacking blocks, completing puzzles, drawing, cutting along a line, and writing.

Fine-Motor Control and Dexterity

Fine-motor control and dexterity involve the controlled use of the small muscles of the hands and fingers. These abilities allow children to make increasingly precise movements when manipulating objects. Fine-motor control supports skills such as buttoning clothing, turning pages, building with small blocks, using eating utensils, drawing, writing, and manipulating classroom tools and materials.

Putting the Abilities Together

These abilities do not develop or function in isolation. Most physical skills require several abilities to work together at the same time. The particular combination depends on the demands of the task.

Table 3.2.1: Physical Skills Require Multiple Abilities

Physical Skill	Abilities That Help Support the Skill
Running	Strength, balance, coordination, body awareness
Jumping	Strength, balance, coordination, motor planning
Catching a ball	Balance, bilateral coordination, body awareness, visual-motor coordination
Climbing	Strength, balance, bilateral coordination, body awareness, motor planning
Cutting with scissors	Fine-motor control, bilateral coordination, visual-motor coordination
Drawing or writing	Fine-motor control, visual-motor coordination
Buttoning clothing	Fine-motor control, bilateral coordination, visual-motor coordination
Pouring a drink	Strength, fine-motor control, bilateral coordination, visual-motor coordination

Note. These examples identify selected abilities that can contribute to each skill. They are not exhaustive lists or diagnostic criteria. The abilities involved may vary with the materials, adaptations, and strategies a child uses.

The same physical skill may look different from one child to another because the abilities that support it are still developing. Rather than viewing a skill as something a child simply **can or cannot do**, educators can observe how the child approaches the task and consider which underlying abilities are contributing to the child's performance.

Relating Abilities to Gross-Motor Skills

Gross-motor skills involve movements that primarily use the large muscles of the body. Children use gross-motor skills throughout the day as they move through the environment, participate in active play, and interact with other children. Running, jumping, throwing, catching, and climbing are examples of gross-motor skills.

Although each may appear to be a single skill, successful performance depends on **multiple physical abilities working together**. Looking closely at familiar gross-motor skills can help educators recognize these connections.

Running

Running requires children to coordinate movements on both sides of the body while maintaining balance as their weight shifts rapidly from one foot to the other. Children must also control the position of their bodies and adjust their movements to changes in speed, direction, and the environment.

Abilities involved: strength, balance, coordination, bilateral coordination, and body awareness.

Jumping

Jumping requires children to produce enough force to move the body off the ground and then maintain control when landing. When jumping with two feet, children coordinate both sides of the body to bend their knees, push off, and land. Balance and body awareness help them maintain stability throughout the movement.

Abilities involved: strength, balance, coordination, bilateral coordination, body awareness, and motor planning.

Throwing

Throwing requires children to coordinate movements of the arms, trunk, and often the legs while directing an object toward a

particular location or target. Children use visual information to determine where to throw and coordinate the timing and force of their movements.

Abilities involved: strength, coordination, bilateral coordination, body awareness, motor planning, and visual-motor coordination.

Catching

Catching requires children to visually track an approaching object, position their bodies, and coordinate their arms and hands with the movement of the object. Balance helps children maintain or regain stability as they reach for and receive the object.

Abilities involved: balance, coordination, bilateral coordination, body awareness, motor planning, and visual-motor coordination.

Climbing

Climbing requires children to support and move their body weight while coordinating the arms and legs. Children must determine where to place their hands and feet, maintain balance as their body position changes, and plan how to move from one position to the next.

Abilities involved: strength, balance, coordination, bilateral coordination, body awareness, and motor planning.

Looking Beyond the Skill

When observing gross-motor development, educators can look beyond whether a child completes a particular skill. For example, two children may both climb to the top of a piece of playground equipment but use different movements, levels of assistance, or strategies to get there. Observing **how** children perform physical skills can provide information about the abilities they are using and developing.

Providing children with varied opportunities to run, jump, throw, catch, climb, and participate in other forms of active play allows them to practice these abilities in meaningful contexts. As the underlying abilities become increasingly coordinated, children can use them in more complex and challenging gross-motor activities.

Relating Abilities to Fine-Motor Skills

Fine-motor skills involve controlled movements of the small muscles, particularly those of the hands and fingers. Children use these skills throughout the day when they draw, write, build, eat, dress, and use classroom materials and tools.

Like gross-motor skills, fine-motor skills depend on **multiple abilities working together**. A child may have the hand strength needed for a task but still be developing the coordination or control needed to complete it successfully. Looking at what a child must do during a task helps educators identify the abilities involved.

Cutting with Scissors

Cutting with scissors requires each hand to perform a different job. One hand opens and closes the scissors while the other holds, moves, and turns the paper. At the same time, the child uses visual information to guide the scissors along a line or around a shape.

Abilities involved: hand strength, fine-motor control, bilateral coordination, and visual-motor coordination.

Drawing and Writing

Drawing and writing require children to control a writing tool while using visual information to guide its movement across the page. Children also use one hand to manipulate the writing tool while the other hand helps stabilize and position the paper. Increasing control of the hands and fingers allows children to make more precise lines, shapes, drawings, and eventually letters.

Abilities involved: hand strength, fine-motor control, bilateral coordination, and visual-motor coordination.

Building with Blocks

Building with blocks requires children to grasp, position, release, and adjust objects with increasing precision. Visual information helps children judge where to place each block and make adjustments as they build. Smaller or more complex building materials require increasingly precise control of the hands and fingers.

Abilities involved: fine-motor control and visual-motor coordination.

Fastening Clothing

Managing buttons, zippers, snaps, and other clothing fasteners requires children to coordinate small and precise hand and finger movements. The hands often perform different roles—for example, one hand may hold the fabric steady while the other pushes a button through a buttonhole. Children must also plan and carry out the movements in the correct sequence.

Abilities involved: fine-motor control, bilateral coordination, visual-motor coordination, and motor planning.

Pouring

Pouring requires children to grasp and control a container, adjust its position, and regulate how far and how quickly it is tilted. Visual information helps the child monitor where the liquid is going and determine when to stop. The other hand may be used to stabilize the receiving container.

Abilities involved: hand and arm strength, fine-motor control, bilateral coordination, and visual-motor coordination.

Using Eating Utensils

Using a spoon or fork requires children to grasp and control the utensil, position it to collect food, and guide it accurately toward the mouth. Cutting or spreading food adds additional demands because the two hands may need to perform different actions at the same time.

Abilities involved: fine-motor control, bilateral coordination, and visual-motor coordination.

Looking Beyond the Skill

As with gross-motor development, educators can learn more by observing **how** a child performs a fine-motor task rather than focusing only on whether the child completes it. A child who has difficulty cutting along a line, for example, may be successfully opening and closing the scissors but still developing the ability to coordinate the helping hand or visually guide the scissors along the cutting path.

Everyday activities such as drawing, building, dressing, pouring, eating, and using classroom tools provide meaningful opportunities for children to practice fine-motor abilities. As these abilities become increasingly coordinated and controlled, children are able to complete more precise and complex tasks with greater independence.

Physical Skills in Everyday Routines and Self-Care

Physical developmental skills are not limited to active play or planned motor activities. Children also use combinations of physical abilities throughout **everyday routines and self-care tasks**. Dressing, eating, washing hands, and managing personal belongings provide frequent opportunities for children to use and strengthen developing abilities while becoming increasingly independent.

In the preceding fine-motor section, fastening clothing, using eating utensils, and pouring illustrated how physical abilities support everyday independence. The following examples extend these connections to other self-care and classroom routines.

Dressing

Getting dressed requires children to coordinate many movements. Pulling on a shirt or pair of pants involves balance, body awareness, bilateral coordination, and motor planning. Children must determine how to position their bodies and clothing and complete a sequence of movements to finish the task.

Abilities involved: balance, bilateral coordination, body awareness, fine-motor control, and motor planning.

Opening Containers

Opening lunch containers, food packages, water bottles, and other classroom materials may require children to pull, twist, squeeze, lift, or separate parts. These tasks often require hand strength as well as coordinated use of both hands.

Abilities involved: hand strength, fine-motor control, bilateral coordination, and motor planning.

Washing Hands

Handwashing involves a sequence of coordinated actions, such as turning on the water, dispensing soap, rubbing the hands together, rinsing, turning off the water, and drying the hands. Children use both gross- and fine-motor abilities while remembering and carrying out the sequence.

Abilities involved: bilateral coordination, fine-motor control, body awareness, and motor planning.

Toileting Routines

Independent toileting involves more than bladder and bowel control. Children may need to manage clothing and fasteners, maintain balance while dressing and undressing, complete hygiene tasks, and coordinate several actions in sequence.

Abilities involved: balance, body awareness, bilateral coordination, fine-motor control, and motor planning.

Putting on Shoes and Coats

Putting on shoes and outerwear requires children to position their bodies and clothing appropriately while coordinating the two sides of the body. Fastening shoes or coats may add additional fine-motor demands.

Abilities involved: balance, body awareness, bilateral coordination, fine-motor control, and motor planning.

Carrying and Managing Classroom Materials

Children use physical abilities when carrying books, moving chairs, transporting toys, putting materials away, or carrying a lunch tray. They must adjust their grip and body position based on an object's size, shape, and weight while safely moving through the environment.

Abilities involved: strength, balance, coordination, body awareness, and motor planning.

Everyday Routines as Opportunities for Development

Everyday routines provide meaningful opportunities for children to practice physical skills because the movements are connected to **real purposes and increasing independence**. A child who zips a coat, pours a drink, opens a lunch container, or carries materials to a table is using physical abilities as part of daily life.

Educators can support development by providing children with appropriate time and opportunities to participate in these tasks rather than routinely completing tasks for them. Assistance can be adjusted based on what the child is able to do independently and which parts of the task still require support.

One Skill, Many Abilities

A physical skill that appears simple often depends on **many abilities working together**. Breaking a skill into its parts can help educators understand what a child must coordinate to complete the task successfully.

Looking closely at both a gross-motor skill and a fine-motor skill demonstrates how the same approach can be used to understand different types of physical development.

Gross-Motor Example: What Does It Take to Catch a Ball?

Catching a ball requires much more than simply reaching out and grabbing it. A child must visually follow the ball, move the body into position, maintain balance, coordinate both sides of the body, time hand movements with the approaching ball, and control the ball once it reaches the hands.

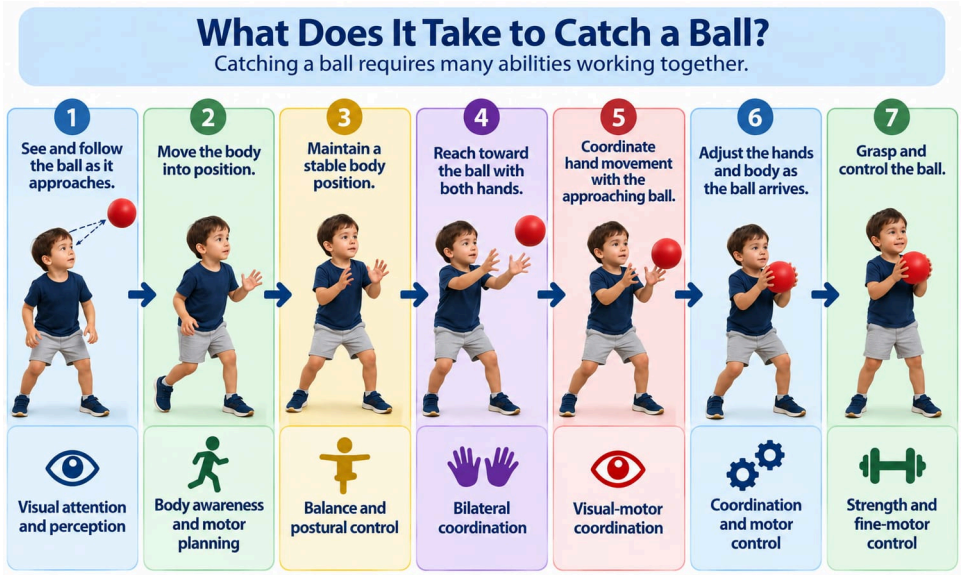


Figure 3.2.2: **What Does It Take to Catch a Ball?** Catching a ball requires multiple abilities working together as a child tracks the ball, positions the body, reaches, coordinates movement, and controls the ball. (OpenAI, 2026b)

Catching demonstrates why educators should look beyond whether a child simply **can or cannot perform a skill**. One child may visually track the ball successfully but have difficulty moving into position, while another child may reach toward the ball at the appropriate time but still be developing the coordination needed to control it once it reaches the hands.

Fine-Motor Example: What Does It Take to Cut with Scissors?

Cutting with scissors may also appear to be one skill, but it requires several abilities to work together. A child must position the scissors, open and close them with control, hold and move the paper with the other hand, visually follow a cutting path, and coordinate the movement of the scissors and paper.



Figure 3.2.3: What Does It Take to Cut with Scissors? Cutting with scissors requires fine-motor control, hand and finger strength, bilateral coordination, visual attention, visual-motor coordination, and motor planning. (OpenAI, 2026c)

When a Child Has Difficulty Cutting

When a child struggles with scissors, simply saying that the child **"cannot cut"** does not explain which part of the task is challenging. Careful observation can help an educator identify what the child is already able to do and which underlying abilities may still be developing.

For example:

- A child who has difficulty positioning the scissors or keeping them correctly positioned may still be developing **fine-motor control and motor planning**.
- A child who has difficulty opening and closing the scissors may need additional opportunities to develop **hand and finger strength and fine-motor control**.
- A child who can operate the scissors but has difficulty holding or moving the paper with the other hand may still be developing **bilateral coordination**.
- A child who can cut but has difficulty following a line or cutting path may still be developing **visual-motor coordination**.
- A child who performs individual parts of the task but has difficulty putting them together may still be developing the **coordination and motor planning** needed for the complete skill.

Supporting the Abilities Behind the Skill

Educators can combine supported practice using scissors with activities that involve related hand skills, such as manipulating playdough, using tongs, and tearing paper. Children also need opportunities to practice the cutting task itself, with suitable scissors, manageable materials, and assistance adjusted to their needs (East Cheshire NHS Trust, n.d.).

Educators can also adjust the task itself. Providing appropriate scissors, manageable materials, shorter cutting paths, and sufficient time allows children to practice the parts of the skill that are developing while experiencing success.

Looking Beyond "Can" or "Cannot"

The same principle applies to other physical skills. Running, climbing, writing, buttoning a coat, pouring a drink, and completing self-care routines all depend on combinations of abilities working together. When a child has difficulty with a physical skill, educators can ask a more useful question than **"Can the child do it?"** They can ask: **"What parts of the skill can the child already do, and what abilities does the child use or continue to develop?"**

Viewing physical skills in this way helps educators observe children's development more carefully and provide meaningful

experiences that support the abilities underlying successful performance.

Observing Abilities Through Children's Physical Skills

Observation helps educators understand **how children use their developing abilities to perform physical skills**. Rather than focusing only on whether a child completes a task successfully, educators can pay attention to the movements, strategies, and abilities the child uses while attempting the task.

For example, an educator might initially observe: *Maya cannot catch a ball.*

This statement describes the outcome, but it provides little information about what Maya is actually able to do. A more useful observation might be: *When a ball is tossed toward Maya, she watches the ball and reaches toward it with both hands. She often closes her hands before the ball reaches them.*

This description provides information about different parts of the skill. Maya is visually attending to the ball and using both hands to reach for it. Her timing and visual-motor coordination may still be developing. This observation suggests what to explore next rather than establishing a cause. Educators can observe Maya across repeated opportunities and consider how the ball, distance, instructions, and her familiarity with the activity affect her performance.

Observe the Parts of the Skill

When observing a child performing a physical skill, educators can consider questions such as:

- What parts of the skill does the child complete independently?
- How does the child position and move the body?
- Does the child use both sides of the body together?
- How does the child use visual information to guide movement?
- Does the child maintain balance and control throughout the task?
- How does the child plan or sequence the movements?
- Which parts of the task appear to require additional practice or support?

These observations can help educators recognize that a child may demonstrate strength in some of the abilities involved in a skill while still developing others.

Using Observation to Support Development

Observations of children's physical skills can help educators plan experiences that provide appropriate opportunities for practice. For example, if a child is successfully tracking a ball but has difficulty coordinating movements to catch it, the educator might provide opportunities to catch larger, slower-moving balls from a short distance. Observations gathered across activities and over time help educators recognize children's strengths and plan responsive learning experiences (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Similarly, a child who can open and close scissors but has difficulty controlling the paper may benefit from experiences that strengthen bilateral coordination, such as tearing paper, stringing beads, building with connecting materials, or completing other activities in which the two hands perform different roles.

The purpose of observing underlying abilities is **not to diagnose a child or determine the cause of a difficulty**. Instead, observation helps educators understand what the child currently does, identify emerging abilities, and provide experiences that support continued development.

By looking closely at **how a child performs a physical skill**, educators gain a more complete picture than they would by recording only whether the child can or cannot complete the task.

Exercise 3.2.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the difference between a **physical ability** and a **physical skill**?
2. A child is climbing playground equipment. Identify **three abilities** the child may use while climbing and explain how each ability supports the skill.
3. Why does cutting with scissors require **bilateral coordination**?
4. A child can open and close scissors but has difficulty holding and moving the paper while cutting. Which underlying ability may still be developing?
5. A child watches an approaching ball and reaches toward it with both hands but closes the hands before the ball arrives. What does this observation tell you about the abilities the child is already using and those that may still be developing?
6. Choose one everyday self-care task, such as dressing, opening a container, pouring a drink, washing hands, or putting on a coat. Identify **at least three abilities** that contribute to completing the task.
7. Why is observing **how** a child performs a physical skill more informative than recording only whether the child can or cannot perform it?

Apply What You Know

Choose a physical skill that was **not used as an example in this section**. Break the skill into smaller actions. For each action, identify one or more abilities the child uses to complete it.

Consider abilities such as **strength, balance, coordination, bilateral coordination, body awareness, motor planning, visual-motor coordination, and fine-motor control**.

Use the following format to organize your thinking:

Table 3.2.2: Apply What You Know

What the Child Does	Ability or Abilities Involved

Then consider: **What might you observe if one of these abilities is still developing?**

Answers available at the end of this section.

References

East Cheshire NHS Trust. (n.d.). *Children's occupational therapy*. Children's occupational therapy resources

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020). *Developmentally appropriate practice* [Position statement]. Developmentally appropriate practice position statement

OpenAI. (2026a). *Many abilities work together to create a physical skill* [AI-generated image].

OpenAI. (2026b). *What does it take to catch a ball?* [AI-generated image].

OpenAI. (2026c). *What does it take to cut with scissors?* [AI-generated image].

Answers

Exercise 3.2.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. A **physical ability** is an underlying capacity that helps a child perform a physical task, such as strength, balance, coordination, body awareness, motor planning, visual-motor coordination, bilateral coordination, or fine-motor control. A **physical skill** is an action or task the child performs, such as running, climbing, catching a ball, cutting with scissors, or buttoning clothing. Most physical skills require several abilities working together.
2. Answers may vary. Examples include:

1. **Strength** helps the child support and move their body weight.
2. **Balance** helps the child maintain stability as body position changes.
3. **Bilateral coordination** helps the child coordinate the arms and legs.
4. **Body awareness** helps the child understand where to position the hands, feet, and body.
5. **Motor planning** helps the child determine how to move from one position to the next.

3. Cutting requires the two hands to work together while performing different jobs. One hand opens and closes the scissors while the other hand holds, moves, and turns the paper.
4. **Bilateral coordination** may still be developing. The child is able to operate the scissors with one hand but has difficulty coordinating the other hand to hold and move the paper.
5. The child is demonstrating **visual attention** by watching the ball and **bilateral coordination** by reaching with both hands. The timing and **visual-motor coordination** needed to coordinate hand movements with the approaching ball may still be developing.
6. Answers will vary. For example, **putting on a coat** may involve:
   1. **Balance** to maintain a stable body position.
   2. **Body awareness** to position the body and arms in relation to the coat.
   3. **Bilateral coordination** to use both sides of the body together.
   4. **Fine-motor control** to manage a zipper, snaps, or buttons.
   5. **Motor planning** to organize and complete the movements in sequence.
7. Observing **how** a child performs a skill helps an educator identify which parts of the task the child can already complete and which underlying abilities may still be developing. This provides more useful information for planning appropriate opportunities for practice and support than simply recording whether the child completed the task.

Sample Answers to Apply What You Know

Answers will vary depending on the physical skill selected. For example, a student might choose **riding a tricycle**:

Table 3.2.3: Apply What You Know

What the Child Does	Ability or Abilities Involved
Gets onto and positions the body on the tricycle	Balance, body awareness, motor planning
Places the feet on the pedals	Body awareness, visual-motor coordination
Pushes the pedals	Strength, bilateral coordination, coordination
Holds and turns the handlebars	Fine-motor control, bilateral coordination, visual-motor coordination
Pedals and steers at the same time	Coordination, motor planning, visual-motor coordination

If one of these abilities is still developing, the educator might observe that the child can complete **some parts of the skill but not yet coordinate all of the actions together**. The educator can use those observations to identify meaningful opportunities for additional practice and support.

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3.3: Strengthening Gross and Fine Motor Development

Introduction

In Section 3.2, you examined the abilities children combine when performing physical skills. This section explains how educators can select experiences, materials, and supports that help children develop and refine those skills.

Children strengthen motor skills through **active play, repeated practice, appropriately challenging experiences, and opportunities to use their bodies and hands in meaningful ways**. Early childhood educators support motor development by creating environments, selecting materials, planning experiences, and adjusting the level of challenge so that children can participate successfully while continuing to build new abilities.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 3.3: Identify methods that strengthen gross and fine motor development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Identify** methods that strengthen gross motor development in children ages 3–8.
- **Identify** methods that strengthen fine motor development in children ages 3–8.
- **Explain** how educators can adapt motor experiences to support different levels of motor ability.
- **Select** developmentally appropriate strategies for supporting a child's gross- or fine-motor development.

How Motor Skills Become Stronger

Children develop stronger motor skills through **active participation, repeated practice, and opportunities to use their bodies and hands in meaningful ways**. Motor development does not occur simply because children get older. Children also need opportunities to practice emerging skills in environments that are safe, engaging, and appropriately challenging.

Educators can strengthen motor development by providing experiences that allow children to **practice skills repeatedly in different ways**. For example, throwing a beanbag into a basket, tossing a ball to a partner, and throwing a playground ball toward a target all provide practice with throwing while varying the level and type of challenge.

Practice and Repetition

Learning a motor skill takes practice. Children often need to perform a movement many times before it becomes smooth, coordinated, and efficient. Educators can provide repeated practice through child-directed play, guided activities, brief demonstrations, and meaningful everyday routines. The approach should match the child's abilities, interests, and learning goals (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Educators can provide repeated opportunities for children to run, climb, balance, throw, draw, build, cut, pour, fasten, and manipulate objects throughout the day. Activities such as ball play, target games, dancing, play dough, cutting, lacing, and using tongs provide opportunities for this type of repeated motor practice.

Appropriate Challenge

Motor experiences should provide enough challenge for children to develop new abilities without making participation unnecessarily difficult or frustrating. An activity that is too easy may provide little opportunity for growth, while one that is too difficult may prevent the child from successfully practicing the skill.

Educators can adjust the **materials, equipment, environment, amount of assistance, or complexity of a task** to provide an appropriate level of challenge. For example, a child learning to catch might begin with a large, lightweight ball from a short

distance before progressing to a smaller ball or a greater distance.

Play-Based and Meaningful Experiences

Young children strengthen motor skills through activities that have a purpose and are enjoyable. Outdoor play, movement games, art experiences, construction, dramatic play, music and movement, classroom jobs, and self-care routines all provide opportunities to practice motor skills.

Rather than separating motor development from the rest of the curriculum, educators can intentionally include opportunities for movement and manipulation **throughout the daily routine**.

Individual Variation

Children do not develop motor skills at exactly the same rate or in exactly the same way. A child may demonstrate strength in one area of motor development while needing additional practice or support in another.

Educators should **observe what an individual child can currently do and provide opportunities that build from that starting point**. The goal is not for every child to perform a task in exactly the same way or at the same time, but to provide experiences that help each child continue developing greater control, coordination, strength, and independence.

Developmental Practice Reminder:

Strengthening motor development does not mean pushing children to perform skills before they are ready. Effective motor experiences build on children's current abilities while providing achievable opportunities for practice and growth.

Methods That Strengthen Gross Motor Development

Gross motor skills involve the large muscles of the body and are used for movements such as running, jumping, climbing, balancing, throwing, and kicking. Children strengthen these skills when they have frequent opportunities to move their bodies in different ways and practice movements that require increasing control, coordination, strength, and balance.

Educators can support gross motor development by providing **varied movement experiences rather than focusing on one specific activity or skill**. A well-designed environment gives children opportunities to practice locomotor skills, balance and stability, object-control skills, strength, and whole-body coordination.

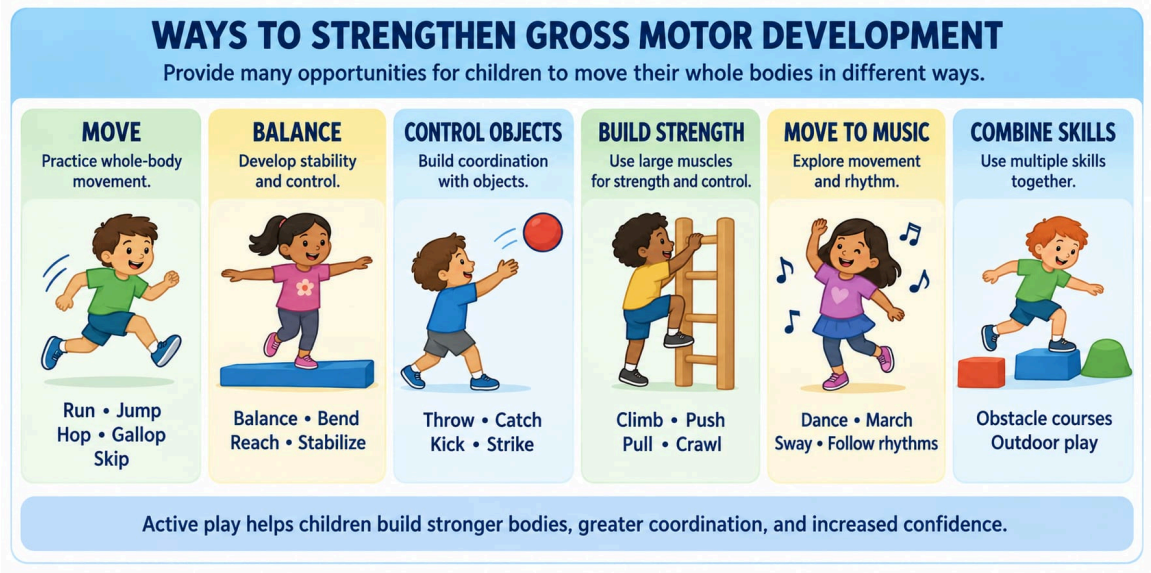


Figure 3.3.1: Ways educators can provide opportunities to strengthen gross motor development through active play and movement. (OpenAI, 2026d)

Locomotor Movement

Locomotor skills move the body from one place to another. Running, jumping, hopping, galloping, and skipping are examples. These movements require children to coordinate different parts of the body while controlling speed, direction, and balance.

Educators can strengthen locomotor skills through activities such as:

- Moving in different ways during transition games
- Following pathways or lines on the ground
- Running or galloping to designated locations
- Jumping over low objects or between floor markers
- Hopping between spots or hoops
- Playing movement games such as follow-the-leader

Children benefit from opportunities to practice the same movement in different ways. For example, they might jump forward, jump from one spot to another, jump over a line, or jump as part of an obstacle course.

Balance and Stability

Balance and stability allow children to maintain or control their body position while remaining still or moving. These abilities contribute to many other motor skills, including running, climbing, kicking, and catching.

Educators can provide opportunities for children to:

- Stand briefly on one foot
- Walk along a line or low balance beam
- Move across stepping stones or floor markers
- Change body positions during movement games
- Bend, stretch, twist, and reach
- Move across uneven or varied outdoor surfaces

The level of challenge can be adjusted by changing the width of a pathway, the distance between stepping stones, the child's speed, or the amount of support available.

Throwing, Catching, Kicking, and Striking

Activities involving balls and other objects help children develop **object-control skills and coordination between vision and movement**.

Educators can provide:

- Balls of different sizes, weights, and textures
- Beanbags for tossing and catching
- Baskets, hoops, or other large targets
- Opportunities to roll, throw, bounce, and catch
- Balls for kicking toward a target
- Lightweight objects and equipment for striking

Materials should match the child's current abilities. A large, lightweight ball may be easier to catch than a small ball. A large target placed nearby may make throwing more successful. As children's skills increase, educators can gradually increase the challenge.

Climbing, Pushing, and Pulling

Climbing, pushing, and pulling provide opportunities to develop **whole-body strength, coordination, and body control**.

Opportunities might include:

- Climbing appropriate playground structures
- Crawling through tunnels
- Pushing or pulling wheeled toys
- Moving lightweight classroom or outdoor materials
- Riding tricycles or other riding toys
- Moving through spaces that require crawling, climbing, or changing body position

Educators should select equipment and experiences that are appropriate for children's abilities and provide supervision needed for safe participation.

Dancing and Movement to Music

Music and movement encourage children to coordinate their bodies with **rhythm, tempo, direction, and movement cues**.

Educators can invite children to:

- Move quickly and slowly
- Start and stop with the music
- Move high and low
- Imitate movements
- Follow simple movement sequences
- Clap, stomp, march, sway, or turn
- Use scarves or other lightweight props while moving

There does not need to be one "correct" way to move. Open-ended movement experiences allow children to practice body control while also making choices about how they move.

Obstacle Courses and Outdoor Play

Obstacle courses can combine several gross motor abilities within one experience. A child might crawl through a tunnel, walk along a line, step over an object, jump between markers, and throw a beanbag toward a target.

Outdoor environments also provide opportunities for children to run, climb, ride, balance, throw, and explore movement over larger and more varied spaces.

Educators can make these experiences more effective by **observing how children participate and adjusting the challenge when needed**. Moving a target closer, providing a larger ball, lowering an obstacle, widening a balance path, or simplifying a movement sequence can make participation more achievable. As children's abilities increase, the challenge can gradually increase as well.

Teaching Practice Reminder:

The goal is not simply to keep children physically active. Intentional gross motor experiences provide children with repeated opportunities to practice particular movements and abilities while keeping the experience playful, meaningful, and appropriately challenging.

Methods That Strengthen Fine Motor Development

Fine motor skills involve the small muscles of the hands and fingers working together with the eyes, arms, and other parts of the body. Children use fine motor skills throughout the day to draw, build, cut, fasten clothing, use utensils, manipulate toys, and complete many other classroom and self-care tasks.

Fine motor development is more than learning to hold a pencil or use scissors. Children need opportunities to develop the **strength, coordination, control, and visual-motor abilities** that make these more complex skills possible. Educators can strengthen fine motor development by providing varied materials and meaningful opportunities for children to use their hands throughout the day.

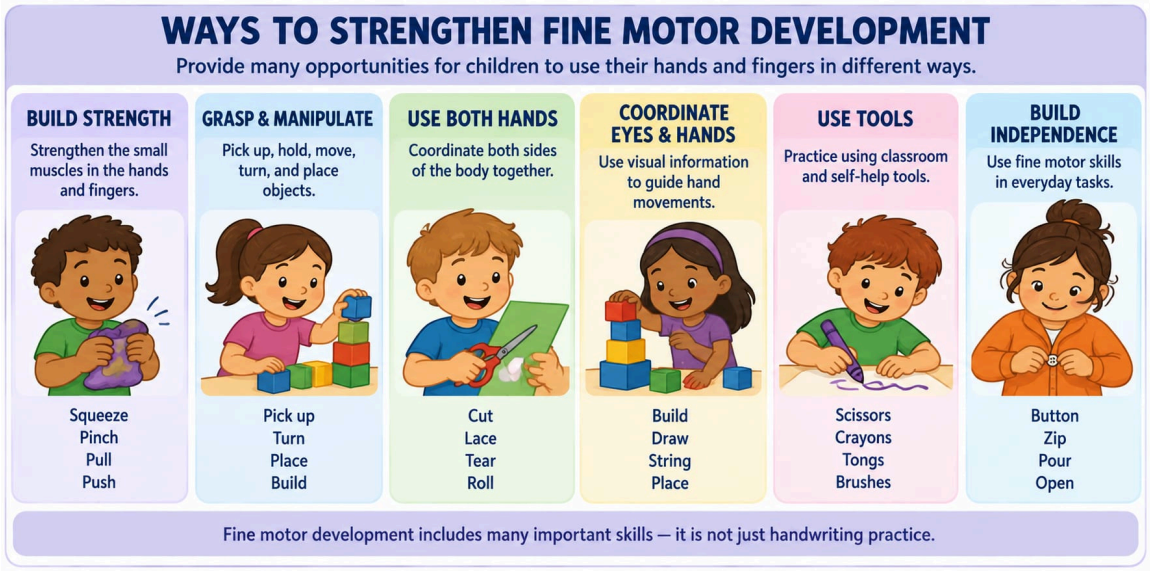


Figure 3.3.2: Ways educators can provide opportunities to strengthen fine motor development through hands-on activities and everyday tasks. (OpenAI, 2026c)

Hand and Finger Strength

Children need **hand and finger strength** to grasp, squeeze, pinch, pull, and manipulate objects. Strength in the hands and fingers supports later tasks such as using scissors, controlling writing tools, fastening clothing, and opening containers.

Educators can provide opportunities for children to:

- Squeeze, roll, pinch, and flatten play dough
- Use spray bottles or squeeze bottles
- Squeeze sponges during water play
- Use clothespins or clips

- Tear and crumple paper
- Use hole punches
- Squeeze glue bottles
- Pick up objects with tongs, tweezers, or eyedroppers

Different materials provide different levels of resistance. For example, firmer dough requires more hand strength than softer dough. Educators can adjust materials based on the amount of challenge a child needs (East Cheshire NHS Trust, n.d.).

Grasp and Manipulation

Grasp and manipulation involve picking up, holding, moving, turning, and repositioning objects with the hands and fingers. Children gradually develop greater control when working with objects of different sizes, shapes, and textures.

Opportunities to strengthen these abilities include:

- Building with blocks and other construction materials
- Completing puzzles
- Stringing beads
- Placing pegs into pegboards
- Manipulating small loose parts
- Turning knobs, lids, and handles
- Sorting small objects
- Drawing, painting, and coloring
- Picking up and transferring objects with tweezers or tongs

Rather than expecting one particular grasp before a child is ready, educators can provide many opportunities to manipulate materials and develop increasingly efficient control.

Bilateral Coordination

Bilateral coordination is the ability to use both sides of the body together in a coordinated way. Many fine motor tasks require the two hands to perform different but complementary actions.

For example, when cutting with scissors, one hand operates the scissors while the other hand holds and turns the paper. When stringing beads, one hand may hold the string while the other places the bead.

Educators can strengthen bilateral coordination through activities such as:

- Cutting with scissors
- Tearing paper
- Lacing and stringing
- Rolling play dough with a rolling pin
- Opening containers
- Building with interlocking materials
- Holding paper while drawing or writing
- Pouring from one container into another
- Fastening buttons, snaps, or zippers

Visual-Motor Coordination

Visual-motor coordination involves using visual information to guide body movement. Children use this ability when they reach for an object, place a puzzle piece, build a block structure, draw a shape, string a bead, or cut along a line.

Educators can provide opportunities for children to:

- Complete puzzles
- Build with blocks

- Stack or nest objects
- Place objects into containers or openings
- String beads
- Trace and draw
- Cut along increasingly complex paths
- Copy simple designs or structures
- Transfer water with eyedroppers
- Use tweezers or tongs to move small objects

The difficulty of these experiences can be adjusted. A child might begin by placing large objects into a wide container before progressing to smaller objects or more precise placement.

Tool Use

Children develop fine motor control by learning to use a variety of **tools for meaningful purposes**. Tool use requires children to combine hand strength, grasp, bilateral coordination, visual-motor coordination, and motor planning.

Useful tools include:

- Crayons, markers, pencils, and paintbrushes
- Scissors
- Glue bottles and glue sticks
- Tweezers and tongs
- Eyedroppers
- Scoops and measuring tools
- Eating and serving utensils
- Simple gardening or classroom tools

Children benefit from using tools for authentic purposes. Scissors can be available for art and construction, tongs can be used to serve food or sort materials, and eyedroppers can be incorporated into art, water play, or science experiences.

Teaching Practice Reminder:

Fine motor development is not limited to handwriting practice. Children strengthen the abilities needed for drawing, writing, cutting, and other complex tasks through many experiences that build hand strength, coordination, manipulation, visual-motor control, tool use, and independence.

Matching Motor Abilities With Opportunities

Effective motor experiences are more than a collection of activities. Educators can think about **what they want children to strengthen** and then provide experiences that give children opportunities to practice those abilities.

Table 3.3.1: Ways to Strengthen Motor Abilities

If you want to strengthen...	Provide opportunities for...	Examples
Balance and stability	changing body positions and maintaining balance	balance beams, stepping stones, standing on one foot
Gross motor coordination	coordinating large body movements	obstacle courses, dancing, climbing
Object control skills	throwing, catching, kicking, and striking	beanbags, different-size balls, targets
Hand and finger strength	squeezing, pinching, pulling, and pushing	play dough, clips, spray bottles
Bilateral coordination	using both hands together	cutting, lacing, tearing paper, rolling dough

If you want to strengthen...	Provide opportunities for...	Examples
Fine motor control	manipulating small objects with increasing control	beads, blocks, puzzles, loose parts
Tool use	using classroom and self-help tools	crayons, paintbrushes, scissors, utensils
Visual-motor coordination	coordinating what the eyes see with hand movements	puzzles, building, drawing, cutting along a path

Note. Examples illustrate possible practice opportunities rather than prescribed interventions. Select and adapt activities according to the child's abilities, interests, and support needs (East Cheshire NHS Trust, n.d.; NAEYC, 2020).

Teaching Practice Reminder:

Start with the ability you want to strengthen, not simply the activity you want children to complete. The same activity may strengthen several motor abilities, and the same ability can be practiced through many different activities.

Everyday Routines Are Motor Opportunities

Supporting motor development does not always require a planned motor activity. Children use and strengthen **gross and fine motor skills throughout the daily routine**. Everyday tasks provide meaningful opportunities to practice movement, coordination, strength, and control while also developing independence.

For example, children can strengthen motor skills when they:

- Put on coats, shoes, and other clothing
- Fasten buttons, snaps, and zippers
- Open and close containers
- Pour drinks and serve food
- Use spoons, forks, scoops, and tongs
- Carry toys, books, or other classroom materials
- Set and clear a table
- Wipe tables or clean up spills
- Sweep, rake, dig, or water plants
- Put materials away on shelves
- Pack and unpack backpacks or other belongings
- Participate in classroom jobs

These experiences often involve **several motor abilities at the same time**. Setting a table, for example, may require a child to carry objects while walking, maintain balance, grasp and release items carefully, and coordinate vision with hand movements to place each item (East Cheshire NHS Trust, n.d.).

Allow Children to Do What They Can for Themselves

Adults sometimes complete tasks for children because it is faster or easier. However, when an adult consistently opens a child's container, zips a coat, carries materials, or cleans up for the child, the child loses an opportunity to practice the motor skills involved.

Educators can support motor development by allowing children **time to attempt manageable tasks independently**, while providing assistance when it is needed. The amount of support can be adjusted as the child's abilities increase.

For example, instead of completely fastening a child's coat, an educator might start the zipper and allow the child to pull it upward. Over time, the child may be able to complete more of the task independently.

Teaching Practice Reminder:

Before doing a routine task for a child, consider whether the task is something the child could safely attempt. Everyday routines can become meaningful opportunities to strengthen motor skills and independence without adding another activity to the schedule.

Choosing the Right Level of Challenge

Earlier examples showed how changing materials, distance, or assistance can make motor practice more achievable. Educators choose these adjustments by observing the child, considering what the task requires, and trying a change that supports active participation.

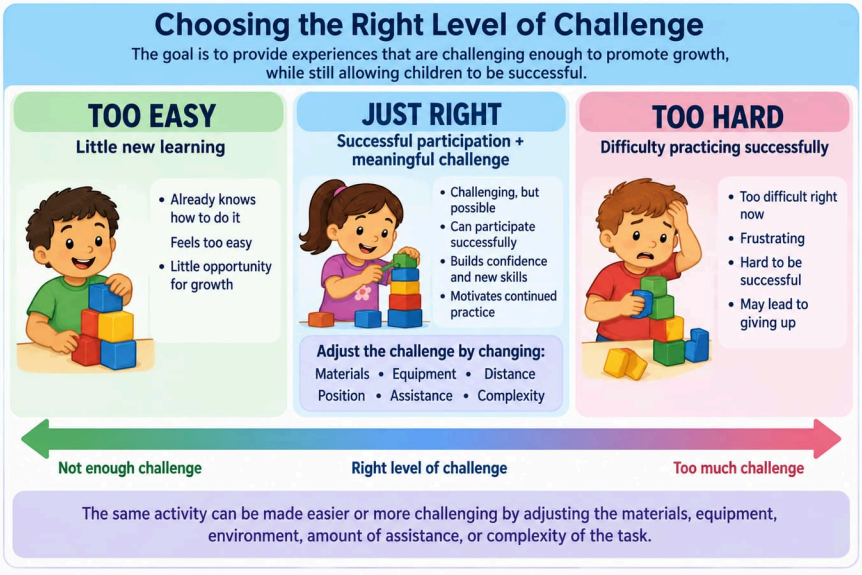


Figure 3.3.3: Choosing an appropriate level of challenge supports successful participation, meaningful practice, and continued motor development. (OpenAI, 2026a)

For example, instead of simply deciding that a child who struggles with scissors needs to *practice cutting more*, an educator can observe more closely:

- Can the child open and close the scissors?
- Can the child maintain an effective grasp on the scissors?
- Can the child hold and stabilize the paper with the other hand?
- Can the child coordinate the actions of both hands?
- Can the child visually follow where they want to cut?
- Is the paper or cutting path appropriate for the child's current abilities?

Adjust the Challenge, Not Just the Amount of Practice

Once educators identify what may be making a task difficult, they can adjust the experience so the child can practice successfully. For cutting, an educator might:

- Provide scissors that are easier for the child to open and close
- Use thicker or sturdier paper that is easier to control
- Begin with short snips before expecting continuous cutting
- Provide shorter or wider cutting paths
- Stabilize the paper or help the child position it
- Gradually increase the complexity as the child's control improves

The same approach can be used with gross motor skills. A child having difficulty catching does not necessarily need to *catch more*. The educator might begin with a larger, lightweight ball, move closer to the child, gently toss rather than throw the ball, or allow the ball to bounce before it is caught.

Adjust and Try Again

Choosing an appropriate challenge is an ongoing process. After making an adjustment, observe how the child responds. As the child's abilities develop, educators can gradually reduce support or increase the challenge.

Teaching Practice Reminder:

When a child struggles with a motor skill, asking **"What does this task require?"** is often more useful than simply asking **"How can the child practice it more?"** The goal is to provide the right kind of practice at the right level of challenge.

Adapting Rather Than Removing the Opportunity

When a motor task is difficult for a child, the solution is not necessarily to remove the activity or complete it for the child. Doing so may also remove an important opportunity to **participate, practice, and develop the abilities needed for the skill**.

Instead, educators can adapt an experience so the child can participate at an appropriate level. An **adaptation** changes some part of the activity while maintaining the child's opportunity to be involved and practice motor skills.

Educators might adapt:

- **Materials:** Use larger objects, thicker crayons, larger beads, lightweight balls, or easier-to-grasp tools.
- **Equipment:** Provide different scissors, a lower target, a wider balance surface, or equipment that offers additional stability.
- **Environment:** Reduce distractions, provide more space for movement, change the child's position, or place materials within easier reach.
- **Instructions:** Break a task into smaller steps, demonstrate the movement, or provide one direction at a time.
- **Level of assistance:** Offer verbal cues, model the action, stabilize materials, or provide physical assistance when appropriate.
- **Level of challenge:** Shorten the distance, simplify the movement, reduce the number of steps, or begin with an easier version of the task.

For example, if a child has difficulty stringing small beads, the educator might provide **larger beads and a firmer cord** rather than eliminating the activity. If a child struggles to throw a ball into a basket, the educator might **move the basket closer or provide a larger target**. The child continues participating in the same type of experience, but the task is better matched to the child's current abilities.

Educators should review adaptations as children's abilities, goals, and circumstances change. Some supports can be reduced, while others—including adaptive tools or accessible positioning—may remain necessary for meaningful participation (NAEYC, 2020).

Teaching Practice Reminder:

The goal of an adaptation is not to make every task easy. It is to make **participation and meaningful practice possible** while maintaining an appropriate level of challenge.

Supporting Children With Different Motor Abilities

Children vary in their motor abilities, and some children may experience persistent difficulty with tasks that require movement, coordination, balance, or fine motor control. An educator's role is not to diagnose the cause of a child's difficulty. Instead,

educators can **observe carefully, support participation, adapt experiences, and communicate concerns appropriately**.

When a child is having difficulty with motor tasks, educators can:

- **Observe** what the child can do and which parts of a task appear challenging.
- **Provide opportunities to participate** rather than routinely removing difficult activities.
- **Adapt activities, materials, or the environment** so the child can practice at an appropriate level.
- **Document observations** using specific, objective descriptions of what the child does.
- **Communicate with families** about observations and strategies that support the child.
- **Collaborate with specialists**, such as occupational or physical therapists, when they are involved with the child.
- **Follow program procedures** when developmental concerns may require additional support or referral.

When Motor Difficulties Persist

Some children experience motor difficulties that are more significant or persistent than the variations typically seen among children. For example, **developmental coordination disorder (DCD)** is a condition that affects the development of motor coordination and can make everyday motor tasks difficult. Children with DCD may have difficulty with gross motor tasks such as running, jumping, or participating in playground activities and fine motor tasks such as writing, using scissors, fastening clothing, or tying shoes (Barnhart et al., 2003; National Health Service, 2023).

Educators may notice patterns of difficulty during everyday classroom activities, but **identifying or diagnosing a motor disorder is not the educator's role**. The educator contributes valuable information by documenting what is observed, providing appropriate supports, communicating with families, and collaborating with other professionals when appropriate.

Regardless of whether a child has an identified disability or diagnosis, educators can create an environment in which children with different motor abilities are able to **participate, practice, experience success, and continue developing their skills**.

Teaching Practice Reminder:

Focus on what the child needs to participate and grow rather than on assigning a label to the child's difficulty. Observe, adapt, support, document, and collaborate while remaining within the educator's professional role.

Putting It Into Practice: Observe → Identify → Support → Adjust

Supporting motor development is an ongoing process. Educators do not need to immediately know the perfect activity or adaptation for every child. Instead, they can use **observation and intentional decision-making** to determine what support will help a child participate, practice, and continue developing motor skills.

A simple process is: **Observe the Child → Identify What the Task Requires → Select a Method or Support → Observe What Happens → Adjust**

1. Observe the Child

Begin by watching what the child actually does. Focus on specific actions rather than making assumptions about the child's abilities.

Consider:

- What can the child already do independently?
- Where does the child begin to have difficulty?
- What strategies does the child already use?
- When is the child successful?
- Does changing the task or situation affect the child's performance?

2. Identify What the Task Requires

Think about the different abilities involved in the task. As discussed in Section 3.2, **one motor skill may require many abilities working together**.

For example, catching a ball may require visual tracking, balance, timing, body positioning, and coordination of the arms and hands. Cutting with scissors may require hand strength, grasp, bilateral coordination, visual-motor coordination, and control of the scissors.

Instead of focusing only on whether the child *can or cannot* perform the final skill, ask: **What does this task require, and which part appears to be challenging for this child?**

3. Select a Method or Support

Choose a strategy that addresses what you observed. This might include:

- Providing additional opportunities for meaningful practice
- Changing the materials or equipment
- Simplifying one part of the task
- Changing the environment or positioning
- Modeling or breaking the task into smaller steps
- Providing verbal, visual, or physical support when appropriate
- Adjusting the level of challenge

The goal is to provide **enough support for successful participation while still allowing the child to actively practice the skill**.

4. Observe What Happens

After providing the support, watch the child again.

Did the change help? Is the child participating more successfully? Is the child able to practice the intended skill? Does the task remain appropriately challenging?

The child's response provides information about whether the support is effective.

5. Adjust

Based on what you observe, continue, change, increase, or gradually reduce the support. As the child's abilities develop, the activity can become more challenging.

The process then begins again: **Observe → Identify → Support → Observe → Adjust**

Motor development is not supported by finding one activity that works for every child. Effective educators continually **observe children's abilities, consider what a task requires, and adjust experiences to provide meaningful opportunities for participation, practice, and growth.**

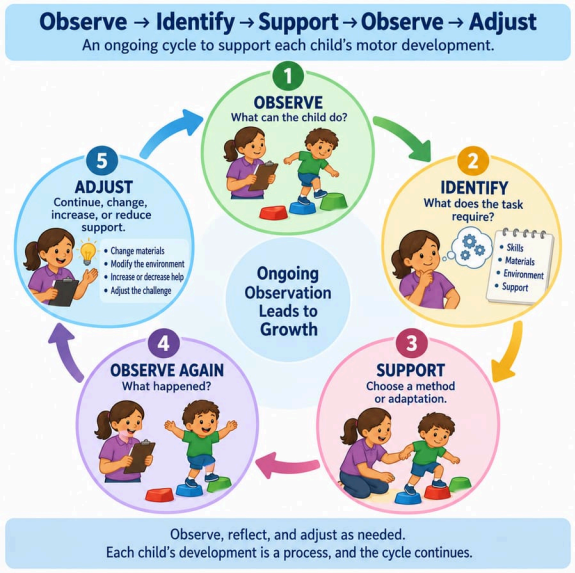


Figure 3.3.4: Educators use an ongoing cycle of observation, identification, support, and adjustment to strengthen children's motor development. (OpenAI, 2026b)

Apply It:

A child is having difficulty with a motor task. Before deciding that the child simply needs "more practice," ask: **What does this task require? What am I observing? What could I change to make meaningful practice possible?**

Vocabulary Alert: Motor Development Terms for Teaching Practice

Several terms in this section describe different abilities that contribute to successful motor performance. Understanding these terms can help educators identify **what a motor task requires** and choose appropriate ways to support a child.

Locomotor Skills: Movements that move the body from one place to another, such as running, jumping, hopping, galloping, and skipping.

Balance and Stability: The ability to maintain and control body position while staying still or moving.

Object-Control Skills: Skills used to control objects with the body, such as throwing, catching, kicking, rolling, and striking.

Bilateral Coordination: The ability to use both sides of the body together in a coordinated way. For example, cutting requires one hand to operate the scissors while the other hand holds and moves the paper.

Visual-Motor Coordination: The ability to use visual information to guide movement. This is used when children catch a ball, complete a puzzle, string beads, draw, or cut along a line.

Adaptation: A change to the materials, equipment, environment, instructions, assistance, or level of challenge that helps a child participate and practice a skill.

Remember: A motor skill is rarely dependent on just one ability. When a child struggles with a task, identifying the abilities the task requires can help an educator decide what to strengthen, support, or adapt.

Exercise 3.3.1

Check Your Understanding

1. Identify **three methods** educators can use to strengthen gross motor development and provide one example of each.

2. Identify **three methods** educators can use to strengthen fine motor development and provide one example of each.
3. Why are everyday routines, such as dressing, serving food, cleaning up, and classroom jobs, valuable opportunities for motor development?
4. A child is having difficulty cutting with scissors. Why might simply providing **more cutting practice** not be the most effective approach? What should the educator consider first?
5. What are **two ways** an educator could adjust the level of challenge of a motor activity without removing the child's opportunity to participate?
6. Explain the difference between **adapting an activity** and completing the activity for the child.
7. When a child experiences persistent difficulty with motor tasks, what is the educator's role? What is **not** the educator's role?
8. Explain how an educator could use the following process to support a child's motor development: **Observe the Child → Identify What the Task Requires → Select a Method or Support → Observe What Happens → Adjust**

Apply What You Know

A 5-year-old child enjoys art activities but becomes frustrated when cutting with scissors. The child can open and close the scissors but has difficulty holding the paper steady while cutting. When the paper moves, the child frequently cuts away from the line and asks the teacher to finish.

Using what you learned in this section:

1. What underlying motor ability may be contributing to the child's difficulty?
2. What could the educator change or provide to make the task more achievable?
3. How could the educator support the child **without taking over the task**?
4. What should the educator observe afterward to determine whether the support was effective?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 3.3.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Answers will vary. Examples include:
    1. Locomotor movement: jumping between floor markers
    2. Balance and stability: walking along a low balance beam or line
    3. Object-control skills: throwing a beanbag toward a target
    4. Other appropriate methods include climbing, pushing, pulling, dancing, movement to music, obstacle courses, and outdoor play.

2. Answers will vary. Examples include:
    1. Hand and finger strength: squeezing and pinching play dough
    2. Bilateral coordination: cutting with scissors while holding the paper with the other hand
    3. Visual-motor coordination: stringing beads
    4. Other appropriate methods include grasp and manipulation, tool use, and self-help activities.
3. Everyday routines give children meaningful and repeated opportunities to use motor skills while developing independence. Tasks such as fastening clothing, pouring, carrying materials, using utensils, and cleaning require children to practice strength, coordination, balance, grasp, and control.
4. Cutting requires several abilities working together. The educator should first observe the child and determine which part of the task is difficult. The child may have difficulty with hand strength, grasp, opening and closing the scissors, stabilizing the paper, bilateral coordination, or visual-motor coordination. Once the difficulty is identified, the educator can select an appropriate support or adaptation.
5. Answers will vary. An educator might:
    1. Use larger or easier-to-grasp materials
    2. Move a target closer
    3. Provide a larger or lighter ball
    4. Shorten or simplify the task
    5. Change the child's position
    6. Break the task into smaller steps
    7. Provide additional assistance or modeling
6. An adaptation changes some part of the activity so the child can continue to participate and practice the skill. Completing the activity for the child removes or reduces the child's opportunity to practice. Effective adaptations provide enough support for participation while allowing the child to remain actively involved.
7. The educator's role is to observe and objectively document what the child does, support participation, adapt experiences when appropriate, communicate with families, follow program procedures, and collaborate with specialists when they are involved. Diagnosing a motor disorder is not the educator's role.
8. The educator first observes what the child can do and where difficulty occurs. Next, the educator identifies the abilities required by the task and considers which part may be challenging. The educator then selects an appropriate method, adaptation, or support and observes how the child responds. Based on the child's response, the educator continues, changes, increases, or gradually reduces the support.

Answers to Apply What You Know

1. The child may be having difficulty with bilateral coordination because cutting requires the two hands to work together in different ways. One hand operates the scissors while the other hand holds, stabilizes, and moves the paper.
2. The educator could provide sturdier paper that is easier to stabilize, use shorter or wider cutting paths, simplify the cutting task, help position the paper, or provide other activities that strengthen bilateral coordination.
3. The educator could demonstrate how to position the helping hand, provide verbal or visual cues, briefly help stabilize or position the paper, or simplify the task. The child should continue operating the scissors and participating as independently as possible.
4. The educator should observe whether the child is better able to stabilize the paper, coordinate both hands, control the scissors, follow the cutting path, remain engaged, and complete more of the task independently. The educator can then adjust the support based on what happens.

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3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

Introduction

Section 3.3 examined ways educators can support motor development through practice, appropriate challenge, and adaptations. Health concerns can also influence children's energy, comfort, and opportunities to participate, making them important considerations when supporting development.

Children's health and development are closely connected. Health concerns can affect much more than a child's physical well-being. When children experience illness, inadequate nutrition, insufficient sleep, chronic health conditions, injury, or other health-related challenges, the effects may also be seen in their **physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development** and in their ability to participate in everyday learning experiences.

Understanding these connections helps early childhood educators recognize how a health concern may influence what they observe in a child's development and participation.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 3.4: Explain how health concerns impact children's development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Identify** common health concerns that may affect children ages 3–8.
- **Explain** how health concerns can influence physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development.
- **Describe** how health concerns may affect children's participation, behavior, and learning.
- **Explain** how protective factors and supportive environments can reduce the developmental impact of health concerns.

Health and Development Are Connected

Health is an important part of the whole child. Physical health, nutrition, sleep, emotional well-being, and access to healthcare can influence how children grow, learn, play, and interact with others.

A health concern does not affect only one developmental domain. For example, a child who is frequently tired may have less energy for physical play, difficulty concentrating during a learning experience, and greater difficulty regulating emotions when interacting with peers. In this way, one health concern can influence several areas of development at the same time.

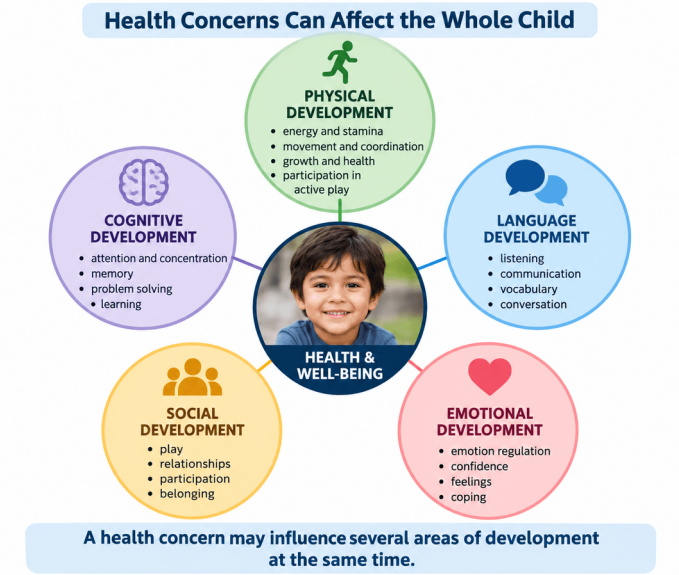


Figure 3.4.1: Health and development are interconnected. A health concern may influence multiple areas of a child's development and participation at the same time. (OpenAI, 2026a)

Health concerns may also affect the **experiences and opportunities children have to develop skills**. A child who frequently misses school because of illness, for example, may have fewer opportunities to participate in classroom conversations, practice emerging skills, engage in physical activity, or develop relationships with peers. This reflects an important principle of child development:

> **Health concerns** can influence development both directly and by affecting children's opportunities to participate, practice, interact, and learn.

However, a health concern does not automatically result in a developmental delay or difficulty. Children respond differently depending on the type and severity of the concern, how long it lasts, the child's individual characteristics, access to treatment and resources, and the supports available within the child's family and environment.

Understanding Health Concerns in Childhood

A **health concern** is a condition or circumstance that may affect a child's physical, mental, or emotional well-being. Some health concerns are temporary, while others may continue over time.

An **acute illness** develops relatively quickly and is usually short-term. Common childhood illnesses such as respiratory infections or stomach illnesses may temporarily affect a child's energy, comfort, attendance, and participation.

A **chronic health condition** lasts for an extended period of time or requires ongoing management. Conditions such as asthma, diabetes, epilepsy, severe allergies, or other long-term health conditions may influence children's daily routines and participation in activities.

Other health-related concerns may include inadequate nutrition or food insecurity, insufficient or disrupted sleep, vision or hearing difficulties, oral health problems, injuries, mental or emotional health concerns, and repeated or prolonged illness.

The presence of a health concern alone does not tell an educator how a child will develop. Educators need to consider **how the concern affects the individual child's functioning and participation**.

How Health Concerns Can Affect Development

Developmental domains are interconnected. When a health concern affects one aspect of a child's functioning, effects may also appear in other areas.

Physical Development

Health concerns may affect a child's growth, energy and stamina, strength and endurance, coordination and movement, participation in active play, and opportunities to practice gross- and fine-motor skills. For example, a child experiencing a prolonged illness may have less energy for running, climbing, or other active play. Reduced participation may temporarily limit opportunities to practice developing motor skills.

Cognitive Development

Health concerns may affect attention and concentration, memory, problem-solving, persistence, processing information, and opportunities to participate in learning experiences. For example, a child who is experiencing pain, hunger, or fatigue may have difficulty concentrating during an activity even though the child understands the concept being taught.

Language Development

Health concerns can influence children's opportunities to listen, communicate, and participate in conversations. For example, hearing difficulties may make it harder for a child to consistently hear speech sounds, directions, or conversations. Frequent absences may also reduce opportunities for children to participate in classroom conversations and language-rich experiences.

Social Development

Health concerns may affect children's participation in play, interactions with peers, development of friendships, independence and sense of belonging within a group. A child whose health condition limits participation in certain activities may need adaptations so the child can remain involved with peers.

Emotional Development

Living with illness, discomfort, fatigue, medical procedures, or limitations on activities can also influence emotional development. Children may experience frustration, worry or anxiety, difficulty regulating emotions, changes in confidence or increased need for reassurance and support. These responses should be considered within the context of the individual child rather than assumed to be characteristics of the child.

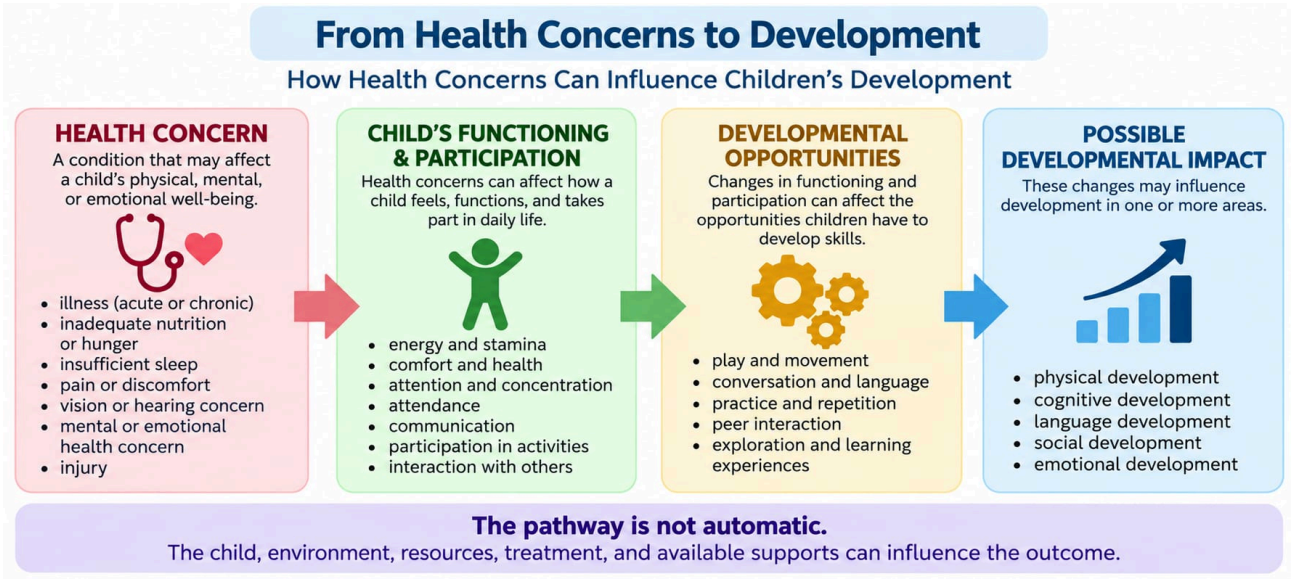


Figure 3.4.2: Health concerns may influence development by affecting children's functioning, participation, and opportunities to practice developing skills. (OpenAI, 2026b)

Health Concerns Can Have Effects Across Domains

A single health concern can influence several developmental domains at the same time. The chart below shows how various types of health concerns may affect a child and their development.

Table 3.4.1: Health Concerns and Possible Effects Across Domains

Health Concern	Possible Immediate Effect	Possible Impact on Development and Participation
Insufficient sleep	Fatigue, irritability, difficulty concentrating	Attention, learning, emotional regulation, peer interactions
Inadequate nutrition or hunger	Low energy, discomfort, difficulty concentrating	Physical growth, learning, behavior, emotional well-being
Hearing difficulty	Difficulty consistently hearing speech or directions	Language, communication, learning, social interaction
Vision difficulty	Difficulty seeing materials or navigating some activities	Learning, motor participation, independence
Chronic illness	Fatigue, treatment needs, activity limitations, absences	Physical participation, learning opportunities, peer relationships
Pain or discomfort	Distraction, irritability, reduced participation	Attention, behavior, play, learning
Mental or emotional health concern	Worry, withdrawal, difficulty regulating emotions	Relationships, participation, learning, emotional development

Note. Examples summarize possible effects discussed in this section (Bell et al., 2016; CDC, 2024a, 2024b, 2026a; Gallegos et al., 2021; Spruyt, 2019).

These are **possible effects**, not predetermined outcomes. The same health concern may affect two children very differently.

Nutrition, Food Security, and Development

Adequate nutrition supports children's physical growth, brain development, energy, and ability to participate in everyday activities. When children do not consistently have access to sufficient nutritious food, the effects may extend across developmental domains. **Food insecurity** occurs when a household does not have consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.

Children experiencing food insecurity may experience hunger, fatigue, or inconsistent nutrition. These experiences can affect physical growth and energy while also making it more difficult to concentrate and participate in learning. Research has linked food insecurity with concerns in children's physical, cognitive, academic, behavioral, and psychosocial development, although the effects vary among children and across studies (Gallegos et al., 2021).

Food access is also influenced by children's environments. Families may have limited access to affordable, nutritious food because of financial circumstances, transportation, availability of nearby food sources, or other community conditions. Educators should avoid making assumptions about a family based on what a child eats or brings to school. Instead, they can support children by creating respectful eating environments and connecting families with available resources when appropriate. For example, a child who frequently comes to school hungry may have difficulty concentrating and may appear irritable or fatigued.

Sleep and Development

Sleep supports physical health, learning, attention, memory, and emotional regulation. Children ages 3–8 continue to need substantial amounts of sleep, although individual sleep patterns and needs vary.

When children consistently receive insufficient or disrupted sleep, the effects may appear throughout the day. A tired child may have difficulty sustaining attention, become frustrated more easily, appear unusually active or restless, have difficulty remembering or following directions, participate less in physical activity, or have difficulty interacting positively with peers. Research associates poor sleep during childhood with health, behavior, cognition, and performance outcomes (Spruyt, 2019).

Sleep difficulties may occur for many reasons. Some are temporary, while others may be related to health conditions, routines, stress, environmental conditions, or other factors. For educators, an important point is that **fatigue can sometimes look like a behavior or learning difficulty**. Observing when and how a behavior occurs can help educators better understand what a child may need.

Illness and Chronic Health Conditions

Most children experience temporary illnesses. A brief illness may have little lasting effect on development, although a child may temporarily have less energy or miss learning experiences.

Longer-term or frequently recurring health conditions can have a greater influence on development because they may affect children's everyday experiences over time (Bell et al., 2016). A child with a chronic health condition may experience:

- Fatigue or reduced stamina;
- Pain or discomfort;
- Restrictions on certain activities;
- Frequent medical appointments;
- Absences from school or child care;
- Medication or treatment routines;
- Worry related to the condition or treatment; or
- Changes in opportunities to play and interact with peers.

The developmental impact does not necessarily come only from the condition itself. Reduced opportunities to participate can also matter. For example, consider a child whose health condition frequently prevents participation in outdoor play. The immediate concern may be physical, but reduced participation could also mean fewer opportunities to practice motor skills, cooperate in group games, develop friendships, and build confidence. Supporting participation whenever safely possible helps children continue to access important developmental experiences.

Vision, Hearing, and Oral Health

Some health concerns are less visible but can still have an important effect on children's development and learning.

Vision

Difficulty seeing clearly may affect a child's ability to view books, pictures, classroom displays, demonstrations, or other learning materials. Vision problems may also affect learning, class participation, behavior, confidence, and participation in activities requiring visual-motor coordination (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024b).

Hearing

Hearing difficulties may affect a child's ability to consistently hear speech, directions, conversations, and environmental sounds. Hearing plays an important role in communication, speech and language development, learning, and social development (CDC, 2024a).

Oral Health

Dental pain or other oral health concerns may affect eating, speaking, playing, learning, concentration, mood, and participation. A child experiencing pain may appear distracted, irritable, tired, or reluctant to participate (CDC, 2024c).

These examples demonstrate why educators should consider health and sensory factors when they notice changes in children's behavior, participation, or development.

Mental and Emotional Health

Mental and emotional health are also part of children's overall health and development. Children may experience stress, anxiety, persistent worry, sadness, or other emotional difficulties. Mental health concerns may affect how children manage emotions, play, learn, develop relationships, and function at home and at school **(CDC, 2026a).**

Young children may not always explain what they are experiencing with words. Changes may instead appear through behavior. A child may become unusually quiet, clingy, irritable, withdrawn, physically restless, or reluctant to participate in previously enjoyed activities.

One behavior alone does not establish that a child has a mental or emotional health condition. Educators observe patterns over time and across situations and communicate concerns according to program procedures.

Injury and Development

Unintentional injuries are an important childhood health concern. Depending on the type and severity of an injury, children may experience temporary or longer-term changes in their health, mobility, comfort, or ability to participate in everyday activities.

An injury may affect development differently depending on its severity and duration. A minor injury may temporarily limit participation, while a more significant injury may affect mobility, independence, communication, learning, or emotional well-being.

Educators help protect children from serious injuries by maintaining safe environments, providing appropriate supervision, and following established safety procedures (CDC, 2026b). At the same time, protecting children from injury does not mean eliminating appropriate physical challenge. Children need opportunities to run, climb, balance, explore, and take **developmentally appropriate risks** in environments designed to reduce serious hazards (Yogman et al., 2018).

Why the Same Health Concern Can Affect Children Differently

A health condition does not determine a child's developmental outcome. The effects of a health concern may depend on several interacting factors:

- **Severity:** How significantly does the concern affect the child?
- **Duration:** Is it temporary, recurring, or ongoing?
- **Timing:** When during development does it occur?
- **Access to care:** Does the child receive appropriate treatment and services?
- **Environment:** What supports and resources are available?
- **Participation:** Does the child continue to have opportunities to play, learn, communicate, and interact with others?
- **Individual characteristics:** How does this particular child respond to the experience?

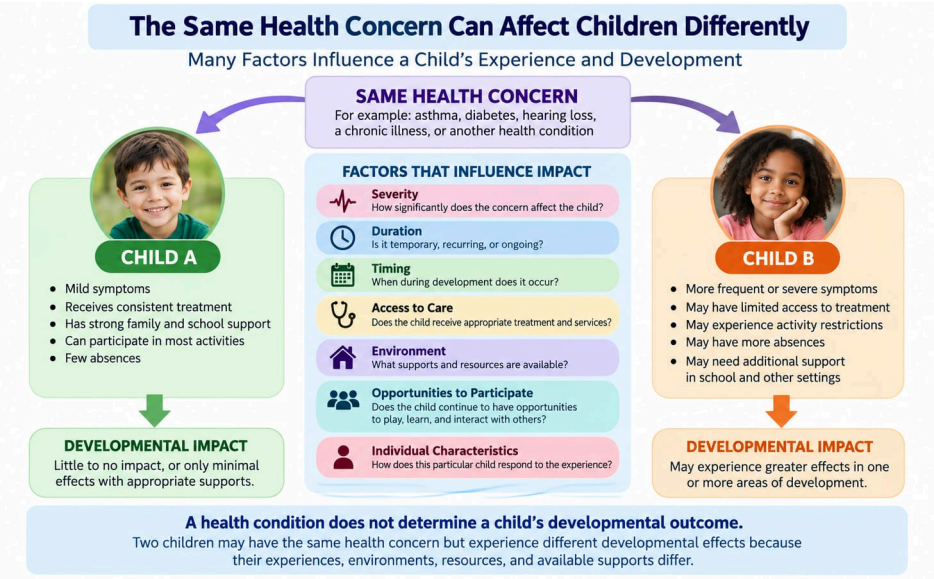


Figure 3.4.3: The developmental impact of a health concern can vary depending on characteristics of the child, the condition, experiences, resources, and available supports. (OpenAI, 2026d)

This is another example of why development should not be viewed as a simple cause-and-effect process. Two children may have the same health condition but experience very different developmental effects because their experiences, environments, resources, and individual characteristics differ.

Risk and Protective Factors

A **risk factor** is a condition or circumstance that increases the possibility of an unfavorable health or developmental outcome.

A **protective factor** is a condition or support that can reduce risk or help children adapt successfully when challenges occur. The table below shows protective factors and how they may support development.

Table 3.4.2: Supporting Development Through Protective Factors

Protective Factor	How It May Support Development
Healthcare	Identifies and treats health concerns

Protective Factor	How It May Support Development
Nutrition and sleep	Supports energy, growth, attention, and participation
Responsive relationships	Provides security and emotional support
Safe environments	Reduces serious health and injury risks
Accommodations	Helps children remain involved in learning and play
Family-professional communication	Supports consistent responses to children's needs

Protective factors do not guarantee that a child will never experience difficulty. Instead, they can reduce risk and strengthen the supports available to the child.

The Educator's Role

Early childhood educators play an important role in supporting children whose health concerns affect their participation and development. However, the educator's role is different from that of a healthcare professional.

Educators do not diagnose health conditions. Instead, educators can:

- **Observe** changes or patterns in children's behavior and participation;
- **Document** what they see and hear objectively;
- **Communicate** observations with families according to program procedures;
- **Support** children's participation in classroom experiences;
- **Adapt** activities or environments when appropriate;
- **Follow** established health and safety plans; and
- **Collaborate** with families and other professionals when appropriate.

When a child has an individualized health or emergency action plan, educators follow its instructions and their program's procedures. Activities and supports should reflect the child's documented needs and guidance from the family and appropriate health professionals.

Objective observation is especially important. Instead of writing, *"Maya was exhausted today,"* an educator might document: "*Maya put her head on the table during two activities, did not participate in outdoor play, and yawned repeatedly between 9:00 and 10:30.*"

The second statement describes what the educator actually observed without diagnosing the cause.

Putting It Into Practice: Look Beyond the Behavior

Consider this situation:

Example 3.4.1

Jordan, age 5, usually participates enthusiastically in classroom activities. During the past week, Jordan has begun putting their head on the table during group activities, becomes frustrated easily when completing tasks, and frequently chooses to watch rather than participate during outdoor play.

An educator could interpret these behaviors as a lack of motivation or misbehavior. A more developmentally informed response is to **look for patterns and consider what might be influencing the child's functioning**.

An educator can begin by asking four questions:

1. **What am I actually seeing and hearing?**
2. **What areas of participation or development appear to be affected?**
3. **Could health, sleep, nutrition, discomfort, stress, or another factor be influencing what I observe?**
4. **What can I appropriately do as the educator, and what information should be shared with the family?**

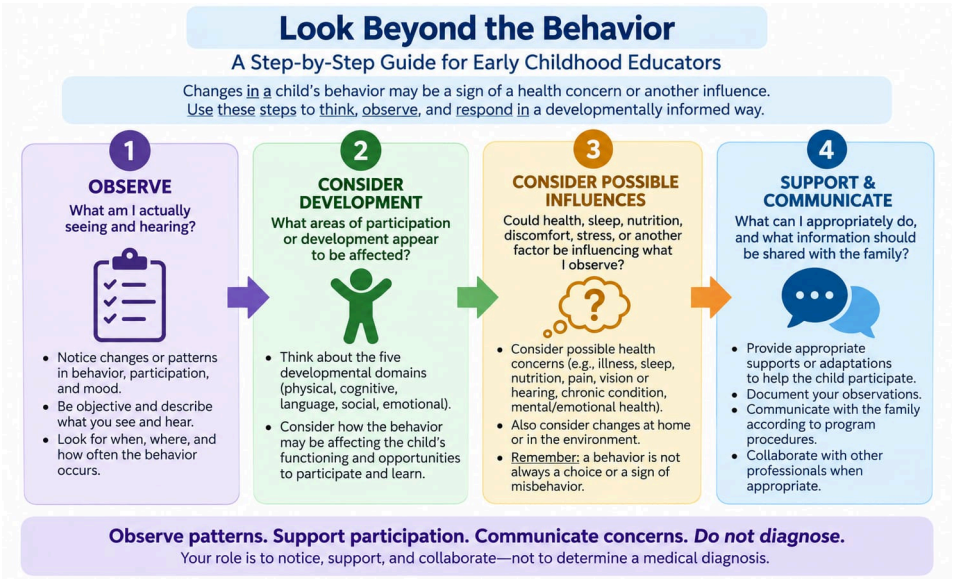


Figure 3.4.4: A step-by-step process for looking beyond behavior and considering possible influences on a child's development and participation. (OpenAI, 2026c)

The educator does not need to determine *why* Jordan's behavior has changed. Instead, the educator can document the pattern, provide appropriate support, communicate observations with the family, and continue to observe. The goal is not to diagnose the child.

The goal is to understand what the child's behavior may be communicating and ensure the child has appropriate opportunities and support to participate, learn, and develop.

Vocabulary Alert

Health Concern: A condition or circumstance that may affect a child's physical, mental, or emotional well-being.

Acute Illness: An illness that develops relatively quickly and is generally short-term.

Chronic Health Condition: A health condition that continues over an extended period or requires ongoing management.

Food Insecurity: Inconsistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.

Risk Factor: A condition or circumstance that increases the possibility of an unfavorable health or developmental outcome.

Protective Factor: A condition, relationship, resource, or support that may reduce risk or help a child adapt successfully when challenges occur.

Exercise 3.4.1

Check Your Understanding

1. **Why can a health concern affect more than a child's physical development?**
    1. Developmental domains operate independently from one another.
    2. Health can influence children's functioning, participation, and opportunities for learning across developmental domains.
    3. Every health concern eventually causes a developmental delay.
    4. Health concerns primarily affect children who already have developmental difficulties.
2. **A child regularly arrives at school tired and has difficulty concentrating and regulating emotions. Which statement best demonstrates an understanding of development?**
    1. The child needs stronger consequences for inappropriate behavior.
    2. The child probably has a cognitive delay.
    3. Insufficient sleep may be influencing several areas of the child's functioning and participation.
    4. The educator should determine why the child is not sleeping.
3. **Why might the same chronic health condition affect two children differently?**
    1. Health conditions only affect children who lack family support.
    2. Development depends entirely on the severity of the condition.
    3. Individual characteristics, severity, duration, environment, treatment, participation, and available supports can influence its impact.
    4. Children of the same age usually respond to health conditions in the same way.
4. **Which action is most appropriate for an early childhood educator who notices a significant change in a child's energy and participation?**
    1. Diagnose the most likely health condition.
    2. Observe and document the pattern and communicate concerns according to program procedures.
    3. Tell the family that the child needs medical treatment.
    4. Wait until the child explains what is causing the change.

Apply What You Know

5. A 6-year-old child who usually participates actively has recently begun missing school because of a recurring health condition. When the child attends, they often watch active games rather than join and seem hesitant to approach peers.

Using what you learned in this section:

- Explain **two ways the child's health concern could influence development** without assuming that the health condition itself causes a developmental delay.
- Identify **one appropriate way an educator could support the child's participation.**

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 3.4.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. 2. Health can influence children's functioning, participation, and opportunities for learning across developmental domains. Developmental domains are interconnected. A health concern may affect a child's energy, attention, communication, participation, or interactions with others, which can influence several areas of development at the same time.
2. 3. Insufficient sleep may be influencing several areas of the child's functioning and participation. Insufficient or disrupted sleep may affect attention, memory, emotional regulation, physical activity, and interactions with others. Educators should consider possible influences on behavior rather than immediately assuming that the behavior reflects a developmental difficulty.
3. 3. Individual characteristics, severity, duration, environment, treatment, participation, and available supports can influence its impact. A health condition does not determine a child's developmental outcome. Two children with the same condition may have different experiences and developmental effects depending on characteristics of the child, the condition, available resources, and the supports they receive.
4. 2. Observe and document the pattern and communicate concerns according to program procedures. Educators do not diagnose health conditions. Their role is to observe and objectively document changes in children's behavior and participation, communicate with families according to program procedures, and provide appropriate support and accommodations.

Sample Answers to Apply What You Know

5. The recurring health condition could influence development by affecting the child's **opportunities for learning and practice**. Missing school may mean fewer opportunities to participate in classroom activities, conversations, physical play, and other experiences through which children develop skills.

It could also influence the child's **social or physical development and participation**. Watching active games rather than joining may reduce opportunities to practice motor skills, while hesitating to approach peers may reduce opportunities to build relationships, cooperate, communicate, and develop a sense of belonging.

These are **possible influences rather than predetermined outcomes**. The health condition itself does not mean that the child has or will develop a developmental delay.

An educator could support the child by providing an appropriate way to participate in activities based on the child's needs and health plan. For example, the educator might adapt an active game so the child can participate safely or help the child enter a peer activity in a comfortable way. The educator should continue to observe and document the child's participation and communicate with the family and other professionals as appropriate.

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3.5: Applying Physical Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

Introduction

Child development theories provide educators with different ways to understand **how and why children's physical abilities develop**. Theory becomes useful in early childhood practice when educators use it to interpret what they observe, set appropriate expectations, design environments and experiences, and decide how to support individual children.

This section examines Gesell's maturational perspective and dynamic systems theory, connecting each perspective to decisions about children's health and physical development.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 3.5: Apply child development theory related to health and physical development to early childhood practice.

By the end of this section, students will be able to:

- **Explain** the major ideas of the maturational perspective on physical development.
- **Explain** how dynamic systems theory describes interactions among the child, task, and environment.
- **Explain** how maturation, experience, health, and environmental opportunities interact with physical development.
- **Use** developmental theory to interpret children's physical abilities and individual differences.
- **Apply** theoretical principles when making decisions about expectations, environments, activities, and support for young children.

Theory as a Lens for Understanding Physical Development

Child development theories provide educators with different ways to understand **how and why children develop**. A theory can be thought of as a **lens** that helps educators notice patterns, interpret what they observe, and consider possible explanations for a child's development.

A theory is **not a rule book** that tells educators exactly what every child should be able to do or how every child should be taught. Children develop as individuals, and no single theory can explain every aspect of development. Instead, theories provide ideas that educators can use alongside their knowledge of **individual children, development, health, experiences, and the environment**.

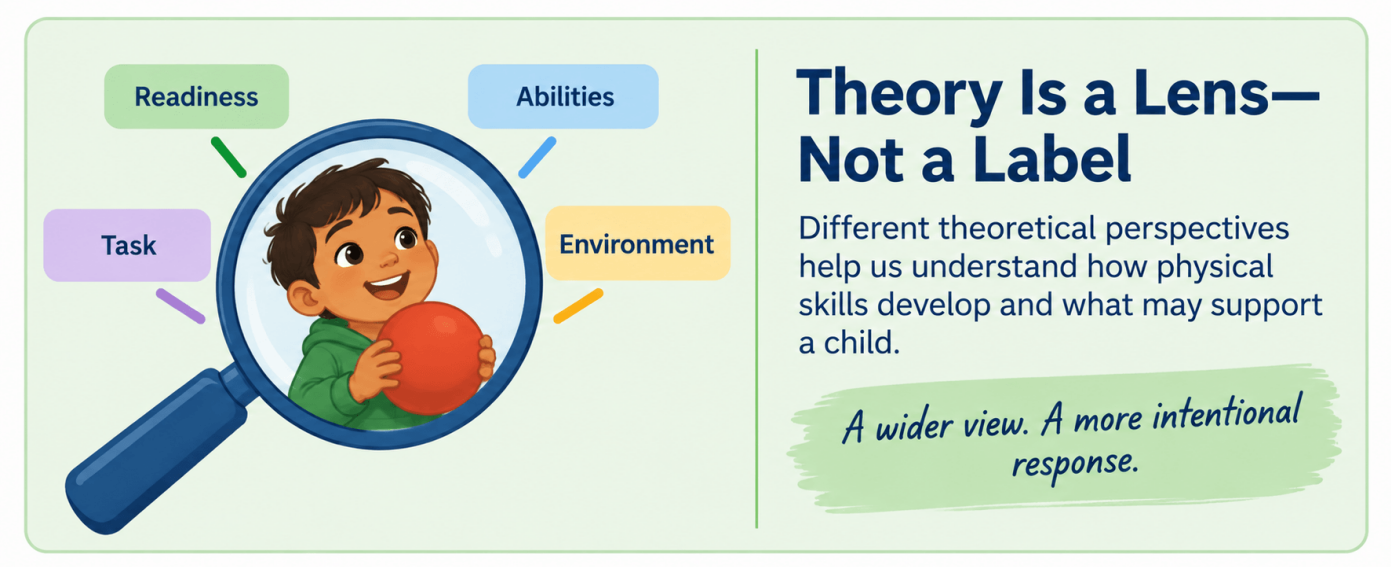


Figure 3.5.1: Theory Is a Lens—Not a Label. Different theoretical perspectives help educators consider readiness, abilities, the task, and the environment when supporting children's physical development. (OpenAI, 2026b).

When educators use theory in practice, they can ask questions such as:

- **What might help explain what I am observing?**
- **What factors may be supporting or influencing this child's physical development?**
- **Are my expectations appropriate for this child's current development?**
- **How might I adjust the environment, activity, or support I provide?**

In this way, theory helps educators move beyond simply identifying **what a child can or cannot yet do**. It helps them think about **why development may be occurring as it is and how they can respond in ways that support the child's continued growth and development.**

The Maturational Perspective: Arnold Gesell



Figure 3.5.2: Arnold Lucius Gesell: Child Development. Arnold Gesell observing an infant. Image retained from Western Technical College's *Gesell's Maturationalist Theory* section; original image source: ClarkNow Staff (2024), Clark University.

Arnold Gesell (1880–1961) was an American psychologist and pediatrician **born in Alma, Wisconsin**. Through systematic

observations of children, Gesell documented patterns in growth and development and helped establish the idea that development can be studied by observing how children's abilities change over time. His work contributed to the development of age-related expectations and developmental norms that influenced later approaches to observing and assessing children's development (ClarkNow Staff, 2024).

Maturation and Biological Readiness

A central idea in Gesell's theory is **maturation**—the biological processes of growth and development that contribute to children's increasing abilities. From a maturational perspective, new physical abilities become possible as the child's brain, nervous system, muscles, sensory systems, and body develop and become increasingly coordinated.

This means that learning a new physical skill involves more than instruction or practice. A child must also have sufficient **biological readiness** for the skill. Opportunities to practice balancing, jumping, drawing, or using scissors can help children develop these abilities, but practice cannot replace the underlying physical and neurological development needed to perform them.

Gesell described development as occurring in generally predictable **sequences**. Children typically develop simpler abilities before more complex ones because later abilities build on earlier development. The sequence may be generally similar across children even though the timing can vary. Gesell emphasized that children progress through development at their own individual rates(Gesell Program in Early Childhood, n.d.).

Developmental Age and Chronological Age

Gesell distinguished between a child's **chronological age** and **developmental age**. Chronological age refers to how much time has passed since a child's birth. Developmental age, in Gesell's work, referred to the level of development reflected in the child's current abilities. Gesell's observations demonstrated that developmental age and chronological age do not always correspond exactly (Gesell Program in Early Childhood, n.d.).

For example, two children who are both five years old may differ in their balance, coordination, hand strength, or control of fine-motor movements. Development does not occur at exactly the same rate for every child. A child may demonstrate different developmental levels across skills and areas of development.

Developmental expectations help educators recognize typical patterns and identify concerns that may warrant follow-up; they should not be used as rigid requirements for classroom performance. Educators can use knowledge of typical developmental patterns to inform their observations while recognizing that each child is an individual and that no developmental chart represents every child.

Why Gesell's Work Was Historically Important

Gesell was among the early researchers to systematically observe and document patterns in children's development. His work contributed to the development of **developmental norms, milestone charts, and age-related expectations** that have influenced how educators and other professionals observe children's growth and development.

His work also reinforced an important idea: knowing a child's chronological age does not tell us everything about what that individual child is developmentally ready to do.

At the same time, the maturational perspective is only **one lens** for understanding development. Children's physical development is also influenced by their experiences, health, opportunities for movement and practice, relationships, and environments. Educators therefore use knowledge of typical development as a guide while observing and responding to the individual child.

What the Maturational Perspective Helps Educators Understand

The maturational perspective has an important practical message for early childhood educators: **children cannot simply be taught into every physical skill before the underlying systems needed for that skill are sufficiently developed.** Practice, encouragement, and appropriate experiences matter, but readiness also depends on the development and coordination of the brain, nervous system, muscles, sensory systems, and body.

Example 3.5.1

Readiness for Toileting

Learning to use the toilet involves several developing abilities, including recognizing bodily signals, developing bladder and bowel control, managing clothing, and communicating a need for assistance through words, gestures, or other communication methods. Educators support this learning through patient guidance, accessible routines, and assistance matched to the child's needs.

An educator who understands maturation would therefore view toileting readiness as more than a matter of age or practice. Two children of the same chronological age may not be ready at exactly the same time.

Applying the Maturational Perspective in Practice

When a child is having difficulty with a physical skill, an educator's first response should not automatically be **"more practice."** Instead, the educator can consider:

- What developing abilities does the child currently demonstrate, and what abilities needed for this skill may still be developing?
- What physical, sensory, or neurological abilities does this skill require?
- Are my expectations appropriate for this child's current development?
- Does the child need additional time, experience, support, or an adaptation?
- What can I observe over time to better understand the child's development?

Applying a maturational perspective does **not** mean waiting passively for development to occur. Educators provide children with rich opportunities for movement, exploration, self-care, and practice while recognizing that children develop at individual rates.

The goal is not to hurry children through development. Instead, educators **observe what children can currently do, provide experiences and support that match their developing abilities, and adjust their expectations as children grow and become ready for increasingly complex skills.**

Maturation Is Important—but Development Is Not Maturation Alone

Gesell's maturational perspective helps explain why **biological growth and readiness matter** in physical development. However, maturation alone does not fully explain how children develop physical skills. Contemporary views of development recognize that children's abilities emerge through the interaction of many factors.

A child's physical development can be influenced by:

- **Maturation** of the brain, nervous system, muscles, and body
- **Health and well-being**, including nutrition, sleep, illness, energy, and other health factors
- **Previous experiences** with movement and physical activities
- **Opportunities to practice** and explore new skills
- **Relationships and support** from adults and peers
- **The environment**, including the space, materials, and equipment available
- **The demands of the task**, including how difficult the movement is and what the child is being asked to do

This means that an educator should not look at a child's physical ability and ask only, **"Is this child developmentally ready?"** The educator should also consider what else might be influencing the child's performance.

For example, a child may have the physical ability to climb but hesitate on unfamiliar playground equipment. Another child may be capable of cutting with scissors but have difficulty when the scissors are too large for their hand or the paper is difficult to hold. A child who usually participates successfully in movement activities may struggle when tired, hungry, recovering from an illness, or learning a particularly challenging new task.

These examples demonstrate that **what a child does at a particular moment reflects more than maturation alone**.

Dynamic Systems Theory: Development Through Interaction

Dynamic systems theory provides another useful lens for understanding physical development. Rather than viewing a new motor skill as the result of maturation alone, dynamic systems theory proposes that movement develops through the interaction of multiple factors.

Three important factors are the **child, the task, and the environment** (Smith & Thelen, 2003; Thelen, 1995).

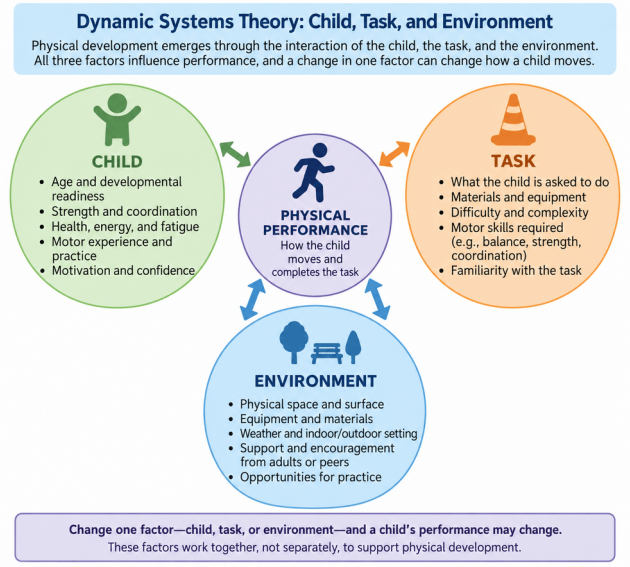


Figure 3.5.3: Dynamic Systems Theory: Child, Task, and Environment. Physical performance emerges through the interaction of characteristics of the child, the task, and the environment. Changes in any one factor may change how a child performs a physical skill. (OpenAI, 2026a).

The Child

Characteristics of the individual child affect how a movement is performed. These may include:

- Body size and proportions
- Strength and muscle control
- Balance and coordination
- Sensory and perceptual abilities
- Health and energy level
- Previous experiences and practice
- Motivation and confidence

The Task

The characteristics of the activity also matter. A task may change depending on:

- The size, weight, or shape of the materials
- The amount of strength or coordination required
- The number of movements or steps involved
- The speed or accuracy expected
- How familiar the task is to the child

The Environment

The physical and social environment can make a movement easier or more difficult. Environmental factors may include:

- The amount and arrangement of space
- The surface on which the child is moving
- The materials and equipment available
- Opportunities for movement and practice
- Encouragement or assistance from adults and peers
- Expectations placed on the child

Because these factors interact, **changing one part of the system can change how successfully a child performs a skill**.

For example, imagine a child who has difficulty catching a ball. The difficulty may not simply mean that the child is "not ready" to catch. An educator could change the **task** by using a larger, softer ball or tossing it from a shorter distance. The educator could change the **environment** by reducing distractions or giving the child more space. At the same time, the educator continues to consider **child factors**, such as visual tracking, balance, coordination, previous experience, and confidence.

The child's performance may change as these different factors change.

Two Perspectives, Two Useful Questions

These perspectives differ in how they explain development. Gesell emphasized maturation and developmental patterns. Dynamic systems theory explains movement as emerging through interacting influences, including the developing body, experience, the task, and the environment. Educators can consider biological development while also examining these interactions (Smith & Thelen, 2003; Thelen, 1995).

Maturational perspective:
Is the child's body and nervous system becoming ready for this ability?

Dynamic systems perspective:
How are the child, task, and environment working together to influence this movement?

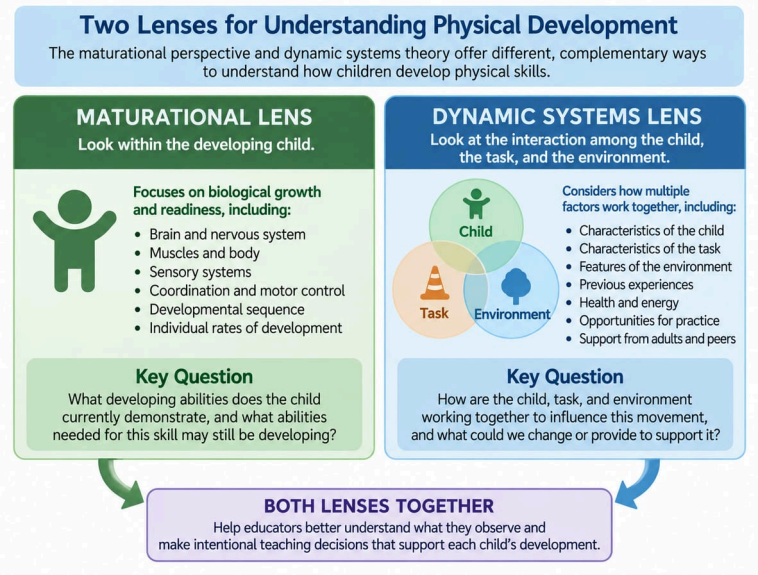


Figure 3.5.4: Two Lenses for Understanding Physical Development. The maturational perspective focuses on developing abilities and biological readiness, while dynamic systems theory considers how the child, task, and environment interact to influence physical performance. (OpenAI, 2026c).

Using both perspectives helps educators avoid two common assumptions: that a child simply needs to **"wait until they are ready"** or that a child simply needs **"more practice."**

Instead, educators can observe carefully and consider multiple explanations. A child's current performance may reflect developing biological readiness **and** the child's health, experiences, opportunities to practice, characteristics of the task, and environment.

> For early childhood educators, the important question becomes: **What factors might be influencing what I am observing, and what can I change or provide to support this child's continued physical development?**

This shifts the educator's focus from judging whether a child **can or cannot** perform a skill to understanding the factors contributing to the child's performance and making intentional decisions about how to support development.

One Skill Through Two Theoretical Lenses: Cutting with Scissors

Consider a child who has difficulty cutting with scissors. The child may have trouble opening and closing the scissors, holding the paper with the opposite hand, staying near a cutting line, or coordinating these actions at the same time.

Instead of concluding that the child simply **"can't use scissors yet,"** an educator can use different theoretical perspectives to think more carefully about what may be contributing to the difficulty.

Looking Through a Maturational Lens

The **maturational perspective** directs the educator's attention toward the child's developing physical and neurological abilities.

The educator might consider:

- Does the child have sufficient **hand and finger strength** to open and close the scissors?
- Can the child coordinate the movements of the fingers and hand?
- Has the child developed sufficient **bilateral coordination** to use one hand to cut while the other hand holds and moves the paper?
- Can the child coordinate what they see with the movements of their hands through **visual-motor coordination**?
- Does the child have sufficient **motor control** to make increasingly precise movements?

From this perspective, difficulty using scissors may indicate that some of the underlying abilities required for cutting are still developing. Simply asking the child to cut the same line repeatedly may not address those underlying developmental needs.

Looking Through a Dynamic Systems Lens

Dynamic systems theory encourages the educator to look beyond the child and consider how the **child, task, and environment are interacting**.

Instead of asking only, "*Can this child cut?*" the educator can experiment with changing different parts of the activity.

- **What happens if we change the scissors?** Would smaller scissors fit the child's hand more comfortably? Would scissors that are easier to open and close allow the child to focus on coordinating the cutting movement?
- **What happens if we change the paper?** Is the paper too thin and difficult to stabilize? Would thicker paper or cardstock provide greater resistance and be easier for the child to control?
- **What happens if we change what the child is cutting?** Cutting across a short strip of paper requires less control than cutting along a line, around a curve, or around a complex shape. The educator can adjust the task to match the child's current abilities and gradually increase the challenge.
- **What happens if we change the child's body position?** Is the child sitting in a stable position with appropriate support? Can the child's feet reach the floor or another stable surface? Would changing the child's position make it easier to control the arms and hands?
- **What happens if we change the amount of adult support?** Would modeling how to position the scissors help? Does the child need a verbal reminder about where to place the thumb or how to hold the paper? Can the adult gradually reduce support as the child's control increases?
- **What happens with additional opportunities to practice?** Has the child had many opportunities to use scissors and other materials that develop hand strength and coordination? Experiences with playdough, tongs, clothespins, tearing paper, drawing, and other fine-motor materials can provide opportunities to develop abilities that contribute to cutting.

From Theory to Teaching Decisions

Using the two theories together provides a more complete way to think about the child's difficulty.

> The **maturational lens** asks: **Does the child have the developing physical and neurological abilities needed for this skill?**

> The **dynamic systems lens** asks: **How are characteristics of the child, task, and environment working together to influence the child's performance?**

Neither question automatically tells the educator exactly what to do. Instead, the theories help the educator **notice different factors, form possible explanations, make an intentional change, and observe what happens next**.

For example, rather than deciding that a child who struggles with scissors is "not ready" or simply needs "more practice," an educator might provide a more stable seating position, offer scissors that better fit the child's hand, begin with short strips of heavier paper, provide activities that strengthen the hands, and observe how the child's cutting changes.

Apply the Theory

Imagine that you are the educator observing this child. Based on what the maturational perspective and dynamic systems theory help you notice:

> What would you change in your teaching, the task, or the environment to support the child's development—and what would you observe afterward to determine whether your support helped?

Being able to use theory to answer questions like this is what it means to **apply child development theory to early childhood practice**.

Applying Theory to Health and Physical Development

Child development theory becomes useful to early childhood educators when it helps them make sense of what they observe and decide how to respond. Rather than using theory to label a child or predict exactly what the child should be able to do, educators can use theoretical perspectives to **ask better questions about development**.

A simple process for applying theory to practice is:

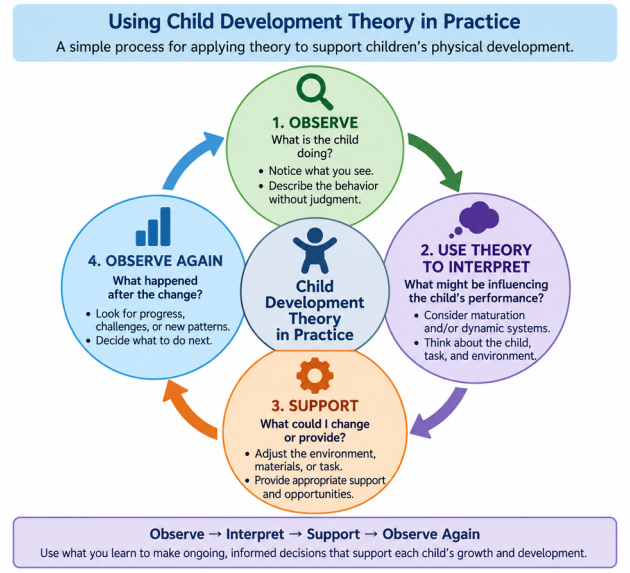


Figure 3.5.5: Using Child Development Theory in Practice. Educators observe, use theory to interpret, provide support, and observe again to make ongoing decisions that support development. (OpenAI, 2026d)

Observe

Begin with what you can actually see. Describe the child's actions without immediately judging the performance or deciding why it is happening.

> For example: During an outdoor movement activity, Maya walks across a low balance beam when holding the teacher's hand. When the teacher releases her hand, Maya steps off the beam after one or two steps.

This observation provides more useful information than simply saying, "*Maya can't balance.*"

Use Theory to Interpret

Next, consider what theoretical perspectives help you notice about the child's performance.

A **maturational perspective** might lead you to consider whether the child's balance, coordination, muscle control, sensory systems, and nervous system are sufficiently developed for the task.

A **dynamic systems perspective** expands the questions. What characteristics of the **child, task, and environment** might be influencing what you are observing?

Consider factors such as:

Child Factors

- Developmental readiness
- Health and well-being
- Energy and fatigue
- Sensory processing
- Previous experiences
- Temperament
- Strength, balance, coordination, and other physical abilities

Task Factors

- Complexity of the activity
- Size, weight, or type of materials
- Number of steps involved
- Amount of strength, balance, or coordination required
- Familiarity of the task

Environmental Factors

- Amount and arrangement of space
- Equipment and materials
- Time available
- Opportunities for practice
- Distractions in the environment
- Adult expectations
- Encouragement and support from adults and peers

Considering these factors does not mean that an educator will immediately know **why** a child is performing a skill in a particular way. Instead, theory provides possible explanations that the educator can explore through continued observation and intentional changes in practice.

Support

Once the educator has considered what might be influencing the child's performance, the next step is to provide an appropriate support.

For Maya, the educator might lower the challenge by providing a wider balance surface, offer a hand at first and gradually reduce assistance, provide opportunities to practice balancing in other ways, or allow Maya additional time to explore the equipment without pressure.

The goal is not to make the task so easy that it no longer provides a challenge. The goal is to provide **enough support for the child to participate successfully while continuing to develop the abilities needed for greater independence**.

Health and well-being should also be considered when choosing support. A child who is tired, hungry, experiencing discomfort, recovering from illness, or managing another health-related factor may perform differently than they do at other times. Educators consider the whole child rather than interpreting one observation as a fixed measure of ability.

Observe Again

After providing support or changing some aspect of the task or environment, the educator observes again.

Did the child's performance change? Did the adaptation make the task more manageable? Does the child need a different type of support? Is there a pattern across different activities, environments, or times of day?

For example, if Maya walks farther across a wider balance surface without holding an adult's hand, the educator has learned something important. Her earlier difficulty may have reflected the interaction between her developing abilities and the demands of the original task.

If the change does not help, that information is valuable too. The educator can reconsider the possible influences, try another appropriate support, and continue observing.

The Question That Guides Practice

Applying theory does not mean that educators need to identify one theory every time they observe a child. Instead, theory helps educators develop a habit of looking beyond a child's immediate performance.

> An educator can continually ask: **What might be influencing what I am observing, and what can I change to better support this child?**

This question shifts the focus away from "*Why can't this child do this?*" and toward understanding development and making intentional teaching decisions.

Theory therefore becomes more than information to remember. It becomes a **tool for observing, interpreting, supporting, and responding to children's health and physical development**.

Vocabulary Alert

Maturation — Biological growth and development that contribute to a child's increasing readiness for new abilities.

Developmental readiness — The point at which developing abilities and supporting conditions allow a child to begin successfully engaging in a particular skill or experience.

Maturational perspective — A theoretical perspective that emphasizes biological growth, readiness, and generally predictable sequences of development.

Dynamic systems theory — A theoretical perspective that views development as emerging through interactions among characteristics of the child, the task, and the environment.

Chronological age — A child's age based on the amount of time that has passed since birth.

Developmental level — A description of a child's current abilities and functioning, which may not correspond exactly with chronological age.

Putting Theory Into Practice

Understanding a theory is different from **applying** it. Early childhood educators use theory to help interpret what they observe, consider possible influences on a child's development, and make intentional decisions about how to respond.

For each of the following situations, use what you have learned about the **maturational perspective** and **dynamic systems theory**. Remember that the goal is not to diagnose the child or identify one definite reason for the child's behavior. Instead, use theory to consider **multiple factors that might be influencing the child's health and physical development**.

As you consider each case, ask:

- **What do you observe?**
- **What might theory help you consider?**
- **What additional information would you want?**
- **What could the educator change or provide?**
- **What would you observe next?**

Case 1: Playground Climbing

A five-year-old frequently plays near the climbing structure but rarely climbs it. The child watches other children climb and sometimes places a foot on the first step before returning to the ground. When an educator encourages the child to climb higher, the child says, "I can't."

Apply the theory: Consider the child's developmental readiness as well as possible child, task, and environmental factors. What might be influencing the child's participation? What could the educator change or provide to support the child while offering an

appropriate level of challenge?

Case 2: Fatigue and Coordination

A six-year-old usually participates actively in outdoor play and movement activities. The child runs, jumps, and plays games successfully earlier in the day. Late in the afternoon, however, the child sometimes moves more slowly, trips more frequently, and has difficulty with activities that normally seem easy.

Apply the theory: What does this situation suggest about the relationship between **health, energy, and physical performance**? What additional information would help you understand what you are observing? How might the educator adjust expectations, activities, or the environment?

Case 3: Dressing Independently

A four-year-old can put on a coat independently but has difficulty fastening the zipper. The child can place the zipper pull in one hand but struggles to coordinate both hands to connect and pull the zipper. After several unsuccessful attempts, the child becomes frustrated and asks the teacher to do it.

Apply the theory: What underlying physical abilities are required to fasten a zipper? What might a maturational perspective help you consider? What child, task, or environmental factors could also be influencing the child's success? How could the educator provide support without simply completing the task for the child?

Case 4: Catching a Ball

During outdoor play, a five-year-old has difficulty catching a small playground ball tossed from several feet away. The child often closes their eyes, turns away, or reaches for the ball after it has already passed. When the educator switches to a large, soft ball and stands closer, the child catches the ball several times.

Apply the theory: What did changing the **task** reveal about the child's abilities? What might the educator consider about the child's developing visual tracking, coordination, previous experience, or confidence? What could the educator change next to provide an appropriate level of challenge?

From Theory to Intentional Practice

More than one interpretation or response may be reasonable. A strong application connects a specific observation to a theoretical idea, identifies an appropriate support, and explains what the educator would observe next. The purpose is to use theory to guide responsive teaching rather than determine a diagnosis.

Exercise 3.5.1

Check Your Understanding

1. **Which statement best represents the maturational perspective?**
    1. Children develop physical skills only through adult instruction.
    2. Physical development depends partly on biological growth and readiness.
    3. All children should demonstrate the same skills at exactly the same age.
    4. Practice has no influence on physical development.
2. **Why should educators avoid treating developmental milestones as strict deadlines?**
    1. Milestones have no relationship to development.
    2. Children develop in generally recognizable patterns but vary in rate and individual development.
    3. Physical development cannot be observed.
    4. Chronological age always predicts ability.
3. **According to dynamic systems theory, which factors can contribute to a child's performance of a physical skill?**
    1. Maturation only

2. Practice only
3. Child, task, and environmental factors
4. Chronological age only

Apply What You Know

4. A five-year-old avoids riding a tricycle on the playground. When encouraged to try, the child pedals a short distance but has difficulty steering and stops. Using what you learned about the maturational perspective and dynamic systems theory, identify at least two factors that might be influencing the child's performance. **Describe one change the educator could make to support the child and explain what the educator should observe next.**

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 3.5.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. 2. Physical development depends partly on biological growth and readiness. The maturational perspective emphasizes that children's developing abilities are related to biological growth and the increasing readiness of the brain, nervous system, muscles, sensory systems, and body. Practice and experience are important, but they cannot completely replace the underlying development needed for a skill.
2. 2. Children develop in generally recognizable patterns but vary in rate and individual development. Developmental expectations can help educators understand common patterns, but children do not develop every ability at exactly the same age or rate. Milestones should be used as guidelines rather than rigid deadlines.
3. 3. Child, task, and environmental factors. Dynamic systems theory explains that physical development emerges through the interaction of multiple factors. A child's abilities and experiences interact with the demands of the task and characteristics of the environment. Changing one part of this system can change how successfully the child performs a skill.

Answers for Apply What You Know

4. Sample Answer:

The child's difficulty riding the tricycle may be influenced by several factors. From a **maturational perspective**, the educator could consider whether the child's balance, coordination, leg strength, motor control, and ability to coordinate pedaling and steering are still developing.

Using **dynamic systems theory**, the educator could also consider how the **child, task, and environment** are interacting. For example, the tricycle may be too large for the child, the pedals may be difficult to reach, the riding surface may make steering difficult, or the child may have had limited previous experience with tricycles.

The educator could provide a tricycle that better fits the child's body and allow the child to practice in a large, open area with a smooth surface. The educator might also provide encouragement or assistance while allowing the child time to explore the movements involved in pedaling and steering.

The educator would then **observe again**. Does the child pedal farther or steer more successfully after the task or environment is changed? Does the child appear more confident? What difficulties remain?

Answers will vary. Appropriate responses should demonstrate that the child's performance may be influenced by **developing physical abilities as well as characteristics of the child, task, and environment**. Responses should identify an appropriate support and explain what the educator could observe afterward to determine whether the support helped.

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3.6: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Health and Physical Development

Introduction

Developmental screening helps early childhood educators and families identify when a child's development may need closer attention. Screening does not diagnose a developmental delay or health condition. Instead, screening tools provide information that can help determine whether additional evaluation or support may be appropriate.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 3.6: Explore the types and purposes of developmental screening tools related to health and physical development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Explain** the purpose of developmental screening and how screening differs from ongoing assessment and diagnostic evaluation.
- **Explore** the types and purposes of developmental screening tools related to health and physical development.
- **Describe** the early childhood educator's role in screening, communicating with families, and supporting appropriate follow-up.

Screening Is One Part of Assessment

Early childhood educators gather information about children in different ways and for different purposes. **Assessment** is a broad process of collecting information to understand a child's development, learning, strengths, and needs. Developmental screening is one part of this larger assessment process.

It is important to understand the difference among **ongoing assessment, developmental screening, and diagnostic evaluation** because each serves a different purpose.

- **Ongoing assessment** asks, *What is the child learning and doing over time?* Educators use observations, documentation, conversations with families, and other information to understand children's development and guide teaching and support.
- **Developmental screening** asks, *Might this child need a closer look?* Screening is typically a brief, structured process used to identify children who may benefit from additional evaluation or support.
- **Diagnostic evaluation** asks, *Is a developmental delay, disability, or condition present?* A diagnostic evaluation is a more comprehensive process conducted by qualified professionals when additional information is needed.

Developmental screening does **not** diagnose a child. Instead, screening helps determine whether a child's development appears to be progressing as expected or whether further evaluation may be appropriate. This distinction is especially important when considering children's health and physical development.

Screening, Assessment, and Evaluation: What's the Difference?

Although **screening, ongoing assessment, and diagnostic evaluation** all provide information about children's development, they are not interchangeable. Understanding the purpose of each helps educators use information appropriately and communicate accurately with families and other professionals.

Table 3.6.1: Comparison of Screening, Assessment and Evaluation

Element	Screening	Ongoing Assessment	Diagnostic Evaluation
Purpose	Identify children who may need further evaluation	Understand development and learning over time	Examine a specific developmental concern in greater depth
Typical Use	Brief, structured check	Ongoing observation and documentation during everyday activities and routines	Comprehensive evaluation conducted when additional information is needed
Result	Indicates whether follow-up or further evaluation may be appropriate	Guides teaching, planning, and individualized support	May identify a developmental condition and inform recommendations for support. Eligibility for services is determined through the applicable evaluation and eligibility process.
Educator's Role	Participate as appropriate, observe, provide information, and communicate with families	Observe, document, and use information to support development and learning	Share relevant observations and documentation and collaborate with families and qualified professionals

What Is Developmental Screening?

Children develop at different rates, and variation in development is expected. At the same time, early childhood educators, families, and other professionals need ways to recognize when a child's development may need closer attention.

Developmental screening is a brief, structured process used to look more closely at a child's development. Screening tools are typically research-based questionnaires, checklists, or other standardized measures that examine areas such as communication, movement, thinking, behavior, and social-emotional development. Developmental screening is more formal than simply observing or monitoring developmental milestones and should use a validated screening tool appropriate for its intended purpose. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2026).

Screening may occur in health care, early childhood, community, or school settings and should be completed by professionals who are appropriately trained to use the selected tool. Screening results help determine whether a child's development appears to be progressing as expected or whether additional evaluation or support may be appropriate. (CDC, 2026).

Why Do We Screen?

The primary purpose of developmental screening is **early identification**. A child may participate successfully in many classroom activities while still experiencing difficulty in a particular area of development. A screening tool provides a systematic way to gather information that may not be apparent from a single observation or activity.

Developmental screening can help:

- identify possible developmental concerns early;
- determine whether additional evaluation may be appropriate;
- help families and professionals make informed decisions about follow-up and support; and
- identify areas of development that may warrant closer attention.

When concerns are identified early, families can be connected with appropriate evaluation, early intervention, or other supports. Developmental monitoring and screening work together to help identify developmental concerns as early as possible. (CDC, 2026).

Screening is Not Diagnosis

A screening result does not diagnose a developmental delay, disability, or health condition. Screening identifies whether additional evaluation may be appropriate. A child whose screening results indicate a possible concern needs further evaluation before conclusions are made about the child's development. (CDC, 2026).

Types of Screening Related to Health and Physical Development

Health and physical development include more than a child's ability to run, jump, draw, or use scissors. Children's vision, hearing, growth, overall health, and motor development can all influence their participation in everyday activities and learning. Different types of screening may therefore be used to examine different aspects of development and health.

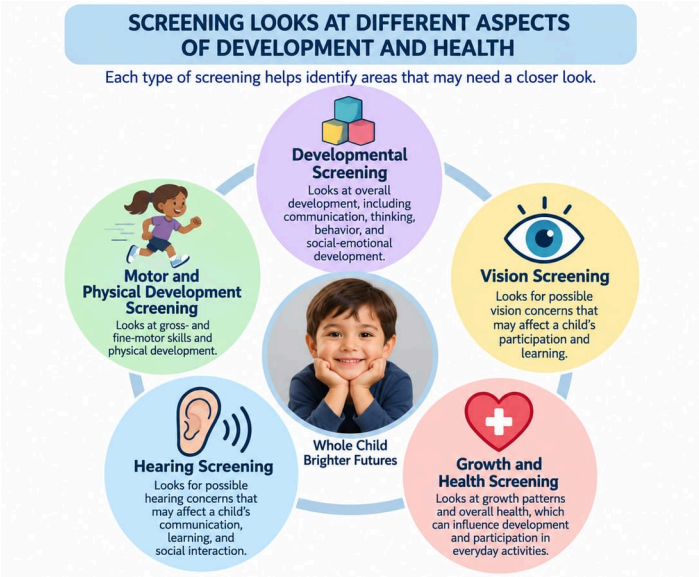


Figure 3.6.1: Types of Screening Related to Health and Physical Development. (OpenAI, 2026b).

Developmental Screening

General developmental screening looks across multiple areas of a child's development. Depending on the screening tool, these areas may include communication, gross-motor skills, fine-motor skills, problem solving, and social or adaptive development.

Because physical development is connected to other areas of development, a broad developmental screening can provide information that a motor-only observation might not reveal. For example, difficulty completing a classroom task may involve motor skills, communication, understanding directions, or a combination of abilities.

Motor and Physical Development Screening

Motor development may be examined as part of a comprehensive developmental screening or through a tool that focuses more specifically on motor abilities. Screening may consider skills involving **gross-motor development**, such as balance, coordination, walking, running, jumping, or climbing, and **fine-motor development**, such as grasping, manipulating objects, drawing, or using classroom tools.

The purpose is not to determine why a child is experiencing difficulty. Instead, screening helps determine whether the child's motor development may warrant additional evaluation.

Vision Screening

Vision screening is used to identify children who may have a possible vision concern and need further evaluation by an appropriate health professional. Vision affects much more than seeing letters or pictures. Children use visual information to move safely through their environment, coordinate movements, manipulate objects, participate in classroom activities, and develop many fine-motor skills.

A vision screening identifies a **possible concern**; it does not replace a comprehensive eye examination when one is needed.

Hearing Screening

Hearing screening is used to identify children who may have a possible hearing concern and need additional evaluation. Hearing supports communication and language development and also contributes to children's participation in classroom activities and interactions. Hearing screening checks hearing; it does not assess balance.

As with other screenings, hearing screening is intended to identify children who may need additional evaluation rather than diagnose the cause of a hearing concern.

Growth and Health Screening

Early childhood health screening may include measures or checks related to **height, weight, growth patterns, oral health, vision, hearing, or other aspects of children's health**, depending on the child's age, program, setting, and applicable requirements.

Health screening information can help families and professionals recognize concerns that may influence a child's development and participation. Early childhood educators should understand the purpose of these screenings while recognizing that health assessment and diagnosis are responsibilities of appropriately qualified health professionals.

Examples of Developmental Screening Tools

Developmental screening tools vary in the ages they are designed for, the developmental areas they examine, who provides information, and who is qualified to administer or interpret them. Educators do not need to memorize every available screening tool. Instead, they should understand **what a tool is designed to screen, how its results are used, and what should happen when screening identifies a possible concern.**

The following are examples of developmental screening tools that educators may encounter:

Table 3.6.2: Developmental Screening Tool Examples

Example	Intended age range	What it examines and why it is used
Ages & Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition (ASQ-3)	1–66 months	Parent-completed screening of communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal-social development. Results help identify areas needing monitoring or further evaluation.
Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status–Revised (PEDS-R)	Birth to age 8; follow the selected version's age limits	Uses parent concerns to help identify developmental and behavioral concerns and guide follow-up. PEDS-R is the revised version currently presented by the publisher.

Example	Intended age range	What it examines and why it is used
Survey of Well-being of Young Children (SWYC)	Early childhood, with age-specific forms extending through approximately 65 months	Screens aspects of development and well-being. Its Milestones component includes motor, language, social, and cognitive development. Follow the guidance for the selected form and component.

Sources: Brookes Publishing (n.d.); PEDStest.com, LLC (n.d.); TEAM UP Center (n.d.).

Age-Range Reminder

This chapter addresses children ages three to eight, but several tools listed here are intended for younger children. Do not administer a younger-child questionnaire to an older child or interpret its scores using norms outside the tool's intended age range. Select an appropriate tool and follow its current administration guidance.

SWYC Qualification:

The developer advises caution with the 60-month Milestones form because its validation evidence is less robust. The form can support developmental surveillance, but the developer does not provide a screening cutoff for that form (TEAM UP Center, n.d.).

These are **examples rather than a complete list of developmental screening tools**. Different tools are designed for different ages, developmental areas, populations, and settings. The appropriate tool depends on the **purpose of the screening, the child's age and characteristics, the developmental areas being examined, and the qualifications required to administer and interpret the tool**.

Some developmental screening tools examine several areas of development, while others focus more specifically on a particular area or concern. For example, a broad developmental screening may include gross- and fine-motor development along with communication and other developmental areas. When a screening identifies a possible concern, additional assessment or evaluation may be appropriate.

Important Distinction: Monitoring is Not Screening

Developmental milestone checklists, including CDC developmental milestone resources, can be useful for **developmental monitoring and communication**, but they are **not standardized developmental screening tools**. Developmental monitoring helps educators and families notice how a child is developing over time. Developmental screening uses a validated screening tool to take a more structured look at development. If developmental monitoring raises a concern, developmental screening or further evaluation may be an appropriate next step.

Choosing and Using Screening Tools Responsibly

Not every screening tool is appropriate for every child or every situation. Before using a developmental screening tool, educators and other professionals need to consider **how the tool was developed, what it is designed to measure, and whether it is appropriate for the child and the purpose of the screening**.

A high-quality screening tool should be:

- **Valid.** The tool should measure what it is intended to measure. For example, a screening tool intended to examine motor development should provide meaningful information about the motor skills it was designed to screen.
- **Reliable.** The tool should produce reasonably consistent results when it is used as intended. Screening results should not depend primarily on who administers the tool or on chance.

- **Appropriate for the child's chronological age.** Use the age-specific form and any age adjustments required by the tool's instructions. Do not choose a younger-age form simply because a child appears to have younger developmental skills.
- **Culturally and linguistically responsive.** A child's language, culture, experiences, and opportunities can influence how the child responds during screening. Whenever possible, screening should be conducted in the child's home or preferred language using tools that are appropriate for the population being screened.
- **Appropriate for its intended purpose.** A screening tool should be used for the purpose for which it was designed. A tool developed for developmental monitoring, classroom assessment, or another purpose should not automatically be used as a developmental screening tool.

These considerations are especially important when screening young children because development is influenced by children's experiences and contexts. A screening result should therefore be interpreted carefully and should never be considered in isolation. Information from families, observations across settings and routines, and other relevant information can contribute to a more complete understanding of the child.

Educators should also follow the procedures established for the screening tool and their program. Some screening tools may be completed with information from families or educators, while others require administration or interpretation by professionals with specific training or qualifications.

Vocabulary Alert: Reliability and Validity

Reliability and **validity** are related, but they do not mean the same thing.

Reliability refers to the **consistency** of a tool. A reliable screening tool produces reasonably consistent results when it is used appropriately under similar conditions.

Validity refers to whether the tool **measures what it is intended to measure** and whether the results support the way the tool is being used.

A screening tool can produce consistent results and still fail to measure the intended skill accurately. For this reason, educators should consider **both reliability and validity** when evaluating a screening tool.

> **Remember:** A screening tool should not be chosen simply because it is available or easy to use. The tool should be appropriate for the **child, developmental area, population, and purpose of the screening**.

The Early Childhood Educator's Role in Screening

Early childhood educators play an important role in developmental screening because they observe children across everyday activities, routines, and interactions. Over time, educators may notice patterns in a child's movement, coordination, self-care skills, participation, or other areas of development that warrant closer attention.

> The educator's role, however, is **not to diagnose a child**. Instead, educators contribute observations and documentation, participate in screening as appropriate, communicate with families, and support follow-up when additional information is needed.

A useful way to think about the educator's role is: **Observe → Document → Screen/Participate → Communicate → Refer/Follow Up → Continue Supporting**

Observe

Observe the child during a variety of everyday activities and routines. Look for patterns across time and settings rather than drawing conclusions from a single observation. Consider what the child can do independently, what may be difficult, and what

conditions appear to support successful participation.

Document

Record specific, objective information about what the child does. Documentation should describe observable behavior rather than assign a label or interpret the cause of a difficulty.

For example, instead of writing *“Maya has poor fine-motor skills,”* an educator might document:

> "Maya used both hands to open and close the scissors. She was able to make two snips in the edge of the paper but was not yet able to move the scissors forward along the line".

Screen or Participate

Educators may participate in developmental screening according to their role, program procedures, and the requirements of the screening tool. This might include completing a questionnaire, contributing observations, helping families understand the process, or supporting screening conducted by another qualified professional.

Educators should use screening tools only as intended and follow the procedures established for the tool and their program.

Communicate

Educators communicate screening information respectfully and objectively with families. They share specific observations, invite family perspectives, explain what screening results can and cannot tell them, and collaborate with families in determining appropriate next steps.

Refer and Follow Up

When screening results or other information indicate that additional evaluation may be appropriate, educators follow their program’s procedures for referral and follow-up. Families may be connected with health care providers, early intervention or special education services, or other qualified professionals who can gather additional information.

A referral does not mean that a child has a developmental delay, disability, or health condition. It means that **additional information may be needed.** A screening result that does not identify a concern does not rule out every difficulty. Persistent family or educator concerns should still receive appropriate follow-up.

Continue Supporting

The educator’s role does not stop when a concern is identified or a referral is made. Educators continue providing developmentally appropriate experiences, adapting activities when needed, observing the child’s participation and progress, and collaborating with the family and other professionals.

Screening is not the end of the process. When screening indicates that additional information may be needed, educators work with families and appropriate professionals while continuing to support the child in everyday routines and learning experiences.

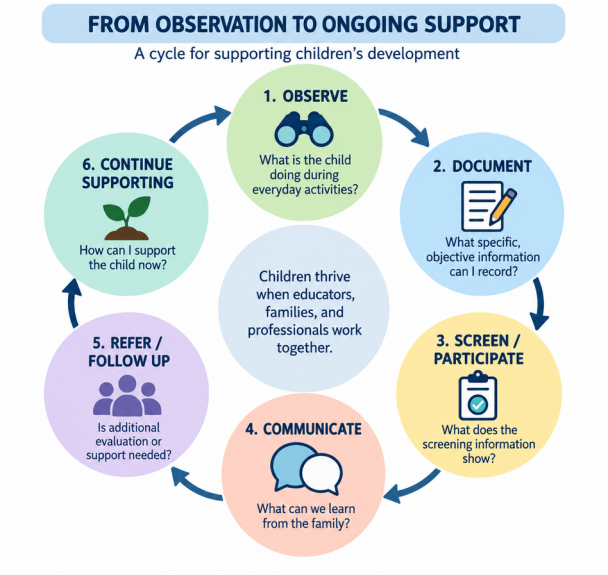


Figure 3.6.2: From Observation to Ongoing Support. The educator's role in developmental screening and follow-up. (OpenAI, 2026a).

This cycle reinforces an important principle of early childhood practice: **educators do not diagnose children; they observe, document, collaborate, and help ensure that developmental concerns receive appropriate follow-up.**

Partnering With Families

Families are essential partners in developmental screening. They know their children across settings, routines, relationships, and experiences that educators may not observe in an early childhood program. A child may demonstrate a skill at home that has not yet been observed at school, or a family may notice a concern that is not apparent in the classroom. Families can contribute valuable information that helps educators and other professionals develop a more complete understanding of a child's development.

Effective partnerships begin with **respectful, objective communication**. When discussing a possible developmental concern, educators should describe what they have observed rather than assign a label, suggest a diagnosis, or make assumptions about why the child is experiencing difficulty.

> For example, instead of saying, "I think something is wrong with his motor development," an educator might say:
>
> "I've noticed that climbing the playground steps and jumping with two feet are difficult for Mateo right now. What are you noticing when he plays at home?"

This approach communicates a specific observation while inviting the family to contribute information about the child's development in other settings.

When partnering with families, educators should:

- **Share specific observations.** Describe what the child does rather than labeling the child or the child's abilities.
- **Invite family perspectives.** Ask what family members notice during routines and activities at home and in the community.
- **Listen before drawing conclusions.** Differences across settings may provide important information about the child's abilities and experiences.
- **Explain the purpose of screening.** Families should understand what the screening examines, why it is being used, and what the results can and cannot tell them.
- **Discuss results carefully.** Screening results indicate whether additional information may be needed; they do not provide a diagnosis.
- **Collaborate on next steps.** When follow-up is recommended, educators can help families understand the process and

connect with appropriate professionals according to program procedures.

Families should be treated as **partners in the process rather than simply recipients of screening results**. Combining family knowledge with educator observations and appropriate screening information provides a more complete picture of the child and supports informed decisions about possible next steps.

Communication Matters

Focus conversations on **what has been observed, what the family has noticed, and what the next step may be**—not on what an educator believes is "wrong" with the child.

Exercise 3.6.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the primary purpose of developmental screening?
2. How is developmental screening different from ongoing assessment and diagnostic evaluation?
3. What should educators consider when choosing or using a developmental screening tool?
4. What is the early childhood educator's role in developmental screening?

Apply What You Know

5. An educator notices that a four-year-old child frequently avoids climbing playground equipment, has difficulty jumping with two feet, and often asks for help with physical activities that classmates complete independently. What should the educator do?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 3.6.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Developmental screening is used to identify children whose development may need closer attention and to determine whether additional evaluation or follow-up may be appropriate. **Screening does not diagnose** a developmental delay, disability, or health condition.
2. **Ongoing assessment** gathers information about a child's development and learning over time to guide teaching and support. Developmental screening is a brief, structured process that identifies whether further evaluation may be needed. Diagnostic evaluation is a more comprehensive process conducted by qualified professionals to investigate concerns and determine whether a developmental condition is present. Eligibility for educational services is determined through the school or service program's evaluation and eligibility process.
3. A screening tool should be **valid, reliable, developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, and appropriate for its intended purpose**. Educators should also consider the child's age, developmental area being screened, population for which the tool was developed, and any training or qualifications required to use or interpret the tool.
4. The educator's role is to **observe, document, participate in screening as appropriate, communicate with families, support referral and follow-up,**

and continue supporting the child. Educators contribute important information about children's development but do not diagnose developmental delays, disabilities, or health conditions.

Answer to Apply What You Know

5. The educator should **observe the child across different activities and over time and objectively document what the child can and cannot yet do**. The educator can share these specific observations with the family and ask what they are noticing at home. Following program procedures, the educator may participate in an appropriate developmental or motor screening or support referral for further screening or evaluation. The educator should **not diagnose the child or assume the reason for the difficulty**. While screening and follow-up occur, the educator should continue providing developmentally appropriate opportunities and supports that allow the child to participate successfully in physical activities.

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3.7: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Health and Physical Development

Introduction

Children's health and physical development are influenced not only by their individual abilities and experiences, but also by the environments in which they spend time. The organization of indoor and outdoor spaces, opportunities for movement, health and safety practices, routines, materials, equipment, and adult supervision can all support—or create challenges for—children's participation and physical development (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Environmental rating scales and observational quality measures provide structured ways to examine features of early childhood environments and experiences. Unlike developmental screening tools, which focus primarily on an individual child's development, environmental measures focus on aspects of the **setting, classroom, program, or experiences provided within that environment**.

Information from these tools can help educators and programs identify strengths, recognize areas for improvement, and make intentional changes that support children's health, safety, physical activity, and participation.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 3.7: Explore the types and purposes of environmental rating scales related to health and physical development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the purpose of environmental rating scales and observational quality measures.
- Explore types of environmental measures related to children's health and physical development.
- Describe how information from environmental measures can support reflection and program improvement.

Environmental Rating Scales Are One Part of Program Assessment

Early childhood educators gather information for different purposes. Sometimes the focus is an **individual child**. At other times, the focus is the **environment and the experiences provided within it**.

Depending on the tool, environmental rating scales and observational quality measures may examine features related to children's health and physical development, such as:

- Indoor and outdoor space;
- Health and safety practices;
- Personal care routines;
- Opportunities for movement and active play;
- Materials and equipment;
- Supervision;
- Accessibility and participation; and
- Classroom organization and daily routines.

These measures are different from developmental screening or other child-focused assessments. Rather than asking how an individual child is developing, environmental measures ask questions such as: **What are children experiencing in this setting? Does the environment provide safe and appropriate opportunities for movement? Do routines and materials support children's health, physical activity, and participation?**

Environmental rating scales can therefore help educators look beyond an individual child and consider how the **environment itself may support or create challenges for children's health and physical development**.

Child-Focused Assessment and Environmental Assessment: What's the Difference?

Early childhood professionals gather information about both children and the environments in which children learn. Understanding the focus and purpose of each helps educators use assessment information appropriately.

Table 3.7.1: Comparison of Child-Focused Assessment and Environmental/Program Assessment

Elements	Child-Focused Assessment	Environmental/Program Assessment
Focus	Individual child's development and learning	Environment and experiences provided to children
Asks	What is this child learning, doing, or experiencing?	What is the quality of this environment or experience?
May Examine	Skills, abilities, development, health, and progress	Space, safety practices, routines, materials, equipment, supervision, activities, and opportunities for movement
Purpose	Support decisions about an individual child's development or learning	Support reflection, planning, and quality improvement

Note. This instructional comparison summarizes differences in assessment focus; it is not a scoring guide for a particular instrument (ERSI, n.d.; NAEYC, 2020).

Important Distinction: Environmental Rating Is Not Child Screening
Environmental rating scales examine characteristics of the **environment, program, classroom, or experiences provided within the setting**. They are not designed to diagnose, evaluate, or label an individual child.

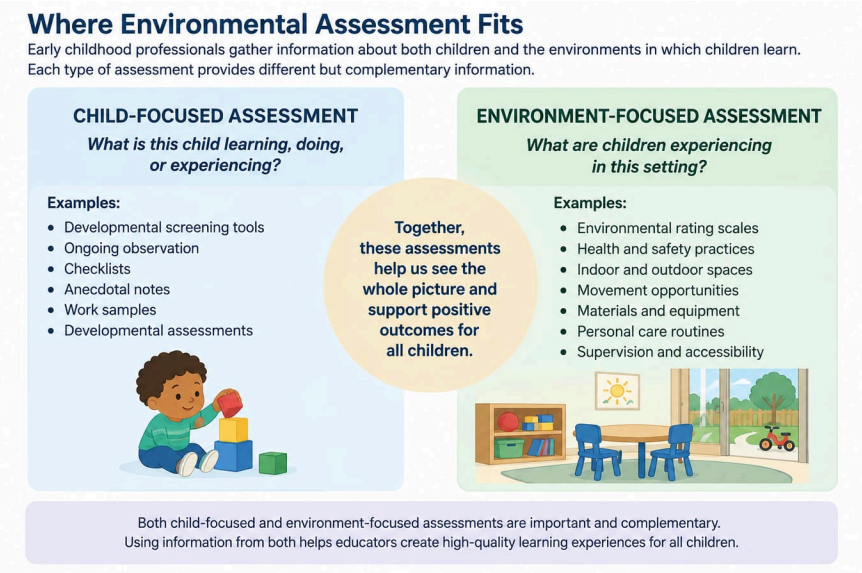


Figure 3.7.1: Where Environmental Assessment Fits. Child-focused and environment-focused assessments provide different but complementary information. Child-focused assessment gathers information about an individual child's development and learning, while environment-focused assessment examines the quality of the setting, including health and safety practices, spaces, movement opportunities, materials, routines, supervision, and accessibility. Together, both types of assessment help educators understand children's experiences and support high-quality learning environments. OpenAI, 2026.

What Are Environmental Rating Scales?

Environmental rating scales are structured tools used to observe and evaluate characteristics of early childhood environments. Rather than focusing on the development of an individual child, these tools examine the **quality of the experiences and opportunities provided within a setting** (Teachers College Press, n.d.).

Many environmental rating scales focus on **process quality**. Process quality refers to what children experience during their everyday time in an early childhood program, including their interactions with adults and peers and their experiences with routines, activities, materials, equipment, and the physical environment (Teachers College Press, n.d.).

Process quality related to health and physical development may include:

- Whether indoor and outdoor spaces are safe and accessible;
- Whether children have regular opportunities for movement and active play;
- Whether materials and equipment support gross- and fine-motor development;
- How adults supervise children during active play and routines;
- How personal care routines support health and safety;
- Whether children have adequate space to move, rest, and participate;
- How routines are organized to support children's physical needs; and
- Whether adaptations allow children with different abilities to participate.

Environmental rating scales provide a **systematic way to observe these experiences**. Instead of relying only on a general impression that a classroom is safe, active, or supportive of physical development, educators and programs can use established criteria to examine specific aspects of the environment.

Why Evaluate the Environment?

The purpose of evaluating an early childhood environment is not simply to produce a score. Environmental information can help educators and programs better understand what children experience throughout the day and identify ways to strengthen those experiences.

Environmental rating scales and observational quality measures can help educators and programs:

- Identify strengths in the physical environment;
- Recognize health, safety, or accessibility concerns;
- Examine opportunities for movement and active play;
- Reflect on routines, supervision, materials, and equipment;
- Plan intentional changes to support participation and physical development; and
- Monitor quality-improvement efforts over time.

Focus on Improvement

An environmental rating provides information that educators can use to **reflect, plan, and improve**. A score is most useful when it leads educators to think about what children are experiencing and what changes could strengthen the environment.

Types of Environmental Measures Related to Health and Physical Development

Environmental measures differ in what they examine and the purpose they serve. Some provide a broad look at the overall quality of an early childhood environment, while others focus more specifically on interactions, routines, or particular features of the setting.

Understanding these differences helps educators select and interpret a measure based on **what they want to learn about the environment**.

Broad Environmental Quality Measures

Broad environmental quality measures examine multiple aspects of an early childhood setting. Depending on the tool, these may include:

- Indoor and outdoor space;
- Furnishings and equipment;
- Health and safety practices;
- Personal care routines;
- Activities and materials;
- Opportunities for movement and active play;
- Interactions among adults and children; and
- Program structure and organization.

Although these measures examine more than health and physical development, many of the areas they assess are closely connected to children's physical experiences. For example, safe and accessible spaces, appropriate equipment, personal care routines, and opportunities for active play can influence children's health, movement, participation, and physical development.

The **Environment Rating Scales (ERS)** are examples of broad environmental quality measures. Different versions are designed for different ages and early childhood settings, including infant/toddler, preschool, school-age, and family child care environments (Environment Rating Scales Institute [ERSI], n.d.).

The **Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3)** is designed for preschool settings. It examines six areas: **Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Literacy, Learning Activities, Interaction, and Program Structure** (Harms et al., 2015).

Interaction-Focused Measures

Some observational measures focus more specifically on the quality of interactions between teachers and children rather than on the entire physical environment.

The **Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)** is one example. CLASS focuses on teacher-child interactions, including how teachers organize the classroom, respond to children, support engagement, and promote learning. Unlike broader environmental rating scales, CLASS is designed primarily to examine educator-child interactions rather than the broader physical environment (Teachstone, n.d.).

Even though CLASS is not primarily a measure of the physical environment, interactions can still influence children's health and physical experiences. For example, educators affect how children participate in movement activities, how safely routines are carried out, how children are supervised, and whether children receive encouragement and support as they try new physical skills.

Different Tools Serve Different Purposes

No single environmental measure captures every aspect of quality. A broad environmental rating scale may examine many features of a classroom, including space, routines, materials, activities, and interactions. An interaction-focused measure may provide a closer look at how adults and children interact.

The appropriate measure depends on **what educators or programs want to understand and improve**.

Examples of Environmental Measures

Environmental measures vary in the ages and settings for which they are designed, the aspects of quality they examine, and the training required to use them. Educators do not need to memorize every available measure. Instead, they should understand **what a tool examines, the purpose for which it is used, and how the information can support improvement**.

Table 3.7.2: Environmental Measures and What They Assess

Example	What It Examines	Purpose
Environment Rating Scales (ERS): a family of tools for different ages and settings	Broad aspects of environmental and process quality, including space, routines, activities, materials, interactions, and program structure	Provides a broad picture of environmental quality to support reflection and program improvement
Environment Rating Scales (ERS): a family of tools for different ages and settings	Multiple aspects of preschool classroom quality, including space and furnishings, personal care routines, learning activities, interaction, and program structure	Examines children's experiences across multiple dimensions of the early childhood environment
Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ITERS-3): center-based programs serving infants and toddlers	Environmental quality in settings serving infants and toddlers	Helps programs examine the quality of environments and experiences provided to younger children
School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale, Updated Edition (SACERS-U): out-of-school-time programs serving ages 5–12	Environmental quality in school-age care settings	Helps programs examine the quality of experiences provided in school-age environments
Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)	Teacher-child interactions and classroom organization	Provides information about the quality of teacher-child interactions to guide reflection and improvement

Sources: Environment Rating Scales Institute (n.d.); Teachstone (n.d.).

The Environment Rating Scales are designed for different ages and settings, while CLASS focuses specifically on educator-child interactions (ERSI, n.d.; Teachstone, n.d.).

Focus on Purpose

Educators should not choose an environmental measure simply because it is familiar or available. The tool should **match what the program wants to examine and improve**. A broad environmental rating scale and an interaction-focused measure provide different kinds of information and serve different purposes.

CLASS has different age levels and editions. For example, CLASS 2nd Edition includes a Pre-K–3rd tool. Programs should identify the version they use and follow its observation, training, and scoring requirements (Teachstone, n.d.).

Connecting Environmental Quality to Health and Physical Development

Environmental measures are especially useful when considering health and physical development because children develop physical skills through repeated opportunities to move, explore, practice, and participate in everyday routines. The organization of space, availability of materials and equipment, health and safety practices, and adult supervision all contribute to what children experience throughout the day (NAEYC, 2020).

Environmental quality does not determine a child's health or physical development. Children bring different abilities, experiences, temperaments, health needs, and levels of development to the classroom. However, a supportive environment can provide repeated opportunities for children to move safely, build physical skills, participate in routines, and develop increasing independence.

Table 3.7.3: How Environmental Features May Support Health and Physical Development

Environmental Feature	How It May Support Children's Health and Physical Development
Safe, accessible spaces	Children have room to move, explore, and participate while reducing unnecessary barriers or hazards.
Gross-motor equipment and active play	Children have opportunities to practice skills such as running, climbing, balancing, jumping, throwing, and catching.
Fine-motor materials	Children can strengthen hand and finger control, coordination, and visual-motor skills through activities such as drawing, building, manipulating objects, and using tools.
Personal care routines	Routines such as handwashing, toileting, meals, and other care practices support health, hygiene, and growing independence.
Predictable routines and rest	Consistent routines help children meet physical needs for activity, rest, nourishment, and care throughout the day.
Appropriate supervision	Adults can support safe participation, respond to children's needs, and help children engage in physical experiences with an appropriate level of challenge.
Inclusive adaptations	Changes to materials, equipment, space, or routines can help children with different abilities and needs participate successfully.

Note. These examples connect environmental features with possible supports for children's participation and development. They are not official items or scoring criteria from a specific rating scale (Harms et al., 2015; NAEYC, 2020).

Environmental measures help educators examine whether these kinds of experiences are consistently available to children. Rather than looking only at an individual child's physical abilities or participation, educators can also ask, **"What is happening in the environment, and how might we strengthen children's opportunities to move, participate, and develop physical skills?"**

The Environment Is Part of the Picture

When children have difficulty participating in movement, routines, or physical activities, educators should consider both the **individual child and the environment**. Changes to space, equipment, routines, supervision, or accessibility may provide additional support.

Choosing and Using Environmental Measures Responsibly

Not every environmental measure is appropriate for every setting or purpose. Before using a rating scale or observational quality measure, educators and programs should consider **what the tool was designed to examine, how it should be used, and whether it is appropriate for the setting and purpose**.

When selecting or using an environmental measure, consider the following:

Purpose. The measure should match what educators or programs want to examine. A broad environmental rating scale may be appropriate when looking at overall classroom quality, while a more focused measure may be useful when the goal is to examine particular features such as interactions, routines, or physical experiences.

Reliability. A reliable measure produces reasonably consistent results when it is used appropriately. For observational measures, this includes consistency among trained observers.

Validity. The measure should provide meaningful information about what it is intended to examine. Evidence supporting a tool should also match the purpose for which the results will be used (NAEYC, 2020; Teachers College Press, n.d.).

Age and setting. Environmental measures are often designed for particular age groups or types of early childhood settings. For example, the Environment Rating Scales include different measures for infant/toddler, preschool, school-age, and family child care settings (ERSI, n.d.).

Cultural and contextual responsiveness. Expectations for environments, routines, physical activity, caregiving practices, and interactions may be influenced by culture, language, community, available resources, and program context. Environmental information should therefore be interpreted thoughtfully and in relation to the children, families, and communities served (NAEYC, 2020).

Training and administration requirements. Some measures require specific training, certification, observation procedures, or scoring methods. Educators and programs should follow the requirements of the particular tool rather than changing procedures in ways that could alter the meaning of the results.

Environmental information should also be considered as **one source of information about program quality**. A single observation or score cannot capture everything children experience within a classroom or program.

Use the Tool as Intended

An environmental measure should not be chosen simply because it is familiar or easy to use. The measure should be appropriate for the **age group, setting, population, and purpose**, and educators should follow the procedures established for the tool.

Vocabulary Alert: Key Environmental Assessment Terms

Environmental rating scale: A structured tool used to observe and evaluate characteristics of an early childhood environment.

Process quality: The quality of children's everyday experiences within an early childhood setting, including their interactions, routines, activities, materials, and experiences within the environment.

Reliability: The consistency of a measurement tool when it is used appropriately.

Validity: The extent to which a tool measures what it is intended to measure and supports its intended use.

The Early Childhood Educator's Role

Early childhood educators play an important role in understanding and improving the environments children experience each day. Because educators participate in classroom routines, supervise play, organize materials and spaces, and support children's participation, they can use environmental information to reflect on practice and make intentional changes.

Educators can use these ideas for everyday reflection and improvement. Formal administration and scoring of a named measure require following that tool's procedures and any applicable training or certification requirements.

A useful way to think about the educator's role is: **Observe → Reflect → Identify → Plan → Make Changes → Observe Again**



Figure 3.7.2: The Early Childhood Educator's Role in Environmental Assessment. Environmental assessment is an ongoing cycle in which educators observe children's experiences, reflect on what is working and where barriers exist, identify areas to strengthen, plan intentional changes, make adjustments to the environment or routines, and observe again to see how children respond. This process helps educators improve safety, participation, movement, and independence. OpenAI, 2026.

Observe

Observe what children experience throughout the day. Pay attention to indoor and outdoor spaces, movement opportunities, materials and equipment, personal care routines, supervision, accessibility, and children's participation in physical activities.

Reflect

Consider what the observations or environmental rating results reveal. What appears to be working well? When do children participate comfortably and successfully? Where do safety concerns, barriers, or difficulties occur?

Identify

Identify specific aspects of the environment or teaching practices that could be strengthened. Rather than focusing only on a child's physical abilities, consider whether changes to **space, equipment, materials, routines, supervision, or accessibility** might better support participation.

Plan

Choose an intentional change based on the information gathered. The change should address a specific aspect of the environment and have a clear purpose.

Make Changes

Put the planned change into practice. For example, an educator might:

- Rearrange furniture to provide clearer pathways for movement;
- Add or adjust gross-motor equipment;
- Place fine-motor materials where children can access them independently;
- Modify a routine to allow more time for children to complete self-care tasks;
- Adapt materials or equipment to support participation; or
- Adjust supervision during active play.

Observe Again

Continue observing after the change. Consider how children respond and whether the change improves safety, participation, movement, or independence. Additional adjustments may be needed.

Environmental Assessment is a Cycle

Environmental assessment is most useful when it leads to **reflection and intentional improvement**. Educators observe children's experiences, make informed changes, and continue observing to determine what is working and what may need further adjustment.

Partnering With Families

Families are important partners in understanding the quality of children's experiences in early childhood programs. They know their children's health routines, physical needs, abilities, preferences, culture, language, and everyday experiences in ways that may not be visible within the classroom (NAEYC, 2020).

Environmental rating scales and observational measures focus on the **environment and experiences provided within the program**, rather than evaluating individual children or families. When programs use information from these measures, educators can help families understand what is being examined and how the information is being used to support program improvement.

When partnering with families, educators can:

- Explain the purpose of environmental assessment;
- Invite families to share information about children's health routines, physical needs, and participation;
- Communicate about changes being made to improve safety, accessibility, movement opportunities, or daily routines;
- Consider family culture, language, values, and caregiving practices when reflecting on environmental quality; and
- Emphasize that environmental assessment is intended to support reflection and continuous improvement.

Family perspectives can add important context to information gathered through environmental observations. Combining structured environmental assessment with educator reflection and family perspectives can help programs make more informed decisions about how to support children's health, physical development, safety, participation, and independence.

Putting It Into Practice: Look at the Environment

Environmental measures can help educators shift from asking only **"Why is this child having difficulty?"** to also asking **"What is happening in the environment that might support or create challenges for participation?"**

Consider the following situation:

Example

Ms. Lopez notices that several children rarely use the climbing equipment during outdoor play. A few children watch from nearby but do not join in, while others try briefly and then move away. Teachers have also noticed that the space around the equipment becomes crowded during active play.

Rather than viewing these difficulties only as problems with individual children's physical abilities or confidence, Ms. Lopez considers the **environment and the opportunities it provides**.

She asks:

- Is there enough space around the equipment for children to move safely?

- Is the equipment appropriate for the children's abilities and developmental levels?
- Are there different levels of challenge available?
- Do children have enough time to explore and practice?
- Are adults positioned where they can supervise and support participation?
- Could materials, equipment, or the arrangement of the space be changed to make participation more accessible?

Based on her observations, Ms. Lopez decides to adjust the arrangement of the outdoor area, add a lower climbing option, and provide more open space around the equipment. Teachers also position themselves nearby to encourage children, model safe use, and provide support when needed.

She then observes the area over the next several days to see how children respond.

This process reflects the same cycle used when examining environmental quality: **Observe** → **Reflect** → **Identify** → **Plan** → **Make Changes** → **Observe Again**

Look Beyond the Skill

When several children have difficulty participating in the same physical activity or routine, consider the **environment, materials, equipment, supervision, and accessibility** as well as individual children's abilities and needs.

Environmental assessment can help educators identify changes that may better support children's **health, safety, movement, participation, and physical development**.

Exercise 3.7.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the primary purpose of an environmental rating scale or observational quality measure?
2. How is environmental assessment different from developmental screening or other assessments that focus on an individual child?
3. What are some aspects of an early childhood environment that may affect children's health and physical development?
4. Why might educators use different environmental measures for different purposes?

Apply What You Know

5. An environmental observation shows that several children rarely use a climbing area during outdoor play. The area is crowded, the equipment provides few levels of challenge, and some children appear unsure about how to participate. How could an educator use this information to support children's health and physical development?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 3.7.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Environmental measures provide structured information about characteristics of an early childhood environment or the experiences occurring within it. The information can help educators and programs identify strengths, recognize areas for improvement, and make intentional changes.
2. Environmental assessment focuses on the setting, classroom, program, or experiences provided within the environment. Child-focused assessment or screening gathers information about an individual child's development, learning, abilities, health, or progress.
3. Environmental measures may examine indoor and outdoor space, health and safety practices, personal care routines, materials and equipment, movement opportunities, supervision, accessibility, classroom organization, and daily routines.
4. Different tools examine different aspects of quality. A broad environmental rating scale may look at space, routines, materials, activities, and interactions, while a more focused measure may examine a specific area such as teacher-child interactions. The tool should match what educators or programs want to understand and improve.

Answer to Apply What You Know

5. The educator could examine the environment rather than assuming the difficulty is caused only by children's physical abilities. The educator might consider whether the space provides enough room for safe movement, whether the equipment offers appropriate levels of challenge, whether children have enough time to practice, and whether adults are positioned to support participation. The educator could then make an intentional change, such as rearranging the area, adding another level of climbing challenge, or adjusting supervision, and observe again to determine how the change affects children's participation and movement.

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4: ANALYZING THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

4.1: The Progression of Social and Emotional Development

4.2: Identity Formation in Early Childhood

4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

4.4: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Social and Emotional Development

4.5: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Social and Emotional Development

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4.1: The Progression of Social and Emotional Development

Introductions

Social and emotional development involves increasingly complex ways of **understanding and expressing emotions, regulating behavior and emotions, forming relationships, interacting with peers, and participating in groups**. This section follows these changes across ages three to eight, emphasizing general developmental patterns, individual variation, and the continuing importance of supportive relationships.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 4.1: Describe the progression of social and emotional development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Describe** the progression of emotional development from ages 3–8.
- **Describe** the progression of social development and peer relationships from ages 3–8.
- **Explain** how emotional regulation and social competence become increasingly complex across early and middle childhood.

Understanding Social and Emotional Development

Social and emotional development describes how children learn to **understand themselves, manage their emotions and behavior, and build relationships with others**. Although social and emotional development can be described separately, they are closely connected and develop together.

Social development refers to how children learn to interact and form relationships with other people. As children develop, they become increasingly able to participate in play, cooperate with others, develop friendships, resolve conflicts, understand social expectations, and function as members of a group.

Emotional development refers to how children learn to recognize, express, understand, and regulate emotions. Young children initially rely heavily on adults to help them manage strong feelings. With development and experience, they become increasingly able to identify emotions, use strategies to manage their responses, and understand the feelings of others.

Social and emotional development are interconnected because **emotions influence relationships, and relationships support emotional development**. For example, a child who is frustrated during play must manage that emotion while also communicating, negotiating, and responding to a peer. Supportive relationships with adults and other children provide opportunities to practice these developing abilities **(Office of Head Start, n.d.)**

From ages 3–8, children generally become more skilled at **understanding emotions, regulating their responses, cooperating with others, developing friendships, resolving social problems, and considering the perspectives and feelings of other people**. These abilities develop gradually and vary across children and situations.

Emotional Development Across Ages 3–8

Emotional development becomes increasingly complex as children grow. Between ages 3 and 8, children make important progress in **recognizing and expressing emotions, understanding why emotions occur, regulating emotional responses, and considering how situations may affect the feelings of themselves and others**. These abilities develop gradually and are strengthened through everyday experiences and supportive relationships.



Figure 4.1.1:Emotional Development Includes Recognizing, Expressing, Understanding, and Regulating Emotions and Considering the Feelings of Others. (OpenAI, 2026a.)

Recognizing and Expressing Emotions

Around age 3, children can express a wide range of emotions, but strong feelings may still be expressed quickly and intensely. They are becoming better able to use words such as *happy, sad, mad,* and *scared* to describe basic emotions. By the preschool years, children increasingly notice when another person is experiencing a strong emotion and may begin responding with concern. For example, a child might approach a crying friend, offer comfort, or seek an adult for help.

As children grow, their emotional vocabulary expands. They become better able to describe how they feel rather than relying primarily on their behavior to communicate an emotion. They also begin recognizing more complex emotions, such as embarrassment, pride, guilt, jealousy, and disappointment.

Understanding Emotions

Children gradually move beyond simply naming an emotion to understanding **why** someone might feel that way. A preschooler may understand that a friend is sad because a toy broke. With increasing development, children recognize that emotions are connected to a person's experiences, desires, expectations, and interpretations of a situation.

Children also begin to understand that the same situation may produce different feelings in different people. Something one child finds exciting may make another child nervous. This growing understanding helps children interpret social situations and respond more appropriately to others.

Regulating Emotional Responses

Young children often need significant adult support to manage strong emotions. An adult may help a child calm down, put feelings into words, wait for a turn, or find another way to solve a problem. Over time, children develop a larger set of strategies for managing their emotional responses.

By the early elementary years, children are increasingly able to pause before reacting, use language to communicate their needs, tolerate frustration, and choose strategies for managing emotions. This does **not** mean that older children no longer experience strong emotions or need adult support. Rather, their capacity to regulate emotions becomes increasingly sophisticated and independent.

Considering Situations and Other People's Perspectives

As children's thinking and social experiences expand, they become increasingly able to consider another person's perspective when interpreting emotions. Instead of focusing only on *"How do I feel?"*, children become better able to consider *"How might the other person feel?"* and *"Why might they feel that way?"*

This growing awareness supports empathy, friendships, cooperation, and conflict resolution. By the early elementary years, children are increasingly able to recognize that emotions may depend on a person's perspective and that people can experience **different—or even mixed—emotions about the same situation**.

Overall Progression

> A simple way to think about emotional development from ages 3–8 is: **Recognize and express emotions → Understand causes of emotions → Regulate emotional responses → Consider perspectives and increasingly complex emotions**

These abilities overlap rather than appearing one at a time. A child who can identify an emotion may still need adult help regulating it, and a child who understands another person's feelings may not always respond effectively in the moment. **Emotional development is a gradual progression toward increasingly complex understanding and increasingly independent regulation.**

Self-Regulation Across Ages 3–8

Self-regulation is a child's developing ability to manage emotions, attention, and behavior in ways that help them participate successfully in everyday activities and relationships. Self-regulation does not develop all at once. During early childhood, children often rely on adults to help them manage strong emotions and behavior. Across ages 3–8, they gradually become more able to regulate themselves.

From Co-Regulation to Increasing Independence

Young children are still learning what to do when they are frustrated, excited, disappointed, angry, worried, or overwhelmed. At around age 3, a child may understand a classroom expectation such as waiting for a turn but still have difficulty following it when emotions are strong.

At this age, **co-regulation** remains important. Co-regulation occurs when a supportive adult helps a child manage emotions and behavior through a calm presence, predictable routines, clear expectations, and assistance with strategies such as using words, waiting, or calming down (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

As children move through the preschool years, they begin to use some of these strategies with less adult assistance. They may remind themselves of a rule, use words instead of grabbing, wait for a short period, or seek help when a problem becomes difficult. Regulation is still inconsistent, particularly when children are tired, frustrated, excited, or experiencing an unfamiliar situation.

Developing Greater Control

During the early elementary years, children generally become better able to **pause, consider expectations, and adjust their behavior to fit a situation**. They can increasingly sustain attention, wait longer for something they want, persist when a task is challenging, and recover from disappointment without as much adult assistance.

Children also become more able to select strategies that fit their needs. For example, a child might take a break when frustrated, ask for help with a difficult task, use words to resolve a disagreement, or remind themselves that they can try again.

Increasing self-regulation does not mean that children no longer need adults. Even older children may need support when emotions are especially strong or situations are challenging. The developmental change is in the **amount and type of support needed**: adults gradually move from providing much of the regulation to supporting children as they increasingly regulate

themselves (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

Overall Progression

> A simple way to think about the progression of self-regulation from ages 3–8 is: **Adult provides substantial support → Child regulates with adult guidance → Child begins using familiar strategies → Child increasingly selects and uses strategies independently**

This progression is not a straight line. A child may regulate independently in a familiar classroom routine but need considerable adult support during a conflict, transition, or new experience. **Increasing independence—not perfect self-control—is the developmental progression.**

Social Development and Relationships Across Ages 3–8

Social development involves learning how to interact with others, form relationships, participate in groups, and respond to the expectations of different social situations. Between ages 3 and 8, children's social worlds expand. Relationships with adults remain important, while interactions with peers become increasingly frequent, cooperative, and complex.



Figure 4.1.2: Social development includes interacting with others, forming relationships, participating in groups, responding to social expectations, and developing social skills. (OpenAI, 2026c.)

From Playing Near Others to Playing with Others

By around age 3, children are increasingly interested in other children and are beginning to participate in shared play. They may imitate peers, take turns with support, show affection toward friends, and respond when another child is upset.

During the preschool years, children become increasingly able to sustain play with others. Instead of simply playing in the same area, they cooperate around shared ideas, take on roles in pretend play, and work together toward a common goal. By around age 4, children often prefer playing with other children rather than playing alone and demonstrate increasing cooperation with peers.

Developing Friendships

As children spend more time with peers, their understanding of **friendship** also develops. Younger children may describe a friend as someone they play with or someone who shares toys and activities with them. Friendships can form quickly and may change

frequently.

By ages 5–8, friendships generally become more stable and reciprocal. Children become increasingly concerned with being accepted by peers, sharing interests, being fair, helping one another, and maintaining friendships. This shift begins to show at age 5, when children may want to please friends, be like their friends, and increasingly follow group rules. During middle childhood, children's developing ability to regulate emotions is also related to the quality of their friendships (Blair et al., 2014).

Cooperating and Participating in Groups

Group participation also becomes more complex across this age span. Younger children are learning basic social expectations such as taking turns, sharing materials, listening to others, and following simple rules. They often need adult reminders and support to do these things successfully.

As children approach the early elementary years, they become better able to coordinate their behavior with a group. They can participate in activities with shared rules, take on different roles, contribute ideas, and consider what the group needs in addition to what they personally want.

Resolving Conflicts

Conflict is a normal part of social development. Younger children may respond to disagreements by grabbing, crying, yelling, withdrawing, or immediately seeking adult assistance. They are still developing the language, emotional regulation, and perspective-taking needed to solve social problems.

With development and experience, children increasingly use **words, negotiation, compromise, and problem-solving** to resolve disagreements. They become better able to explain what happened, listen to another person's point of view, suggest solutions, and recognize that a fair solution may require both children to adjust what they want.

Adults continue to play an important role, but the nature of that support changes. Rather than solving every conflict for children, adults can increasingly support children as they participate in solving the problem themselves.

Increasingly Complex Peer Relationships

By the early elementary years, children are increasingly aware of their place within a larger peer group. They notice who shares their interests, how others respond to them, whether rules are being followed, and what peers consider fair or unfair. Belonging to a group and maintaining friendships may become increasingly important.

Peer relationships therefore require children to coordinate many developing abilities at once: **regulating emotions, communicating, cooperating, understanding another person's perspective, resolving disagreements, and adjusting behavior to different social situations**.

Overall Progression

> A simple way to think about social development from ages 3–8 is: **Interest in and interaction with peers → Cooperative play → Developing friendships → Increasingly independent conflict resolution and group participation → More reciprocal and complex peer relationships**

As with other areas of development, these abilities overlap and do not appear on a fixed schedule. A child may participate successfully in a familiar group activity yet need considerable support during a disagreement with a friend. **The overall progression is toward increasingly reciprocal, cooperative, and complex relationships with others.**

The Development of Empathy and Perspective Taking

As children develop socially and emotionally, they become increasingly able to **notice, understand, and respond to the feelings of others**. They also begin to recognize that another person may think, feel, or respond differently than they do. These developing abilities support friendships, cooperation, helping behaviors, and conflict resolution.

Noticing and Responding to Others' Feelings

During the preschool years, children increasingly notice when another person is experiencing a strong emotion and may begin responding with concern. For example, a child might approach a crying friend, offer comfort, or seek an adult for help.

At first, children's responses may be based largely on what they can observe. Crying signals that a child may need support, but it does not reveal one specific emotion. The child may be sad, frustrated, frightened, overwhelmed, or experiencing discomfort. Understanding another person's feelings requires attention to the situation and the person's communication.

Developing Empathy

Empathy involves understanding and responding to another person's feelings. During the preschool years, children become increasingly able to connect another person's emotional response with what has happened. A child may understand, for example, that a classmate is disappointed because someone else is using the toy they wanted.

Children also become more able to respond in ways that fit another person's needs. Rather than simply recognizing that someone is upset, they may offer comfort, assistance, or companionship.

Understanding Different Perspectives

Young children often interpret situations primarily from their own point of view. With development, they become increasingly able to engage in **perspective taking**—considering what another person might see, know, think, want, or feel.

For example, two children may experience the same event differently. One child may be excited about performing in front of the class while another feels nervous. Increasing perspective-taking ability helps children recognize that **their own thoughts and feelings are not necessarily shared by everyone else**.

During the early elementary years, children become better able to use this understanding in increasingly complex social situations. They may consider why a friend reacted in a particular way, recognize that a misunderstanding contributed to a conflict, or adjust their response after considering another person's point of view.

Overall Progression

> The following sequence summarizes a general direction of development rather than a series of separate stages. Children develop these abilities together and may demonstrate them differently across situations.
>
> A simple way to think about the development of empathy and perspective taking from ages 3–8 is: **Notice another person's feelings → Respond to another person's distress → Understand why another person may feel that way → Recognize that others may think and feel differently → Use another person's perspective to navigate social situations**

These abilities develop gradually and continue well beyond age 8. **Children move from primarily noticing observable emotions toward increasingly understanding and considering the perspectives, thoughts, and feelings that underlie other people's behavior.**

Social-Emotional Development Across Ages 3–8

The current CDC milestone framework provides age-specific developmental milestones through age 5. For example, by age 3, most children notice and join other children in play; by age 4, milestones include comforting others and changing behavior according to the setting; and by age 5, children increasingly follow rules and take turns during games (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

The ages 6–8 descriptions below represent **broader developmental patterns rather than CDC milestone criteria**. During middle childhood, children generally demonstrate increasing self-regulation, perspective taking, social understanding, and increasingly complex friendships and peer relationships **(National Research Council, 1984).**

Table 4.1.1*: Social-emotional Development Ages 3-8*

Age	Emotional Understanding & Regulation	Social Interaction & Relationships	Empathy & Perspective Taking
3 years	Identifies and expresses basic emotions; still relies heavily on adults to manage strong feelings; begins using simple strategies with support.	Notices other children and joins their play; begins taking turns and participating in shared activities; frequently needs adult help with conflicts.	Notices obvious emotions in others and may show concern or attempt to comfort someone who is upset.
4 years	Uses more words to communicate feelings; begins adjusting behavior to different situations; still needs adult support when emotions are strong.	Actively seeks other children for play; participates in increasingly cooperative and imaginative play; begins following shared expectations.	Increasingly recognizes when another person is hurt or sad and may respond with comfort or help.
5 years	Increasingly manages familiar routines and expectations; begins using learned strategies to handle frustration and disappointment.	Participates in games with rules, takes turns, cooperates with peers, and shows increasing interest in friendships and group belonging.	Better understands why another person may feel a certain way and begins considering another person's viewpoint during social interactions.
6–8 years	Uses a growing range of strategies to manage emotions, attention, and behavior. Increasing independence varies with the situation; adult support remains important.	and behavior. Increasing independence varies with the situation; adult support remains important.Friendships and group belonging become increasingly important. Children develop greater reciprocity, cooperation, negotiation, and conflict-resolution skills.	Increasingly considers others' thoughts and feelings, recognizes different reactions to the same situation, and uses perspective taking during social problem-solving.

Note. This table combines selected milestone examples with broader developmental patterns. It is an instructional summary, not a screening tool or a timetable that every child follows. Abilities overlap and vary across children and situations (CDC, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c; National Research Council, 1984; Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

Seeing the Progression

Across ages 3–8, the most important change is not simply that children acquire more individual social-emotional skills. Their abilities become **more coordinated, flexible, and independent**.

A 3-year-old may notice that a friend is crying and seek an adult for help. An older child may recognize *why* the friend is upset, consider the friend's perspective, manage their own response, and decide how to offer help. Similarly, children move from needing substantial adult assistance during peer conflicts toward increasingly using language, negotiation, perspective taking,

and emotional regulation to work through disagreements themselves.

> The overall developmental progression can be summarized as: **Adult-supported regulation and interaction → Increasing emotional understanding and cooperative play → Growing independence and reciprocal friendships → More complex regulation, perspective taking, and peer relationships**

This progression provides a way to understand **how social and emotional abilities change across childhood**, rather than treating development as a checklist of isolated behaviors.

Individual Variation in Social and Emotional Development

Social and emotional development follows general patterns, but **children do not all develop at the same rate or express their social-emotional abilities in the same way**. Developmental progress should not be viewed as a rigid timetable.

Differences in **temperament, experiences, relationships, culture, language, disability, and the social context** can influence how children express emotions, interact with others, respond to unfamiliar situations, and participate in groups. For example, one child may eagerly join a group of peers, while another may prefer to observe before participating. Both behaviors can reflect individual differences rather than differences in developmental ability.

A child's social-emotional abilities may also vary across settings and situations. A child who communicates confidently and regulates emotions independently in a familiar environment may need more support in a new or challenging situation.

Understanding individual variation helps educators focus on **patterns of development over time and within context**, rather than expecting every child to demonstrate the same behavior at the same age.

Putting the Progression Together

Putting the Progression Together: Social and Emotional Development Ages 3–8

Age	Emotional Understanding and Expression	Self-Regulation	Relationships & Peer Interaction	Empathy & Social Understanding
3 years	Identifies and expresses basic emotions; shows a wide range of feelings; often needs adult support to understand and manage strong emotions.	Relies heavily on adults to manage emotions and behavior; may have difficulty waiting, sharing, or adjusting when upset.	Notices other children and begins to join their play; takes turns with support; frequently needs adult help with conflicts.	Notices when others are upset and may show concern or try to comfort them.
4 years	Uses more words to describe feelings; begins to understand that people can feel differently about the same situation.	Begins using simple strategies to calm down with adult support; still has difficulty when emotions are strong.	Actively seeks other children for play; engages in more cooperative and imaginative play; begins to follow shared expectations.	Increasingly recognizes when another person is hurt or sad and may respond with comfort or help.
5 years	Understands a wider range of emotions; begins to explain why they feel a certain way.	Uses learned strategies to handle frustration and disappointment; begins to adjust behavior to different situations.	Participates in games with rules, takes turns, and cooperates with peers; shows increasing interest in friendships and group belonging.	Better understands why another person may feel a certain way and begins to consider another person's viewpoint during social interactions.
6–8 years	Increasingly recognizes that people can react differently to the same situation and develops understanding of more complex emotions.	Uses a growing range of strategies to manage emotions, attention, and behavior. Increasing independence varies with the situation; adult support remains important.	Friendships and group belonging become increasingly important. Children develop greater reciprocity, cooperation, negotiation, and conflict-resolution skills.	Increasingly considers others' thoughts and feelings, recognizes different reactions to the same situation, and uses perspective taking during social problem-solving.

Across ages 3–8, children move from needing substantial adult support toward increasingly independent emotional understanding, self-regulation, and relationships with others.

General developmental patterns, not a fixed timetable or screening tool. Abilities overlap and vary across children and situations.

Figure 4.1.3: Social and Emotional Development Across Ages 3–8. (OpenAI, 2026b.) Accessible text version

Vocabulary Alert

Social development: The developing ability to interact with others, form relationships, and participate in social groups.

Emotional development: The developing ability to recognize, express, understand, and manage emotions.

Self-regulation: The developing ability to manage emotions, attention, and behavior.

Co-regulation: Support from another person that helps a child manage emotions and behavior while developing greater independence.

Empathy: The ability to understand and respond to another person's feelings.

Perspective taking: The ability to consider another person's thoughts, feelings, experiences, or point of view.

Social competence: The developing ability to interact effectively with others and navigate social situations and relationships.

Exercise 4.1.1

Check Your Understanding

1. How do children's understanding and expression of emotions generally change from ages 3–8?
2. Describe the progression from **co-regulation to increasing self-regulation** during early and middle childhood.
3. How do children's friendships and peer relationships generally become more complex between ages 3 and 8?
4. What is the relationship between **empathy** and **perspective taking**?
5. Why should developmental progressions be viewed as general patterns rather than rigid age-based expectations?

Apply What You Know

During a disagreement over a game, a younger child begins crying and immediately asks the teacher to solve the problem. An older child tells a peer why they are upset, listens to the peer's explanation, and suggests that they take turns choosing what happens next. **What differences in social and emotional development do you notice between the two children? Identify at least two developing abilities demonstrated in the example.**

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 4.1.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Children move from identifying and expressing basic emotions toward understanding a wider range of emotions, explaining why emotions occur, and recognizing that people may experience different or mixed emotions in the same situation. They also become increasingly able to communicate feelings with words and adjust emotional expression to the situation.
2. Young children rely heavily on adults to help them manage emotions and behavior. With development, they begin using familiar strategies with adult guidance and gradually become more able to choose and use strategies independently. Even older children may still need adult support during challenging situations or strong emotions.
3. Children progress from beginning to participate in shared and cooperative play toward developing more stable and reciprocal friendships. They become increasingly able to cooperate, participate in groups, negotiate, compromise, resolve conflicts, and consider the needs and expectations of others.
4. Empathy involves understanding and responding to another person's feelings. Perspective taking involves considering what another person may see, know, think, want, or feel. As perspective taking develops, children become better able to understand why another person feels a certain way and respond appropriately.
5. Children do not all develop at the same rate or express their social-emotional abilities in the same way. Temperament, experiences, relationships, culture, language, disability, and social context can influence development. A child's abilities may also vary across different settings and situations.

Sample Answer to Apply What You Know

In this situation, the older child demonstrates self-regulation by communicating frustration, perspective taking by listening to the peer's explanation, and problem-solving by suggesting a solution. Seeking an adult's help is also an appropriate strategy at any age; the difference illustrated here is how independently each child coordinates several abilities during this particular disagreement.

The younger child's response is also developmentally meaningful. Seeking the teacher's help shows that the child still relies more heavily on **adult support or co-regulation** during a challenging social situation. Together, the examples illustrate the general progression from adult-supported regulation and conflict resolution toward increasingly independent regulation, perspective taking, negotiation, and problem-solving.

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4.2: Identity Formation in Early Childhood

Introduction

Section 4.1 examined how children's emotional understanding and relationships become increasingly complex. These changes also contribute to children's developing understanding of themselves and where they belong.

During childhood, children develop an increasingly complex understanding of **who they are**. They begin with relatively concrete descriptions of themselves and gradually develop a broader sense of identity that includes their abilities, interests, relationships, roles, and connections to family, culture, language, and community. Identity develops through children's experiences and interactions with others as they learn about themselves and their place in the social world.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 4.2: Describe identity formation in childhood.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Describe** how children's understanding of themselves develops from ages 3–8.
- **Differentiate** identity, self-concept, and self-esteem.
- **Explain** how relationships, family, culture, language, and community contribute to identity formation.
- **Describe** how children's growing awareness of similarities and differences contributes to their developing identities.

Understanding Identity, Self-Concept, and Self-Esteem

The terms **identity**, **self-concept**, and **self-esteem** are closely related, but they describe different aspects of children's developing sense of self.

Identity is a broad understanding of who a person is. A child's developing identity may include characteristics, abilities, interests, relationships, roles, and connections to family, culture, language, and community. Identity develops over time as children have new experiences and learn more about themselves and others.

Self-concept refers to the beliefs and descriptions children have about themselves—their answers to the question, **"Who am I?"** Young children often describe themselves using concrete and observable characteristics, such as their age, physical appearance, favorite activities, possessions, or things they can do. As children develop, their self-concepts become increasingly complex and may include abilities, personality characteristics, relationships, and social roles (Harter, 2012).

Self-esteem refers to a person's overall sense of worth and value. Children also evaluate particular abilities, such as drawing, reading, or making friends. These specific self-evaluations can contribute to self-esteem, but finding one activity difficult does not necessarily mean that a child feels negatively about themselves overall (Harter, 2012).

A simple way to distinguish the three concepts is:

Identity: Who am I as a person and as a member of different groups and communities?
Self-concept: What do I believe and know about myself?
Self-esteem: How do I feel about and evaluate myself?

These aspects of the self develop together. A child's experiences, relationships, successes, challenges, and interactions with others can contribute to both how the child **describes the self** and how the child **feels about the self**.

Developmental Connection

Identity is **developing rather than fixed** during childhood. Children are continually adding to and revising their understanding of

themselves as their thinking becomes more complex and their experiences and relationships expand. For this reason, educators should view children's statements about themselves as part of an ongoing developmental process rather than as permanent descriptions of who they are.

The Development of Identity and Self-Concept From Ages 3–8

Children's understanding of themselves becomes increasingly complex between ages 3 and 8. Young children often describe themselves using characteristics that are **concrete and observable**, such as their age, physical appearance, possessions, favorite activities, or things they can do. For example, a young child might describe herself by her age, hair color, and enjoyment of playing with blocks .

As children develop, they begin to include more information about their **abilities, preferences, relationships, and social roles**. A child might describe themselves as "a fast runner," "someone who loves dinosaurs," "a big sister," or "a good friend." These descriptions reflect children's growing ability to think about themselves in relation to both what they can do and the people around them.

During the early elementary years, children's self-concepts become increasingly detailed and organized. Children become better able to consider different aspects of themselves and recognize that they may have different abilities, feelings, and roles in different situations. Their developing cognitive and social abilities allow them to build a more complex understanding of **who they are and where they belong**. (Cimpian et al., 2017; Harter, 2012)

The Overall Progression

A simple way to think about the development of identity and self-concept from ages 3–8 is:

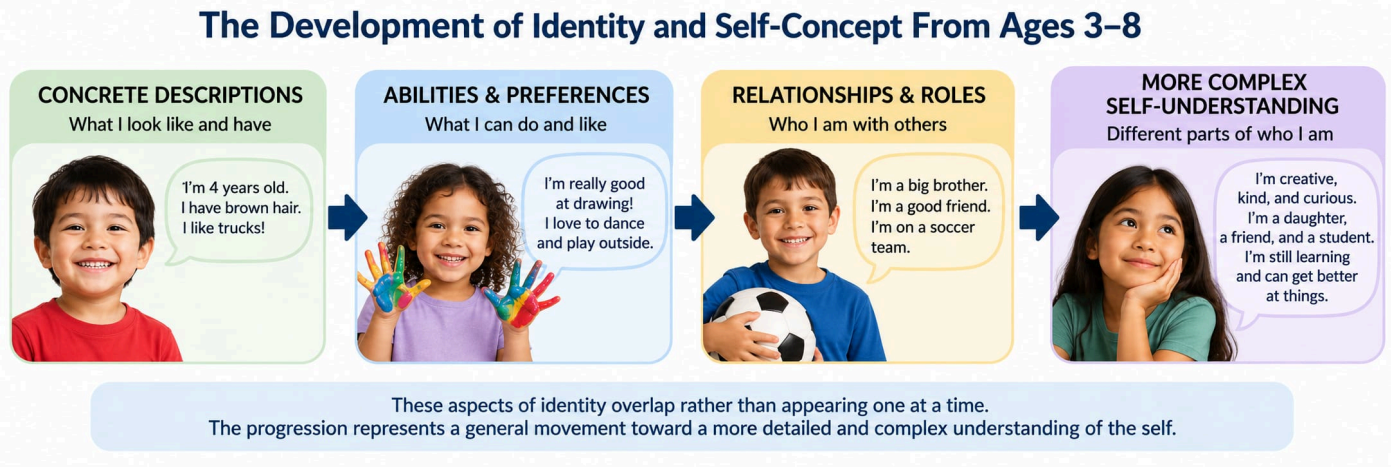


Figure 4.2.1: The development of identity and self-concept from concrete descriptions toward increasingly complex self-understanding. (*OpenAI, 2026a).*

These aspects of identity **overlap rather than appearing one at a time**. A child who describes themselves using physical characteristics may also talk about relationships, abilities, or group memberships. The progression represents a general movement toward a more detailed and complex understanding of the self rather than a rigid timetable.

From Highly Positive to More Differentiated Self-Descriptions

Young children often describe their abilities in very positive ways. A preschooler may confidently announce that they are the fastest runner, the best artist, or able to build the biggest tower. These highly positive descriptions can reflect children's developing ability to evaluate and compare their performance.

Example

Younger child: "I'm really good at everything in school!"

Developing complexity: "I'm really good at drawing, but reading some words is hard for me."

The second statement reflects a more differentiated self-concept. The child can recognize that abilities may vary across different areas while still maintaining a broader sense of self.

Developmental Reminder

The development of identity does not follow a fixed sequence or timetable. Children's self-understanding is influenced by their **development, experiences, relationships, and social and cultural contexts**. Children of the same age may therefore describe and understand themselves in very different ways.

Identity Develops Through Relationships

Children do not develop their identities in isolation. Their understanding of who they are is shaped, in part, through **interactions and relationships with other people**. Family members, educators, peers, and others communicate messages about children's abilities, characteristics, roles, and belonging through their words, actions, expectations, and responses.

Sociologist **Charles Horton Cooley** described this social influence through the concept of the **looking-glass self**. Cooley proposed that people develop aspects of their self-concept by imagining how others see them and interpreting others' responses. In other words, other people's reactions can become one source of information children use to understand themselves. This process does not create a perfect reflection of what others think; children interpret the responses they receive. (Cooley, 1902)

For young children, these interactions occur repeatedly during everyday experiences.

Consider the different messages communicated by statements such as:

"You're such a good artist!"
"You kept trying different ways to draw that until it worked."

Both statements are positive, but they communicate somewhat different information about the child. The first may contribute to an identity connected with **being an artist**, while the second draws attention to **effort, persistence, and learning**.

Children also receive messages about themselves through experiences that are not direct praise or criticism. Being invited into play, trusted with responsibility, listened to by an adult, represented in classroom materials, or included as a valued member of a group can contribute to children's developing understanding of **who they are and where they belong**.

Relationships Are an Influence, Not a Mirror

The looking-glass self does **not** mean that children's identities are simply determined by what other people say about them. Children actively interpret their experiences, and their developing identities are influenced by many interacting factors.

A child may receive different messages about themselves from different people and in different settings. For example, a child might see themselves as quiet in a large classroom group, talkative with family members, and confident while playing with a close friend. These experiences can become part of an increasingly complex understanding of self.

As children's relationships and social experiences expand, they have more opportunities to consider themselves from different perspectives. Their developing identities therefore reflect an ongoing interaction among **how children understand themselves, how they experience relationships with others, and the social contexts in which they participate**. (Brummelman &

Thomaes, 2017)

Developmental Connection

Relationships contribute to identity formation because they provide children with repeated experiences of **recognition, feedback, participation, and belonging**. As children develop, they increasingly integrate these experiences into their understanding of who they are.

Family, Culture, Language, and Community Shape Identity

Children develop their identities within the **families, cultures, languages, and communities** to which they belong. These contexts influence children's experiences, relationships, values, traditions, expectations, and sense of belonging. As children develop, they begin to understand not only themselves as individuals but also themselves as members of families and social groups. (Brummelman & Thomaes, 2017; Harter, 2012)

Family

Families are among children's earliest and most influential contexts for identity development. Through everyday interactions, routines, stories, traditions, celebrations, and relationships, children learn about **who they are and where they belong**.

Children may develop a sense of themselves through their roles within a family, such as being a sibling, grandchild, cousin, or other family member. They may also learn family stories, traditions, values, and expectations that connect them with people and experiences across generations.

Families take many forms, and children may define family and family roles in different ways. These experiences become part of the child's developing understanding of self.

Culture

Culture includes shared ways of living, communicating, understanding, and participating in the world. Cultural values and practices can influence how children understand relationships, independence, responsibility, cooperation, communication, and other aspects of themselves and their social worlds.

Children participate in culture rather than simply receiving it. Through interactions with family and community members, they learn cultural practices and meanings while developing their own understanding of how those experiences connect with who they are.

Children may also participate in **more than one cultural context**. The expectations and practices children experience at home, in an early childhood program or school, and within their communities may overlap in some ways and differ in others. These multiple experiences can all contribute to children's developing identities.

Language

Language can be an important part of identity and belonging. Through language, children communicate with others, participate in family and community life, hear stories, express ideas, and develop relationships.

Children who use more than one language may connect different languages with particular people, places, experiences, or parts of their lives. A home language can provide important connections to **family, culture, and community**, even as children learn and use additional languages in other settings.

For this reason, children's languages are more than communication tools. They can also be part of how children understand **who they are and where they belong**. (Office of Head Start, n.d.)

Community

As children's social worlds expand, their experiences within communities also contribute to identity formation. Children may develop connections with neighborhoods, schools, early childhood programs, cultural groups, teams, clubs, community organizations, or other groups in which they participate.

Through these experiences, children begin to recognize themselves as members of different groups and to understand that belonging can be connected with shared **relationships, experiences, practices, places, and interests**.

Identity Has Many Interconnected Parts

A child's identity cannot be understood through any single characteristic or group membership. Family, culture, language, community, relationships, abilities, interests, experiences, and other aspects of identity **interact with one another**.

For example, a child might understand herself as a sister, a Spanish and English speaker, a soccer player, a member of her extended family, someone who loves animals, and a kind friend. These are not separate identities that simply get added together. They are interconnected parts of the child's developing understanding of **who she is**.

Developmental Connection

From ages 3–8, children's growing cognitive and social abilities allow them to notice and describe increasingly complex aspects of themselves and their connections with others. As their experiences expand, children can begin incorporating **family relationships, cultural experiences, languages, communities, and group memberships** into their developing identities.

Identity formation therefore involves both **individual development and social experience**. Children develop an understanding of themselves while participating in the relationships and communities that give their experiences meaning.

Developing Awareness of Similarities and Differences

As children develop their identities, they also become increasingly aware of **how they are similar to and different from other people**. Children notice characteristics such as physical appearance, language, abilities, family roles and structures, interests, and other features of themselves and others.

Noticing similarities and differences is a normal part of children's developing understanding of the social world. Children use the information they observe and experience to make sense of **who they are, who other people are, and how people are connected**.

Children Notice and Ask Questions

Young children are active observers. They may notice differences in skin color, hair, clothing, languages, physical abilities, family structures, or other characteristics and ask direct questions about what they see (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

These questions can reflect children's efforts to understand and organize their experiences. Adults' responses provide additional information that children may incorporate into their developing understanding of themselves and others.

For example, a child might ask why another child uses a wheelchair, why a classmate speaks another language with a family member, or why another child's family looks different from their own. These moments provide opportunities to respond with **simple, accurate, and respectful information** while communicating that differences are a normal part of human diversity.

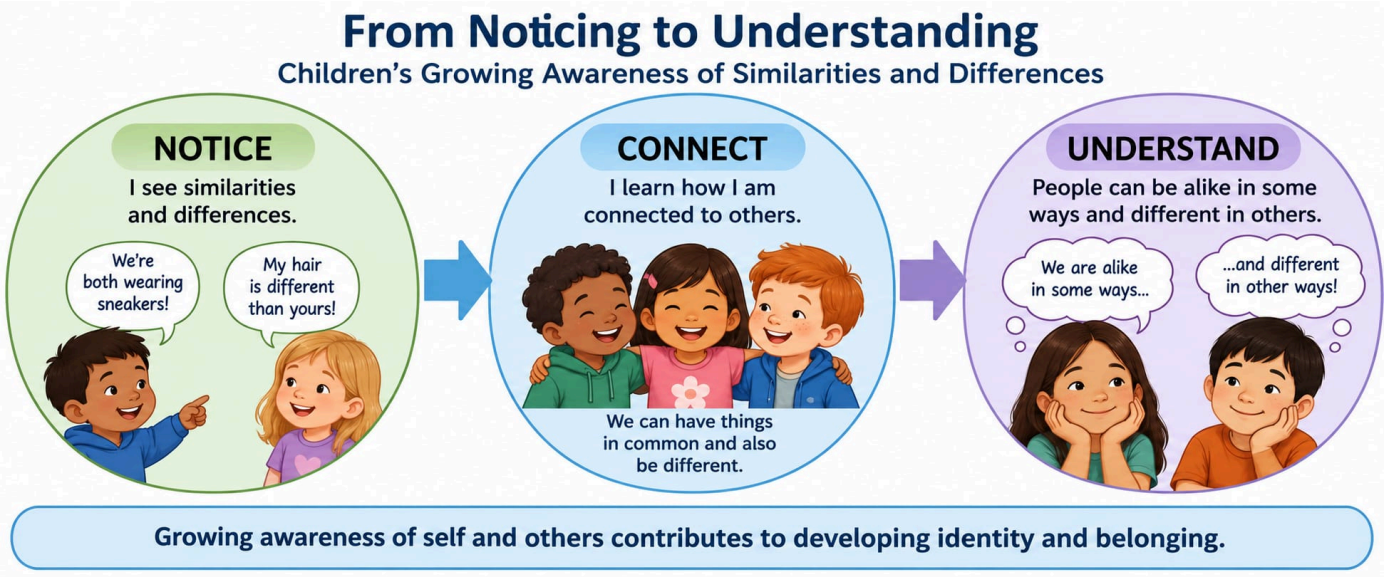


Figure 4.2.2: Children's growing awareness of similarities and differences contributes to developing identity and belonging (OpenAI, 2026b).

From Individual Characteristics to Group Membership

As children's thinking becomes more complex, they increasingly recognize that people can share characteristics, experiences, or identities with others. Children may begin to understand themselves as members of different groups connected with their **families, cultures, languages, communities, abilities, interests, or other aspects of identity**.

Group membership can contribute to a child's sense of **belonging**. A child may recognize, for example, "We speak the same language at home," "We both live with our grandparents," or "We're both on the same team." At the same time, children begin to understand that people within the same group are not all alike.

Children Learn Social Messages About Differences

Children do not develop their understanding of differences only through their own observations. They also encounter messages from **family members, peers, educators, books, media, communities, and the broader society**.

These messages can influence what children come to understand about which characteristics and groups are valued, represented, included, or excluded. As a result, children's developing identities are influenced not only by how they see themselves but also by the messages they encounter about people who are similar to and different from them (NAEYC, 2020).

Similarities and Differences Can Exist Together

As children's understanding develops, they become increasingly able to recognize that two people can be **similar in some ways and different in others**.

For example, two children may both enjoy building with blocks but speak different languages at home. Two siblings may share a family and cultural traditions but have very different interests and abilities. A child may share one part of their identity with one group of people and another part with a different group.

This growing understanding contributes to a more complex sense of identity. Children begin to recognize that **no single characteristic completely defines a person**.

Developmental Connection

Developing awareness of similarities and differences is connected to children's growing understanding of both **self and others**. As children gain experiences and their thinking becomes more complex, they can increasingly recognize individual

characteristics, group memberships, and the many ways these aspects of identity can overlap.

The goal is not for children to become unaware of differences. Rather, healthy identity development includes learning that **differences are meaningful parts of human identity and that people can differ while sharing belonging, relationships, and common experiences**.

Self-Esteem and Children's Evaluations of Themselves

As children develop a clearer understanding of themselves, they also evaluate their abilities and experiences. These evaluations may concern particular areas, such as schoolwork, physical activities, or friendships. Global self-esteem concerns their broader sense of worth as a person (Harter, 2012).

Children's self-evaluations develop through a combination of their own experiences and the responses they receive from others. Successes, challenges, relationships, feedback, and opportunities to participate and contribute can all provide information children use when evaluating themselves.

From Highly Positive to More Differentiated Self-Evaluations

Young children often have very positive views of themselves and their abilities. A preschooler may confidently announce, "I'm the fastest runner!" or "I'm the best at building!" Young children's evaluations of themselves are often highly positive and tend to become more realistic as they move toward middle childhood.

As children's thinking and experiences expand, their self-evaluations become increasingly **differentiated**. Rather than evaluating themselves in one broad way, children become better able to recognize that they may feel confident in some areas while finding other areas more challenging.

Example

"I'm really good at soccer, but catching is harder for me."

"Reading is hard sometimes, but I'm a really good storyteller."

These statements reflect a developing ability to evaluate different aspects of the self separately.

Experience and Feedback Matter

Children learn about their abilities partly through what happens when they participate in activities. Completing a challenging puzzle, learning to write a name, helping a younger child, joining a game, or practicing a new physical skill can provide experiences of **competence and accomplishment**.

Children also receive information about themselves through feedback from adults and peers. Feedback can draw children's attention to qualities such as effort, persistence, improvement, creativity, kindness, problem-solving, or cooperation.

Example

Compare "You're so smart" with "You tried several ways to solve that problem and kept going when the first one didn't work."

The second response gives the child specific information about **what they did** rather than assigning a broad label to who they are (American Psychological Association, 2024).

Comparison Becomes More Important

As children move through the early elementary years, they become increasingly able to compare their abilities and performance with those of other children. These comparisons can provide additional information for children's developing self-evaluations.

A child who once believed they were "the fastest runner" may begin to notice that some classmates run faster while others do not. Similarly, children may compare their reading, drawing, building, problem-solving, or social abilities with those of their peers.

These comparisons contribute to increasingly realistic and differentiated self-evaluations, but they can also affect how children feel about their abilities. Children's self-esteem therefore continues to develop through an interaction among **their experiences, their interpretations of those experiences, and the responses of other people**. (Harter, 2012)

Self-Esteem Is Not the Same as Being Good at Everything

Healthy self-esteem does not require children to believe they are successful at every activity. As children's self-understanding becomes more complex, they can begin to recognize both **strengths and areas that are still developing**.

> A child can think, "This is hard for me, and I am still learning," without concluding: "I'm not good at anything."

This distinction becomes increasingly important as children encounter more challenging tasks and become more aware of differences in abilities among themselves and their peers.

Developmental Connection

Across ages 3–8, children's self-evaluations generally become **more detailed, differentiated, and connected to their experiences**. Young children's highly positive evaluations gradually develop into a more complex understanding in which children can recognize different strengths, challenges, and areas for growth.

Self-esteem is therefore not a fixed trait. It develops alongside children's **self-concept, relationships, experiences, and growing ability to understand themselves in increasingly complex ways**.

Putting It Together: Identity Formation From Ages 3–8

Identity formation is an ongoing developmental process. Between ages 3 and 8, children move toward an increasingly complex understanding of **who they are, what they can do, how they relate to others, and where they belong**.

Children's developing identities are shaped by multiple influences working together. Their growing cognitive and social abilities allow them to think about themselves in new ways, while their experiences and relationships provide information they use to understand and evaluate themselves. These influences do not operate separately. They continually interact as children develop.

For example, imagine a child who is learning to read in English while also speaking Spanish with family members. The child may begin to understand themselves as a reader, a bilingual speaker, a student, and a member of a family in which Spanish is an important part of communication and connection. Experiences at home, at school, and in the community can all contribute to this developing sense of self.

Another child might understand themselves as a big brother, a skilled builder, a member of a soccer team, someone who needs extra help with writing, and a friend who makes others laugh. Each of these experiences contributes information the child can incorporate into an increasingly complex understanding of **who they are**.

Identity Is Developing, Contextual, and Complex

Three ideas are especially important when thinking about identity formation during childhood:

Identity is developing. Children's understanding of themselves changes as their thinking, abilities, relationships, and experiences change.

Identity is contextual. Children develop within families, cultures, languages, communities, and social relationships that contribute to how they understand themselves and where they belong.

Identity is complex. No single characteristic, ability, experience, or group membership defines a child. Multiple aspects of identity interact as children develop an increasingly detailed understanding of themselves.

The Big Picture

Across ages 3–8, children's identity development can be understood as a gradual movement toward a **more detailed, differentiated, and interconnected sense of self**. Children increasingly recognize their characteristics, abilities, interests, relationships, roles, and group memberships while also learning that they may be similar to others in some ways and different in others.

Identity formation is therefore more than learning to describe oneself.

> It is the developing understanding of: **Who am I? What am I like? What can I do? Who am I connected to? Where do I belong?**

The answers to these questions continue to develop throughout childhood and beyond.

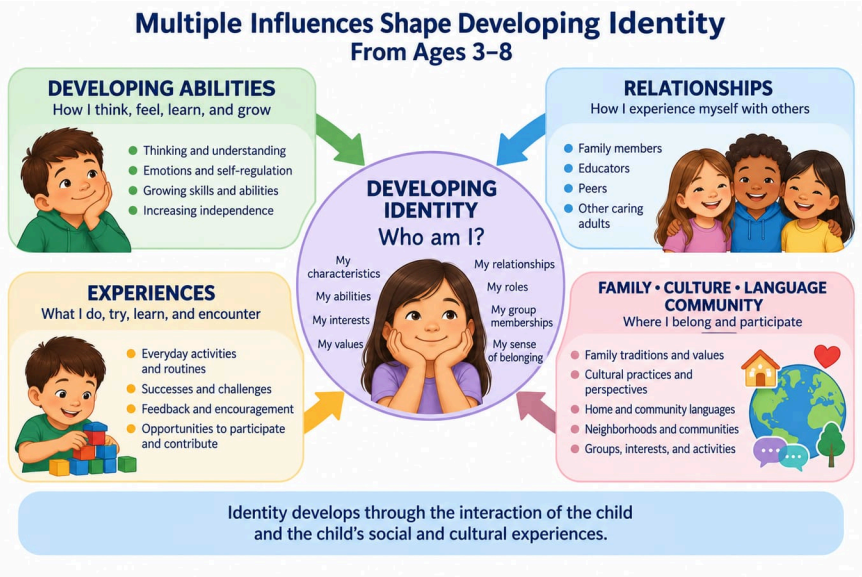


Figure 4.2.3: Multiple influences interact to shape children's developing identities from ages 3–8 (OpenAI, 2026c).

Vocabulary Alert

Identity: A developing understanding of who a person is, including characteristics, abilities, interests, relationships, roles, and connections to family, culture, language, and community.

Self-concept: The beliefs and descriptions a person has about themselves; how a child answers the question, **"Who am I?"**

Self-esteem: How a person evaluates and feels about themselves, including their characteristics and abilities.

Looking-glass self: Cooley's concept that people develop aspects of their self-concept by interpreting how others view and respond to them.

Belonging: The sense of being accepted, valued, and connected within relationships, groups, and communities.

Exercise 4.2.1

Check Your Understanding

1. How does children's self-concept generally change from ages 3–8?
    1. Children move from understanding themselves through relationships to describing only physical characteristics.
    2. Children move from relatively concrete descriptions toward increasingly complex understandings of their abilities, relationships, roles, and group memberships.
    3. Children develop a complete and stable identity by age 8.
    4. Children become less aware of similarities and differences as they get older.
2. What is the difference between self-concept and self-esteem?
    1. Self-concept is how children describe and understand themselves, while self-esteem is how they evaluate and feel about themselves.
    2. Self-concept develops during preschool, while self-esteem begins during middle childhood.
    3. Self-concept is shaped by other people, while self-esteem is not.
    4. Self-concept describes abilities, while self-esteem describes relationships.
3. Which statement best explains how relationships contribute to identity formation?
    1. Children's identities are determined by what adults tell them about themselves.
    2. Children develop identity independently and are minimally influenced by other people.
    3. Children interpret interactions and feedback from others as one source of information about themselves.
    4. Children develop positive identities only when adults frequently praise them.
4. Which example best demonstrates how family, culture, language, and community can contribute to identity formation?
    1. A child learns to cut with scissors during an art activity.
    2. A child identifies as a big sister, speaks Hmong with family members, and describes family celebrations that are important to her.
    3. A child completes a puzzle more quickly than a classmate.
    4. A child remembers the rules of a classroom game.
5. Why is children's awareness of similarities and differences important to identity development?
    1. Children need to learn that people within the same group are alike.
    2. Children should eventually stop noticing differences among people.
    3. Recognizing similarities, differences, and group connections contributes to children's understanding of themselves, others, and belonging.
    4. Awareness of differences is unrelated to children's understanding of themselves.

Apply What You Know

6. Mateo, age 7, tells his teacher: "I'm good at building things, and I'm a big brother. We speak Spanish at my grandma's house. Reading is harder for me, but I'm getting better. Jayden and I are best friends even though we like different things." What does Mateo's statement reveal about his developing identity? Identify **at least three aspects of identity formation** represented in his description and explain what they show about his developing understanding of himself.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 4.2.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. 2. Children generally move from relatively concrete descriptions of themselves toward more detailed and complex understandings that can include abilities, preferences, relationships, roles, and group memberships.
2. 1. **Self-concept** involves what children believe and understand about themselves, while **self-esteem** involves how they evaluate and feel about themselves.
3. 3. Relationships provide children with experiences and feedback that they interpret as they develop their understanding of themselves. Relationships influence identity, but they do not simply determine it.
4. 2. The child's descriptions of being a sister, using a family language, and participating in family traditions illustrate how family, language, and culture can become interconnected parts of developing identity.
5. 3. As children notice similarities and differences, they develop a more complex understanding of themselves in relation to other people and the groups and communities to which they belong.

Answer to Apply What You Know

6. Answers will vary. Mateo demonstrates several aspects of developing identity. For example, he identifies an **ability** (building), a **family role** (big brother), a connection between **language and family** (speaking Spanish with his grandmother), an increasingly differentiated understanding of his abilities (recognizing that reading is challenging while also recognizing improvement), and a **peer relationship** (friendship with Jayden). He also recognizes that people can be connected while having different interests. Together, these statements demonstrate an increasingly complex and interconnected understanding of **who he is, what he can do, who he is connected to, and where he belongs**.

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4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

Introduction

Theories of social and emotional development provide different ways to understand **children's needs, relationships, emotions, behavior, and developing sense of competence**. Rather than providing one explanation for development, theories offer different lenses that can help early childhood educators interpret what they observe and make intentional decisions about how to support children.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 4.3: Apply theory related to social and emotional development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- **Explain** how selected theories contribute to understanding social and emotional development.
- **Apply** theoretical perspectives to social and emotional development from ages 3–8.
- **Use** theory to interpret children's behavior, relationships, and developmental needs.
- **Identify** teaching practices that support children's social and emotional development based on theoretical perspectives.

Theory as a Lens for Understanding Social and Emotional Development

Young children's social and emotional development is complex. The same behavior can have many possible influences, including a child's developmental abilities, needs, relationships, previous experiences, temperament, and the situation in which the behavior occurs.

Developmental theories give educators **lenses for thinking about what they observe**. Each theory draws attention to different aspects of development. One theory might lead an educator to consider whether a child's needs are being met, while another might focus attention on relationships, developing competence, or the child's experiences with adults.

In this section, we will use four theoretical perspectives that offer particularly useful lenses for understanding social and emotional development:

- **Abraham Maslow — Humanistic Theory:** considers how needs such as physical well-being, safety, belonging, and esteem can influence development and participation.
- **Erik Erikson — Psychosocial Theory:** considers the developmental challenges children experience as they develop initiative, competence, and a sense of themselves in relation to others.
- **Sigmund Freud — Psychodynamic Theory:** provides a historical perspective emphasizing early experiences and the ways adults respond to children's developing needs and behaviors.
- **John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth — Attachment Theory:** considers how responsive relationships and emotional security support exploration, relationships, and developing regulation.

These perspectives differ in their historical purposes and research support. In particular, Freud’s psychosexual theory is examined as a historical contribution rather than an evidence-based explanation for interpreting children’s classroom behavior.

Theory Is a Lens—Not a Label

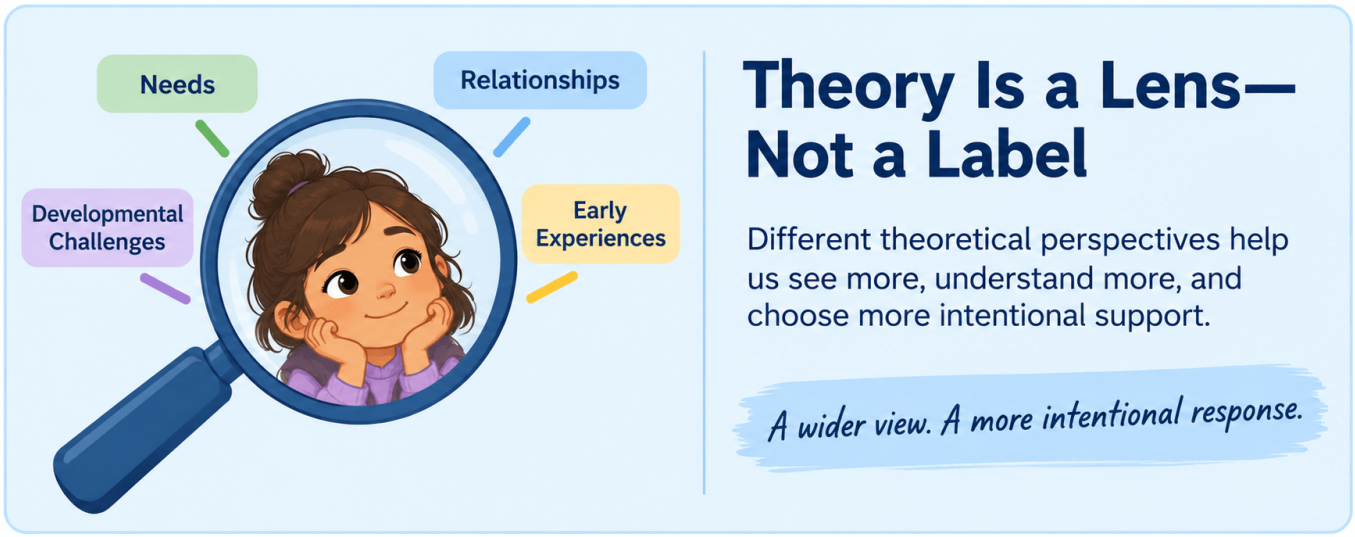


Figure 4.3.1: Theory Is a Lens—Not a Label. Different theoretical perspectives help educators consider multiple influences and make more intentional decisions about supporting children (OpenAI, 2026g).

A theory can help an educator ask better questions about children's development, but it should not be used to label a child or assume that one theory explains a child's behavior. Educators combine knowledge of theory with what they know about **child development, the individual child, and the child's family, culture, language, and community** when making decisions about how to respond and provide support.

Maslow's Humanistic Perspective: Needs Matter

Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) was a humanistic theorist who focused on the whole person and the needs that motivate human behavior. Maslow proposed that people have different types of needs, including **physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization** (Maslow, 1943).

For early childhood educators, Maslow's theory provides a useful lens for considering how children's **physical well-being, sense of safety, belonging, and feelings of competence** may influence their emotions, relationships, participation, and learning.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow originally organized human needs into a **hierarchy**, commonly represented as a pyramid. Physiological needs form the foundation, followed by safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). The model suggests that more basic needs often demand attention before higher-level needs become a person's primary motivation.

The hierarchy should not be interpreted as a rigid staircase. In his original 1943 article, Maslow acknowledged exceptions to the proposed order and explained that several needs can influence behavior at the same time (Maslow, 1943).

Important:

The hierarchy is the theoretical model students should know. In practice, educators can think about these needs as interacting influences rather than a checklist that must be completed from bottom to top.

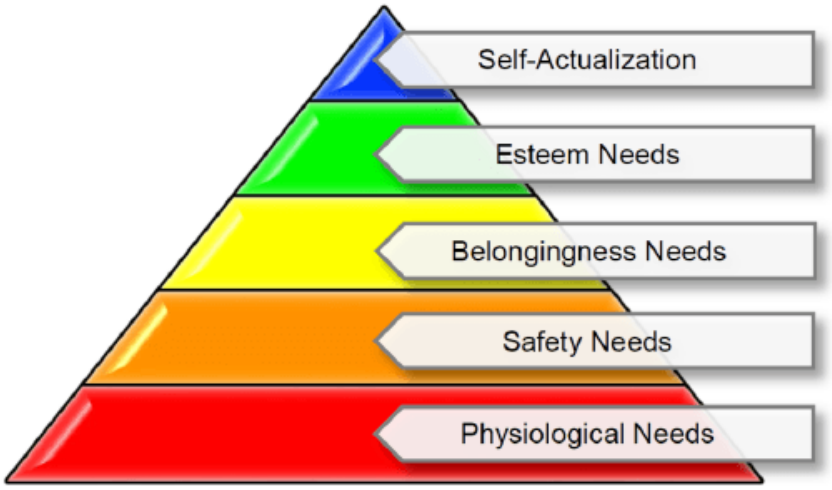


Figure 4.3.2: Humanistic Theory © Deirdre Budzyna via. ROTEL is licensed under a CC BY-SA (Attribution ShareAlike) license

Needs That Matter in Early Childhood

Although Maslow's theory describes needs across the lifespan, several are especially useful for understanding children ages 3–8.

Table 4.3.1: Needs in Early Childhood

Need	What It Can Mean for a Young Child	How Educators Can Provide Support
Physiological needs	Children need food, water, rest, movement, physical comfort, and opportunities to use the bathroom.	Attend to children's physical needs and recognize that hunger, fatigue, discomfort, or the need for movement may affect behavior and participation.
Safety needs	Children need to experience physical and emotional safety, predictability, and appropriate boundaries.	Create safe environments, establish predictable routines, prepare children for transitions, and respond calmly and consistently.
Love and belonging	Children need caring relationships and opportunities to experience acceptance and connection with adults and peers.	Build responsive relationships, help children enter play and groups, create a classroom community, and communicate that each child belongs.
Esteem needs	Children need opportunities to experience competence, contribution, and growing confidence in what they can do.	Provide achievable challenges, meaningful responsibilities, choices, encouragement, and opportunities for children to recognize their growing abilities.
Self-actualization	Maslow described this as developing one's potential and continuing to grow.	Provide opportunities for creativity, exploration, problem-solving, interests, and increasingly independent learning.

Note. Needs are based on Maslow (1943); examples illustrate possible applications in early childhood practice.

From Hierarchy to an Interactive Lens

Maslow's hierarchy helps identify different types of human needs. When applying the theory to young children, however, it can be useful to consider how these needs **interact in everyday experiences**.

A child might feel connected to a teacher while also being hungry. Another child might feel physically safe but uncertain about belonging to a peer group. A child can feel proud of completing a difficult task while also needing reassurance during an unfamiliar transition.

Maslow's Lens

What needs might be influencing this child's experience right now?

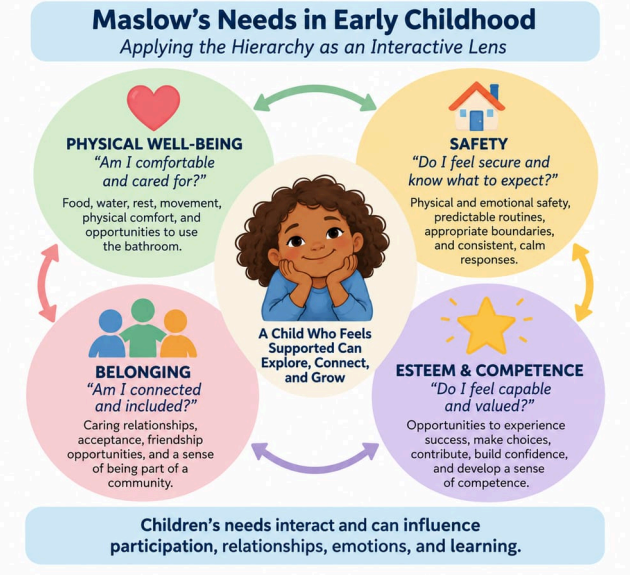


Figure 4.3.3: Applying Maslow's Hierarchy as an Interactive Lens. Children's needs for physical well-being, safety, belonging, and esteem can interact and influence participation, relationships, emotions, and learning (OpenAI, 2026a).

Looking Beyond the Behavior

Consider a five-year-old who arrives at school and refuses to join morning activities. The child stays close to the teacher, becomes upset when other children approach, and pushes away materials the teacher offers.

It might be tempting to describe the child as **uncooperative** or **not ready to participate**. Maslow's perspective encourages the educator to look beyond the behavior and consider possible needs.

The educator might ask:

- Is the child hungry, tired, uncomfortable, or in need of movement?
- Does the child feel physically and emotionally safe?
- Is the child seeking connection with a trusted adult?
- Does the child feel that they belong in the group?
- Does the activity provide an accessible way for the child to participate and experience success?

These questions do not tell the educator **why** the child is behaving this way. Instead, they help the educator consider possibilities, gather additional information, and choose a supportive response.

From Theory to Teaching Practice

Using Maslow's theory does not mean educators should assume that every challenging behavior results from an unmet need. It means considering children's needs as **one possible influence** on what they observe.

For example, an educator might:

Observe: A seven-year-old repeatedly gives up when asked to write independently and says, "I'm bad at this."

Use Maslow's lens: The educator considers the child's need to experience competence and esteem rather than assuming the child is simply refusing to work.

Support: The educator adjusts the task so the child can begin successfully, acknowledges specific effort and progress, and provides enough assistance for the child to continue independently.

Observe again: The educator watches to see whether the support changes the child's willingness to participate and considers what additional information may be needed.

Developmental Connection

Children's social, emotional, and learning experiences are interconnected. A child who feels **safe, connected, and capable** may be better able to explore, interact with others, persist through challenges, and participate in learning. Educators cannot control every circumstance affecting a child's needs, but they can create classroom environments and relationships that promote **safety, belonging, and opportunities for competence.**

Erikson's Psychosocial Perspective: Developing Through Relationships and Experiences

Erik Erikson (1902–1994) developed a psychosocial theory that describes development across the entire lifespan. Erikson proposed that people encounter different **psychosocial challenges** as they develop. Each challenge involves two competing possibilities, such as trust and mistrust or autonomy and shame and doubt. (Erikson, 1963).

Erikson described **eight stages of psychosocial development**, beginning in infancy and continuing through older adulthood. Although each stage is associated with a particular period of life, development is not simply finished when a stage ends. Earlier psychosocial themes can continue to influence development and may be encountered again as people experience new relationships, environments, and challenges.

Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development

Table 4.3.2: Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development

Stage	Approximate Period	Psychosocial Challenge	Developmental Focus
1	Infancy	**Trust vs. Mistrust**	Developing security and trust in relationships
2	Toddlerhood	**Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt**	Developing independence and confidence in doing things for oneself
3	Preschool years	**Initiative vs. Guilt**	Developing initiative, purpose, and willingness to act on ideas
4	School-age years	**Industry vs. Inferiority**	Developing competence and confidence in one's abilities
5	Adolescence	**Identity vs. Role Confusion**	Developing a sense of identity and direction
6	Early adulthood	**Intimacy vs. Isolation**	Developing close, reciprocal relationships
7	Middle adulthood	**Generativity vs. Stagnation**	Contributing to others and future generations

Stage	Approximate Period	Psychosocial Challenge	Developmental Focus
8	Older adulthood	**Integrity vs. Despair**	Reflecting on one's life with a sense of meaning and acceptance

Note. This table summarizes Erikson's theoretical stages. The periods are approximate, and the stages are not diagnostic categories or requirements that children complete on a fixed schedule (Erikson, 1963).

The eight stages show that Erikson viewed social and emotional development as a **lifelong process**. Childhood experiences are important, but development continues through adolescence and adulthood.

Our Focus: The First Four Stages

Because this text focuses on development from **ages 3–8**, we will examine Erikson's first four stages more closely. **Trust vs. Mistrust** and **Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt** begin before age three but provide important foundations for later social and emotional development. **Initiative vs. Guilt** and **Industry vs. Inferiority** overlap directly with the ages emphasized in this text.

The remaining four stages occur primarily during **adolescence and adulthood** and are included to show how childhood development fits within Erikson's larger lifespan theory.

Trust vs. Mistrust: Developing Security in Relationships

Erikson's first psychosocial stage begins during **infancy**. Infants depend on caregivers to meet their needs for food, comfort, safety, and affection. Erikson proposed that consistent and responsive care contributes to a developing sense that other people can be trusted and that the world is generally safe and predictable (Erikson, 1963). This stage emphasizes dependable caregiving, comfort, and affection in the development of trust.

Although this stage begins in infancy, **trust continues to matter for children ages 3–8**. Children encounter new teachers, peers, classrooms, expectations, and transitions. They continue learning whether adults are dependable and whether they can seek help when they need it.

Early childhood educators can support developing trust by:

- Responding to children's needs and distress with care;
- Following through on what they say;
- Maintaining predictable routines;
- Preparing children for changes and transitions;
- Being emotionally available when children seek support; and
- Creating an environment in which children know they can ask for help.

Erikson's Trust Lens

Can this child depend on the people and environment around them?

Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt: "I Can Do It"

During **toddlerhood**, children increasingly want to do things for themselves. They make choices, explore their surroundings, attempt self-help tasks, and exercise increasing control over their bodies and actions.

Erikson proposed that patient encouragement of children's efforts can support **autonomy**, while excessive restriction, unrealistic expectations, or discouragement can contribute to feelings of **shame and doubt** (Erikson, 1963).

Autonomy does not stop developing when toddlerhood ends. Children ages 3–8 continue becoming more independent as they dress themselves, manage belongings, make choices, solve problems, complete classroom responsibilities, and attempt increasingly complex tasks.

Educators can support autonomy by:

- Offering meaningful and developmentally appropriate choices;
- Allowing children sufficient time to try tasks independently;
- Encouraging self-help skills;
- Providing assistance without immediately taking over;
- Recognizing children's growing capabilities; and
- Responding to mistakes without embarrassment or shame.

Example: A four-year-old struggles to zip a coat and says, **"I can do it!"**

It might be faster for an adult to immediately zip the coat. Erikson's theory encourages the educator to consider:

Erikson's Autonomy Lens

How can I provide enough support for this child to succeed without taking away the opportunity for independence?

Important:

Supporting autonomy does not mean children should do everything independently. Children need different levels of assistance. The goal is to provide appropriate support while preserving opportunities for children to **participate, make choices, and experience growing independence.**

Initiative vs. Guilt: "I Have Ideas"

During the **preschool years**, children increasingly initiate activities, create plans, make choices, invent play scenarios, ask questions, and attempt to influence what happens around them.

Erikson described this psychosocial challenge as **initiative vs. guilt**. When adults provide appropriate opportunities for children to initiate and act on their ideas, children can develop a stronger sense of purpose and initiative. When children's efforts are repeatedly dismissed, ridiculed, or unnecessarily controlled, children may become hesitant about acting on their ideas (Erikson, 1963). This stage emphasizes the importance of supporting children's efforts while helping them make realistic and appropriate choices.

Educators can support initiative by:

- Allowing children to make meaningful choices;
- Providing opportunities to plan and lead play;
- Listening seriously to children's ideas;
- Encouraging curiosity and questions;
- Allowing reasonable experimentation and mistakes;
- Helping children modify plans when something does not work; and
- Setting necessary limits without shaming children for their ideas.

Example: A child announces, **"I'm going to make a zoo for all the animals!"** and begins moving blocks and other materials across the classroom.

Rather than immediately stopping the child's plan because the materials are being used differently than expected, the educator can ask:

> How can I support this child's initiative while helping them work within appropriate classroom boundaries?

The educator might help the child think through the plan, determine which materials can be used, invite other children to participate, or establish reasonable boundaries for where the zoo can be constructed.

Industry vs. Inferiority: "I Am Becoming Capable"

As children enter the **school-age years**, they become increasingly interested in learning skills, accomplishing tasks, producing things, and demonstrating what they can do. Erikson described this psychosocial challenge as **industry vs. inferiority**.

Children become increasingly aware of their abilities and may compare their performance with expectations or with the abilities of peers. Experiences of **practice, progress, contribution, and accomplishment** can support a developing sense of competence. Repeated experiences of failure, ridicule, or expectations that are consistently beyond a child's abilities can contribute to feelings of inferiority (Erikson, 1963).

This stage connects children's growing responsibility, skill development, perseverance, and recognition for accomplishment.

For educators working with children ages 6–8, providing opportunities to experience **authentic competence** is particularly important.

Educators can support industry by:

- Providing challenging but achievable tasks;
- Giving children opportunities to practice developing skills;
- Recognizing specific effort, strategies, improvement, and accomplishment;
- Avoiding unnecessary comparisons among children;
- Helping children approach mistakes as part of learning;
- Providing meaningful classroom responsibilities; and
- Creating multiple ways for children to contribute and demonstrate competence.

Example: A seven-year-old is working on a project, looks at another child's work, and says, **"Mine isn't good. I'm bad at this."**

Instead of simply responding, "*No, you're not. Yours is great!*" an educator can help the child recognize specific progress, identify a strategy for the difficult part, and experience success through continued effort.

> Erikson's theory encourages the educator to ask: **How can I help this child experience genuine competence rather than simply telling the child they are capable?**

From Trust to Industry

Erikson's first four psychosocial stages illustrate an expanding developmental progression:

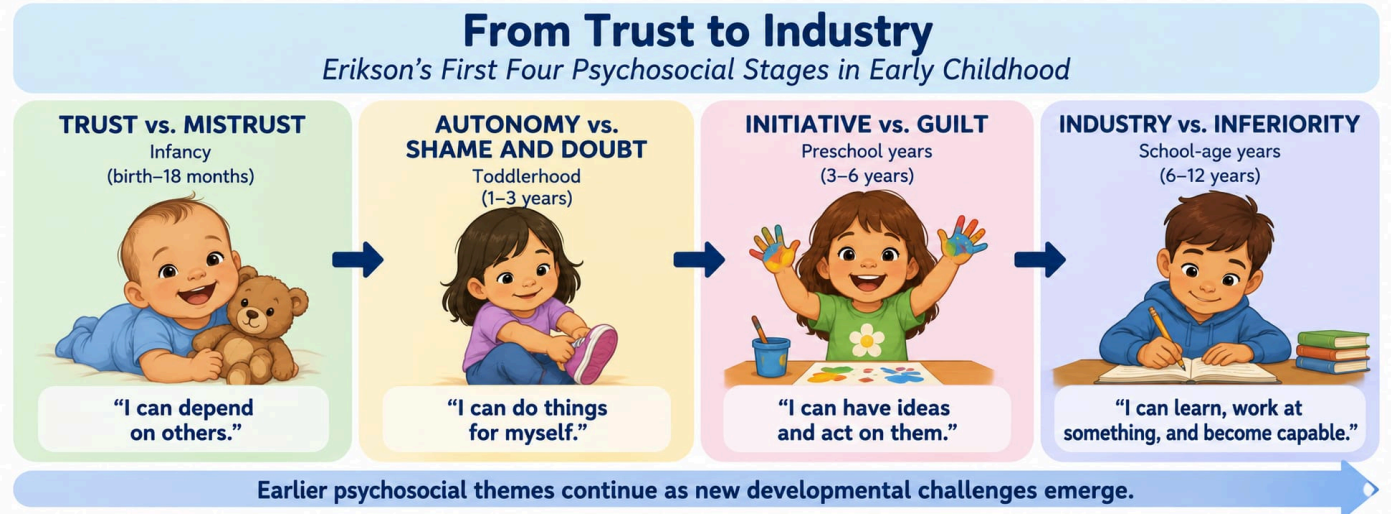


Figure 4.3.4: From Trust to Industry. Erikson's first four psychosocial stages show developing trust, autonomy, initiative, and competence. Earlier psychosocial themes continue as new developmental challenges emerge (OpenAI, 2026d).

These stages should not be interpreted to mean that children finish developing trust before developing autonomy, or finish developing autonomy before developing initiative. Instead, **earlier psychosocial themes continue to matter as children encounter new developmental challenges**.

A seven-year-old, for example, may be working toward greater competence while also needing to trust a new teacher, develop independence in a new classroom routine, and feel confident enough to initiate a friendship.

Erikson as a Lens

Erikson's theory gives educators a way to consider how children's experiences with **relationships, independence, initiative, and competence** may influence their social and emotional development.

When a child is struggling, the theory does not tell the educator exactly why the behavior is occurring. Instead, it provides questions that can help the educator interpret what they observe.

Erikson's Lens

What developmental challenge might this child be working through, and how can my response support trust, autonomy, initiative, or competence?

Looking Beyond the Behavior

Consider a six-year-old who begins building a complicated structure with blocks. The structure repeatedly falls. After several attempts, the child knocks the remaining blocks over and says, **"I can't do anything right."**

An educator might initially focus on the child's frustration or the knocked-over blocks. Erikson's lens encourages the educator to consider the child's developing sense of **initiative and competence**.

The educator might ask:

- Does the child have opportunities to make plans and carry out their own ideas?
- Is the challenge achievable with appropriate support?
- How does the child respond to mistakes and difficulty?
- What kinds of feedback has the child received about their abilities?
- How can I support the child without taking over the task?

These questions do not establish **why** the child responded this way. Instead, they help the educator consider how the experience may relate to the child's developing initiative and competence and identify possible ways to provide support.

From Theory to Teaching Practice

Erikson's theory can help educators move from simply observing behavior to considering how their responses may support children's psychosocial development.

For example:

Observe: A six-year-old attempts a difficult block structure, becomes frustrated, knocks it down, and says, "I can't do anything right."

Use Erikson's lens: The educator considers the child's developing initiative and sense of competence.

Support: Rather than rebuilding the structure for the child or offering only general praise, the educator acknowledges the frustration, helps the child identify what worked, and offers enough assistance for the child to try another strategy.

Observe again: The educator watches how the child responds. Does the child attempt the task again? Seek assistance? Try a different strategy? Continue to avoid similar challenges?

Theory has not given the educator a diagnosis or a single explanation for the child's behavior. Instead, it has helped the educator **ask a developmental question, select an intentional response, and observe what happens next**.

Developmental Connection

Erikson's theory emphasizes that children's social and emotional development occurs through their experiences with **people, expectations, challenges, and opportunities**. Educators can support this development by creating relationships and environments in which children can depend on others, exercise growing independence, act on their ideas, make mistakes, practice skills, and experience authentic competence.

Freud's Psychodynamic Perspective: Early Experiences Matter

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) developed a psychodynamic theory that emphasized the importance of **early childhood experiences** in personality and emotional development. Freud proposed that children's experiences during the early years, including how adults respond to their needs and behavior, can influence later development (Spielman et al., 2020).

Many specific parts of Freud's theory have been criticized and are difficult to test scientifically. However, his emphasis on the importance of early childhood experiences influenced later theories of development and helped draw attention to the idea that experiences during childhood matter.

For early childhood educators, Freud's theory is most useful as a **historical lens for considering children's developing needs, impulses, and behaviors—and how adults respond to them**.

Id, Ego, and Superego

Freud proposed that personality includes three interacting components: the **id, ego, and superego** (Spielman et al., 2020).

Table 4.3.3: Freud's Id, Ego, and Superego

Component	Freud's Description	Simple Way to Think About It
Id	Present from birth and driven by immediate biological urges and pleasure	"I want it now."

Component	Freud's Description	Simple Way to Think About It
Ego	Develops as children interact with the world and learn to manage desires within reality	"What can I actually do?"
Superego	Develops as children begin to internalize expectations, values, and rules	"What am I supposed to do?"

Young children are still developing the ability to **wait, manage impulses, consider expectations, and regulate their behavior**. Although contemporary explanations of self-regulation extend far beyond Freud's model, his theory was an early attempt to explain how internal desires and external expectations interact.

Note. Summary of Freud's theoretical concepts, as described in Spielman et al. (2020).

Freud's Stages of Psychosexual Development

Freud proposed that children move through a series of **psychosexual stages** in which different areas of the body and developmental experiences become important. He called the stages **oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital** (Spielman et al., 2020).

Freud believed that experiences during these stages could influence later personality. Many of these specific claims are **not supported by contemporary developmental research**, so educators should not use Freud's stages to predict children's later personalities or interpret ordinary developmental behavior as evidence of a psychological problem.

The stages can, however, provide a historical framework for considering an idea that remains important in early childhood education: **how adults respond to children's developmentally expected needs and behaviors matters.**

Connecting Freud's Stages to Early Childhood Practice

The following table places Freud's historical descriptions beside contemporary developmental observations and teaching responses. The classroom examples do not demonstrate that Freud's stages are correct, and the recommended practices do not depend on accepting his explanations.

Table 4.3.4: Freud's Psychosexual Stages and Early Childhood Practice

Freud's Stage	Developmental Focus in Freud's Theory	What Educators May Observe	Implications for Practice
Oral Stage	Freud associated infancy with needs and experiences centered around the mouth.	Infants and young toddlers commonly explore objects with their mouths.	Provide clean, developmentally appropriate materials that are safe to mouth and keep choking hazards out of reach. Respond to oral exploration as a developmental behavior rather than misbehavior.
Anal Stage	Freud associated this period with increasing control over elimination and toilet learning.	Toddlers and young children develop toileting independence at different rates and may have accidents.	Approach toileting patiently and respectfully. Avoid punishment, embarrassment, or shame related to accidents or readiness.

Freud's Stage	Developmental Focus in Freud's Theory	What Educators May Observe	Implications for Practice
Phallic Stage	Freud proposed that pleasure becomes focused on the genitals and described conflicts involving children's feelings toward their parents.	Young children may become curious about bodies, notice physical differences, and ask questions.	Respond calmly and matter-of-factly. Use accurate, developmentally appropriate language and teach appropriate privacy and boundaries without creating unnecessary shame.
Latency Stage	Freud proposed a period of relative quieting of sexual interests, with greater attention to peers, school, and other activities.	School-age children become increasingly involved in friendships, group activities, interests, and developing skills.	Provide opportunities for friendship, cooperation, group participation, interests, and developing competence.
Genital Stage	Freud associated this stage with puberty and later sexual development.	This stage begins beyond the primary age range emphasized in this text.	Recognize it as part of Freud's complete theory; detailed application is beyond the ages emphasized in this section.

Note. Historical descriptions are summarized from Spielman et al. (2020). Classroom observations and teaching responses are instructional applications, not evidence validating Freud's stages.

Responding Without Shame

One useful connection between Freud's historical theory and early childhood practice is the importance of considering **how adults respond to children's developmentally expected behavior**.

Consider a three-year-old who has been successfully using the toilet but has an accident during a busy classroom transition.

An adult might respond: "You're a big kid. You know better than that."

Another response might be: "Your clothes are wet. Let's get you changed."

Both responses address the same situation, but the child's **emotional experience of the adult's response is very different**.

A supportive response addresses the child's needs while protecting dignity. The educator can help the child change clothes, respond matter-of-factly to the accident, and continue supporting developing toileting independence. Respectful guidance protects children's dignity and supports learning without humiliation or shame (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Freud's theory historically drew attention to experiences surrounding toilet learning. Contemporary early childhood practice does not require accepting Freud's explanation of the anal stage to recognize an important principle:

> Children can be guided and supported **without being embarrassed or shamed for developmentally expected needs, mistakes, or behaviors.**

Developmental Behaviors Need Developmental Responses

The same principle can be applied to other developmental experiences.

An infant who repeatedly puts a toy into their mouth is not being disobedient. The environment should provide **safe opportunities**

for exploration.

A preschooler who asks a question about bodies does not need an alarmed or shaming response. The educator can answer simply and accurately while reinforcing **privacy and appropriate boundaries**.

A young child who struggles to wait for a turn is still developing the ability to manage impulses. Rather than expecting adult-level self-control, educators can provide **clear expectations, modeling, reminders, and support**.

In each situation, educators consider both **what the child is developing and how the adult's response may affect the child's experience**.

Freud's Theory in Contemporary Practice

Freud's theory has important limitations. His ideas were developed without the types of systematic developmental research used today, and many of his specific explanations about psychosexual development are difficult to test scientifically (Spielman et al., 2020).

For this reason, early childhood educators should **not use Freud's theory to diagnose children, predict later personality, or assume that ordinary developmental behaviors have hidden psychological meanings**.

Instead, Freud is useful for understanding the **history of developmental theory** and for recognizing several ideas that influenced later thinking:

- Early childhood experiences can matter;
- Children's behavior occurs within relationships with adults;
- Young children are developing ways of managing impulses and expectations; and
- Adults' responses become part of children's early experiences.

> **Freud's Lens**
>
> How might my response to this child's developmental needs and behaviors affect the child's experience?

Developmental Connection

Freud's theory reminds educators to consider children's behavior within a **developmental context**. Contemporary knowledge of child development provides stronger evidence for understanding behaviors such as mouthing objects, toilet learning, body curiosity, and developing self-regulation. Freud's historical contribution is his emphasis on the importance of **early experiences and adult responses**.

For educators, the practical message is not to interpret children's behavior through Freud's theory alone. It is to respond to developmentally expected behavior with **safety, respect, appropriate guidance, and as little unnecessary shame as possible**.

Bowlby and Ainsworth's Attachment Perspective: Relationships Provide a Secure Base

John Bowlby (1907–1990) developed attachment theory to explain the importance of children's early emotional relationships with caregivers. **Mary Ainsworth (1913–1999)** expanded attachment theory through observational research examining how young children use caregivers for security while exploring their environments (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988).

Attachment theory proposes that young children form emotional bonds with familiar caregivers who provide care, comfort, and protection. When children experience a caregiver as available and responsive, the relationship can provide a sense of security

from which the child can **explore, interact with others, and seek comfort when needed**.

Although attachment theory began with a focus on infants and their primary caregivers, the central idea remains relevant as children grow: **supportive relationships can provide emotional security while children develop increasing independence**.

Secure Base and Safe Haven

Two important concepts in attachment theory are **secure base** and **safe haven**.

A **secure base** is a trusted relationship that gives a child the confidence to explore (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988). A young child may move away from a familiar adult to investigate materials, interact with peers, or try something new while knowing that support is available if needed.

A **safe haven** refers to seeking a trusted caregiver for comfort, reassurance, or protection when distressed, frightened, hurt, or overwhelmed (Bowlby, 1988).

These functions work together:

SECURE BASE
I feel safe enough to explore.

↕

SAFE HAVEN
I can return for comfort and support when I need it.

A child may move between **seeking support and exploring independently** many times throughout the day. Increasing independence does not mean that children no longer need relationships with responsive adults.

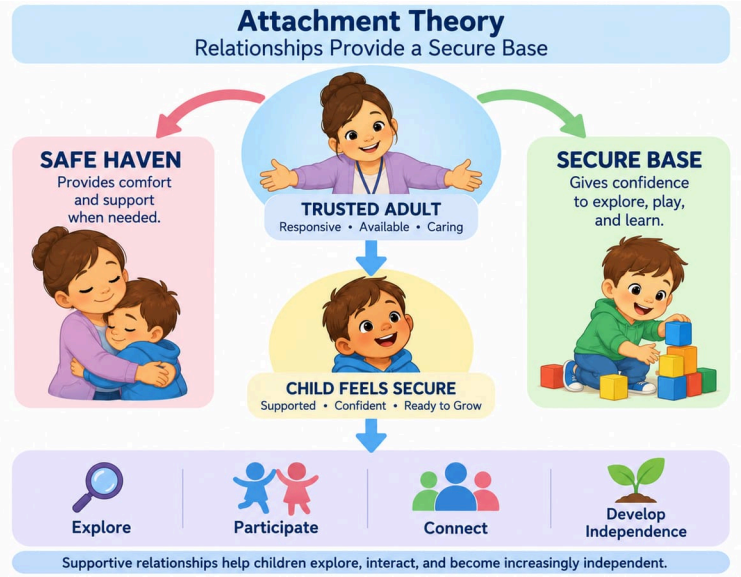


Figure 4.3.5: Attachment Theory. A trusted adult can provide a safe haven for comfort and a secure base for exploration, supporting children's participation, relationships, and growing independence (OpenAI, 2026c).

Attachment and the Developing Child

Attachment relationships begin during infancy, but children's needs for **connection, reassurance, and emotional security continue as they develop**.

A preschooler entering an unfamiliar classroom may stay close to a trusted adult before joining play. A kindergartner who becomes

overwhelmed during a conflict may seek an educator's help before returning to peers. An eight-year-old may briefly check in with a teacher before attempting a challenging task independently.

As children develop, the ways they seek support may change. The underlying developmental process remains important: children can use supportive relationships as a foundation from which to **explore, participate, develop relationships, manage emotions, and become increasingly independent**.

Ainsworth and Patterns of Attachment

Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues developed an observational research procedure known as the **Strange Situation** to study attachment relationships between infants and caregivers. Researchers observed children's responses to exploration, separation, and reunion with a caregiver (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

This work contributed to the identification of different **patterns of attachment**, including secure and insecure patterns (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Later research expanded the classifications used to describe attachment relationships.

For early childhood educators, the purpose of learning about attachment patterns is **not to classify children in the classroom**. Instead, attachment research helps demonstrate that children's behavior toward adults can be related to their experiences, expectations, relationships, and the particular situation.

Important:

Attachment Is Not a Classroom Diagnosis

An educator should not observe a child's classroom behavior and conclude, **"This child has an insecure attachment"** or assign the child an attachment classification.

Attachment classifications are based on specific research methods and describe patterns within attachment relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Classroom behavior alone does not provide enough information to determine a child's attachment pattern.

An educator's role is to **observe, build responsive relationships, support the child, communicate with families when appropriate, and avoid labeling the child**.

What Does Attachment Theory Mean for Educators?

Early childhood educators are not substitutes for children's parents or other primary caregivers. However, teachers can become **important, trusted adults** in children's lives.

Responsive educator-child relationships can help children feel secure in the classroom and support their participation, exploration, relationships, and developing emotional regulation.

Educators can support emotionally secure relationships by:

- Greeting children warmly and consistently;
- Responding when children seek help or comfort;
- Maintaining predictable routines and expectations;
- Acknowledging children's emotions;
- Remaining calm and available during distress;
- Preparing children for transitions and changes;
- Reconnecting with children after conflict or challenging behavior;
- Encouraging exploration while remaining available for support; and
- Gradually supporting greater independence as children become ready.

The goal is not to keep children close to the educator. Instead, a supportive relationship can help provide the security children need to **move outward—to explore, interact, take reasonable risks, solve problems, and become increasingly**

independent.

Co-Regulation and Growing Independence

Young children are still developing the ability to regulate their emotions and behavior. At times, children may rely on a trusted adult to help them calm, understand what they are feeling, and determine what to do next.

This process is often called **co-regulation**. An educator might stay nearby, speak calmly, acknowledge the child's emotion, help the child identify a strategy, or provide reassurance until the child is ready to continue (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

Over time, children can increasingly use strategies themselves.

For example: Co-regulation with responsive adults supports children's increasing use of self-regulation strategies.

Supporting a child during distress does not necessarily make the child more dependent. Appropriate support can provide the security from which children gradually develop greater confidence and independence.

Looking Beyond the Behavior

Consider a five-year-old who has difficulty separating from a caregiver in the morning. After the caregiver leaves, the child stays close to the teacher, watches the other children play, and repeatedly asks when the caregiver will return.

It might be tempting to describe the child as **too dependent** or insist that the child immediately join the group.

Attachment theory encourages the educator to consider the child's need for **connection and emotional security**.

The educator might ask:

- Does the child know what to expect during the morning routine?
- Is there a familiar adult available to provide reassurance?
- What helps the child feel secure enough to begin exploring?
- Can the educator remain available while gently supporting participation?
- Does the child gradually move away from the adult when they feel more secure?

These questions do not tell the educator **why** the child is having difficulty separating. Instead, they help the educator consider how a responsive relationship and predictable environment might support the child.

From Theory to Teaching Practice

Attachment theory can help educators think intentionally about the relationship between **security and independence**.

For example:

Observe: A five-year-old remains beside the teacher each morning and does not join peers after the caregiver leaves.

Use attachment theory to interpret: The educator considers whether connection with a familiar adult may help provide the emotional security the child needs before exploring independently.

Support: The educator welcomes the child, acknowledges the separation, reminds the child when the caregiver will return, and invites the child to participate in a familiar activity while remaining available nearby.

Observe again: The educator watches what happens over time. Does the child begin moving farther from the teacher? Engage with materials? Interact with peers? Need less reassurance as the routine becomes familiar?

The educator does not diagnose an attachment pattern. Instead, attachment theory helps the educator consider **how relationships and emotional security may support participation and increasing independence**.

Attachment Theory as a Lens

Attachment theory encourages educators to consider the relationship between **connection, security, exploration, and independence**.

Bowlby and Ainsworth's Lens

How can responsive relationships and emotional security help this child explore, regulate emotions, interact with others, and become increasingly independent?

Developmental Connection

Children's need for supportive relationships does not disappear as they become more independent. Instead, **security and independence can develop together**.

A responsive adult can serve as a **secure base** from which a child explores and a source of support when the child becomes overwhelmed. As children develop confidence and regulatory skills, they may need less direct adult assistance, but knowing that a trusted adult is available can continue to support exploration, relationships, and participation.

For early childhood educators, attachment theory reinforces an important principle:

Responsive relationships do not compete with independence. They can help create the security from which independence develops.

Four Perspectives, Four Useful Questions

Maslow, Erikson, Freud, and Bowlby and Ainsworth each draw attention to different aspects of children's social and emotional development. No single theory provides a complete explanation for a child's behavior or development. Instead, educators can use different theoretical perspectives as **lenses for asking questions, considering possible influences, and making intentional teaching decisions**.

When observing a child, each theoretical perspective encourages the educator to consider something different.

Table 4.3.5: Theory and Useful Questions for Educators

Theoretical Perspective	Focus	A Useful Question for Educators
Maslow — Humanistic Theory	Needs	What needs might be influencing this child's experience right now?
Erikson — Psychosocial Theory	Developmental challenges	What developmental challenge might this child be working through, and how can my response support trust, autonomy, initiative, or competence?
Freud — Psychodynamic Theory	Early experiences and adult responses	How might my response to this child's developmental needs and behaviors affect the child's experience?
Bowlby & Ainsworth — Attachment Theory	Relationships and emotional security	How can responsive relationships and emotional security help this child explore, regulate emotions, interact with others, and become increasingly independent?

Note. These questions are instructional applications of the perspectives discussed in this section. They are not diagnostic questions or validated assessment items.

Different Lenses Can Reveal Different Possibilities

Consider a five-year-old who arrives at school, stays close to the teacher, watches other children playing, and says, **"I don't want to play."**

The behavior is the same, but each theory directs the educator's attention toward different possibilities.

Maslow's lens — Needs: The educator might consider whether the child feels physically comfortable, safe, connected, and included.

Erikson's lens — Developmental challenges: The educator might consider the child's developing trust, autonomy, and initiative. Does the child feel secure enough to move away from the adult, make a choice, and initiate participation?

Freud's lens — Adult responses and early experiences: The educator might consider how their response could affect the child's experience. Would pressure, embarrassment, or criticism increase distress? How can the educator respond without shaming the child?

Bowlby and Ainsworth's lens — Relationships and security: The educator might consider whether staying near a trusted adult provides the security the child needs before moving outward to explore and interact with peers.

> **One Child—Multiple Lenses**
>
> These theories do **not** tell the educator why the child is staying near the teacher. Each theory simply draws attention to different possibilities.
>
> The educator still needs to **observe the child, consider the situation, gather information, communicate with the family when appropriate, and determine what support may be helpful**.

Using Multiple Theories in Practice

Educators do not need to choose one theory and use it to explain everything they observe. Multiple theoretical perspectives can help educators develop a **more complete understanding of a situation**.

For example, the five-year-old staying near the teacher may benefit from:

- A predictable morning routine that supports **safety**;
- Opportunities to make choices and initiate participation that support **autonomy and initiative**;
- An adult response that avoids **pressure or shame**; and
- A responsive relationship that provides a **secure base** for gradually joining classroom activities.

These supports come from different theoretical perspectives, but they can work together in practice.

The purpose of applying theory is therefore not to find the **one correct explanation** for a child's behavior. Instead, theory helps educators **ask better questions and consider multiple possibilities before deciding how to respond**.

> **Theory Helps Us Ask—Not Assume**
>
> Instead of asking, "Which theory explains this child?"
>
> Ask: "What does each theoretical lens help me notice, and how can that information help me support this child?"

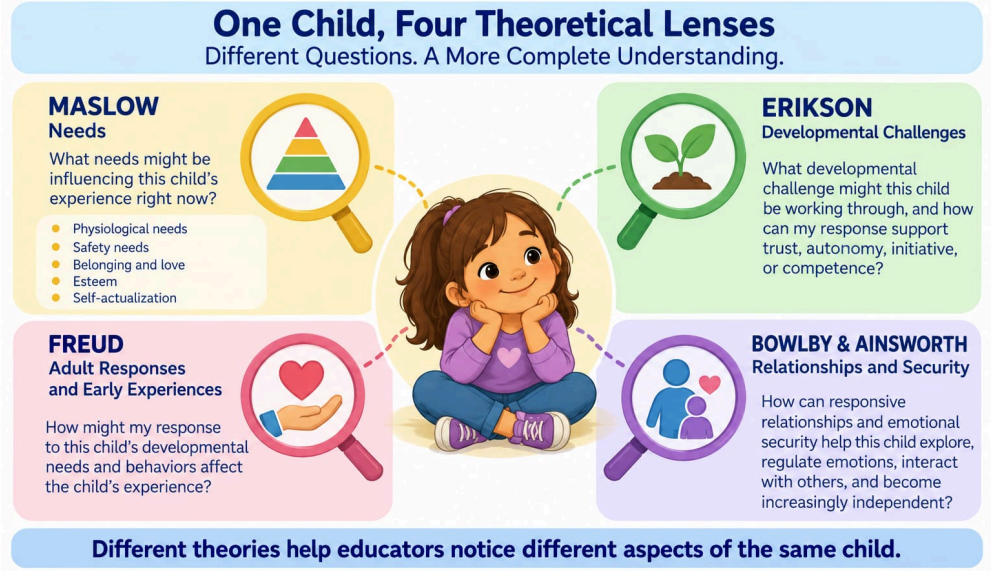


Figure 4.3.6: One Child, Four Theoretical Lenses. Maslow, Erikson, Freud, and Bowlby and Ainsworth highlight different aspects of social and emotional development and help educators consider multiple perspectives (OpenAI, 2026e).

Applying Theory to Practice: Observe → Interpret → Support → Observe Again

Theories become useful to early childhood educators when they help inform **intentional teaching decisions**. Rather than using a theory to label a child or assume why a behavior is occurring, educators can use theoretical perspectives to ask questions, consider possible influences, select appropriate supports, and then observe how the child responds.

A simple process for applying theory to practice is: **OBSERVE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT → OBSERVE AGAIN**

Step 1. Observe: What Is Happening?

Begin with what you can actually **see and hear**. Notice the child's behavior, emotions, interactions, and the context in which they occur.

Ask:

- What is the child doing or saying?
- When and where does it occur?
- Who is present?
- What happened before and after?
- Does the behavior occur repeatedly or only in certain situations?

Keep observations **objective and descriptive** rather than immediately assigning a reason for the behavior.

Example: A five-year-old stays close to the teacher during free play, watches other children playing, and says, *"I don't want to play."*

Step 2. Interpret: What Might Be Influencing This?

Next, use theoretical perspectives to consider **possible explanations**, rather than deciding that one explanation must be correct.

Ask the four theoretical questions:

- **Maslow:** What needs might be influencing this child's experience?

- **Erikson:** What developmental challenge might the child be working through?
- **Freud:** How might my response to the child's developmental needs and behaviors affect the child's experience?
- **Bowlby and Ainsworth:** How might relationships and emotional security support the child's exploration and independence?

Also consider what you know about the **individual child, family, culture, language, environment, and situation**.

For the child staying close to the teacher, several possibilities might be considered. The child may need more time to feel safe or connected, may be developing confidence to initiate play, or may benefit from the security of a trusted relationship before joining peers.

Theory helps the educator develop **questions and possibilities—not conclusions about the child**.

Step 3. Support: What Can I Do?

Based on the observation and possible interpretations, choose an intentional response that is **responsive, respectful, and developmentally appropriate**.

Support might involve:

- Responding to a physical or emotional need;
- Strengthening connection with the child;
- Adjusting the environment or routine;
- Providing an appropriate choice;
- Helping the child enter a peer interaction;
- Offering reassurance or co-regulation;
- Providing an achievable challenge;
- Allowing additional time or practice; or
- Communicating with the child's family when appropriate.

Example: The educator warmly welcomes the child, offers a familiar activity, remains nearby for reassurance, and invites the child to join peers when the child appears ready.

Step 4. Observe Again: What Happened?

After providing support, observe the child again.

Ask:

- How did the child respond?
- What appears to be working?
- What might need to change?
- Do I need additional information?
- Is a different theoretical lens helpful?

In the example, the educator might notice that over time the child begins moving farther from the teacher, engages with familiar materials, joins another child in play, and seeks less reassurance.

If the support does not help, the educator does not assume that the child has failed. Instead, the educator **reconsiders the interpretation, adjusts the support, gathers more information, and continues observing**.

Theory Supports a Cycle of Intentional Teaching

Applying theory is not a one-time decision. Children develop, relationships change, and situations vary. Educators continually move through the process: **OBSERVE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT → OBSERVE AGAIN**

Each new observation provides information that can help the educator refine their understanding and make the next teaching decision.

Theory Helps Us Ask Better Questions

Theory does not tell educators exactly what a child needs or provide a single explanation for behavior. It helps educators **notice different possibilities, ask more informed questions, and make intentional decisions about how to provide support**.

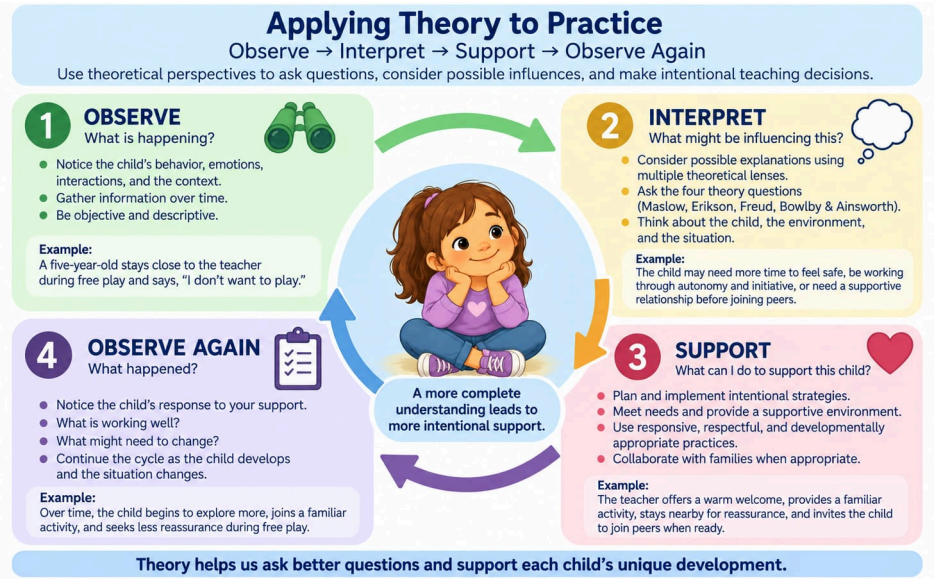


Figure 4.3.7: Applying Theory to Practice. Educators can observe, interpret, support, and observe again to use theoretical perspectives in intentional teaching decisions (OpenAI, 2026b).

Putting Theory Into Practice

Theories are most useful when educators can apply them to real situations. The following cases describe children experiencing common social and emotional challenges. As you consider each situation, remember that **there may be more than one possible interpretation**.

Use Maslow, Erikson, Freud, and Bowlby and Ainsworth as different lenses. Then consider how the educator could provide intentional support.

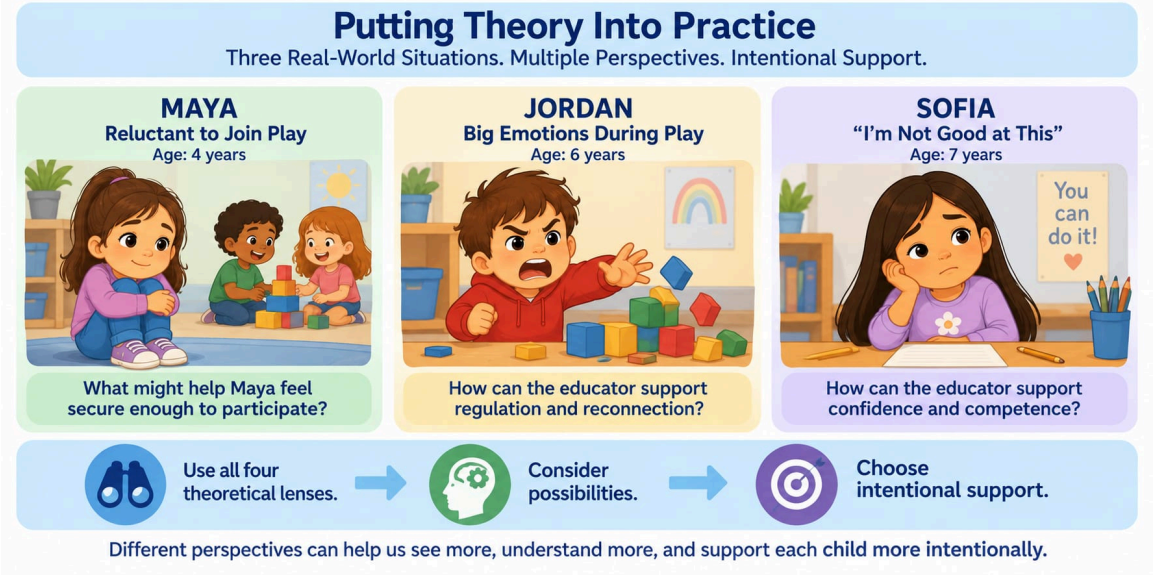


Figure 4.3.8: Putting Theory Into Practice. Multiple theoretical perspectives can help educators consider possibilities and choose intentional support for children in different social and emotional situations (OpenAI, 2026f).

Case 1: Maya — Reluctant to Join Play

Maya, age 4, arrives at school and stays close to the teacher during free play. She watches other children playing but does not join them. When another child invites Maya to play, she shakes her head and says, **"I don't want to play."** She continues to stay close to the teacher when the class transitions to small groups.

Consider the four lenses:

- **Maslow:** What needs might be influencing Maya's experience?
- **Erikson:** What developmental challenge might Maya be working through?
- **Freud:** How might the educator's response affect Maya's experience?
- **Bowlby and Ainsworth:** How might relationships and emotional security support Maya's exploration and participation?

Think about: What could the educator do to support Maya without forcing her to participate before she is ready?

Case 2: Jordan — Big Emotions During Play

Jordan, age 6, is building with blocks during center time. Another child accidentally knocks over part of Jordan's structure. Jordan yells, **"You're so mean!"**, pushes several blocks away, and refuses to help clean up. Jordan says he does not want to play anymore.

Consider the four lenses:

- **Maslow:** What needs might be influencing Jordan's experience?
- **Erikson:** What developmental challenge might Jordan be working through?
- **Freud:** How might the educator's response to Jordan's behavior affect his experience?
- **Bowlby and Ainsworth:** How might a supportive relationship help Jordan regulate his emotions and eventually reconnect with the other child?

Think about: How could the educator acknowledge Jordan's feelings, maintain appropriate limits, and help him regain enough regulation to problem-solve?

Case 3: Sofia — “I'm Not Good at This”

Sofia, age 7, is asked to share an idea during a group project. She looks down, quietly says, **“I don't know,”** and pushes her paper away. Later, she tells the teacher, **“I'm not good at this. Other kids have better ideas.”**

Consider the four lenses:

- **Maslow:** How might Sofia's needs for belonging, esteem, or competence influence this situation?
- **Erikson:** How might **industry vs. inferiority** help the educator understand Sofia's response?
- **Freud:** How might the educator respond without creating embarrassment or shame?
- **Bowlby and Ainsworth:** How might a supportive relationship provide enough security for Sofia to take a social or learning risk?

Think about: How could the educator support Sofia in experiencing authentic competence without simply telling her, *“You're good at it”*?

Applying the Process

For each case, educators can use the same process introduced earlier: **OBSERVE → INTERPRET → SUPPORT → OBSERVE AGAIN**

The goal is not to decide which theory is **“correct.”** Instead:

Observe what the child is doing and the context in which it occurs.

Interpret the situation using one or more theoretical lenses.

Support the child with an intentional, developmentally appropriate response.

Observe again to determine how the child responds and whether the support should continue or change.

> **More Than One Lens Can Be Useful**
>
> A child's behavior rarely has one simple explanation. Using multiple theoretical perspectives can help educators **consider possibilities without making assumptions** and choose support based on what they continue to observe and learn about the child.

Vocabulary Alert

Humanistic theory: A perspective that considers the whole person and emphasizes human needs, growth, and potential.

Hierarchy of needs: Maslow's theory that organizes human needs from physiological needs through safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization.

Psychosocial theory: Erikson's theory that development occurs through a series of social and emotional challenges across the lifespan.

Trust vs. mistrust: Erikson's first psychosocial stage, focused on developing trust and security through responsive relationships.

Autonomy vs. shame and doubt: Erikson's second psychosocial stage, focused on developing independence and confidence in one's abilities.

Initiative vs. guilt: Erikson's third psychosocial stage, focused on developing initiative, purpose, and confidence in acting on ideas.

Industry vs. inferiority: Erikson's fourth psychosocial stage, focused on developing competence and confidence through learning, practice, and accomplishment.

Psychodynamic theory: A perspective originating with Freud that emphasizes early experiences and internal processes in development.

Id: In Freud's theory, the component of personality driven by immediate needs, urges, and pleasure.

Ego: In Freud's theory, the component of personality that helps manage desires within the demands of reality.

Superego: In Freud's theory, the component of personality associated with internalized expectations, values, and rules.

Attachment theory: A theory associated with Bowlby and Ainsworth that emphasizes children's emotional bonds with caregivers and the role of relationships in providing security.

Secure base: In attachment theory, a trusted relationship that provides security from which a child can explore.

Safe haven: In attachment theory, a trusted relationship to which a child can turn for comfort and support during distress.

Co-regulation: Support from another person that helps a child manage emotions, behavior, and responses while self-regulation is developing.

Exercise 4.3.1

Check Your Understanding

Use what you have learned about Maslow, Erikson, Freud, and Bowlby and Ainsworth to answer the following questions.

1. Match each theoretical perspective with the question it most directly encourages an educator to consider. A: Maslow, B: Erikson, C: Freud, D: Bowlby and Ainsworth
    1. How might my response to this child's developmental needs and behaviors affect the child's experience?
    2. What needs might be influencing this child's experience?
    3. How might relationships and emotional security support this child's exploration and independence?
    4. What developmental challenge might this child be working through?
2. A seven-year-old avoids a challenging activity and says, “Everyone else is better at this than me.” Which Eriksonian stage is most directly related to this situation?
    1. Trust vs. Mistrust
    2. Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt
    3. Initiative vs. Guilt
    4. Industry vs. Inferiority
3. A four-year-old insists on putting on their own coat but becomes frustrated with the zipper. Which response best supports autonomy?
    1. Zip the coat immediately so the child does not become frustrated.
    2. Tell the child they are taking too long and need to let an adult do it.
    3. Allow the child time to try and provide only as much assistance as needed.
    4. Tell the child they cannot put on the coat independently until they are older.
4. A five-year-old stays close to the teacher after arriving at school and watches other children play. From an attachment perspective, what might be an appropriate educator response?
    1. Require the child to immediately join the other children.
    2. Remain available for reassurance while gradually supporting the child in exploring and joining play.
    3. Ignore the child so they learn to become independent.
    4. Conclude that the child has an insecure attachment.
5. A three-year-old has a toileting accident after several weeks of successfully using the toilet. Which response reflects the respectful contemporary practice discussed alongside Freud’s historical theory?

1. Remind the child that big children should not have accidents.
2. Ask the child why they chose not to use the toilet.
3. Respond matter-of-factly, help the child change, and avoid embarrassment or shame. Freud historically emphasized experiences surrounding toilet learning, but respectful responses to accidents do not depend on accepting his psychosexual theory.
4. Explain the accident as evidence that the child is fixated in Freud's anal stage.

6. An educator observes that a six-year-old becomes upset whenever another child changes the rules of a game. What should the educator do first when using the Observe → Interpret → Support → Observe Again process?
    1. Decide which theory explains the behavior.
    2. Document what the child does, when it occurs, and what happens before and after.
    3. Tell the child how to respond differently next time.
    4. Ask the family to explain why the child behaves this way.

Apply What You Know: One Child, Multiple Theoretical Lenses

Eight-year-old Eli has recently begun avoiding group projects. During one activity, the teacher asks the children to work together to design and build a bridge using classroom materials. Eli watches the other children begin building but does not contribute.

When another child says, **"Eli, you can make this part,"** Eli responds, **"No. I'll mess it up."**

The teacher encourages Eli to try, but Eli moves away from the group and sits alone. Later, he tells the teacher, **"They don't need me. They're better at this anyway."**

Use the four theoretical lenses and the **Observe → Interpret → Support → Observe Again** process to analyze the situation.

1. **Observe:** What do you know from the description? Identify at least **two objective observations** without assuming why Eli is behaving this way.
2. **Interpret:** Choose **two of the four theoretical perspectives** below. Explain one possibility each perspective might help the educator consider.
    1. Maslow
    2. Erikson
    3. Freud
    4. Bowlby and Ainsworth
3. **Support:** Describe **two intentional teaching responses** the educator could use to support Eli. Explain how each response connects to your interpretation.
4. **Observe Again:** What could the educator watch for after providing support to determine whether it is helping?
5. **Think More Deeply:** Why would it be inappropriate for the educator to use one theory to conclude exactly why Eli is avoiding the group?

> **Remember:** The goal is not to identify the one theory that "explains" Eli. Theories provide **different lenses for asking questions and considering possibilities**. Educators continue to observe, gather information, provide support, and adjust their responses based on what they learn.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Contributions and Attributions

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Answers

Exercise 4.3.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Match each theoretical perspective with the question it most directly encourages an educator to consider.
    1. C: Freud
    2. A: Maslow
    3. D: Bowlby and Ainsworth
    4. B: Erikson
2. 4: Industry vs. Inferiority. At approximately age seven, children are developing competence and confidence in their abilities. The child's statement that everyone else is better may reflect concerns about competence and comparison with others.
3. 3: Allow the child time to try and provide only as much assistance as needed. This supports autonomy by allowing the child to participate in the task and experience growing independence while still receiving appropriate assistance.
4. 2: Remain available for reassurance while gradually supporting the child in exploring and joining play. From an attachment perspective, a trusted adult can provide a **secure base** from which the child gradually explores and participates. The educator should not diagnose an attachment pattern based on classroom behavior alone.
5. 3: Respond matter-of-factly, help the child change, and avoid embarrassment or shame. The practical connection to Freud's theory is to consider how adult responses become part of children's early experiences. Contemporary educators can support toileting development without punishment, embarrassment, or shame.
6. 2: Document what the child does, when it occurs, and what happens before and after. The process begins with **Observe**. Educators first gather objective, descriptive information before interpreting the behavior through theoretical perspectives.

Answers to Apply What You Know: One Child, Multiple Theoretical Lenses

Answers will vary. The following is one possible application of the theories.

1. Observe

Objective observations might include:

Eli watches the other children begin the group project but does not contribute. When invited to make part of the bridge, Eli says, **"No. I'll mess it up."**

- Eli moves away from the group and sits alone.

- Later, Eli tells the teacher, **“They don't need me. They're better at this anyway.”**

These observations describe what Eli **does and says without assuming why he behaves this way**.

2. Interpret

Students may appropriately apply any two theories if their explanations are supported by the situation.

Maslow: The educator might consider Eli's needs for **belonging and esteem**. His statement that the group does not need him may suggest that the educator should explore whether Eli feels included and valued and whether he has opportunities to experience competence.

Erikson: Eli is eight years old and within Erikson's **industry vs. inferiority** stage. His statements about messing up and other children being better may lead the educator to consider his developing sense of competence.

Freud: Freud's lens directs attention toward the educator's response. Criticism, pressure, comparison, or embarrassment could make the experience more difficult. The educator can respond respectfully and avoid shaming Eli for his reluctance to participate.

Bowlby and Ainsworth: The educator might consider how a supportive relationship and emotional security could help Eli feel comfortable enough to take a risk, participate with peers, and attempt something he is unsure he can do.

None of these interpretations establishes **why** Eli is avoiding the activity. They identify possibilities for the educator to consider.

3. Support

Possible responses include:

Give Eli an **achievable but meaningful role** in the project so he can contribute and experience authentic competence. Ask Eli privately which part of the project he would like to try rather than putting him on the spot in front of peers.

- Provide enough assistance for Eli to begin successfully without completing the task for him.
- Recognize specific effort, strategies, progress, and contribution rather than offering only general praise.
- Help the group identify ways each child can contribute so that Eli experiences belonging and participation.
- Remain available for reassurance while encouraging Eli to take an appropriate social or learning risk.

A strong response connects the selected support to the theoretical interpretation. For example, providing an achievable, meaningful role could support **industry and competence**, while helping Eli enter the group could support **belonging and emotional security**.

4. Observe Again

The educator could observe whether Eli:

begins participating in the group; attempts the assigned or chosen task;

- persists when the task becomes difficult;
- contributes ideas;
- interacts with peers;
- expresses greater confidence in his abilities; or
- requires less adult reassurance over time.

If the support does not appear helpful, the educator should **gather additional information, reconsider possible interpretations, and adjust the support**.

5. Think More Deeply

It would be inappropriate to use one theory to conclude exactly why Eli is avoiding the group because **theories are lenses, not diagnoses or complete explanations of an individual child**.

Eli's behavior could be influenced by multiple factors, including his needs, developmental experiences, relationships, previous experiences, individual characteristics, and the immediate situation. Educators should use theory to **ask informed questions and consider possibilities**, then continue observing and gathering information before making teaching decisions.

> **Key Idea:** Theory helps educators move from **Observe → Interpret → Support → Observe Again**. The goal is not to find the theory that explains the child, but to use theory to make more informed and intentional teaching decisions.

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4.4: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Social and Emotional Development

Introduction

Social and emotional development affects how children understand and manage emotions, build relationships, interact with others, and participate in everyday experiences. Because children develop these abilities at different rates and may behave differently across people, settings, and situations, educators need multiple sources of information to understand a child's development.

Developmental screening provides one way to identify children who **may need closer observation, additional support, or further evaluation**. Screening is not used to diagnose a child. Instead, it helps educators, families, and other professionals determine whether additional information or follow-up may be needed (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2026)

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 4.4: Explore the types and purposes of developmental screening tools related to social and emotional development.

By the end of this section, students will be able to:

- **Distinguish** developmental screening from ongoing assessment and diagnostic evaluation.
- **Identify** types of screening tools related to social and emotional development.
- **Explain** the purposes of social-emotional and behavioral screening.
- **Describe** characteristics of appropriate screening tools and responsible screening practices.
- **Explain** the early childhood educator's role in screening, communicating with families, and supporting children following screening.

Screening Is One Part of Assessment

Early childhood educators gather information about children's development in many ways. **Ongoing assessment, developmental screening, and diagnostic evaluation serve different purposes.** Understanding these differences helps educators use information appropriately and avoid drawing conclusions that a particular process cannot support (CDC, 2026).

Table 4.4.1: Types of Assessment, Screening, and Evaluation

Process	Primary Purpose	What It Helps Us Understand	Example
Ongoing assessment	Understand development and learning over time	What a child does across everyday activities, relationships, and experiences	Observations, anecdotal records, portfolios
Developmental screening	Identify children who may need additional assessment or support	Whether development appears to be within an expected range or may warrant follow-up	Developmental or social-emotional screening tools

Process	Primary Purpose	What It Helps Us Understand	Example
Diagnostic evaluation	Investigate a specific developmental, behavioral, or mental health concern	Detailed information that may identify a developmental or mental health condition and guide recommendations for support. Eligibility for services is determined through the applicable evaluation and eligibility process.	Evaluation conducted by qualified professionals

As discussed in Section 3.6, screening is intended to identify children who may need further evaluation. The important distinction is that **screening identifies possible concerns; it does not determine why a concern exists or provide a diagnosis** (CDC, 2026).

> **Screening does not diagnose.** A screening result indicates whether additional observation, assessment, referral, or evaluation may be appropriate.

What Is Social-Emotional Developmental Screening?

Developmental screening is a brief, structured process used to identify children who may benefit from additional assessment, evaluation, or support. Some developmental screening tools examine several areas of development, including social and emotional development, while other tools focus specifically on children's social-emotional development and behavior.

Social-emotional screening focuses more closely on how children develop the abilities needed to understand and express emotions, regulate their behavior, build relationships, and interact with others.

Depending on the screening tool, areas examined may include:

- Emotional expression and regulation
- Relationships with adults and peers
- Social interaction and participation
- Cooperation and prosocial behavior
- Independence and self-regulation
- Behaviors that may interfere with relationships or participation
- Social-emotional strengths and competencies

Screening results provide one source of information about a child's development. Children's social and emotional behavior can vary across people, settings, activities, and situations. For this reason, screening results should be considered alongside information from **families, observations, and other relevant sources** rather than interpreted in isolation (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Why Do We Screen Social and Emotional Development?

The primary purpose of screening is **early identification—not diagnosis**. Screening can help educators, families, and other professionals recognize when a child's social-emotional development may warrant closer attention or additional support and determine whether further assessment or evaluation may be appropriate **(CDC, 2026).**

Social-emotional screening can help:

- Identify children's social-emotional strengths
- Identify areas that may need closer observation
- Recognize children who may benefit from additional support

- Determine whether further assessment or evaluation should be considered
- Support conversations and partnerships with families
- Connect children and families with additional resources when needed
- Provide information that can guide appropriate follow-up

> A screening result is a starting point for asking questions—**not a label for a child.**

Developmental Connection

Earlier sections examined how children's abilities to **understand and regulate emotions, develop a sense of self, form relationships, and participate socially** develop during early childhood. Screening provides educators and families with another way to gather information when they have questions about these areas of development.

Types of Screening Related to Social and Emotional Development

Screening related to social and emotional development can take several forms. Some tools examine **development across multiple domains**, while others focus specifically on **social-emotional development or behavioral and emotional concerns**. The type of tool selected should match the purpose of the screening. These categories overlap. A screening system may include several components, and the same tool may support more than one purpose. The examples below illustrate these differences rather than represent three completely separate groups of tools.

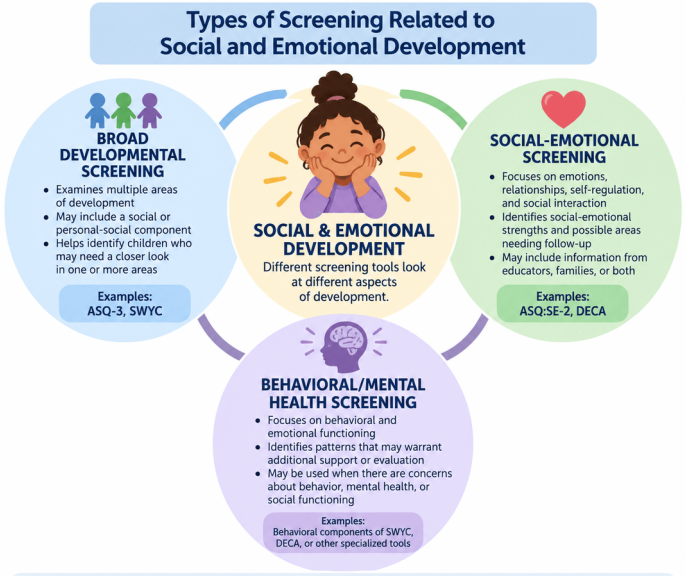


Figure 4.4.1: Types of Screening Related to Social and Emotional Development. Broad developmental, social-emotional, and behavioral/mental health screening tools examine different aspects of children's development and serve different screening purposes (OpenAI, 2026c)

Broad Developmental Screening

Broad developmental screening tools examine several areas of development at the same time. Depending on the tool, these may include communication, cognitive development, motor development, problem solving, adaptive skills, and social-emotional development.

Because development is interconnected, a broad screening tool can help determine whether a concern that appears social or emotional may occur alongside differences in other areas of development. For example, difficulty communicating with peers may be related to social development, language development, or an interaction between several areas.

Examples include:

Ages & Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition (ASQ-3)

ASQ-3 is a parent-completed developmental screening tool for children ages 1–66 months. It examines communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem solving, and personal-social development. It helps identify children who may need further assessment. Its personal-social area does not replace a focused social-emotional screening tool (Squires & Bricker, 2009).

Survey of Well-being of Young Children (SWYC)

The SWYC is a comprehensive screening system that includes components related to developmental milestones, behavioral and emotional development, and family factors (Perrin et al., 2016).

Purpose: Broad developmental screening helps identify whether a child may need **additional assessment or follow-up in one or more areas of development**.

Social-Emotional Screening

Social-emotional screening tools focus more specifically on children's emotional development, self-regulation, relationships, social interaction, and related behaviors.

These tools can provide more focused information than a broad developmental screener when there are questions specifically about a child's social-emotional development.

Examples include:

Ages & Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional, Second Edition (ASQ:SE-2)

ASQ:SE-2 is a parent-completed screening tool specifically designed to screen social-emotional development in children from 1 through 72 months. It examines **self-regulation, compliance, social communication, adaptive functioning, autonomy, affect, and interactions with other people**. Its purpose is to identify children who may need further assessment related to social-emotional development (Squires et al., 2015).

Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA)

The DECA system uses a **strength-based approach** to children's social-emotional development. The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment for Preschoolers, Second Edition (DECA-P2), is designed for children ages 3–5 and examines protective factors including **initiative, self-regulation, and attachment/relationships**, along with behavioral concerns. The DECA-P2 can be used as a screener when its purpose is to identify children who may need additional observation or assessment (Devereux Center for Resilient Children, n.d.).

Purpose: Social-emotional screening helps identify **strengths and areas of concern specifically related to children's social-emotional development** and determine whether additional observation, support, or evaluation may be appropriate.

Behavioral and Mental Health Screening

Some screening tools focus more specifically on **behavioral and emotional concerns** that could affect a child's relationships, participation, learning, or well-being.

Depending on the tool and the child's age, screening may examine areas such as:

- Attention and concentration
- Anxiety or withdrawal

- Emotional regulation
- Aggression or other externalizing behaviors
- Peer relationships
- Prosocial behavior

Some comprehensive screening systems include behavioral or emotional components. For example, the SWYC includes the Preschool Pediatric Symptom Checklist (PPSC), an emotional and behavioral screening instrument for children ages 18–65 months (TEAM UP Center, n.d.). The DECA-P2 includes a behavioral concerns scale alongside its measures of protective factors (Devereux Center for Resilient Children, n.d.).

Purpose: Behavioral and mental health screening helps identify children whose patterns of behavior or emotional functioning may warrant **closer observation, additional support, or further evaluation by an appropriately qualified professional**.

> **Screening identifies the need to look more closely.** Whether a tool examines overall development, social-emotional development, or behavioral and emotional concerns, a screening result does not by itself explain why a child behaves in a particular way or establish a diagnosis.

Putting the Types Together

Table 4.4.2: Purposes of Types of Screening

Type of Screening	Primary Focus	Examples	Primary Purpose
Broad developmental	Multiple areas of development	ASQ-3, SWYC	Identify possible concerns across developmental areas
Social-emotional	Relationships, emotions, self-regulation, social interaction	ASQ:SE-2; DECA-P2 used for screening	Identify social-emotional strengths and possible areas needing follow-up
Behavioral/mental health	Behavioral and emotional functioning	SWYC's PPSC; DECA-P2 behavioral concerns scale	Identify patterns that may warrant additional support or evaluation

Important Distinction: Monitoring Is Not Screening

Developmental monitoring and **developmental screening** both help educators and families pay attention to children's social and emotional development, but they are not the same process.

Developmental monitoring occurs over time as educators and families observe children's development during everyday activities, relationships, and routines. Milestone checklists and other developmental resources can help adults notice changes, recognize emerging abilities, and communicate about a child's development. These resources can support developmental monitoring, but they are **not standardized developmental screening tools** (CDC, 2026).

Developmental screening is a more structured process that uses a **validated screening tool** designed for a specific purpose and population. Social-emotional screening tools use established procedures and scoring criteria to help determine whether a child's development may warrant closer attention or further evaluation.

> **Monitoring helps us notice development over time. Screening uses a validated tool to take a more structured look.** If developmental monitoring raises a concern about a child's social or emotional development, an appropriate screening or further evaluation may be the next step.

Choosing and Using Screening Tools Responsibly

Not every screening tool is appropriate for every child, situation, or purpose. Early childhood educators and programs should consider **how the tool was developed, what it is designed to measure, whether it is appropriate for the child and the purpose of the screening, and whether it is valid, reliable, developmentally appropriate, and culturally and linguistically responsive** (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

When selecting and using a screening tool, educators and programs should consider the following:

Validity
A screening tool should have evidence that it measures what it is intended to measure. For example, a tool used to screen social-emotional development should provide meaningful information about the social-emotional abilities or behaviors it was designed to examine.

Reliability
A screening tool should produce sufficiently consistent results when it is used as intended. Reliability helps educators have confidence that results are not simply due to inconsistencies in the tool or how it is administered.

Age Appropriateness
Screening tools are developed for specific age ranges. Educators should use the version or screening interval designed for the child's age rather than assuming that one tool is appropriate for all children. The tools described in this section primarily serve infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children; they do not all cover the full three-to-eight age range discussed in this textbook. For older children, programs must select an appropriate tool supported for the child's age and the purpose of screening.

Purpose Appropriateness
The screening tool should match the reason for screening. A broad developmental screener may be appropriate when there are questions about several areas of development, while a social-emotional screener may be more appropriate when the purpose is to look specifically at social-emotional development.

Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness
Culture, language, family expectations, and experiences can influence how children communicate, interact with others, express emotions, and demonstrate social behaviors. Educators should consider whether a screening tool is appropriate for the child's cultural and linguistic background and use appropriate translated versions or other supports when available.

Following Administration Procedures
Screening tools should be administered, scored, and interpreted according to the procedures established for that particular tool. Changing questions, scoring procedures, age ranges, or other parts of a standardized screening process can affect the meaning of the results. Educators should also understand their role and follow program procedures regarding who administers the screening, communicates results, and makes referrals (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

> **The goal is not simply to complete a screening.** The goal is to gather useful information with an appropriate tool and use that information responsibly to determine whether additional observation, support, assessment, or evaluation may be needed.

A screening result should never be interpreted by itself as a complete picture of a child's development. This is especially important when screening social and emotional development because children's behavior can vary across **relationships, environments, cultures, languages, and situations**.

Vocabulary Alert: Reliability and Validity

Reliability and **validity** are related, but they do not mean the same thing.

Reliability refers to the **consistency of a tool**. A reliable screening tool produces reasonably consistent results when it is used appropriately under similar conditions.

Validity refers to whether the tool **measures what it is intended to measure** and whether the results support the way the tool is being used.

A screening tool can produce consistent results and still fail to measure what it is intended to measure accurately. For this reason, educators should consider **both reliability and validity** when evaluating a screening tool.

Social-Emotional Screening Requires Context

Children's social and emotional development is expressed through their **relationships, interactions, emotions, and behavior**. These may look different depending on where a child is, who is present, what is happening, and what expectations exist in that setting. For this reason, a screening result should not be interpreted without considering the context in which a child's development occurs.

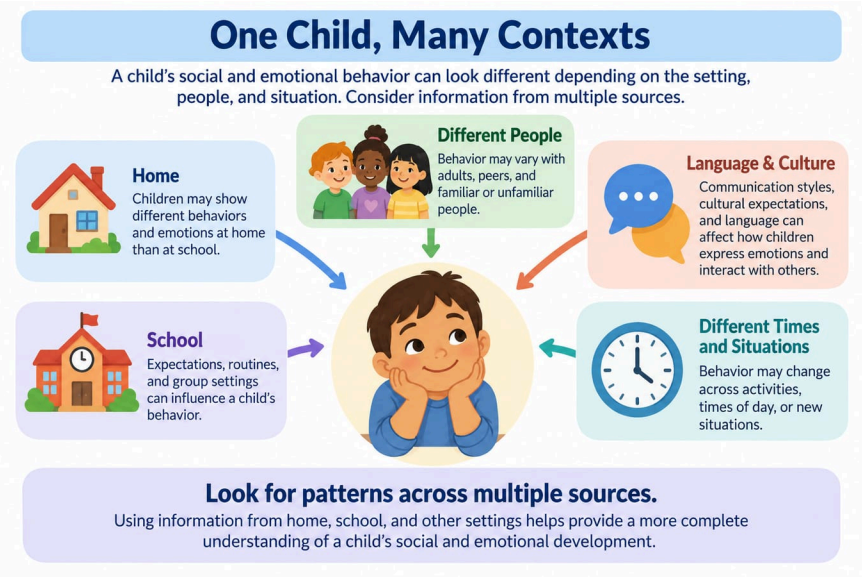


Figure 4.4.2: One Child, Many Contexts. Children's social and emotional behavior may vary across settings, relationships, languages, cultures, and situations. Looking for patterns across multiple sources provides a more complete understanding of development (OpenAI, 2026b).

A child may behave differently:

- At home and at school
- With familiar and unfamiliar adults
- With adults and with peers
- Individually and in groups
- During familiar and unfamiliar activities
- In different languages or communication settings
- When expectations differ across home, school, or cultural settings
- When tired, hungry, overwhelmed, stressed, or experiencing changes in routines or relationships

For example, a child who rarely talks or joins peer play at school may interact comfortably with siblings, cousins, or neighborhood children at home. Another child may manage frustration successfully during familiar classroom routines but have difficulty during transitions or in large, noisy groups. These differences provide important information about the situations in which a child's social-emotional abilities are more or less likely to be demonstrated.

Culture and Language Are Part of the Context

Expectations for children's behavior are influenced by **family, culture, language, and community**. Behaviors such as eye contact, independence, emotional expression, interactions with adults, communication styles, and participation in groups may be understood or encouraged differently across families and cultures (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Educators should therefore be cautious about interpreting a difference from classroom expectations as evidence of a developmental concern. When screening children who are multilingual learners, educators should also consider whether language differences or the screening process itself may influence how a child's abilities are represented (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Look for Patterns Across Sources

Social-emotional screening is most useful when it is considered alongside other information about the child. Educators can look for patterns across:

- Observations in different activities and settings
- Information provided by families
- The child's developmental history
- Interactions with different adults and peers
- Behavior across different times or routines
- Results from appropriate screening tools

Families are particularly important sources of information because they observe children across settings, routines, relationships, and experiences that educators may not see. Combining family information with observations and appropriate screening results can provide a more complete understanding of a child's development (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

> **Behavior has context.** A screening result should lead educators to gather information and ask questions—not assume that one behavior, one setting, or one screening score provides a complete picture of the child.

Considering context does not mean ignoring a concern. Instead, it helps educators develop a more complete understanding of **what is happening, when it occurs, where it occurs, and what additional information may be needed** before determining appropriate next steps.

The Early Childhood Educator's Role

Early childhood educators may participate in developmental screening, but their role extends beyond administering or helping families complete a screening tool. Educators observe children during everyday experiences, document what they see, communicate with families, participate in screening according to program procedures, and continue supporting children before and after screening (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

A useful way to think about the educator's role is: **Observe → Document → Screen/Participate → Communicate → Refer/Follow Up → Continue Supporting**

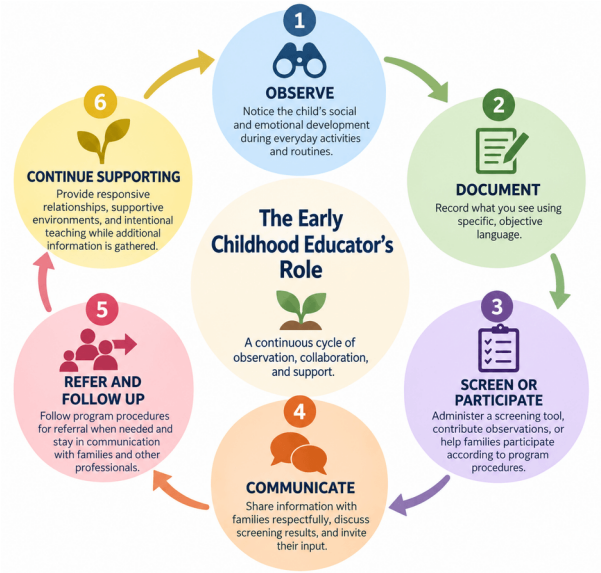


Figure 4.4.3: The Early Childhood Educator's Role in Developmental Screening. Educators observe, document, participate in screening, communicate, refer and follow up when needed, and continue supporting the child's development (OpenAI, 2026a).

Observe

Begin with careful observation of the child's social and emotional development during everyday activities and routines. Observe across different times, settings, relationships, and experiences.

Educators might notice:

- How the child expresses and regulates emotions
- How the child responds to frustration or change
- How the child interacts with adults and peers
- How the child enters and participates in play
- How the child responds to social problems or conflicts
- How the child seeks help, comfort, or connection
- Whether patterns change across activities, settings, or times of day

The goal is to notice **patterns over time**, rather than draw conclusions from a single behavior or incident.

Document

Record what actually happened using **specific, objective language**. Documentation provides more useful information when it describes observable behavior rather than assigning a label or interpretation.

Instead of: "Liam was aggressive during play."

Document: "During block play, Liam reached for a block in Maya's hand. When Maya held onto the block, Liam pushed her with both hands and picked up the block."

Objective documentation helps educators and families consider what happened **before, during, and after a behavior** and look for patterns across situations.

Screen or Participate in Screening

Educators may administer a screening tool, contribute observations, or help families participate in the screening process, depending on the tool and program procedures.

When participating in screening, educators should:

- Use the appropriate tool for the child's age and the purpose of screening
- Follow the tool's administration and scoring procedures
- Gather information from families when appropriate
- Consider the child's language, culture, experiences, and context
- Stay within their professional role

Screening provides additional information. It does not replace ongoing observation, and educators should not use screening results to independently diagnose or label a child (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Communicate

Screening information should be discussed with families **respectfully, objectively, and in understandable language**. Educators can begin with the child's strengths, describe what they have observed, explain the purpose of the screening, and invite families to share what they see at home and in other settings (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Rather than saying: "I think something is wrong with Ava's social development."

An educator might say: "I've noticed that Ava often watches the other children play but rarely joins them. What do you notice when she is with other children outside of school?"

This approach invites families into the process instead of presenting the educator's interpretation as a conclusion.

Refer and Follow Up

When screening results indicate that additional assessment or evaluation may be appropriate, educators follow their program's procedures for **referral and follow-up** (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

A referral does not mean that a child has a disorder or developmental delay. It means that additional information may be needed to better understand the child's development and determine whether additional services or supports would be helpful.

Educators can help families understand the next steps, connect with appropriate resources, and continue communicating as additional information becomes available.

Continue Supporting

Screening or referral does not end the educator's role. Children continue to need **responsive relationships, supportive environments, intentional teaching, and opportunities to develop social-emotional skills** while additional information is being gathered.

Educators continue to observe:

- What strengths does the child demonstrate?
- When is the child most successful?
- What situations appear particularly challenging?
- What supports seem to help?
- Are patterns changing over time?

The educator can then use this information to make appropriate teaching decisions while continuing to collaborate with the family and other professionals involved in supporting the child.

> **Screening is part of an ongoing process.** Educators observe, document, participate in screening, communicate with families, follow up when needed, and continue supporting the child's development (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Partnering With Families

The communication step described above continues throughout the screening process. The following examples show how educators can make these conversations collaborative, specific, and understandable.

Families are essential partners in social-emotional screening. They know their child's strengths, relationships, routines, experiences, culture, language, and behavior across settings. Educators see children in group and educational environments, while families observe children in situations and relationships that educators may never see. Bringing these perspectives together provides a more complete picture of the child's development (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Begin With Strengths

Conversations about screening should recognize what the child **can do**, not focus only on concerns. Beginning with specific strengths helps create a more balanced picture of the child's development and reinforces that screening is intended to support children rather than label them.

For example: "Mateo is very connected to the adults in our classroom and often seeks us out to share something he has made. We've also noticed that joining other children in play seems more difficult for him."

This communicates both a strength and an observation without making assumptions about why the behavior is occurring.

Communicate Objectively

When discussing concerns, educators should describe **what they have actually observed** rather than using labels or interpretations.

Instead of: "Sofia has poor emotional regulation."

An educator might say: "During cleanup this week, Sofia became upset on four occasions when it was time to stop playing. She cried, dropped to the floor, and needed an adult to stay with her for several minutes before she was ready to move to the next activity."

Objective descriptions give families useful information and create opportunities to compare what happens across settings.

Educators can then ask questions such as:

- *What do you notice at home?*
- *Does this happen in other settings or with other people?*
- *What seems to help when this happens?*
- *Are there situations in which this is easier for your child?*

Invite Family Knowledge

Families should not simply receive screening information; they should be **participants in the process**. Some screening tools are designed to be completed by families, while others incorporate information from both families and professionals (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Family perspectives can help educators understand whether a behavior occurs across settings, identify children's strengths that may not be visible at school, and recognize cultural, linguistic, or family expectations that may influence how a child's behavior is understood.

When educators and families observe something differently, the goal is not to determine whose perspective is correct. The difference itself may provide important information about **when, where, and with whom a child demonstrates particular social-emotional abilities**.

Explain What Screening Results Mean

Families need clear information about the purpose and limitations of screening. Educators should explain that screening results can help identify whether **additional observation, support, assessment, or evaluation may be appropriate** (CDC, 2026).

A screening result may indicate that:

- Development appears to be progressing as expected in the areas screened
- An area should be monitored more closely
- Additional information would be helpful
- Further assessment or evaluation may be recommended

A result that does not identify a concern does not override persistent concerns raised by families or educators. Continued concerns should be discussed and followed up according to program procedures (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Explain What Screening Results Do Not Mean

Just as important, families should understand what screening **cannot** determine.

A screening result alone does **not**:

- Diagnose a developmental or mental health condition
- Explain why a child behaves in a particular way
- Provide a complete picture of the child's development
- Define the child's abilities or potential

Replace information from families, observations, and other appropriate assessments

> **Screening should support partnership, not create a label.** Educators and families bring different knowledge about the child. Together, they can use screening results, observations, and family information to determine appropriate next steps while continuing to recognize and support the child's strengths.

> **Communication Matters**
>
> Focus conversations on **what has been observed, what the family has noticed, and what the next step may be—not on what an educator believes is "wrong" with the child.**

Exercise 4.4.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the primary purpose of social-emotional developmental screening?
2. How is developmental screening different from ongoing assessment and diagnostic evaluation?
3. What are some types of screening tools that may provide information about a child's social and emotional development?
4. What should educators consider when choosing and using a screening tool related to social and emotional development?
5. What is the early childhood educator's role in developmental screening?

Apply What You Know

6. During free-choice time, a five-year-old child often watches other children play but rarely joins them. The educator has observed this pattern for several weeks. When the educator talks with the family, they report that the child talks frequently and plays cooperatively with siblings and cousins at home.

What should the educator do?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 4.4.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Social-emotional developmental screening helps identify children whose development may need closer attention and determine whether additional assessment, evaluation, or support may be appropriate. **Screening does not diagnose a developmental delay, behavioral disorder, or mental health condition.**
2. **Ongoing assessment** gathers information about a child's development and learning over time and helps educators plan teaching and support. **Developmental screening** is a brief, structured process using an appropriate screening tool to identify whether a child may need a closer look. **Diagnostic evaluation** is a more comprehensive process conducted by qualified professionals to examine a specific concern and may identify a condition and guide recommendations for support. Eligibility for services is determined through the applicable evaluation and eligibility process.
3. Screening may include **broad developmental screening, social-emotional screening, and behavioral or mental health screening**. Broad developmental tools examine several areas of development and may include a social or personal-social component. More focused tools examine social-emotional development, behavior, relationships, emotional regulation, or related areas.
4. The tool should be **valid, reliable, developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, and appropriate for its intended purpose**. Educators should also consider the child's age, language, culture, experiences, the population for which the tool was developed, and any procedures, training, or qualifications required to administer or interpret it.
5. The educator's role is to **observe, document, participate in screening as appropriate, communicate with families, support referral and follow-up, and continue supporting the child**. Educators contribute valuable information about children's development but do not diagnose developmental, behavioral, or mental health conditions.

Answer to Apply What You Know

6. The educator should continue to **observe and objectively document** the child's interactions across different activities, peers, settings, and times. The difference between the child's behavior at school and at home is important information rather than evidence that one observation is more accurate than the other.

The educator should continue communicating with the family and consider factors such as the child's relationships, language, experiences, classroom environment, and the situations in which the child is more or less likely to interact with others. Following program procedures, an appropriate developmental or social-emotional screening tool may provide additional information and help determine whether further assessment or evaluation is warranted.

The educator should **not diagnose the child or assume the reason for the behavior based on observations or a screening result alone**. While gathering information or completing follow-up, the educator should continue providing responsive relationships and appropriate opportunities for the child to interact and participate successfully with peers.

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4.5: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Social and Emotional Development

Introduction

Children's social and emotional development is influenced not only by their individual characteristics and experiences, but also by the environments in which they spend time. The organization of the classroom, relationships with adults and peers, daily routines, expectations, and teacher-child interactions can all support—or create challenges for—children's participation and development (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Environmental rating scales and observational quality measures provide structured ways to examine features of early childhood environments and interactions. Unlike developmental screening tools, which focus primarily on an individual child's development, environmental measures focus on aspects of the **setting, classroom, program, or interactions within that environment**.

Information from these tools can help educators and programs identify strengths, recognize areas for improvement, and make intentional changes that support children's social and emotional development.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 4.5: Explore the types and purposes of environmental rating scales related to social and emotional development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the purpose of environmental rating scales and observational quality measures.
- Explore types of environmental measures related to children's social and emotional development.
- Describe how information from environmental measures can support reflection and program improvement.

Environmental Rating Scales Are One Part of Program Assessment

Early childhood educators gather information for different purposes. Sometimes the focus is an **individual child**. At other times, the focus is the **environment and the experiences provided within it**.

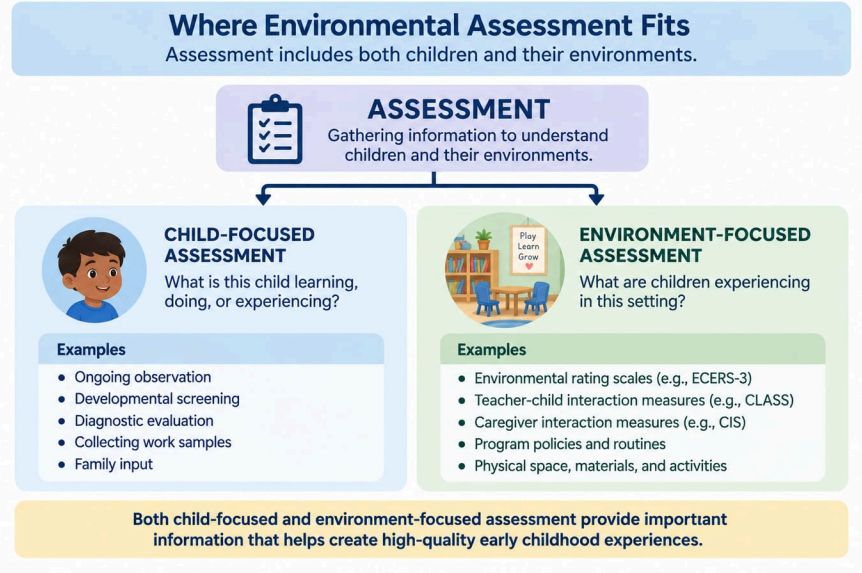


Figure 4.5.1: Where Environmental Assessment Fits. Child-focused and environment-focused assessments provide different information about children's experiences (OpenAI, 2026d).

Environmental rating scales and observational quality measures examine features of an early childhood setting, such as:

- Teacher-child interactions;
- Relationships and emotional climate;
- Routines and transitions;
- Classroom organization;
- Materials and activities;
- Opportunities for children's participation and independence; and
- Features of the physical environment.

These measures are different from developmental screening or other child-focused assessments. Rather than asking how an individual child is developing, environmental measures ask questions such as: **What are children experiencing in this setting? How do adults interact with children? How do the environment, routines, and teaching practices support children's development and learning?**

Environmental rating scales can therefore help educators look beyond individual children and consider how the **environment itself may support or create challenges for children's participation and development**.

Child-Focused Assessment and Environmental Assessment: What's the Difference?

Early childhood professionals gather information about both children and the environments in which children learn. Understanding the focus and purpose of each helps educators use assessment information appropriately.

Table 4.5.1: Comparison of Child-Focused Assessment and Environmental/Program Assessment

Element	Child-Focused Assessment	Environmental/Program Assessment
Focus	Individual child's development and learning	Environment and experiences provided to children
Asks	What is this child learning, doing, or experiencing?	What is the quality of this environment or interaction?
May Examine	Skills, behaviors, development, and progress	Interactions, routines, materials, activities, organization, and physical environment

Element	Child-Focused Assessment	Environmental/Program Assessment
Purpose	Support decisions about an individual child's learning or development	Support reflection, planning, and quality improvement

Important Distinction: Environmental Rating Is Not Child Screening

Environmental rating scales examine characteristics of the **environment, program, classroom, or interactions**. They are not designed to diagnose or label an individual child.

What Are Environmental Rating Scales?

Environmental rating scales are structured tools used to observe and evaluate characteristics of early childhood environments. Rather than focusing on the development of an individual child, these tools examine the **quality of the experiences and opportunities provided within a setting (Harms et al., 2015).**

Many environmental rating scales focus on **process quality**. Process quality refers to what children experience during their everyday time in an early childhood program, particularly their interactions with adults and peers and their experiences with activities, routines, materials, and the environment **(Harms et al., 2015).**

Process quality related to social and emotional development may include:

- How adults respond to children's needs and emotions;
- The quality of relationships between adults and children;
- How children interact with peers;
- How adults guide children's behavior and support problem solving;
- How routines and transitions are organized;
- Whether children have opportunities to make choices and participate independently; and
- How the environment supports positive interactions and participation.

Environmental rating scales provide a **systematic way to observe these experiences**. Instead of relying only on a general impression that a classroom is "good" or "high quality," educators and programs can use established criteria to examine specific aspects of the environment.

Why Evaluate the Environment?

The purpose of evaluating an early childhood environment is not simply to produce a score. Environmental information can help educators and programs better understand what children experience throughout the day and identify ways to strengthen those experiences.

Environmental rating scales and observational quality measures can help educators and programs:

- Identify strengths in the learning environment;
- Recognize areas that may need improvement;
- Examine the quality of interactions children experience;
- Reflect on teaching practices, routines, and classroom organization;
- Plan intentional changes to the environment or teaching practices; and
- Monitor quality-improvement efforts over time.

Focus on Improvement

An environmental rating provides information that educators can use to **reflect, plan, and improve**. A score is most useful when it leads educators to think about what children are experiencing and what changes could strengthen the environment.

Types of Environmental Measures Related to Social and Emotional Development

Environmental measures differ in **what they examine and the purpose they serve**. Some provide a broad look at the overall quality of an early childhood environment, while others focus more specifically on the interactions between adults and children.

Understanding these differences helps educators select and interpret a measure based on **what they want to learn about the environment**. These categories overlap. Teachers are also caregivers, and interaction measures may be used in several types of settings. The distinction here is the scope of the measure—whether it examines many features of the environment or focuses more closely on adult-child interactions.

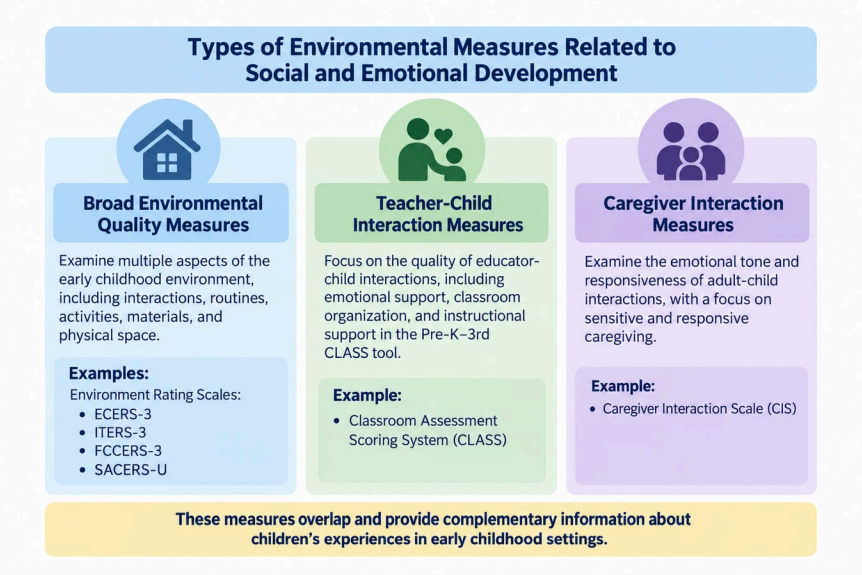


Figure 4.5.1: Types of Environmental Measures Related to Social and Emotional Development (OpenAI, 2026c).

Broad Environmental Quality Measures

Broad environmental quality measures examine multiple aspects of an early childhood setting. Depending on the tool, these may include:

- Space and furnishings;
- Routines and transitions;
- Activities and materials;
- Interactions among adults and children;
- Opportunities for children's participation and independence; and
- Program structure and organization.

Although these measures examine more than social and emotional development, many of the areas they assess are closely related to children's social and emotional experiences. For example, the quality of interactions, routines, behavior guidance, and opportunities for peer participation can influence how children experience relationships and participate in the classroom.

The **Environment Rating Scales (ERS)** are examples of broad environmental quality measures. Different versions are designed for different ages and early childhood settings. There are scales for infant/toddler, preschool, school-age, and family child care environments **(Environment Rating Scales Institute [ERSI], n.d.).**

Teacher-Child Interaction Measures

Some observational measures focus more specifically on the **quality of interactions between teachers and children** rather

than on the entire classroom environment.

These measures may examine characteristics such as:

- Warmth and responsiveness;
- Teacher sensitivity;
- Emotional climate;
- Behavior guidance;
- Respect for children's perspectives;
- Communication; and
- Support for children's engagement and learning.

The **Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)** is an example of an interaction-focused measure. Unlike broader environmental measures that examine physical space, materials, and other aspects of the classroom, CLASS focuses primarily on the **quality of educator-child interactions (Teachstone, n.d.).**

Caregiver Interaction Measures

Other measures focus even more specifically on the **emotional and relational qualities of adult-child interactions**.

For example, the **Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS)** examines the emotional tone and responsiveness of caregiver-child interactions, including dimensions related to sensitivity, harshness, detachment, and permissiveness **(Halle et al., 2010).**

Because these measures focus on adult-child relationships, they can provide information about aspects of the environment that are particularly relevant to children's social and emotional experiences.

> **Different Tools Serve Different Purposes**
>
> No single environmental measure captures every aspect of quality. A broad environmental rating scale may examine many features of a classroom, while an interaction-focused measure may provide a closer look at **how adults and children interact**. The appropriate measure depends on **what educators or programs want to understand and improve**.

Examples of Environmental Measures

Environmental measures vary in the ages and settings for which they are designed, the aspects of quality they examine, and the training required to use them. Educators do not need to memorize every available measure. Instead, they should understand **what a tool examines, the purpose for which it is used, and how the information can support improvement**.

The following are examples of environmental measures that educators may encounter:

Environmental Measure Examples

Table 4.5.2: Environmental Measures and What They Assess.

Example	What It Examines	Purpose
Environment Rating Scales (ERS)	Broad aspects of environmental and process quality, including interactions, activities, routines, space, and program structure	Provides a broad picture of environmental quality to support reflection and program improvement
Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3)	Multiple aspects of preschool classroom quality, including space and furnishings, personal care routines, language and literacy, learning activities, interaction, and program structure	Examines children's experiences across multiple dimensions of the early childhood environment

Example	What It Examines	Purpose
Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), Pre-K–3rd, Second Edition	Teacher-child interactions, including emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support	Provides information about the quality of teacher-child interactions to guide reflection and improvement
Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS)	Emotional tone and responsiveness of adult-child interactions, including sensitivity, harshness, detachment, and permissiveness	Provides information about the emotional and relational quality of caregiver-child interactions

Sources: Environment Rating Scales Institute (n.d.); Halle et al. (2010); Harms et al. (2015); Teachstone (n.d.).

The six areas examined by **ECERS-3** are Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Literacy, Learning Activities, Interaction, and Program Structure (Harms et al., 2015). The **CLASS Pre-K–3rd**, Second Edition, examines Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. Other age levels or editions may organize interactions differently (Teachstone, n.d.).

These are **examples rather than a complete list of environmental measures**. Different tools are designed for different settings, age groups, and purposes. Some provide a broad picture of environmental quality, while others focus more closely on particular aspects of children's experiences, such as teacher-child interactions.

> **Focus on Purpose**
>
> Educators should not choose an environmental measure simply because it is familiar or available. The tool should match **what the program wants to examine and improve**. A broad environmental rating scale and an interaction-focused measure provide different kinds of information and serve different purposes.

Connecting Environmental Quality to Social and Emotional Development

Environmental measures are especially useful when considering social and emotional development because children develop these skills within relationships and everyday experiences. The ways adults respond to children, organize routines, guide behavior, and create opportunities for interaction all contribute to what children experience throughout the day **(NAEYC, 2020).**

Environmental quality does not determine a child's social and emotional development. Children bring different temperaments, abilities, experiences, cultures, and needs to the classroom. However, a supportive environment can provide repeated opportunities for children to **develop relationships, express and regulate emotions, cooperate with others, solve social problems, and participate successfully in a group**.

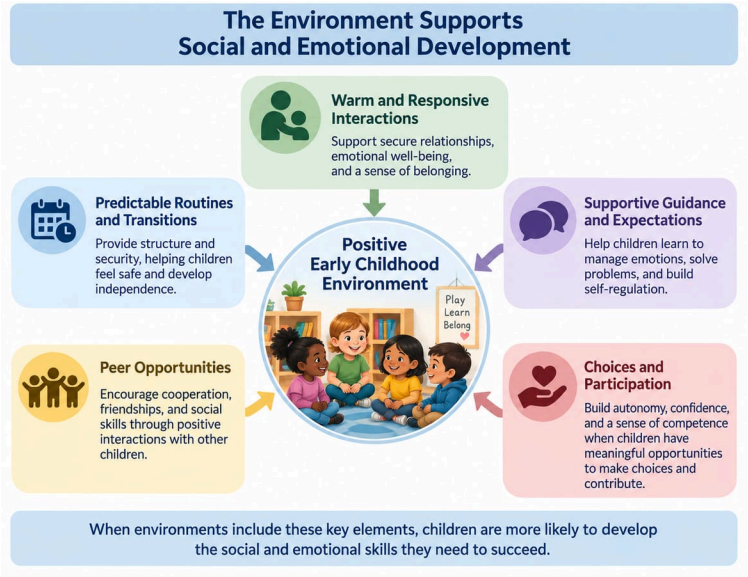


Figure 4.5.3: The Environment Supports Social and Emotional Development. Features of a positive early childhood environment can support children's relationships, self-regulation, social skills, independence, and sense of belonging (OpenAI, 2026a).

Table 4.5.3: How Environmental Assessments May Support Children's Development

Environmental Feature	How Environmental Features May Support Social and Emotional Development
Warm, responsive interactions	Children experience adults noticing and responding to their needs, emotions, and communication.
Predictable routines and transitions	Children can anticipate what happens next and gradually participate with greater confidence and independence.
Supportive behavior guidance	Children receive help understanding emotions, managing behavior, and solving social problems.
Opportunities for peer interaction	Children practice communicating, cooperating, sharing ideas, negotiating, and resolving conflicts.
Choices and opportunities for participation	Children practice independence, decision-making, and expressing their preferences and ideas.
Inclusive and accessible environments	Children have opportunities to participate, interact, and experience a sense of belonging within the group.

Source: Examples synthesized from National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020).

Environmental measures help educators examine whether these kinds of experiences are consistently available to children. Rather than looking only at an individual child's behavior, educators can also ask, **"What is happening in the environment, and how might we strengthen children's experiences?"**

> **The Environment Is Part of the Picture**
>
> When children experience difficulty participating, interacting with peers, managing emotions, or following routines, educators should consider both the **individual child and the environment**. Changes to interactions, routines, expectations, or classroom organization may provide additional support.

Choosing and Using Environmental Measures Responsibly

Not every environmental measure is appropriate for every setting or purpose. Before using a rating scale or observational quality measure, educators and programs should consider **what the tool was designed to examine, how it should be used, and whether it is appropriate for the setting and purpose**.

When selecting or using an environmental measure, consider the following:

Purpose. The measure should match what educators or programs want to examine. A broad environmental rating scale may be appropriate when looking at overall classroom quality, while an interaction-focused measure may be more appropriate when the goal is to examine teacher-child interactions.

Reliability. A reliable measure produces reasonably consistent results when it is used appropriately. For observational measures, this includes consistency among trained observers.

Validity. The measure should provide meaningful information about what it is intended to examine. Evidence supporting a tool should also match the purpose for which the results will be used.

Age and setting. Environmental measures are often designed for particular age groups or types of early childhood settings. For example, the Environment Rating Scales include different measures for infant/toddler, preschool, school-age, and family child care settings **(ERSI, n.d.).**

Cultural and contextual responsiveness. Expectations for environments and interactions can be influenced by culture, language, community, resources, and program context. Environmental information should therefore be interpreted thoughtfully and in relation to the children, families, and communities served **(NAEYC, 2020).**

Training and administration requirements. Some measures require specific training, certification, observation procedures, or scoring methods. Educators and programs should follow the requirements of the particular tool rather than adapting it in ways that could change the meaning of the results.

Environmental information should also be considered as **one source of information about program quality**. A single observation or score cannot capture everything children experience within a classroom or program.

> **Use the Tool as Intended**
>
> An environmental measure should not be chosen simply because it is familiar or easy to use. The measure should be appropriate for the **age group, setting, population, and purpose**, and educators should follow the procedures established for the tool.

Vocabulary Alert: Key Environmental Assessment Terms

Environmental rating scale: A structured tool used to observe and evaluate characteristics of an early childhood environment.

Process quality: The quality of children's everyday experiences within an early childhood setting, particularly their interactions, relationships, activities, and routines.

Reliability: The consistency of a measurement tool when it is used appropriately.

Validity: The extent to which a tool measures what it is intended to measure and supports its intended use.

The Early Childhood Educator's Role

Early childhood educators play an important role in understanding and improving the environments children experience each day. Because educators participate in classroom routines, interactions, and activities, they can use environmental information to reflect on practice and make intentional changes.

A useful way to think about the educator's role is: **Observe → Reflect → Identify → Plan → Make Changes → Observe Again**

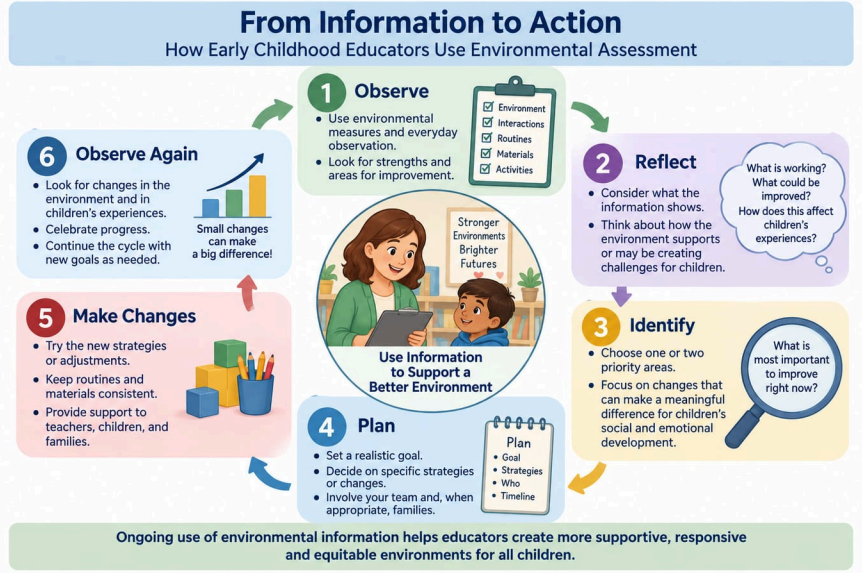


Figure 4.5.4: From Information to Action. Environmental assessment is an ongoing cycle of observation, reflection, planning, change, and continued observation (OpenAI, 2026b).

Observe

Observe what children experience throughout the day. Pay attention to interactions, relationships, routines, transitions, activities, classroom organization, and opportunities for children to participate and make choices.

Reflect

Consider what the observations or environmental rating results reveal. What appears to be working well? When do children appear engaged, comfortable, and successful? When do difficulties or barriers occur?

Identify

Identify specific aspects of the environment or teaching practices that could be strengthened. Rather than focusing only on children's behavior, consider whether changes to interactions, routines, expectations, materials, or classroom organization might better support participation.

Plan

Choose an intentional change based on the information gathered. The change should address a specific aspect of the environment and have a clear purpose.

Make Changes

Put the planned change into practice. For example, an educator might adjust a transition, reorganize an area of the classroom, provide additional choices, or change how adults support children during peer conflicts.

Observe Again

Continue observing after the change. Consider how children respond and whether the change improved their experiences. Additional adjustments may be needed.

> **Environmental Assessment Is a Cycle**
>
> Environmental assessment is most useful when it leads to **reflection and intentional improvement**. Educators observe children's experiences, make informed changes, and continue observing to determine what is working and what may need further adjustment.

Partnering With Families

Families are important partners in understanding the quality of children's experiences in early childhood programs. They know their children's experiences, relationships, routines, culture, language, and community in ways that may not be visible within the classroom.

Environmental rating scales and observational measures focus on the **environment and interactions within the program**, rather than evaluating individual children or families. When programs use information from these measures, educators can help families understand what is being examined and how the information is being used to support program improvement.

When partnering with families, educators can:

- Explain the purpose of environmental assessment;
- Invite families to share perspectives about their children's experiences;
- Communicate about changes being made to strengthen the environment;
- Consider family culture, language, values, and experiences when reflecting on environmental quality; and
- Emphasize that environmental assessment is intended to support **reflection and continuous improvement**.

Family perspectives can add important context to information gathered through environmental observations. Combining structured environmental assessment with educator reflection and family perspectives can help programs make more informed decisions about how to support children's social and emotional experiences.

Putting It Into Practice: Look at the Environment

Environmental measures can help educators shift from asking only **“Why is this child having difficulty?”** to also asking **“What is happening in the environment that might support or create challenges for participation?”**

Consider the following situation:

Example 4.5.1

Ms. Rivera notices that several children have difficulty during the transition from center time to lunch. Children frequently argue over cleanup materials, some become upset when play ends, and teachers spend much of the transition reminding children what to do.

Rather than viewing these difficulties only as problems with individual children's behavior, Ms. Rivera considers the **environment and routine**.

She asks:

- Is the transition predictable for children?

- Do children receive enough warning before play ends?
- Are cleanup expectations clear and appropriate?
- Do children have meaningful ways to participate in cleanup?
- How are teachers responding when children become frustrated?
- Could the routine or environment be changed to support greater independence and cooperation?

Based on her observations, Ms. Rivera decides to provide a consistent warning before cleanup, use a visual cue to show what happens next, and give children specific cleanup responsibilities. She then observes the transition over the next several days to see how children respond.

This process reflects the same cycle used when examining environmental quality: **Observe** → **Reflect** → **Identify** → **Plan** → **Make Changes** → **Observe Again**

Look Beyond the Behavior

When several children experience difficulty in the same situation, consider the **environment, interactions, and routines** as well as individual children's needs. Environmental assessment can help educators identify changes that may better support children's social and emotional development.

Exercise 4.5.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the primary purpose of an environmental rating scale or observational quality measure?
2. How is environmental assessment different from assessment or screening that focuses on an individual child?
3. What are some aspects of an early childhood environment that environmental measures may examine?
4. How do broad environmental rating scales differ from measures that focus primarily on teacher-child interactions?

Apply What You Know

5. An environmental observation shows that children frequently experience conflicts during classroom transitions and that teachers spend much of this time directing or correcting children's behavior. How could an educator use this information to support children's social and emotional development?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 4.5.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Environmental measures provide structured information about characteristics of an early childhood environment or the interactions occurring within it. The information can help educators and programs identify strengths, recognize areas for improvement, and make intentional changes.
2. Environmental assessment focuses on the **setting, classroom, program, or interactions within the environment**. Child-focused assessment or screening gathers information about an **individual child's development, learning, or behavior**.
3. Environmental measures may examine teacher-child interactions, relationships and emotional climate, routines and transitions, classroom organization, activities and materials, opportunities for participation and independence, and features of the physical environment.
4. Broad environmental rating scales examine multiple aspects of classroom or program quality, such as interactions, routines, activities, materials, and physical space. Interaction-focused measures concentrate more specifically on the **quality of interactions between adults and children**.

Answer to Apply What You Know

5. The educator could examine the **environment and transition routine** rather than assuming the difficulties are caused only by children's behavior. The educator might consider whether expectations are clear, whether children receive enough warning, how teachers respond to children's emotions and behavior, and whether children have meaningful ways to participate. After making an intentional change, the educator should observe again to determine how the change affects children's participation, cooperation, and interactions.

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5: ANALYZING THE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATION OF CHILDREN

5.1: The Progression of Language Development and Communication

5.2: Methods to Promote Language Development

5.3: Multilingual Learners

5.4: Applying Language Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

5.5: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Language Development and Communication

5.6: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Language Development and Communication

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5.1: The Progression of Language Development and Communication

Introduction

Language and communication develop rapidly from ages 3–8, with increasing abilities to understand language, express increasingly complex ideas, participate in conversations, tell stories, and adapt communication to different people and situations.

This section organizes language and communication into four connected strands: receptive language, expressive language, social communication, and narrative language. Vocabulary and grammar contribute across these strands. These categories help us describe development, although children use them together during everyday communication.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 5.1: Describe the progression of language development and communication.

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

- Describe the progression of language and communication development from ages 3–8.
- Identify developmental changes in receptive language, expressive language, vocabulary and grammar, and social communication.
- Recognize individual, cultural, and linguistic variation in language development.



Figure 5.1.1: The four strands of language and communication—receptive language, expressive language, social communication, and narrative language—develop together to support children's communication, learning, and relationships (OpenAI, 2026a).

Understanding Language: Receptive Language

Receptive language is the ability to understand language, including spoken or signed language. Children use receptive language when they listen to conversations, follow directions, understand questions, learn new words, and make meaning from stories and explanations. Receptive language develops alongside expressive language, but children often understand more language than they can use themselves.

From ages 3–8, children generally become increasingly able to understand **longer messages, more complex directions, a wider range of vocabulary, and meanings that depend on context**. Around age three, children increasingly understand familiar directions and location words. During the preschool years, they become better able to follow directions involving multiple steps (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], n.d.-a; Office of Head Start, n.d.).

The Progression of Understanding Language

Around Age 3

Children are becoming increasingly successful at understanding everyday language used during routines, play, and conversations. They increasingly follow familiar directions and understand words that describe people, objects, actions, and locations (ASHA, n.d.-a).

For example, a child may understand: "Put your cup on the table and bring me your coat." Familiar routines, gestures, and objects in view can help children make sense of these directions.

Around Ages 4–5

As receptive language develops, children understand a rapidly expanding range of words and increasingly complex sentences. They become better able to listen to stories, understand questions, follow classroom directions, and connect information they hear with what they already know (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Children are also learning that the meaning of a message comes from more than individual words. **Context**, including the situation, facial expressions, tone of voice, and what has already been said, can help children determine what another person means. Context contributes to the meaning of spoken communication.

Around Ages 6–8

As children move into middle childhood, they become increasingly able to understand language that is **more complex, precise, and flexible**. They draw on their growing vocabulary and knowledge of language to make connections among words and ideas.

Their understanding of word meanings also becomes more sophisticated. Rather than thinking primarily about what can be done with an object, older children increasingly recognize categories and relationships among words. For example, a younger child may associate *pizza* with *eat*, while an older child may recognize *pizza* as a type of *food*.

Children also become increasingly able to understand humor, wordplay, and meanings that are not completely literal. This growing flexibility reflects both expanding vocabulary and a more sophisticated understanding of how language works (ASHA, n.d.-e).

The Overall Progression

A simple way to think about receptive language development from ages 3–8 is: **Understanding familiar words and directions → Understanding increasingly complex sentences and stories → Using context to interpret meaning → Understanding increasingly flexible and nonliteral language**

Across this progression, children are doing more than simply learning additional words. They are becoming increasingly skilled at **making meaning from language**—an ability that supports conversation, learning, relationships, and communication throughout the school day (ASHA, n.d.-e).

Vocabulary Alert:

Receptive language: Language that a person understands through listening or other forms of communication.

Context: Information from the situation, previous communication, facial expressions, tone, and other cues that help a listener determine meaning.

Expressing Language: Expressive Language

Expressive language is the ability to use words, sentences, gestures, and other forms of communication to share ideas, needs, feelings, and experiences with other people. Children use expressive language when they talk with adults and peers, answer questions, describe events, tell stories, and explain their thinking. Expressive language develops rapidly from ages 3–8 as children's vocabulary, grammar, sentence length, and communication skills become increasingly complex (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

From ages 3–8, children generally become increasingly able to **name and describe familiar people and objects, combine words into longer and more organized sentences, use grammar more accurately, and communicate ideas more clearly and purposefully**.

Around Age 3

Around age 3, children are using language more often and for more purposes. They name familiar people and objects, talk about what they are doing, express wants and needs, and participate in short conversations. Many children at this age can say their first name, use words such as *I, me, we,* and *you*, and carry on a conversation using two or three sentences.

At this stage, children are still learning the rules of grammar. As they begin to recognize patterns in language, they may apply those rules too broadly. For example, a child may say "I goed there" or "I doed that." This type of over-regularization is typical as children begin learning how words change to show tense.

Around Ages 4–5

During ages 4–5, expressive language becomes more organized, detailed, and understandable. Children use longer sentences, a wider range of vocabulary, and more accurate grammar. They become increasingly able to tell stories, describe events, recite songs or poems, and communicate so that others can understand them (ASHA, n.d.-b; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025, 2026).

By age 4, many children use increasingly complex grammar and tell simple stories. By age 5, their speech and storytelling generally become clearer and more organized.

Adults continue to play an important role during this period. When children use immature grammar or unclear speech, responsive adults can model more complete or accurate language and encourage children to say more. Through scaffolding, an adult helps a child to use increasingly advanced language.

Around Ages 6–8

As children move into middle childhood, expressive language becomes more flexible, precise, and purposeful. Children are increasingly able to explain ideas, describe experiences in more detail, choose words more carefully, and use language differently depending on the situation or listener. Their growing vocabulary makes it easier to express increasingly complex thoughts (ASHA, n.d.-e).

By middle childhood, vocabulary grows rapidly and children develop a more sophisticated understanding of word meanings. Older children become more flexible with grammar and more quickly learn exceptions to language rules. Older children may also begin to use humor, wordplay, and jokes, showing a more advanced ability to use language creatively.

At this stage, expressive language supports not only conversation, but also explanation, storytelling, problem solving, classroom participation, and relationships with peers.

The Overall Progression

A simple way to think about expressive language development from ages 3–8 is: **Naming and using short sentences → Speaking in longer and clearer sentences → Using grammar and vocabulary more accurately → Expressing increasingly detailed, organized, and flexible ideas**

Across this progression, children are doing more than simply talking more. They are becoming increasingly skilled at **using language to communicate clearly, connect with others, share experiences, and express increasingly complex thoughts**.

Vocabulary Alert:

Expressive language: Language that a person uses to communicate thoughts, needs, ideas, and feelings to others through speech, gestures, or other forms of expression.

Conversation and Social Communication

Social communication is the ability to use language and other communication behaviors effectively with other people. It includes taking turns in conversation, staying on topic, listening and responding to others, using appropriate language for the situation, and interpreting cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice (ASHA, n.d.-e).

From ages 3–8, children generally become increasingly able to **participate in longer conversations, respond more directly to others, stay on a shared topic, and adjust their communication to fit different people and situations**.

Around Age 3

Around age 3, children are becoming more active participants in conversations. They may initiate interactions, answer simple questions, make comments, and take several conversational turns with familiar adults or peers. Many children at this age can carry on a conversation using two or three sentences.

At this age, conversations may still be brief and strongly connected to what is happening in the moment. Children may shift topics quickly, repeat themselves, or expect others to understand what they mean without providing much background information.

Children are also learning that communication involves more than speaking. They begin to use and respond to **eye gaze, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and other social cues** as they interact with others.

Around Ages 4–5

During ages 4–5, children generally become better able to take turns, maintain a topic for longer periods, answer questions more completely, and contribute relevant information to a conversation. Their growing language skills allow them to participate in increasingly complex interactions during play, routines, and group experiences (CDC, 2026).

Children also become more aware that meaning depends partly on **context**. Context and facial expressions help people understand the meaning of communication. This means that children are beginning to consider not only the words someone says, but also how the words are said and what is happening around them.

Around Ages 6–8

As children move into middle childhood, conversations become more organized, reciprocal, and flexible. Children are increasingly able to stay on topic, provide background information when needed, ask relevant follow-up questions, and respond to another person's ideas rather than simply waiting for their own turn to speak (ASHA, n.d.-e).

They also become better able to adjust their language depending on **who they are talking with and what the situation requires**. A child may speak differently with a teacher than with a close friend or may explain an idea in greater detail when the listener does not already know the background.

Growing understanding of context also helps children interpret humor and wordplay. Older children increasingly understand jokes and plays on words that younger children may interpret literally.

These abilities support increasingly complex peer relationships, collaborative play, classroom discussions, problem solving, and conflict resolution.

The Overall Progression

A simple way to think about conversation and social communication development from ages 3–8 is: **Participating in short exchanges → Taking more conversational turns and staying on topic → Using context and social cues to interpret meaning → Adjusting communication to different listeners and situations**

Across this progression, children are learning that successful communication is not simply about talking. It also involves **listening, responding, interpreting social cues, considering another person's knowledge or perspective, and adapting communication to the situation**.

Vocabulary Alert:

Social communication: The use of language, gestures, facial expressions, tone, and other communication behaviors to interact effectively with other people.

Conversational turn: One person's contribution to an ongoing conversation before another person responds.

Context: Information from the situation and surrounding communication that helps a person interpret meaning.

Narrative and Storytelling

Narrative language is the ability to organize and communicate events, experiences, or imagined ideas in a meaningful sequence. Children use narrative language when they describe what happened, retell a familiar story, explain an experience, or create an imaginary story. Storytelling draws on several developing language abilities at the same time, including vocabulary, grammar, memory, sequencing, and an understanding of what a listener needs to know (Spencer & Petersen, 2020).

From ages 3–8, children generally become increasingly able to **move from brief descriptions of events to longer, more organized stories that include sequence, details, characters, and connections among events**.

Around Age 3

Around age 3, children often begin by talking about events that are familiar, recent, or happening in the moment. Their early narratives may consist of only a few connected statements and may not yet include all the information a listener needs.

For example, a child might say: “We went outside. I fell down. Daddy helped me.”

The child is beginning to put events into an understandable order, even though the story may be brief and missing details about when, where, or why something happened.

At this age, children often rely on adults to help extend their stories through questions such as “What happened next?” or “Who was with you?” (Spencer & Petersen, 2020).

Around Ages 4–5

During ages 4–5, children’s stories generally become longer and more organized. They begin to include more information about **who was involved, what happened, and the order in which events occurred**.

By age 5, many children can tell a simple story using full sentences. Children may retell familiar stories, describe personal experiences, and invent stories during dramatic play. Their narratives increasingly include a recognizable beginning, a sequence of events, and an ending, although details or connections may still be incomplete (ASHA, n.d.-b; CDC, 2026).

For example: “We went to the park after lunch. I climbed the big ladder, and then I went down the slide. Then we went home.”

The story now gives the listener more information and connects events in a clearer sequence.

Around Ages 6–8

As children move into middle childhood, narratives generally become more detailed, connected, and purposeful. Children are increasingly able to organize events in a logical sequence, provide background information, explain why events happened, and include details that help a listener understand the story (ASHA, n.d.-e; Spencer & Petersen, 2020).

Their growing vocabulary and more flexible use of grammar support this development. Older children develop a more sophisticated understanding of word meanings and become more flexible in their use of language. Children may also use dialogue, humor, and wordplay to make stories more interesting.

By this age, children are increasingly able to consider the listener when telling a story. They may explain unfamiliar people or events, clarify when the listener appears confused, and include information needed to make the story understandable.

The Overall Progression

A simple way to think about narrative and storytelling development from ages 3–8 is: **Sharing brief events → Connecting events in sequence → Telling simple organized stories → Creating increasingly detailed and connected narratives for a listener**

Across this progression, children are learning that a story is more than a collection of sentences. Effective storytelling requires them to **organize ideas, connect events, provide enough information for a listener, and communicate a meaningful sequence of experiences or ideas**.

Vocabulary Alert:

Narrative language: Language used to organize and communicate events, experiences, or imagined ideas in a meaningful sequence.

Sequence: The order in which events or ideas occur.

Language Development Is More Than the Number of Words Children Know

Vocabulary growth is an important part of language development, but knowing more words is only one part of becoming an effective communicator. As children develop, they are also learning **how words are organized into sentences, how word meanings change with context, and how language can communicate ideas that are not always literal**.

Between ages 3 and 8, growth in vocabulary, grammar, understanding of meaning, and use of context work together. These developing abilities help children understand increasingly complex language and communicate their own ideas with greater accuracy and flexibility.

Vocabulary Growth

Children's vocabularies expand rapidly during early and middle childhood. As children encounter unfamiliar words in conversations, books, play, and everyday experiences, they begin connecting those words with concepts they already know. **Fast mapping** is the process of making an initial connection between a new word and its possible meaning after limited exposure. This first understanding may not be complete; children refine the word's meaning as they hear and use it in different situations (Heibeck & Markman, 1987).

As children get older, vocabulary growth involves more than simply adding new words. They develop increasingly detailed knowledge about how words are related. For example, a child may first know *dog* as the name of a familiar animal and later understand relationships among words such as *dog, animal, mammal,* and *pet*.

In middle childhood, this growing network of word knowledge can make it easier for children to connect unfamiliar words with

concepts they already understand.

Learning the Rules of Grammar

Children are also learning the **grammar** of the language or languages they use. Grammar includes the patterns and rules people use to combine words and organize sentences. Languages use patterns and rules for forming words, phrases, and sentences.

Young children do not usually learn these patterns by memorizing a list of grammar rules. Instead, they begin recognizing patterns in the language they hear and use.

This can lead to errors that actually demonstrate developing language knowledge.

For example, a child might say: “I goed to Grandma's house.”

The child already understands that *-ed* often signals something that happened in the past. The error occurs because the child has applied that pattern to an irregular word. This is called **overregularization** (Marcus et al., 1992).

As children gain experience with language, they increasingly learn both common grammatical patterns and the exceptions to them.

From Literal to More Flexible Meanings

Young children may understand the individual words in a sentence but still misunderstand what the speaker means. This is especially noticeable with **figurative or nonliteral language**.

For example, an adult might say: “That was a piece of cake!”

A young child may wonder where the cake is because the child interprets the words according to their literal meanings. As children develop, they become increasingly able to recognize that words and phrases can communicate meanings beyond their literal definitions. This growing flexibility contributes to understanding humor, jokes, expressions, and plays on words. Older children increasingly understand wordplay that younger children may interpret literally (ASHA, n.d.-e).

Context Helps Children Make Meaning

Understanding language also depends on **context**. A listener does not interpret words in isolation. Meaning may be influenced by what is happening, what was said previously, who is speaking, and communication cues such as facial expressions and tone of voice.

For example, the words “That's great” could express excitement, encouragement, disappointment, or sarcasm depending on how they are said and what is happening.

Facial expressions contribute to understanding meaning. As children become more experienced communicators, they become increasingly skilled at combining the words they hear with information from the situation to determine what another person means (ASHA, n.d.-e).

Putting These Skills Together

Vocabulary, grammar, meaning, and context do not develop separately. Children use them together whenever they communicate.

A simple way to think about this development is: **Learning words → Recognizing language patterns → Understanding relationships among words and ideas → Using context and increasingly flexible meanings**

As children's language develops, the important change is not simply **how many words they know**, but how effectively they can **understand, organize, interpret, and use language to communicate meaning**.

Vocabulary Alert;

Fast mapping: Making an initial connection between a new word and its possible meaning after limited exposure.

Grammar: The patterns and rules used to organize words and sentences within a language.

Overregularization: Applying a language rule to a word that is an exception to the rule, such as saying "*goed*" instead of *went*.

Literal meaning: The direct or usual meaning of a word or phrase.

Nonliteral language: Language in which the intended meaning differs from the direct meaning of the individual words.

Language, Culture, and Multilingual Development

Language development does not occur in isolation. Children learn to communicate within families, communities, and cultures that shape **which languages are used, who speaks with whom, how conversations are organized, and what forms of communication are valued**. For this reason, language development should be understood within the child's cultural and linguistic context rather than compared only with one pattern of communication (Office of Head Start, n.d.; Ramírez, 2023).

Patterns of adult-child talk vary across cultures, so educators should avoid treating one style of interaction as the standard for all children. Cultures may differ in who serves as a primary communication partner, how often adults initiate speech with children, and how much communication occurs among children themselves.

Language Develops Within Culture

Children learn not only the words and grammar of a language, but also **how language is used in their community**. They learn when to speak, when to listen, how to show respect, how stories are told, and how people communicate with adults, peers, and other family members.

For example, some children may experience frequent one-to-one conversations with adults, while others may participate more often in conversations involving siblings, extended family members, or groups. Neither pattern should automatically be viewed as more supportive of development. What matters is understanding how communication functions within the child's family and cultural context.

Educators should avoid assuming that one culturally specific pattern of communication represents the expected pattern for all children and families.

Developing More Than One Language

Children may grow up hearing and using **two or more languages** at home, in their community, and in educational settings. Children in middle childhood may be learning one or more languages while developing comprehension, fluency, and meaning in communication.

When children are developing more than one language, their knowledge may be distributed across those languages. A child may know some words, expressions, or ways of communicating in one language and other words or expressions in another. For this reason, looking only at one language may not provide a complete picture of what the child understands or can communicate (Fitton et al., 2023).

Children may also use different languages with different people or in different settings. For example, a child might use one language with family members and another at school. Which language a child uses most comfortably may depend on the topic, the communication partner, and the situation.

Different Does Not Mean Delayed

Language development can look different across children because children have different experiences with language. Differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, conversational style, or which language a child chooses to use do not automatically indicate a developmental concern.

Educators should consider questions such as:

- What language or languages does the child hear and use?
- With whom does the child use each language?
- How does the family typically communicate with children?
- What communication skills does the child demonstrate across settings and languages?

Considering the child's full communication experience helps educators distinguish **linguistic and cultural differences from possible developmental concerns** (ASHA, n.d.-e; Fitton et al., 2023).

Supporting Children's Home Languages

A child's home language is part of the child's relationships, family life, culture, and identity. Early childhood educators can support language development by valuing and including the languages children bring to the learning environment.

This may include learning important words and phrases from families, incorporating children's home languages into books, songs, labels, and classroom routines, and encouraging families to continue communicating with children in the language or languages they know best.

Supporting a child's home language does not require an educator to be fluent in every language represented in the classroom. It begins with recognizing children's languages as strengths and partnering with families to understand how each child communicates (Office of Head Start, n.d.; Ramírez, 2023).

Putting Culture and Language Together

A useful way to think about language development is: **Children develop language within relationships → Relationships occur within families and communities → Families and communities use language in culturally meaningful ways**

Therefore, there is **no single way that healthy communication must look** across all children.

Vocabulary Alert:

Home language: A language used by a child and family in the home or family community.

Multilingual: Using or developing knowledge of more than one language.

Cultural context: The beliefs, practices, relationships, and experiences within a cultural community that influence how communication is understood and used.

Individual Variation

Language and communication development follows general patterns, but children do not all develop skills at the same rate or in exactly the same way. One child may use a large vocabulary but speak very little in unfamiliar settings, while another may be highly conversational but still be developing grammatical accuracy. Differences can also appear across receptive language, expressive language, social communication, and storytelling (ASHA, n.d.-c).

Children's language development is influenced by many interacting factors, including **individual development, relationships, experiences, culture, and exposure to one or more languages**. Because of this variation, educators should look at patterns of

development over time rather than expecting every child to demonstrate the same skill at the same age.

Development Does Not Always Progress Evenly

Language development is not always smooth or uniform. A child may make rapid progress in one area while developing more gradually in another.

For example, a child may:

- Understand complex directions but use relatively short sentences,
- Have a large vocabulary but find it difficult to stay on topic during conversations,
- Communicate confidently with family members but speak less in a classroom setting,
- Tell detailed stories while still making grammatical errors.

These differences remind educators to consider the **whole pattern of communication development** rather than focusing on one skill in isolation.

Context Matters

Children may communicate differently depending on the setting, communication partner, topic, or language being used. A child who speaks very little during a large-group activity may communicate much more during play with a familiar peer. A multilingual child may demonstrate certain vocabulary or storytelling skills more strongly in one language than another (Fitton et al., 2023).

For this reason, a child's language abilities are best understood through observations across **different settings, people, activities, and languages**.

Developmental Variation and Possible Concerns

Individual variation does not mean that all differences should be ignored. Educators should become familiar with general developmental expectations and notice when a child's communication skills consistently differ from expected patterns or when the child has difficulty communicating needs, understanding others, or participating in relationships and learning.

A single observation is rarely enough to understand a child's development. Educators can gather information over time, consider the child's cultural and linguistic background, and partner with families to learn how the child communicates in other settings.

When concerns remain, educators can follow appropriate program procedures for screening, referral, or additional support (ASHA, n.d.-c, n.d.-f).

Focus on Progress Over Time

Rather than asking whether every child communicates in exactly the same way, educators can ask:

- What communication skills is the child currently demonstrating?
- How have those skills changed over time?
- In which settings does the child communicate most successfully?
- What supports help the child participate and communicate?
- What do families notice about the child's communication at home and in the community?

These questions help educators recognize both children's strengths and areas where additional support may be helpful.

The Key Idea

> Language development follows a general progression, **but the pace and pattern of development vary across children.**

Understanding individual variation means looking at the child's **overall development, communication experiences, cultural and linguistic background, and progress over time** rather than comparing the child with a single rigid expectation.



Figure 5.1.2: The overall progression of language and communication development from familiar language to increasingly organized, complex, flexible, and purposeful communication (OpenAI, 2026b).

Putting the Progression Together: Ages 3–8

Language and communication development from ages 3–8 involves several areas that develop together. Children are becoming better able to **understand language, express increasingly complex ideas, participate in conversations, and organize experiences into stories**.

Around age three, children increasingly follow familiar directions, use pronouns and plurals, and participate in short conversations.

Table 5.1.1: Language and Communication Development Across Ages 3–8

Age Range	Understanding Language	Expressing Language	Conversation and Social Communication	Narrative and Storytelling
Around age 3	Understands familiar words, simple questions, location words, and increasingly complex directions	Uses growing vocabulary, short sentences, pronouns, and emerging grammar	Participates in short exchanges and takes several conversational turns	Shares brief events or experiences, often with adult support
Around ages 4–5	Understands longer sentences, stories, questions, and more complex directions	Uses longer sentences, expanding vocabulary, and increasingly accurate grammar	Maintains topics for longer periods and increasingly uses social and contextual cues	Tells simple stories with a clearer sequence of events
Around ages 6–8	Understands increasingly complex, flexible, and nonliteral language	Uses more precise vocabulary and increasingly organized, detailed language	Adjusts communication to listeners and situations and participates in more reciprocal conversations	Tells increasingly organized stories with sequence, details, explanations, and connections among events

The table shows a general developmental progression rather than a fixed schedule. Children may develop more quickly in one area than another, and their communication may look different depending on the setting, communication partner, culture, and language or languages being used (ASHA, n.d.-c, n.d.-d).

Note: Developmental descriptions are synthesized from CDC developmental milestones, Head Start's Early Learning Outcomes Framework, and ASHA communication and social communication resources (ASHA, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-e; CDC, 2025, 2026; Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Four Strands, One Developing Communication System

Although receptive language, expressive language, social communication, and storytelling can be described separately, children use them together.

For example, when a child tells a friend about something that happened at home, the child may need to:

- **Understand** the friend's questions,
- **Express** ideas using vocabulary and grammar,
- **Take conversational turns** and notice whether the friend understands, and
- **Organize events into a meaningful sequence**.

Development in one area can support development in another. A larger vocabulary can help a child tell a more detailed story. Better understanding of context can support conversation. More complex grammar can help a child explain relationships among ideas.

The Overall Progression

A simple way to think about language and communication development from ages 3–8 is: **Understanding and using familiar language → Communicating in longer and more organized ways → Participating in increasingly complex conversations and stories → Using language more flexibly, precisely, and purposefully**

Across this progression, children are not simply learning more words. They are becoming increasingly able to **use language to understand others, express themselves, build relationships, share experiences, and participate in learning**.

Exercise 5.1.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What is receptive language, and how does it generally develop from ages 3–8?
2. What is expressive language? Give one example of how expressive language becomes more complex as children develop.
3. How does conversation and social communication typically change between age 3 and ages 6–8?
4. Describe one way narrative and storytelling skills generally develop from ages 3–8.
5. Why is language development more than simply learning more vocabulary words?
6. What is overregularization? Give an example.
7. Why is context important for understanding language?
8. Why should educators consider a child's cultural and linguistic background when thinking about language development?
9. True or False: A multilingual child who knows some words in one language and different words in another should be judged only by what the child can say in the language used at school.
10. Which statement best describes individual variation in language development?
    1. All children should demonstrate the same communication skills at exactly the same age.
    2. Children may develop different language skills at different rates and may communicate differently across settings.
    3. Differences in communication always indicate a developmental delay.
    4. Vocabulary size is the most important indicator of language development.

Apply Your Learning

11. A 4-year-old says, "I goed to the park and I runned really fast." What does this example suggest about the child's developing understanding of language?

12. A 7-year-old tells a classmate: “Yesterday we went to my grandma’s house because it was her birthday. First we ate dinner, and then she opened her presents. I gave her the card I made at school.” What features of developing narrative language can you identify in this example?
13. A child speaks very little during large-group activities but has long conversations with a familiar friend during play. What should an educator consider before deciding that the child has difficulty with language?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 5.1.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Receptive language is the ability to understand language. From ages 3–8, children generally progress from understanding familiar words, questions, and directions to understanding increasingly complex sentences, stories, vocabulary, context, and nonliteral meanings.
2. Expressive language is the ability to use language to communicate thoughts, needs, ideas, and feelings. For example, a younger child may use short sentences to describe an experience, while an older child may use more detailed vocabulary, complex sentences, and more accurate grammar to explain the same experience.
3. Around age 3, children often participate in relatively short conversational exchanges. By ages 6–8, they are increasingly able to maintain topics, respond to

another person's ideas, ask relevant questions, provide needed background information, and adjust their communication for different listeners and situations.
4. Children generally progress from sharing brief or loosely connected events to telling increasingly organized stories that include sequence, details, characters, explanations, and connections among events.
5. Language development also involves grammar, sentence organization, understanding literal and nonliteral meanings, interpreting context, participating in conversations, and organizing ideas into stories. Vocabulary is important, but it is only one part of communication.
6. Overregularization occurs when a child applies a language rule to a word that is an exception to the rule. For example, a child may say *"goed"* instead of *"went"* because the child has learned that *-ed* often signals past tense.
7. Context helps a listener determine what a speaker means. The situation, previous conversation, facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice can all change or clarify the meaning of spoken words.
8. Children learn language within families, cultures, and communities. Communication patterns, languages used, conversational expectations, and opportunities to communicate can differ across cultures. Considering this context helps educators understand a child's communication more accurately.
9. False. A multilingual child's language knowledge may be distributed across languages. Looking at only one language may not show the child's full communication abilities.
10. **2.** Children may develop different language skills at different rates and may communicate differently across settings.

Answer to Apply Your Learning

11. The child is demonstrating **overregularization**. The child has recognized grammatical patterns for forming the past tense and is applying those patterns to irregular verbs. This error reflects developing knowledge of grammar rather than simply a lack of language ability.
12. The child organizes events in a logical sequence, provides background information, connects events using words such as *because, first,* and *then*, and includes details that help the listener understand what happened. These are signs of increasingly organized narrative language.
13. The educator should consider the child's communication across different settings, people, activities, and languages. The difference between large-group and peer communication suggests that context may affect how the child communicates. Observations over time and information from the family would provide a more complete picture before drawing conclusions.

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5.2: Methods to Promote Language Development

Introduction

Language development is strengthened through meaningful interactions with adults and peers. Educators support language throughout the day by responding to children's communication, modeling new language, extending conversations, and creating opportunities for children to listen, speak, gesture, ask questions, tell stories, and express ideas.

Promoting language development does not require a separate language lesson. Everyday routines, play, books, songs, outdoor experiences, and classroom conversations all provide opportunities for intentional language support. The educator's role is to notice what a child is communicating and respond in ways that support and extend the child's communication (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 5.2: Identify methods to promote language development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Identify methods educators use to promote language development.
- Describe how responsive interactions and conversations support children's language.
- Explain how play, routines, books, songs, and other everyday experiences can promote language development.
- Identify ways to support children with different language and communication needs.

Educators can promote language development in many ways throughout the day. The following methods provide a framework for supporting children's communication during interactions, play, routines, and learning experiences.

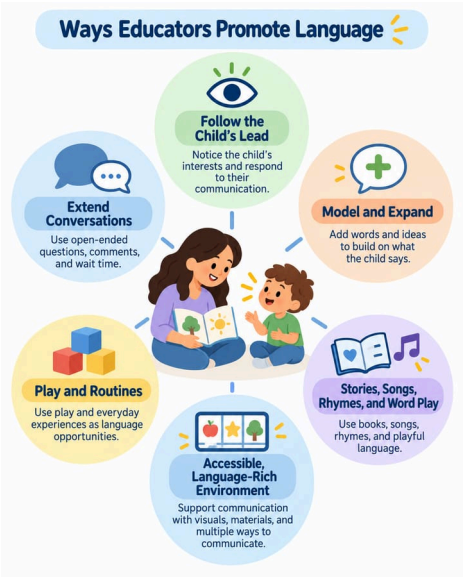


Figure 5.2.1: Ways Educators Promote Language. Educators promote language development by following the child's lead, modeling and expanding language, extending conversations, using play and routines, using stories, songs, rhymes, and word play, and creating an accessible, language-rich environment (OpenAI, 2026b).

Respond and Follow the Child's Lead

Children are more likely to communicate when adults notice and respond to what already has their attention. **Following the**

child's lead means observing what the child is looking at, doing, pointing to, talking about, or trying to communicate and then joining that focus rather than immediately redirecting the interaction.

A child's communication may include words, sounds, gestures, facial expressions, eye gaze, movements, or the use of pictures or other communication supports. When educators respond to these attempts, they show children that their communication has meaning and that other people are interested in what they have to say.

For example, a child pushing a toy truck across the floor may say, "Truck go!" Instead of changing the topic or asking an unrelated question, the educator might respond, "Yes, the truck is going fast!" The adult follows the child's interest while also providing a slightly more complex language model.

Educators can follow a child's lead by:

- Noticing what the child is focused on;
- Getting physically near enough to share the experience;
- Responding to the child's words, gestures, or other communication attempts;
- Commenting on what the child is doing rather than asking a constant series of questions;
- Imitating a child's sounds, actions, or words when appropriate; and
- Pausing to give the child time to respond or continue the interaction.

These back-and-forth exchanges help create **serve-and-return interactions**, in which the child communicates and the adult responds in a meaningful way. Over time, repeated responsive interactions give children many opportunities to practice taking turns, expressing ideas, understanding language, and learning new words (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, n.d.).

Putting It Into Practice

During outdoor play, Malik crouches beside a puddle and says, "Big water."

His teacher moves closer and says, "That is a big puddle. The rain made a big puddle."

Malik points to his boot and says, "Jump."

The teacher responds, "You want to jump in the puddle. What do you think will happen?"

In this interaction, the teacher begins with **Malik's interest**, responds to his communication, adds new language, and then gives him an opportunity to continue the conversation. The interaction remains centered on what Malik is already thinking about rather than on a lesson the teacher has imposed.

Model and Expand Language

Children learn language by hearing how words and sentences are used in meaningful situations. Educators can support this learning by **modeling language** and by adding to what children already say rather than requiring them to repeat words or correcting them directly.

Modeling means providing clear examples of words, phrases, and sentences during everyday interactions. For example, if a child points to a caterpillar, the educator might say, "That caterpillar is crawling slowly across the leaf." The educator gives the child language connected to something the child is already noticing.

Expansion means repeating a child's message while adding the words or grammatical features needed to make it more complete. If a child says, "Dog run," the educator might respond, "Yes, the dog is running." The child's meaning is preserved while the adult provides a more complete language model.

Recasting means responding to a child's message by changing its grammatical form while preserving its meaning. For example, if a child says, "Water cold," the educator might respond, "Is the water cold?" Expansion and recasting overlap: an expansion adds missing words or grammatical features, while a recast may also change the sentence structure. Both provide language models

without requiring the child to repeat a corrected sentence (Bradshaw et al., 1998; Cleave et al., 2015).

Educators can model and expand language by:

- Using words that match what the child is seeing, doing, or thinking about;
- Adding one or two ideas to what the child has said;
- Introducing new vocabulary naturally during play and routines;
- Using complete sentences while still keeping language understandable;
- Recasting a child's message without turning the interaction into a correction; and
- Repeating important words in different situations so children have multiple opportunities to hear and use them.

Putting It Into Practice

Lena is building with blocks and says, "Tall tower."

Her teacher responds, "You built a tall tower. It is almost as tall as you."

Lena adds another block and says, "Fall?"

The teacher replies, "You think it might fall. Let's see what happens when you put one more block on top."

The teacher does not ask Lena to repeat a sentence correctly. Instead, she **models more complete language, expands Lena's ideas, and introduces new words within the conversation**.

Extend Conversations

Children need opportunities to do more than answer questions. They develop language through **back-and-forth conversations** in which adults listen, respond, and give them time to express ideas.

Educators can extend conversations by using comments and questions that invite children to say more. Questions that can be answered with one word, such as "Did you play outside?" often end the exchange quickly. A more open prompt, such as "What did you do outside?" gives the child more opportunity to describe, explain, and organize ideas. Longer exchanges create more opportunities for children to practice conversational language (Strasser, 2024).

Match questions and comments to the child's communication abilities and interests. Open-ended questions can invite longer responses, but choices, yes-or-no questions, gestures, pictures, and comments may make participation easier for some children. The goal is a meaningful exchange, not a particular length or form of response.

Educators can extend conversations by:

- Asking **open-ended questions** such as "What happened next?" or "Why do you think that happened?";
- Making comments that encourage children to continue, such as "Tell me more about that";
- Pausing after a question or comment to give the child time to think and respond;
- Building on what the child says rather than quickly changing the topic;
- Encouraging children to explain their ideas, predictions, and problem-solving; and
- Sharing their own ideas when it helps keep the conversation going.

Longer conversations can also include **shared thinking**, in which the adult and child work through an idea together. Strategies may include clarifying ideas, suggesting possibilities, speculating, and asking open-ended questions (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004).

Putting It Into Practice

During science exploration, Nora watches an ice cube begin to melt.

Her teacher asks, “What do you notice?”

Nora says, “It’s getting little.”

The teacher responds, “It is getting smaller. What do you think is happening to it?”

Nora pauses and says, “Turning into water.”

The teacher replies, “You think the ice is turning into water. What do you think made that happen?”

Rather than moving quickly from one question to another, the teacher listens to Nora’s ideas, builds on her responses, and gives her time to think. The conversation supports both **language development and thinking**.

With older children, educators can extend conversations by inviting explanations, comparisons, and supporting reasons. For example, after two children test different bridge designs, an educator might ask, “What changed between your first bridge and this one?” or “What makes you think this design will hold more weight?” The educator listens, adds useful vocabulary, and gives children time to respond to one another’s ideas.

Build Language Into Play and Everyday Routines

Children have many opportunities to use language during activities that already occur throughout the day. **Play and everyday routines** provide meaningful reasons to communicate because children are talking about what they are doing, what they want, what they notice, and what they plan to do next.

Play is especially valuable because children can use language with both adults and peers. In dramatic play, children may take on roles, negotiate what will happen, solve problems, and create stories together. A pretend restaurant, veterinary clinic, grocery store, construction site, or home area can introduce new vocabulary while giving children opportunities to practice conversation (Joseph, 2024).

Educators can promote language during play by:

- Commenting on what children are doing;
- Introducing words that relate to the materials and actions;
- Joining play when doing so can extend children's ideas;
- Asking occasional questions that encourage children to explain or predict;
- Helping children communicate with one another; and
- Adding props, pictures, books, writing materials, and other materials that encourage conversation and pretend play.

Everyday routines also create repeated opportunities for language. Arrival, meals, handwashing, getting dressed for outdoors, cleanup, and transitions happen regularly, which allows children to hear and use familiar words many times.

For example, while children prepare to go outside, an educator might say, “First you pulled on your boots. Now you're zipping your coat. What do you still need?” During snack, an educator might comment, “Your apple is crunchy. Mine is juicy. What do you notice about yours?”

These conversations do not require a separate language activity. The educator intentionally **adds language to experiences children are already having**.

Putting It Into Practice

Several children are pretending that the dramatic play area is a veterinary clinic. Mateo holds a stuffed dog and says, “He sick.”

The teacher responds, “Your dog is sick. What does the veterinarian need to do?”

Mateo says, “Check him.”

The teacher hands him a toy stethoscope and says, “You can use the stethoscope to listen to his heart.”

Another child says, “I need it!”

The teacher responds, “You need the stethoscope too. How could you tell Mateo that you would like a turn when he is finished?”

The teacher uses the children's play to introduce vocabulary, expand their language, and support communication between peers without taking control of the play.

Use Stories, Songs, Rhymes, and Word Play

Stories, songs, rhymes, and playful language give children repeated opportunities to hear and use new words, sentence patterns, sounds, and rhythms. Because these experiences are enjoyable and predictable, children can participate even when they do not yet know every word.

Rhymes and songs are especially useful because repetition helps children anticipate and join in with words and phrases. Nursery rhymes and short poems also draw children's attention to the sounds and rhythms of language. Rhymes and poems allow children to practice language while hearing similarities in the beginnings and endings of words (Dunst et al., 2011).

Educators can promote language through stories, songs, and rhymes by:

- Repeating favorite songs, rhymes, and stories so children become familiar with the language;
- Pausing at predictable places and allowing children to supply a word, sound, or phrase;
- Emphasizing interesting or unfamiliar vocabulary and briefly explaining its meaning;
- Using gestures, facial expressions, props, pictures, or movements to support understanding;
- Inviting children to retell or act out parts of a familiar story;
- Changing familiar songs or rhymes by adding children's names, ideas, or new verses; and
- Encouraging children to notice and play with words that sound alike.

Stories and songs can also be made more accessible by providing pictures or objects children can point to or use while participating. **Story and song boards** are one way children can respond, repeat, and participate even when spoken language is difficult.

Putting It Into Practice

During group time, the teacher begins a familiar rhyme and pauses before the final word:

“Twinkle, twinkle, little…”

Several children call out, “Star!”

Later, the teacher asks, “What else can we think of that is in the sky?”

Children suggest “moon,” “clouds,” and “birds.” The teacher repeats their ideas and introduces another word: “Yes, sometimes we can even see an **airplane** traveling across the sky.”

The familiar rhyme gives children an easy way to participate, while the conversation that follows provides opportunities to use known words and learn new ones.

Create an Accessible, Language-Rich Environment

The environment can either create or limit opportunities for communication. An **accessible, language-rich environment** gives children many ways to understand others, express ideas, and participate in conversations throughout the day.

Language-rich environments include more than spoken words. Educators can use pictures, gestures, objects, signs, visual schedules, books, labels, and communication systems to support understanding and expression. These supports are especially important for children who are still developing spoken language, learning more than one language, or using alternative forms of communication.

Children may use many types of communication supports, including picture communication boards, adapted books, signs, story and song boards, and speech-generating devices. Some children may use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), such as pictures, communication boards, signs, or speech-generating devices, to support or provide alternatives to spoken communication (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, n.d.).

Educators can create an accessible, language-rich environment by:

- Placing books, pictures, labels, and meaningful print where children can see and use them;
- Using gestures, facial expressions, objects, and visuals to support spoken language;
- Providing picture communication boards, visual schedules, or other communication supports when helpful;
- Including materials that reflect children's home languages and cultures;
- Learning and using important words and phrases from children's home languages;
- Making communication tools available across classroom routines and play areas; and
- Ensuring that children who communicate in different ways still have opportunities to make choices, ask questions, join play, and share ideas.

Communication supports should not be treated as separate from the classroom experience. They work best when they are used naturally during play, routines, stories, and conversations (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, n.d.).

Putting It Into Practice

During snack, Sofia points to a picture of milk on her communication board.

Her teacher responds, "You want milk," while also pointing to the same picture.

Later, during a song, Sofia uses another picture to choose which animal the group should sing about next.

The teacher does not wait for Sofia to use spoken words before including her in the interaction. Instead, the communication support gives Sofia a way to participate, make choices, and communicate with others.

This is an important principle throughout language development: **the goal is communication, not just speech**.

Supporting Children Who Use More Than One Language

Children who are learning and using more than one language may communicate differently across people, settings, and situations. They may understand more language than they currently use, combine words from different languages in the same sentence, or rely on gestures and other forms of communication while becoming comfortable using a newer language. These patterns can be part of multilingual language development (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Educators can support multilingual children by valuing and building on the languages they already use. Children may sometimes use words from more than one language within the same interaction. For example, a child might say, "Quiero milk." Rather than treating the child's message as an error, the educator can acknowledge the meaning and provide additional language. The important first step is recognizing and responding to what the child is communicating.

Educators can support children who use more than one language by:

- Encouraging children to communicate in the language or languages available to them;
- Responding to the meaning of a child's message rather than focusing primarily on correcting language;
- Using gestures, pictures, objects, and routines to help make meaning clear;
- Learning useful words and phrases from children, families, and other knowledgeable speakers;
- Connecting new words to familiar people, objects, actions, and experiences;
- Giving children time to listen, observe, and participate before expecting spoken responses; and
- Including children's home languages in classroom materials, songs, stories, and conversations when possible.

Maintaining and developing a child's home language is important and can support learning while also strengthening meaningful family and cultural connections (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Putting It Into Practice

During dramatic play, Elena is preparing pretend food and tells her teacher, "Mira, soup."

Her teacher responds, "I see your soup. ¿Qué tienes en la sopa? What do you have in your soup?"

Elena points to the pretend vegetables and begins naming some of them.

The teacher accepts Elena's use of both languages, follows her idea, and provides additional language without requiring her to choose only one language. The goal is to **keep communication going while building on the language Elena already has**.

Putting It Together: A Cycle for Supporting Language Development

Promoting language development is an ongoing process. Educators observe how children are communicating, respond to their ideas, add language that extends what children already know, and then give children time to continue the interaction.

A useful way to think about this process is:

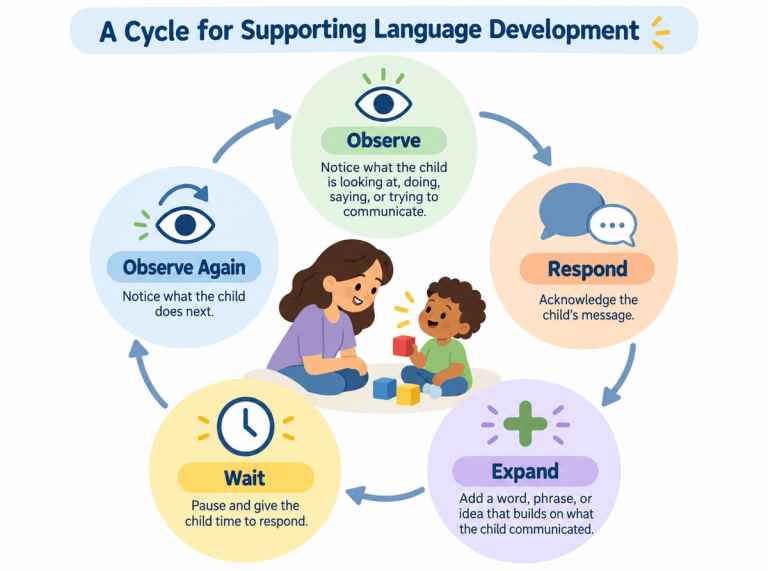


Figure 5.2.2: A Cycle for Supporting Language Development. Educators observe a child's communication, respond, expand the language, wait for the child's next turn, and then observe again (OpenAI, 2026a).

Observe → Respond → Expand → Wait → Observe Again

Observe: Notice what the child is looking at, doing, saying, gesturing toward, or trying to communicate.

Respond: Acknowledge the child's message so the child knows their communication has been noticed and understood.

Expand: Build on the child's message with a more complete sentence, useful vocabulary, or a related idea. This step may include expansion, recasting, or adding information.

Wait: Pause and give the child time to think, respond, gesture, speak, or continue the interaction.

Observe Again: Notice what the child does next. The child's response helps the educator decide whether to continue, add more language, clarify an idea, or simply listen.

Putting the Cycle Into Practice

During outdoor play, Jamal points toward a bird and says, "Bird!"

Observe: The teacher notices that Jamal is watching the bird.

Respond: "You see the bird!"

Expand: "That little bird is hopping across the grass."

Wait: The teacher pauses rather than immediately asking another question.

Jamal says, "Get worm."

Observe Again: The teacher now has new information about what Jamal is thinking and can continue the conversation: "You think the bird is looking for a worm."

The cycle can happen quickly and naturally during play, routines, stories, meals, and other everyday experiences. It helps educators remain responsive rather than turning every interaction into a lesson or series of questions.

Intentional teaching does not always mean talking more. **Sometimes the most supportive thing an educator can do is respond, add a little language, and then wait for the child to take the next turn.**

Vocabulary Alert

Following the child's lead: Noticing what a child is interested in or communicating and joining that focus rather than redirecting the interaction.

Modeling: Providing clear examples of words, phrases, and sentences during meaningful interactions.

Expansion: Repeating a child's message while adding words or grammatical features to make it more complete.

Recasting: Responding to a child's message by expressing the same idea in a different or more complete sentence form without directly correcting the child.

Open-ended question: A question that encourages a child to provide more than a one-word or yes-or-no response.

Wait time: An intentional pause that gives a child time to think, process language, and respond.

Language-rich environment: An environment that provides frequent, meaningful opportunities for children to hear, understand, and use language in different ways.

Home language: The language or languages a child learns and uses with family or within their home and community.

Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC): Ways of communicating that supplement or provide alternatives to speech, such as gestures, pictures, communication boards, signs, or speech-generating devices.

Serve-and-return interaction: A responsive back-and-forth exchange in which a child communicates through words, sounds, gestures, or actions and another person responds meaningfully.

Exercise 5.2.1

Check Your Understanding

1. Why is following a child's lead an effective way to support language development?
2. What is the difference between **expansion** and **recasting**?
3. How can open-ended questions extend conversations, and when might other types of questions or communication supports be more helpful?
4. Identify two ways educators can promote language development during play or everyday routines.
5. Why is wait time important during conversations with children?
6. Give one example of how an educator can create an accessible, language-rich environment.
7. How can educators support children who use more than one language?
8. What is the purpose of the cycle **Observe** → **Respond** → **Expand** → **Wait** → **Observe Again**?

Apply Your Learning

Scenario 1: Building With Blocks

A child is building a bridge with blocks and says, "Car go under."

What could the educator say or do to **follow the child's lead and expand the child's language**?

Scenario 2: Snack Time

During snack, an educator repeatedly asks children questions such as:

- "Is that an apple?"
- "Is it red?"
- "Do you like it?"

Most children answer with one word.

How could the educator change the interaction to encourage **longer conversations**?

Scenario 3: Dramatic Play

Several children are pretending to run a grocery store. One child is the cashier, another is shopping, and another is placing food into bags.

Identify **two ways** the educator could promote language development without taking over the play.

Scenario 4: Multiple Ways to Communicate

A child uses spoken words sometimes but also points to pictures on a communication board to express wants and ideas.

How should the educator respond to the child's use of the communication board?

Scenario 5: Multilingual Language Development

A child tells the teacher, "Quiero the blue one."

What would be an appropriate response that supports the child's communication and language development?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 5.2.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Following the child's lead connects language to something the child is already interested in and trying to communicate. This makes the interaction meaningful and encourages the child to continue communicating.
2. An expansion repeats the child's message while adding words or grammatical features to make it more complete. A recast changes the grammatical form while preserving the child's meaning. These strategies overlap and provide language models without directly requiring correction.
3. Open-ended questions can encourage children to describe, explain, predict, and share ideas. Choices, yes-or-no questions, comments, gestures, or pictures may be more helpful when they match a child's communication needs or make participation easier.
4. Answers may include commenting on what children are doing, introducing new vocabulary, joining play to extend ideas, encouraging peer conversation, using visual supports, or talking through everyday routines.
5. Wait time gives children time to process what they heard, organize their thoughts, and decide how they want to respond.
6. Answers may include providing books, pictures, labels, gestures, visual schedules, communication boards, AAC, or materials that reflect children's home languages and cultures.
7. Educators can value and respond to all of the child's languages, use visuals and gestures, learn important words from families, connect new language to meaningful experiences, and focus on the child's message rather than correcting language use.
8. The cycle helps educators respond intentionally to a child's current communication and decide what support to provide next.

Answers to Apply Your Learning

Scenario 1: Building With Blocks: The educator might say, "Yes, the car is going under the bridge. You made a tall bridge for the car to drive through." This follows the child's idea and adds vocabulary and sentence structure.

Scenario 2: Snack Time: The educator could use comments and open-ended prompts such as, "Your apple sounds crunchy," "Tell me what you notice about it," or "What is your favorite part of snack today?" The educator should also pause and give children time to respond.

Scenario 3: Dramatic Play: The educator could introduce vocabulary such as *cashier, receipt,* or *customer*, or make a comment that extends the play, such as, "It looks like your store is very busy today." The educator could also help children communicate with one another without directing the entire play.

Scenario 4: Multiple Ways to Communicate: The educator should respond to the child's message just as they would respond to spoken communication. The communication board is a valid way for the child to participate, make choices, ask for something, or share an idea (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, n.d.).

Scenario 5: Multilingual Language Development: The educator might respond, "You want the blue one. Aquí está—the blue one." The educator acknowledges the child's meaning and provides additional language without treating the use of two languages as an error.

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5.3: Multilingual Learners

Introduction

Section 5.1 described general patterns in language development, and Section 5.2 introduced methods educators can use to support communication. This section examines how those patterns and practices apply when children are learning or using more than one language.

Multilingual children bring language knowledge developed through relationships and experiences across home, school, and community settings. Educators can build on these strengths by learning about children's language experiences, supporting their home languages, and providing meaningful opportunities to communicate. Understanding multilingual development also helps educators distinguish language differences from concerns that may require professional evaluation (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], n.d.-a).

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 5.3: Examine bilingual language development.

Upon completion of this section, students will be able to:

- **Describe** how children develop two or more languages, including simultaneous and sequential multilingual development.
- **Explain** how receptive and expressive language skills develop across multiple languages.
- **Identify** common characteristics of multilingual language development, including code-switching, translanguaging, and differences in language use across settings.
- **Identify** common multilingual differences and communication patterns that may warrant consultation or further evaluation.
- **Identify** intentional teaching practices that support multilingual learners while valuing their home languages and cultural backgrounds.



Figure 5.3.1: One Child, Multiple Languages. Children's language knowledge develops through interactions across home, family, early learning programs, and community environments. Each setting provides meaningful opportunities to hear, use, and build on different languages (OpenAI, 2026c).

Multilingualism Is a Strength

Children develop language through meaningful interactions with the people and communities around them. While some children grow up hearing and using one language, others develop two or more languages as part of their everyday experiences. These children bring valuable language skills, cultural knowledge, and experiences to early learning environments.

A **multilingual learner** is a child who is learning or using two or more languages. Some children are exposed to multiple languages from birth, while others begin learning an additional language when they enter an early childhood program, school, or new community.

The term *multilingual learner* is used throughout this chapter because it recognizes the full range of languages children bring to their learning environments. Although terms such as *dual language learner (DLL)* and *English language learner (ELL)* are also used in educational settings, *multilingual learner* emphasizes that children are developing knowledge and communication skills across languages rather than simply learning English (ASHA, n.d.-a).

Learning more than one language does not cause language delays or language disorders. Multilingual children may develop different levels of proficiency in each language depending on their experiences, opportunities to communicate, and the languages used in different settings. For example, a child might understand and speak Spanish comfortably at home while still developing the English vocabulary used in the classroom. This difference does not necessarily indicate a developmental concern (ASHA, n.d.-b).

For early childhood educators, recognizing multilingualism as a strength means valuing children's home languages, building on their existing communication skills, and providing meaningful opportunities to develop language across everyday routines, play, and relationships.

> **The Big Idea:** Multilingual learners are not starting from zero when they enter a classroom where a different language is spoken. They bring existing language knowledge, relationships, and experiences that provide a foundation for continued learning.

How Multilingual Language Development Happens

Children can develop two or more languages in different ways depending on when they are introduced to each language and the opportunities they have to hear, use, and interact in those languages. Some children grow up learning multiple languages from birth, while others begin learning an additional language during early childhood.

Although the experiences of multilingual learners vary, **children develop language through meaningful interactions, relationships, and everyday experiences**, just as children learning one language do.

Simultaneous Multilingual Development

Simultaneous multilingual development occurs when children are exposed to and begin learning two or more languages from birth or very early childhood (ASHA, n.d.-a).

For example, a child may hear Spanish from one parent, English from another parent, and both languages during family activities. Over time, the child begins to understand and communicate using both languages.

Children developing languages simultaneously may:

- Understand words and phrases in both languages before using them independently.
- Develop vocabulary in each language based on the people, activities, and experiences associated with that language.
- Use words from different languages within the same conversation.
- Show different levels of proficiency in each language depending on how frequently they hear and use it.

Example 5.3.1

Three-year-old Sofia speaks Spanish with her grandparents and English at her early childhood program. She knows the Spanish names for many foods her family prepares at home but uses English words when describing classroom materials and activities.

Sofia's vocabulary reflects her experiences across both languages rather than a lack of language knowledge.

Sequential Multilingual Development

Sequential multilingual development occurs when a child begins learning an additional language after establishing some knowledge of a first language (ASHA, n.d.-a).

For example, a four-year-old child who has primarily spoken Hmong at home may begin learning English when entering a preschool program.

As children encounter a new language, they may initially rely on familiar words, gestures, facial expressions, and observations of others to communicate. They gradually develop an understanding of the new language and begin using it as they gain confidence and experience.

Children developing languages sequentially may:

- Understand more of the new language than they can express.
- Continue using their home language while learning the additional language.
- Use gestures, facial expressions, or familiar words to communicate.
- Speak less frequently in unfamiliar language environments.
- Gradually increase their vocabulary and sentence complexity as they gain experience with the new language.

Example 5.3.2

Four-year-old Kai speaks Hmong with his family. When he begins preschool, most classroom conversations occur in English. At first, Kai watches other children, follows familiar routines, and uses gestures to communicate. Over time, he begins using English words and short phrases during play.

Kai's developing English skills build alongside his existing knowledge of Hmong.

The Importance of Language Experiences

The development of multiple languages is influenced by both the **quantity and quality of children's language experiences** (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2017).

Quantity refers to how often children have opportunities to hear and use a language. Children who regularly interact with family members, educators, and peers in a particular language have more opportunities to develop vocabulary, comprehension, and communication skills in that language.

Quality refers to how meaningful, responsive, and engaging those interactions are. Language learning is strengthened when adults respond to children's communication, extend conversations, introduce new vocabulary, and encourage children to express their ideas.

For example, hearing an adult name objects provides language exposure. However, talking together about what a child is doing, asking meaningful questions, and responding to the child's ideas creates richer opportunities for language development.

For multilingual learners, opportunities to hear and use **each language** are important. A child may develop strong vocabulary related to family routines in one language while learning vocabulary related to classroom experiences in another.

Early childhood educators can support language development by creating opportunities for meaningful communication throughout play, conversations, shared reading, and everyday routines.

Languages Develop as Interconnected Resources

Multilingual children learn language-specific vocabulary, sounds, and grammatical patterns while also making connections across their languages. Knowledge and experiences developed in one language can support learning and communication in another (NASEM, 2024).

Children bring knowledge from one language to their understanding and use of another. For example, a child who understands the concept of *bigger* and *smaller* in Spanish does not need to relearn the concept when encountering the English words. The child is learning new words to express something already understood.

Children may also draw on vocabulary, sentence structures, and communication strategies from more than one language as they express their ideas. These connections allow children to use their developing language knowledge flexibly across different settings.

Example 5.3.3

During a classroom activity, five-year-old Mateo explains that a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. He first describes the process in Spanish and then uses pictures, gestures, and familiar English words to share his understanding with classmates.

Mateo already understands the science concept. Learning additional English vocabulary helps him communicate that knowledge in another language.

Rather than viewing children's languages as competing with one another, educators should recognize that **each language contributes to the child's overall communication, learning, and understanding of the world**.

Putting It Together: Two Pathways to Multilingual Development

Table 5.3.1: Pathways to Multilingual Development

Simultaneous Multilingual Development	Sequential Multilingual Development
Children begin learning two or more languages from birth or very early childhood.	Children begin learning an additional language after developing some knowledge of a first language.
Languages develop alongside one another through everyday experiences.	Children build on existing language knowledge while developing an additional language.
Children may use different languages with different people or in different settings.	Children may initially rely on their home language, gestures, and observation in a new language environment.
Vocabulary and communication skills develop across languages based on exposure and opportunities to use them.	Understanding and expressive language in the additional language develop through meaningful exposure and interaction.

Source: Synthesized from ASHA (n.d.-a).

Both pathways represent typical ways children become multilingual. Children do not all develop their languages at the same rate or use each language equally.

The Big Idea

Multilingual language development is shaped by when children encounter different languages, the meaningful opportunities they have to use them, and the connections they make across languages. **A child's complete language development is best understood by considering all the languages they know and use.**

Receptive and Expressive Language Across Languages

Multilingual children develop both **receptive language** (understanding what others communicate) and **expressive language** (communicating thoughts, needs, and ideas). These abilities develop through interactions with family members, educators, peers, and others who use different languages.

Just as with children learning one language, receptive and expressive language do not always develop at the same rate. **Children often understand more language than they can independently express**, especially when they are beginning to learn an additional language (ASHA, n.d.-a).

Receptive Language: Understanding Across Languages

Receptive language: The ability to understand language, including spoken or signed language.

Multilingual children develop receptive language skills through repeated exposure to meaningful conversations, familiar routines, and interactions in each language.

A child may demonstrate understanding by:

- Following directions in a familiar language.
- Pointing to objects or pictures when they are named.
- Responding appropriately to questions or requests.
- Using gestures or actions to show understanding.
- Recognizing familiar words and phrases during everyday activities.

Children may understand different words and concepts in different languages depending on their experiences.

Example 5.3.4

Three-year-old Isabella understands Spanish directions from her grandmother, such as *"Trae tus zapatos"* (Bring your shoes). At preschool, she also understands familiar English directions such as *"Wash your hands"* and *"Time to clean up."*

Although Isabella may respond differently depending on the language being used, she demonstrates receptive language skills in both Spanish and English.

Expressive Language: Communicating Across Languages

Expressive language involves using words, sentences, gestures, signs, and other forms of communication to share thoughts, feelings, needs, and ideas.

Multilingual children may express themselves differently depending on the language, setting, or person with whom they are communicating.

For example, a child might:

- Speak in longer sentences when using a familiar home language.
- Use individual words or short phrases in a newer language.
- Combine words from different languages.
- Rely on gestures, facial expressions, or pointing when unfamiliar with a word.
- Communicate more confidently with familiar adults or peers.

These differences may reflect the child's language experiences rather than a developmental delay.

Example 5.3.5

Four-year-old Luis speaks in complete Spanish sentences when playing with his cousins. At preschool, where English is primarily spoken, he uses shorter phrases such as *"My turn"* or *"Want blue one."*

Luis's shorter English sentences do not necessarily indicate limited expressive language development. His ability to communicate in Spanish provides important information about his overall language skills.

Understanding May Develop Before Speaking

When children begin learning an additional language, they may spend time listening, observing, and developing an understanding of the language before using many spoken words.

A child might follow familiar classroom directions, recognize the names of classmates, and understand routine questions without responding verbally in the newer language.

This does not mean the child is failing to learn. **Listening and understanding are important parts of language development, even when spoken language is limited.**

However, educators should not automatically assume that limited speech is simply part of multilingual development. Understanding and communication should be considered across the child's languages, settings, and relationships.

Example 5.3.6

Four-year-old Mai recently entered an English-speaking preschool. She understands when her teacher says, *"Put your coat in your cubby,"* and follows the direction independently. However, when the teacher asks what she would like to play, Mai points toward the blocks rather than answering in English.

Mai's actions demonstrate that her understanding of English is developing, even though she is not yet using many English words to communicate.

An educator can support Mai by acknowledging her choice and modeling language naturally: **"You want the blocks! Let's build with the blocks."**

This approach supports expressive language without requiring Mai to speak before she feels ready.

Considering Language Abilities Across All Languages

One of the most important considerations when examining multilingual language development is that **a child's language abilities cannot be accurately understood by looking at only one language** (ASHA, n.d.-a).

Multilingual children often develop vocabulary related to the experiences they have in each language. For example, a child may know the names of foods, family members, and household routines in their home language while knowing the names of classroom materials, activities, and school routines in English.

If an educator considers only the child's English vocabulary, the child's overall language knowledge may appear more limited than it actually is.

Consider the following example:

Table 5.3.2: Language Knowledge Examples

Language Experience	What the Child Demonstrates
At home, speaking Spanish	Describes family activities, asks questions, and uses longer sentences.

Language Experience	What the Child Demonstrates
At preschool, speaking English	Uses familiar words, short phrases, and gestures to communicate.
Across both languages	Demonstrates vocabulary, comprehension, and communication skills that may not be fully apparent in either language alone.

Sources: Illustrative examples informed by ASHA (n.d.-a) and NASEM (2017, 2024).

Example 5.3.7

Five-year-old Camila can describe how her family makes tortillas using detailed Spanish sentences. During an English classroom discussion about cooking, she uses only a few English words, such as *"mix," "cook,"* and *"eat."*

If the educator considers only Camila's English responses, her language abilities may appear limited. However, her Spanish explanations demonstrate vocabulary knowledge, sentence formation, and the ability to describe a sequence of events.

By learning about Camila's communication in both languages, the educator gains a more complete understanding of her language development.

What This Means for Educators

Early childhood educators should recognize that receptive and expressive language skills may look different across a child's languages and environments.

To develop a more complete understanding of multilingual language abilities, educators can:

- **Observe communication across activities.** Notice how children respond to directions, participate in play, express needs, and communicate with others.
- **Partner with families.** Ask which languages children hear and use at home and how they communicate with familiar people.
- **Recognize nonverbal communication.** Gestures, pointing, facial expressions, and actions can provide information about children's understanding and communication.
- **Allow additional response time.** Give children opportunities to process language and communicate without pressure.
- **Value all languages.** Encourage children to use their home languages while continuing to develop additional languages.

Educators do not need to speak every language used by the children in their classroom. However, they can work with families, interpreters, and other professionals to better understand children's communication and provide appropriate support.

When concerns about language development arise, **educators should consider the child's communication abilities across all languages rather than relying only on performance in English**. Concerns that occur across languages may warrant additional observation and consultation with qualified professionals (ASHA, n.d.-a).

The Big Idea

Receptive and expressive language skills develop across all the languages a child hears and uses. A multilingual child may understand considerably more than they can express in a newer language, and their communication abilities may differ across settings.

Understanding the child's complete language experience helps educators recognize existing strengths, provide meaningful language support, and avoid confusing typical multilingual differences with possible developmental concerns.

What Multilingual Development May Look Like

Multilingual children do not always use their languages in the same ways or at the same levels. Their communication may vary depending on where they are, whom they are speaking with, and the opportunities they have to hear and use each language (NASEM, 2024).

These differences are often typical characteristics of multilingual development rather than signs of language delays. Understanding what multilingual development may look like helps educators recognize children's communication strengths and respond appropriately to their needs.

Using Different Languages in Different Settings

Multilingual children often use different languages depending on the people and environments around them.

For example, a child may primarily speak Spanish at home with family members but use English when interacting with educators and classmates. Another child may use one language with grandparents and a different language with siblings.

Children gradually learn which languages are commonly used in different situations and may adjust their communication accordingly.

Example 5.3.8

Four-year-old Elena speaks Spanish with her grandmother and English with her preschool friends. When her grandmother visits the classroom, Elena immediately begins speaking Spanish to her.

Elena's ability to adjust her language demonstrates that she recognizes differences in her communication environments.

Mixing or Switching Between Languages

Multilingual children may combine words from different languages or switch languages during conversations. For example, a child might say, *"I want más juice."*

These patterns are common in multilingual communication and do not, by themselves, indicate confusion or a language delay.

Code-switching, code-mixing, and translanguaging are explored in greater detail in the next section.

Using Gestures and Observation to Communicate

When children are learning an additional language, they may rely on gestures, facial expressions, pointing, and observation to support communication. A child who does not yet know the English word for an object may point toward it, demonstrate how it is used, or use a familiar word from their home language.

Children may also observe how classmates respond to directions or participate in classroom routines before joining an activity. These behaviors can help children participate and communicate while developing their understanding of a newer language.

Example 5.3.9

Three-year-old Amir recently entered an English-speaking preschool. During snack time, he points to the water pitcher and looks toward his teacher. The teacher responds, *"You would like some water. Here is your water."*

Amir successfully communicates his need, and the teacher provides a meaningful English language model without requiring him to repeat the words.

Gestures and observation are valuable communication strategies. However, educators should continue observing children's development across languages rather than assuming limited speech is always related to learning an additional language.

Uneven Vocabulary Across Languages

Multilingual children may know certain words in one language without yet knowing their equivalents in another. As the earlier examples showed, vocabulary reflects children's experiences and opportunities to use each language. Educators should consider vocabulary across languages rather than treating English vocabulary alone as the child's complete language knowledge (NASEM, 2024).

Different Rates of Language Development

Multilingual children may develop their languages at different rates depending on their experiences and opportunities to communicate (NASEM, 2017).

A child who hears and uses English throughout the preschool day may develop English vocabulary related to classroom activities quickly. However, the child may continue using more complex sentences and a wider range of vocabulary in their home language.

Language development is influenced by:

- **Frequency of exposure:** How often the child hears and uses each language.
- **Quality of interactions:** Opportunities for meaningful conversations, responsive communication, and shared experiences.
- **Communication partners:** The languages used with family members, educators, peers, and others.
- **Language environments:** Where and how each language is used throughout the child's day.
- **Individual differences:** The child's interests, experiences, developmental characteristics, and opportunities to participate.

Children's abilities in each language may also change over time as their environments and experiences change.

Example 5.3.10

Four-year-old Lin speaks Mandarin at home and English at preschool. As she spends more time interacting with English-speaking classmates, her English vocabulary expands. She continues developing Mandarin through conversations, stories, and family activities at home.

Lin's languages may develop at different rates, but both contribute to her overall language development.

Putting It Together: Recognizing Multilingual Development

The following table summarizes common characteristics of multilingual development and what educators should understand about them.

Table 5.3.3: Recognizing Multilingual Development

What Educators May Observe	What It May Mean
A child speaks one language at home and another at preschool.	Children often use different languages with different people and in different settings.
A child combines words from two languages in one sentence.	Mixing languages is a common communication practice and does not, by itself, indicate confusion.
A child points, gestures, or observes rather than speaking in a newer language.	The child may be using familiar communication strategies while developing understanding and expressive skills.
A child knows certain words in one language but not another.	Vocabulary often reflects the experiences and activities associated with each language.

What Educators May Observe	What It May Mean
A child uses longer sentences in one language than another.	Language proficiency may differ depending on exposure, practice, and opportunities to communicate.
A child becomes more comfortable using a language over time.	Increased familiarity and meaningful interactions can support continued language development.

Sources: Illustrative examples informed by ASHA (n.d.-a) and NASEM (2017, 2024).

What This Means for Educators

Recognizing these characteristics helps educators respond to multilingual learners without placing unnecessary emphasis on differences from monolingual children.

Educators can support children by:

- **Observing communication in different situations** rather than relying on a single interaction.
- **Learning about children's home languages** through conversations with families.
- **Accepting communication in any language** and responding to the child's intended message.
- **Using gestures, visuals, and familiar routines** to support understanding and participation.
- **Providing meaningful opportunities to hear and use language** through play, conversations, and daily activities.

Educators should also recognize that **typical multilingual differences and developmental concerns can occur together**. Learning multiple languages does not cause a language disorder, but multilingual children can experience language disorders just as monolingual children can.

When concerns persist, educators should gather information about the child's communication across languages and collaborate with families and appropriate professionals.

> **The Big Idea**
>
> **Multilingual development does not look exactly the same for every child or across every language.** Children may use different languages in different settings, combine languages, rely on gestures, and demonstrate different levels of vocabulary and sentence complexity.
>
> These patterns often reflect how children experience and use their languages. Understanding the child's complete language environment helps educators recognize strengths, support continued development, and identify when additional information may be needed.

Code-Switching and Translanguaging

Multilingual children often use their languages flexibly as they communicate with family members, educators, and peers. They may switch between languages, combine words from different languages, or draw on their full language knowledge to express an idea.

These communication patterns are natural features of multilingual development. **Using more than one language during a conversation does not mean a child is confused or unable to distinguish between languages.** Instead, children are using the language resources available to them to communicate.

Code-Switching: Moving Between Languages

Code-switching occurs when a multilingual speaker moves between two or more languages during a conversation or interaction (ASHA, n.d.-a). A child may switch languages depending on whom they are speaking with, the topic being discussed, or which words are most familiar.

For example, a child might begin speaking in English and then switch to Spanish when talking with a family member.

Example 5.3.11

Four-year-old Sofia is building with blocks when her teacher asks what she is making.

Sofia responds, *"I'm making a house!"*

When her Spanish-speaking grandmother arrives, Sofia turns toward her and says, *"¡Mira mi casa!"* (Look at my house!)

Sofia demonstrates code-switching by using different languages with different communication partners.

Children may also switch languages within a single conversation or sentence.

Code-Mixing: Combining Languages

Code-mixing is a term sometimes used to describe combining words or grammatical features from different languages within the same sentence or expression.

For example, a child might say: *"I want más."* (I want more.) or *"Look at my zapatos!"* (Look at my shoes!)

In these examples, the child combines English and Spanish vocabulary to communicate a complete message.

Although *code-switching* and *code-mixing* are sometimes described separately, the terms often overlap in research and educational discussions. Both describe ways multilingual speakers use their languages together (ASHA, n.d.-a).

Children may combine languages because:

- A particular word is more familiar in one language.
- The child associates a word with a specific person, activity, or experience.
- The child knows the listener understands both languages.
- Using words from both languages helps the child communicate an idea.

Code-mixing is not evidence that a child is confused about language. Multilingual children can develop knowledge of the vocabulary and grammatical patterns of their languages while also using them together.

Translanguaging: Using All Language Resources to Communicate and Learn

Translanguaging is a broader concept that describes how multilingual individuals draw on their full range of language resources to communicate, understand information, and participate in learning (ASHA, n.d.-a).

Rather than viewing languages as completely separate systems, translanguaging recognizes that children can use knowledge from all their languages to make meaning.

For young children, translanguaging may involve:

- Using words from different languages to explain an idea.
- Listening to a story in one language and discussing it in another.
- Using familiar home-language vocabulary while learning new English words.
- Combining speech, gestures, pictures, and language knowledge to communicate.
- Drawing on concepts learned in one language to understand new vocabulary in another.

Example 5.3.12

During a classroom discussion about butterflies, five-year-old Mateo says: ***"The mariposa comes out of the chrysalis!"***

His teacher responds: ***"Yes! Mariposa means butterfly in Spanish. The butterfly comes out of the chrysalis."***

Mateo uses language resources from both Spanish and English to demonstrate his understanding of the butterfly's life cycle.

His teacher recognizes his scientific knowledge while also introducing and reinforcing English vocabulary.

This interaction demonstrates how educators can support communication and learning without requiring children to use only one language.

Understanding the Differences

Although these concepts are related, they emphasize different aspects of multilingual communication.

Table 5.3.4: Understanding Language Differences

Concept	What It Means	Example
Code-switching	Moving between languages during a conversation or interaction.	A child speaks English with a teacher and switches to Spanish when speaking with a grandparent.
Code-mixing	Combining words or features from different languages within an expression.	A child says, *"I want más."*
Translanguaging	Drawing on the full range of language resources to communicate, understand, and learn.	A child uses Spanish vocabulary, English words, gestures, and pictures to explain how a butterfly grows.

Source: Synthesized from ASHA (n.d.-a).

An Important Distinction: Code-switching and code-mixing describe patterns of language use. Translanguaging provides a broader way of understanding how multilingual learners use their combined language knowledge to communicate and construct meaning. These concepts overlap rather than representing completely separate behaviors.

What This Means for Educators

Early childhood educators can support multilingual learners by recognizing that children may communicate using more than one language. Rather than correcting children simply because they combine languages, educators should focus on understanding and responding to the child's message (NASEM, 2024).

Effective practices include:

- **Accept communication across languages.** Encourage children to express ideas using the languages they know.
- **Respond to meaning first.** Acknowledge what the child is communicating before introducing additional vocabulary.
- **Model new language naturally.** Expand children's statements by introducing words and sentences without requiring immediate repetition.
- **Include home languages in the classroom.** Incorporate familiar words, songs, books, labels, and family contributions.
- **Provide opportunities for peer interaction.** Encourage children to communicate and collaborate during play and everyday activities.
- **Partner with families.** Learn which languages children use and encourage families to continue meaningful communication in their preferred languages.

Example 5.3.13

Responding to Code-Mixing

During snack time, three-year-old Lucia says: **"More leche, please."**

Rather than correcting Lucia for combining languages, her teacher responds: **“You would like more milk. Here's some milk for you.”**

The teacher acknowledges Lucia's request, models the English word *milk*, and keeps the interaction positive.

If the teacher also speaks Spanish, she might say: **“Yes, leche! You would like more milk.”**

Both responses recognize Lucia's communication while providing opportunities for continued language development.

The Big Idea

Code-switching, code-mixing, and translanguaging are natural ways multilingual children use their developing language knowledge. These behaviors do not, by themselves, indicate confusion or a language delay.

When educators value children's complete language resources, they create opportunities for children to communicate confidently, build vocabulary, and connect new learning to what they already know.

The “Silent Period”: Understanding Limited Speech in a New Language

When children begin learning an additional language, they may initially speak very little in that language. They might spend time listening, observing others, following familiar routines, and using gestures to communicate.

This experience is sometimes called the **silent period**, a term traditionally used to describe a time when a child is developing an understanding of a new language but is not yet using much spoken language in that setting (ASHA, n.d.-a).

However, **not all multilingual children experience a silent period, and limited speech should not automatically be considered a normal stage of learning another language.**

Educators must consider the child's communication across all languages and settings before making assumptions about their development.

What Limited Speech May Look Like

A child who is beginning to learn a new language may:

- Listen carefully while others speak.
- Follow familiar directions without responding verbally.
- Use gestures, pointing, or facial expressions to communicate.
- Speak more frequently with familiar people who use their home language.
- Participate in activities without initiating conversations.
- Gradually begin using words and phrases in the new language.

These behaviors may reflect the child's adjustment to a new language environment. However, they can also occur for other reasons, including temperament, unfamiliarity with the setting, communication difficulties, or developmental concerns.

Example 5.3.14

Four-year-old Anika speaks Hindi comfortably with her family. When she begins attending an English-speaking preschool, she rarely speaks during group activities. However, she follows classroom routines, participates in play, and uses gestures to communicate with her teacher.

After talking with Anika's family, her teacher learns that Anika continues to use complete sentences, ask questions, and tell stories in Hindi at home.

This information suggests that Anika's limited English speech may be related to her experiences learning and using a newer language rather than an overall difficulty with expressive language.

Why Educators Should Use the Term Carefully

Historically, the silent period has sometimes been described as an expected stage of sequential multilingual development. However, **children vary considerably in how they begin using an additional language**. Some begin speaking almost immediately, while others initially communicate more through listening, gestures, and observation. There is no single amount of time that defines a typical silent period for every multilingual child.

Educators should avoid assuming that a child who speaks very little is simply going through a silent period and will eventually begin speaking without additional support (ASHA, n.d.-a).

This assumption can be particularly concerning when a child:

- Communicates very little in both their home language and the newer language.
- Has difficulty understanding familiar language or directions across languages.
- Shows limited progress in communication over time.
- Loses language or communication skills previously demonstrated.
- Experiences persistent difficulties communicating needs, participating in interactions, or connecting with others.

These observations do not necessarily mean a child has a language disorder. However, they indicate that educators should gather additional information, collaborate with the family, and consider whether further evaluation is appropriate.

Important: Learning multiple languages does not cause language disorders. However, multilingual children can experience language disorders, and their needs should not be overlooked simply because they are learning an additional language.

Looking Beyond Silence: Understanding the Whole Child

When a multilingual child speaks very little in the classroom, educators should look beyond the amount of English the child uses.

The following questions can help educators develop a more complete understanding of the child's communication.

Table 5.3.5: Understanding Silence

Questions to Consider	Why It Matters
What languages does the child hear and use at home?	Identifies the child's language experiences and opportunities to communicate.
How does the child communicate with familiar family members?	Provides information about expressive language in comfortable, familiar settings.
Does the child understand familiar words and directions in their home language?	Helps educators understand receptive language across languages.
Does the child communicate through gestures, facial expressions, signs, or pointing?	Recognizes communication abilities beyond spoken English.
Has the child's communication changed over time?	Helps educators identify progress, persistent difficulties, or loss of previously developed skills.
Are family members concerned about the child's communication?	Incorporates valuable information from people who know the child well.

Sources: Synthesized from ASHA (n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

These questions help educators distinguish between limited use of a newer language and broader communication concerns.

Supporting Children Who Speak Little in a New Language

Children who are beginning to learn an additional language benefit from welcoming environments where they can participate without being pressured to speak.

Educators can support communication by:

- **Building trusting relationships.** Creating a predictable, welcoming environment where children feel comfortable participating.
- **Using meaningful language models.** Describe actions, name objects, and introduce vocabulary during play and everyday routines.
- **Supporting understanding.** Use gestures, pictures, objects, and demonstrations alongside spoken language.
- **Accepting different forms of communication.** Respond to children's gestures, facial expressions, home-language words, and attempts to communicate.
- **Providing opportunities without pressure.** Invite children to participate in conversations without requiring them to repeat words or speak in front of a group.
- **Partnering with families.** Learn how children communicate at home and encourage continued use of their home languages.
- **Observing development over time.** Document children's communication and consider whether additional support or evaluation may be needed.

Example 5.3.15

Supporting Communication Without Pressure

During a classroom activity, four-year-old Minh points toward a container of playdough rather than asking for it in English.

His teacher responds: **"You would like the playdough. Here's the playdough. Would you like the blue or yellow?"**

Minh points to the blue playdough.

His teacher says: **"Blue! You chose blue playdough."**

The teacher acknowledges Minh's communication, provides English language models, and encourages participation without requiring him to speak.

Over time, repeated interactions like this create meaningful opportunities for Minh to develop receptive and expressive language.

The Big Idea

Some multilingual children initially speak little when entering a new language environment, **but a “silent period” is not a universal or required stage of language development.**

Educators should never use the idea of a silent period to dismiss persistent communication difficulties or delay appropriate support.

By observing communication across languages, partnering with families, and providing responsive language experiences, educators can support multilingual learners while remaining attentive to possible developmental concerns.

Multilingual Difference or Possible Language Delay?

Multilingual children develop language through experiences with different people, languages, and environments. As a result, their communication skills may look different from those of children learning only one language.

A child might use longer sentences in their home language, speak less frequently in English, or know different vocabulary words

in each language. **These differences do not automatically indicate a language delay or disorder.**

However, multilingual children can experience language delays and disorders just as monolingual children can. Educators must recognize when differences are related to multilingual development and when communication difficulties may require further attention.

> The **key distinction** is that differences in language use may reflect multilingual development, while persistent communication difficulties across a child's languages may indicate the need for further evaluation (ASHA, n.d.-b).

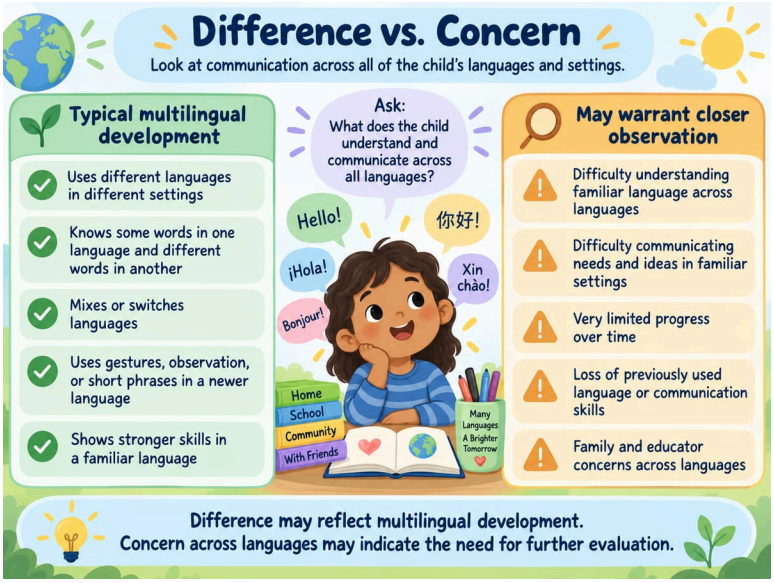


Figure 5.3.2: Multilingual Difference vs. Possible Developmental Concern. Common variations in multilingual language development are contrasted with communication patterns that may warrant closer observation. Educators should consider children's communication across all languages and settings when determining whether further evaluation may be needed (OpenAI, 2026b).

Understanding Language Differences

A **language difference** occurs when a child's communication patterns reflect their language experiences, cultural background, or the languages they are learning rather than an underlying developmental difficulty.

Multilingual children may demonstrate differences such as:

- Using more complex sentences in a familiar home language than in English.
- Knowing certain vocabulary words in one language but not another.
- Switching between languages during conversations.
- Using gestures or familiar words while learning a newer language.
- Speaking less frequently in an unfamiliar language environment.
- Developing proficiency in each language at different rates.

These characteristics may be part of typical multilingual development.

Example 5.3.16

Four-year-old Valentina speaks Spanish fluently with her family. At preschool, she uses short English phrases and occasionally includes Spanish words when communicating with classmates.

Her teacher initially wonders whether Valentina's limited English sentences indicate a language delay.

After speaking with her family, the teacher learns that Valentina regularly asks questions, tells stories, and uses detailed sentences in Spanish.

This information suggests that Valentina's shorter English sentences reflect her developing proficiency in English rather than an overall difficulty with language development.

Recognizing Possible Language Delays

A **language delay** occurs when a child's language skills develop more slowly than expected for their age and developmental experiences.

A **language disorder** involves persistent difficulties understanding or using language that affect communication and learning. A language delay does not necessarily mean a child has a language disorder.

For multilingual children, concerns become particularly important when difficulties are evident **across the languages the child knows and uses**, rather than only in a newer language (ASHA, n.d.-b).

Possible areas of concern include:

- Difficulty understanding familiar words, questions, or directions in languages the child regularly hears and uses.
- Limited ability to communicate needs, ideas, or experiences across familiar language environments.
- Persistent difficulties developing vocabulary or sentence structures despite meaningful opportunities to learn and communicate.
- Difficulty participating in everyday communication with familiar people.
- Loss of previously developed language or communication skills.
- Concerns expressed by family members about the child's communication in their home language.

These observations do not establish that a child has a developmental delay or language disorder. However, they provide reasons to gather additional information and consider consultation with qualified professionals.

Important: A child does not need to demonstrate difficulties in exactly the same way in every language for a language disorder to be present. The child's language exposure, proficiency, developmental history, and communication opportunities must also be considered.

Why Assessing Only English Can Be Misleading

Multilingual children often develop vocabulary across their languages rather than learning the same words in each language at the same time (NASEM, 2024).

For example, a child may know the Spanish words for foods and family routines while knowing English words for classroom materials and playground activities.

If an educator considers only the child's English vocabulary, the child may appear to know fewer words than they actually do. As discussed earlier, English performance alone may not represent a multilingual child's complete language knowledge. During an evaluation, qualified professionals consider vocabulary, comprehension, and communication across the child's languages, along with language exposure and developmental history. The appropriate assessment methods depend on the child and the purpose of the evaluation (ASHA, n.d.-a).

Looking at the Whole Child: Difference or Concern?

The following table provides examples of how educators can distinguish common multilingual differences from communication patterns that may warrant closer attention.

Table 5.3.6: Difference or Concern?

What Educators Observe	May Reflect Multilingual Development	May Warrant Further Attention
Vocabulary	A child knows different words in different languages.	A child has persistent difficulty learning or using familiar vocabulary across languages despite meaningful opportunities.
Sentence development	A child uses longer sentences in a familiar home language and shorter phrases in a newer language.	A child experiences ongoing difficulty forming or understanding sentences in languages they regularly use.
Language use	A child switches or combines languages during conversations.	A child has persistent difficulty communicating ideas or needs across familiar languages and settings.
Understanding	A child follows directions in a familiar language but is still learning directions in a newer language.	A child has difficulty understanding familiar language in settings where they have sufficient language experience.
Classroom participation	A child initially uses gestures or observes peers while becoming familiar with a new language.	A child experiences persistent communication difficulties that interfere with participation across settings.
Development over time	A child gradually develops additional language skills with exposure and meaningful interaction.	A child makes unexpectedly limited progress given their language experiences or loses previously developed communication skills.

This table is intended to guide educator observation, **not to diagnose a language delay or disorder**.

Sources: Illustrative examples informed by ASHA (n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

What Should Educators Do When They Have Concerns?

Early childhood educators play an important role in recognizing children's communication strengths and identifying when additional information may be needed.

However, **educators do not diagnose language delays or disorders**. Their responsibility is to observe, document, communicate with families, and collaborate with appropriate professionals.

When concerns arise, educators can follow four steps.

Step 1. Observe Communication Across Settings

Pay attention to how the child communicates during play, routines, conversations, and interactions with familiar adults and peers.

Notice both receptive and expressive language, including gestures, signs, and other forms of communication.

Step 2. Gather Information From Families

Ask families how the child communicates in their home language and whether they have noticed any difficulties.

Useful questions include:

- What languages does your child hear and use?
- How does your child communicate wants, needs, and ideas at home?
- Does your child understand familiar questions and directions?
- Have you noticed changes or concerns in your child's communication?

Family perspectives are essential because educators may not observe the child's full range of language abilities in the classroom.

Step 3. Provide Responsive Language Support

Continue providing meaningful communication opportunities in a supportive environment.

Use conversations, shared reading, play, visuals, gestures, and familiar routines to encourage language development.

Support the child's home language while also providing opportunities to develop English.

Step 4. Collaborate When Additional Evaluation May Be Needed

When concerns persist, educators should discuss their observations with families and collaborate with appropriate professionals, such as speech-language pathologists or early intervention specialists.

When a developmental concern is significant, educators should not delay referral simply to see whether additional exposure to English resolves the difficulty.

A comprehensive evaluation should consider the child's language development and experiences across relevant languages, using qualified interpreters or multilingual professionals when appropriate (ASHA, n.d.-a).

Putting It Into Practice: Two Children, Different Needs

Consider two children in the same preschool classroom.

Child A: Elena

Elena speaks Spanish confidently with her family. She tells stories, asks questions, and follows complex directions in Spanish. At preschool, she uses short English phrases and sometimes points to communicate.

Her teacher learns that Elena recently began using English regularly.

What might this suggest?

Elena's communication may reflect typical sequential multilingual development. Her existing Spanish language abilities provide important evidence of her overall communication skills.

Her teacher should continue supporting English development while valuing and encouraging Spanish.

Child B: Noah

Noah hears and uses both English and Spanish regularly. His family reports that he has difficulty understanding familiar directions and communicating his needs in Spanish. His teacher also observes similar difficulties during English classroom activities.

Both the family and teacher have ongoing concerns about his communication.

What might this suggest?

Noah's difficulties across familiar language environments suggest that additional information and evaluation may be appropriate.

His teacher should document observations, collaborate with his family, and help connect them with appropriate professionals.

The Difference: Elena demonstrates language skills in her familiar language while developing another language. Noah demonstrates communication difficulties across familiar language experiences. Neither child's behavior alone establishes a diagnosis, but the information helps guide appropriate educational decisions.

The Big Idea

A multilingual difference **is not the same as a language delay or disorder.**

Children may demonstrate different vocabulary knowledge, sentence complexity, and communication patterns across languages because of their experiences and opportunities to use each language.

However, persistent difficulties understanding or using language across familiar language environments may indicate the need for additional evaluation.

Effective educators consider the child's complete language experience, collaborate with families, and recognize both the strengths and possible support needs of multilingual learners.

Supporting Home Languages and English

Early childhood educators play an important role in helping multilingual children develop communication skills while maintaining connections to their families, cultures, and communities. Supporting multilingual learners does not mean focusing only on helping children learn English. It means **valuing the languages children already know while creating meaningful opportunities to develop additional languages**.

Children benefit from environments where their home languages are respected, their communication attempts are encouraged, and they have opportunities to interact with others throughout the day.

Valuing and Maintaining Home Languages

A child's **home language** is a language used within the child's family or home environment. Some children have more than one home language, and the languages they use may change depending on family members and situations.

Home languages support children's communication, relationships, cultural identity, and sense of belonging. They also provide a foundation of vocabulary, concepts, and language knowledge that children can draw upon when learning additional languages (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Educators can demonstrate respect for home languages by:

- Encouraging children to communicate using the languages they know.
- Including home-language words in classroom conversations and routines.
- Providing books, songs, and learning materials that represent children's languages.
- Displaying children's names and familiar words accurately.
- Recognizing children's home languages as valuable resources for learning.
- Avoiding classroom expectations that require children to use only English.

Example 5.3.17

During morning arrival, Ms. Rivera greets children in English and, when she knows the appropriate words, in their home languages. She says *“Good morning,” “Buenos días,”* or another familiar greeting.

These simple interactions help communicate that children's languages and backgrounds are welcomed in the classroom.

Important: Supporting English development does not require replacing a child's home language. Children can continue developing their home languages while learning English.

Partnering With Families

Families are essential partners in supporting multilingual language development. They provide valuable information about the languages children hear, understand, and use in everyday life (NASEM, 2024). Educators should approach families with curiosity and respect rather than making assumptions about language use based on a family's cultural background.

Helpful questions include:

- What languages does your child hear and use at home?
- Who speaks each language with your child?
- Which language does your child prefer during play or conversations?
- Are there favorite songs, stories, or expressions your child enjoys?
- Are there words or phrases that would help your child feel comfortable in the classroom?

Families can also contribute familiar songs, stories, photographs, and cultural experiences that help connect home and school.

Example 5.3.18

Three-year-old Amara's family shares that she enjoys a familiar bedtime song in Arabic. Her teacher invites the family to share the song or a recording so it can be included during a quiet classroom routine.

Hearing something familiar helps Amara connect her home experiences with her preschool environment.

Educators should also make efforts to communicate with families in their preferred languages, using qualified interpreters or translated materials when needed.

Learning Key Words and Phrases

Educators do not need to be fluent in every language spoken by children in their classroom to provide meaningful support.

Learning a few important words or phrases can help children feel understood and make everyday interactions more comfortable.

Useful words and phrases might include:

Table 5.3.7: Useful Key Words and Phrases

Classroom Situation	Helpful Words or Phrases to Learn
Greetings	Hello, goodbye, good morning
Comfort and reassurance	It's okay, help, family member's name
Basic needs	Water, hungry, bathroom, tired
Daily routines	Eat, wash hands, clean up, outside
Play and relationships	Play, friend, my turn, your turn
Feelings	Happy, sad, scared, hurt

Families can help educators identify words that are especially meaningful to their children and provide accurate pronunciation.

Example 5.3.19

Two-year-old Mateo uses the Spanish word *“agua”* when requesting water.

His teacher responds: **“Agua! You would like some water. Here's your water.”**

The teacher acknowledges Mateo's familiar word while also modeling English vocabulary.

This response supports communication without requiring Mateo to replace his home language with English.

Using Visuals, Gestures, and Predictable Routines

Children who are learning an additional language benefit from communication that includes more than spoken words. **Visual supports, gestures, demonstrations, and predictable routines** help children understand what is happening and participate in classroom activities (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Educators can use:

- **Pictures and photographs** to represent classroom activities and objects.
- **Gestures and actions** to support directions and explanations.
- **Visual schedules** to show what happens throughout the day.
- **Real objects** to introduce vocabulary during play and routines.
- **Repeated language** to help children become familiar with common words and phrases.

Example 5.3.20

Before outdoor play, Ms. Chen holds up a child's coat, points toward the door, and says: **“It's time to go outside. Let's put on our coats.”**

She demonstrates putting on a coat while speaking.

The combination of spoken language, gestures, and familiar routines helps children understand the direction while providing meaningful English exposure.

These strategies benefit all young children, not only multilingual learners.

Using Songs, Books, and Play

Songs, books, and play provide natural opportunities for children to hear, understand, and use language (NASEM, 2017).

Songs and Rhymes

Songs provide repeated vocabulary, predictable language patterns, and opportunities to participate through movement.

Educators can include songs in children's home languages, invite families to share familiar music, and use actions to support understanding.

Shared Reading

Books provide opportunities to introduce vocabulary, discuss pictures, and connect children's experiences to new language.

Educators can:

- Include books in children's home languages.
- Invite children to describe pictures using familiar words.
- Introduce English vocabulary while acknowledging home-language words.
- Ask meaningful questions and allow time for responses.
- Encourage families to read and tell stories in the languages they know best.

Play and Peer Interactions

Play provides meaningful reasons for children to communicate.

During block play, dramatic play, sensory activities, and outdoor experiences, children can use language to request materials, explain ideas, solve problems, and interact with peers.

Educators can support peer communication by modeling words and phrases, helping children understand one another, and encouraging cooperative play.

Example 5.3.23

During dramatic play, four-year-old Lucia says *"comida"* while pretending to prepare a meal.

Her teacher responds: **"You're making comida—food! What are you cooking?"**

Lucia points to a toy vegetable and continues playing.

The teacher recognizes Lucia's Spanish vocabulary, introduces the English word *food*, and encourages further communication.

Providing Meaningful Opportunities for Conversation

Multilingual children need opportunities to participate in conversations, not simply hear adults speak.

Language development is strengthened through **responsive back-and-forth interactions** in which adults listen, respond, and expand children's communication.

Educators can support these interactions by:

- Following children's interests during play and conversations.
- Asking questions that invite children to share ideas.
- Giving children sufficient time to respond.
- Accepting gestures, home-language words, and other communication attempts.
- Expanding children's statements with additional vocabulary.
- Encouraging conversations with peers.
- Avoiding unnecessary pressure to repeat words or speak only English.

Example 5.3.24

During outdoor play, three-year-old Diego points toward a bird and says: **"Pájaro!"**

His teacher responds: **"Yes, a pájaro—a bird! The bird is flying. Where do you think it's going?"**

Diego points toward a nearby tree.

His teacher continues: **"It's flying toward the tree!"**

This interaction supports language development by acknowledging Diego's communication, introducing additional vocabulary, and extending the conversation.

The goal is not to test Diego's English vocabulary but to **create a meaningful exchange that builds on what he already knows**.

Encouraging Families to Continue Using Their Home Languages

Some families worry that speaking their home language will make it harder for their child to learn English. Educators can reassure families that **continuing to use home languages does not cause language delays or prevent children from learning English** (ASHA, n.d.-b; Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Families should be encouraged to communicate in the languages they know and use comfortably. Rich conversations, storytelling, songs, shared reading, and everyday interactions in home languages provide valuable opportunities for language development.

Educators should **never recommend that families stop speaking their home language as a strategy for improving English development**.

For example, a family that speaks Hmong at home should not feel pressured to switch exclusively to English. Instead, educators can encourage continued Hmong conversations while providing meaningful opportunities for English development in the early childhood program.

Maintaining home languages helps children continue building relationships, sharing family experiences, and participating in their communities.

Putting It Together: Intentional Support for Multilingual Learners

Table 5.3.8: Intentional Support

Teaching Practice	How It Supports Language Development
Value home languages	Promotes belonging and recognizes children's existing language knowledge.
Partner with families	Provides information about children's communication and connects home and school experiences.
Learn key words and phrases	Helps educators respond to children's needs and acknowledge familiar language.
Use visuals, gestures, and routines	Supports understanding and participation while children develop additional language skills.
Include songs, books, and play	Provides engaging opportunities to hear and use language in meaningful contexts.
Encourage conversations	Builds vocabulary, comprehension, and expressive communication through responsive interactions.
Support continued home-language use	Helps children maintain and develop their existing languages while learning English.

Sources: Synthesized from NASEM (2017, 2024) and Office of Head Start (n.d.).

The Big Idea

Supporting multilingual learners means building on the languages children already know while providing meaningful opportunities to develop English and other languages.

Early childhood educators strengthen language development by valuing home languages, partnering with families, using responsive teaching strategies, and creating environments where children can communicate in different ways.

The goal is not to replace a child's home language with English, but to expand the child's ability to communicate, connect, and learn across languages.

From Observation to Intentional Teaching

Supporting multilingual learners requires more than introducing new vocabulary or providing opportunities to hear English. Educators must understand how children communicate across languages, recognize their existing strengths, and intentionally plan experiences that support continued language development.

Because multilingual children may demonstrate different language abilities depending on the setting, communication partner, and language being used, **ongoing observation and responsive teaching are essential** (NASEM, 2024).

Educators can use a simple teaching cycle to guide their decisions: **Observe → Learn About Languages → Support → Expand → Observe Again**

This cycle helps educators move from noticing children's communication to making intentional teaching decisions that build on their existing language knowledge.



Figure 5.3.3: From Observation to Intentional Teaching. Educators can support multilingual learners by following an intentional teaching cycle: observe children's communication, learn about the languages they hear and use, provide supportive strategies, expand language through meaningful interactions, and observe again to guide next steps (OpenAI, 2026a).

Step 1. Observe: What Can the Child Understand and Communicate?

Begin by observing how the child communicates during everyday activities, including play, routines, shared reading, and interactions with adults and peers. Look for both receptive and expressive language skills.

Consider:

- How does the child communicate wants, needs, and ideas?
- What words, gestures, signs, or other communication strategies does the child use?
- How does the child respond to familiar questions and directions?
- When does the child appear most comfortable communicating?
- Does the child's communication change depending on the setting or person?

Example 5.3.25

During snack time, three-year-old Sofia points to a banana and says, *"Plátano."* Her teacher notices that Sofia uses Spanish words during meals but often uses English words during block play.

Rather than viewing this difference as a concern, the teacher recognizes that Sofia may have different vocabulary knowledge across her languages.

Step 2. Learn About Languages: What Does the Child Know Across Languages?

Next, gather information about the languages the child hears, understands, and uses. Partner with families to understand the child's communication beyond the classroom (ASHA, n.d.-a).

Consider:

- What languages does the child hear and use at home?
- Which languages does the child use with different family members?
- How does the child communicate during familiar home routines?
- What words, songs, or expressions are especially meaningful to the child?
- Are family members noticing progress or expressing concerns?

Example 5.3.26

Sofia's teacher asks her family about the languages she uses at home. Her family explains that Sofia speaks Spanish during meals and family activities but has also begun using English words learned at preschool.

This information helps the teacher understand Sofia's communication across settings.

Remember: A child's English communication alone does not provide a complete picture of their language development.

Step 3. Support: How Can the Educator Encourage Communication?

Use observations and family information to create an environment where the child can understand, participate, and communicate successfully.

Support may include:

- Accepting communication in the child's home language.
- Using gestures, pictures, and real objects alongside spoken language.
- Learning familiar home-language words and phrases.
- Providing predictable routines and opportunities for participation.
- Giving the child sufficient time to respond.
- Encouraging interactions with peers.
- Responding to communication attempts without requiring immediate English responses.

Example 5.3.27

When Sofia says *"Plátano,"* her teacher responds: **"Yes, plátano! You would like a banana."**

The teacher acknowledges Sofia's Spanish word while connecting it to English vocabulary.

This response supports communication without correcting or discouraging Sofia's home language.

Step 4. Expand: How Can the Educator Build on What the Child Already Knows?

Once the child's communication is acknowledged and supported, the educator can intentionally introduce additional vocabulary, sentence structures, and opportunities for conversation. Expanding language means adding meaningful information to the child's communication rather than simply asking the child to repeat words (NASEM, 2017).

Educators can:

- Add descriptive words to children's statements.
- Model longer sentences.
- Introduce new vocabulary during familiar activities.
- Connect new English words to concepts children already understand.
- Ask questions that encourage children to share ideas.
- Continue conversations based on children's interests.

Example 5.3.28

Sofia points to her banana and says: **“Plátano.”**

Her teacher responds: **“You have a yellow banana. You're peeling the banana. What will you do with the peel?”**

Sofia points toward the trash can.

Her teacher continues: **“Yes! The peel goes in the trash.”**

The teacher builds on Sofia's original communication by introducing descriptive vocabulary and extending the conversation.

Step 5. Observe Again: What Is the Child Learning?

After providing language support, educators observe the child's communication again. The goal is not to determine whether the child immediately repeats new vocabulary. Instead, educators look for evidence of growing understanding, participation, and communication over time.

Consider:

- Does the child demonstrate understanding of new words or directions?
- Is the child using additional words, gestures, or communication strategies?
- Does the child participate more frequently in conversations or activities?
- How is the child communicating across languages?
- What additional support or opportunities might be helpful?

Example 5.3.29

Over the next several weeks, Sofia begins using the English word *banana* during snack time while continuing to use *plátano* with Spanish-speaking family members.

Her teacher recognizes that Sofia is developing additional vocabulary while maintaining her home-language knowledge.

The teacher continues observing Sofia's communication and introducing meaningful vocabulary during everyday interactions.

When observations raise concerns about development, educators should also collaborate with families and appropriate professionals rather than relying solely on classroom language strategies.

Putting the Cycle Into Practice

Table 5.3.9: Intentional Teaching Actions

Step	Educator's Question	Intentional Teaching Action
Observe	What can the child understand and communicate?	Notice receptive and expressive language during everyday activities.

Step	Educator's Question	Intentional Teaching Action
Learn About Languages	What does the child know and use across languages?	Partner with families to understand language experiences and communication strengths.
Support	How can I help the child participate and communicate?	Use home languages, visuals, gestures, routines, and responsive interactions.
Expand	How can I build on the child's existing language knowledge?	Model vocabulary, extend sentences, and encourage meaningful conversations.
Observe Again	What is changing in the child's communication?	Look for progress across languages and adjust teaching strategies as needed.

This cycle is ongoing rather than a sequence completed only once. As children gain language knowledge, encounter new experiences, and develop relationships, educators continue observing and adapting their teaching.

Connecting the Cycle to Intentional Practice

Consider how two educators might respond differently to the same situation.

Situation: A four-year-old child points to a toy truck and says its name in their home language.

- **Less Responsive Approach:** The educator says: “Say truck. You need to use English.” The educator focuses on obtaining an English response without acknowledging the child's existing language knowledge.
- **Intentional, Responsive Approach:** The educator says: “You found the truck! That's a big red truck. Where is it going?” The educator acknowledges the child's communication, models English vocabulary, and creates an opportunity for continued interaction. The educator might also use the child's home-language word when they know it.

The Difference: Intentional teaching builds on the child's existing communication rather than requiring the child to demonstrate English proficiency before participating.

> **The Big Idea**
>
> Intentional teaching begins with **understanding how children communicate across all their languages**.
>
> By following the cycle **Observe** → **Learn About Languages** → **Support** → **Expand** → **Observe Again**, educators can recognize multilingual children's strengths, provide responsive language experiences, and adjust their teaching as children develop.
>
> The goal is to help children become increasingly confident and capable communicators while valuing the languages, relationships, and experiences they bring to the classroom.

Putting It Into Practice: Sebastian's Language Development

The toddler example below revisits earlier language development. The same principles—considering all languages, partnering with families, and responding to concerns—also apply when educators work with children ages three through eight.

A Classroom Observation

Ms. Katrina is reading a picture book with Sebastian, a 22-month-old child in her early childhood classroom. As she points to a picture of a pumpkin, she says, *“Pumpkin!”*

Sebastian looks at the picture, smiles, and points, but he does not repeat the word.

Throughout the morning, Ms. Katrina notices that Sebastian rarely speaks during classroom activities. He often communicates by pointing, smiling, or using gestures.

Concerned about his limited speech, Ms. Katrina talks with Sebastian's family. His mother explains that Sebastian uses a few familiar words, such as *"Mama"* and *"Daddy,"* at home but generally speaks very little. She also shares her concern that Sebastian might have difficulty learning English.

Later that week, the class visits a pumpkin farm.

When Sebastian sees a large pumpkin, he becomes excited. He points toward it and enthusiastically calls out: "Cabasasa!"

He repeats the word as he touches and explores several pumpkins.

Ms. Katrina recognizes that Sebastian is attempting to say *calabaza*, the Spanish word for pumpkin.

This observation provides important new information about Sebastian's communication. However, it does not answer every question about his language development.

Looking Beyond the Initial Observation

Sebastian's experience illustrates why educators must consider multiple sources of information when examining multilingual language development.

Rather than immediately identifying Sebastian's limited English speech as a language delay—or assuming it is simply a normal part of multilingual development—Ms. Katrina needs to learn more about his communication across languages and settings.

The following table illustrates how she can interpret her observations.

Table 5.3.10: What Educators Should Consider

Area to Consider	What We Know About Sebastian	What the Educator Should Consider
Language difference	Sebastian uses an approximation of the Spanish word *calabaza*.	His communication may include language knowledge that is not demonstrated during English classroom activities.
Language exposure	Sebastian hears English at school and demonstrates some knowledge of Spanish.	What languages does he regularly hear and use? How much experience does he have with each language?
Family information	His mother reports that he uses very few words at home.	Does Sebastian communicate differently with familiar family members? What words, gestures, and phrases does he use in each language?
Classroom observation	Sebastian points, smiles, and uses gestures but speaks very little.	How does he demonstrate understanding? Does he communicate differently during familiar or preferred activities?
Possible developmental concern	Limited spoken language has been observed at school and reported at home.	Does Sebastian demonstrate ongoing communication difficulties across familiar languages and settings that warrant further evaluation?

What Can Ms. Katrina Learn From This Experience?

1. Sebastian demonstrates emerging expressive language.

Sebastian's attempt to say *calabaza* shows that he can use a spoken word approximation to communicate about something

meaningful to him.

His excitement and repeated use of the word also demonstrate his interest in communicating during a familiar, engaging experience.

However, one spoken word does not provide enough information to determine whether his overall expressive language development is progressing as expected.

2. Language exposure matters.

Sebastian may have different experiences with Spanish and English.

For example, he might hear Spanish during family activities and English during classroom routines.

Ms. Katrina should ask his family which languages Sebastian hears and uses rather than assuming that English is his only developing language.

3. Family information is essential.

Sebastian's mother reports that he speaks very little at home.

This information is particularly important because his limited speech may not occur only in the English-speaking classroom.

Ms. Katrina should gather additional information about his receptive and expressive language abilities in the languages he regularly hears and uses.

4. Observation should include understanding as well as speaking.

Sebastian's gestures, pointing, and responses to pictures provide information about his communication.

Ms. Katrina should also observe whether he understands familiar words, responds to his name, follows everyday directions, and participates in interactions.

These observations can help identify communication strengths as well as possible areas of concern.

5. Multilingual development should not be used to dismiss concerns.

Sebastian's use of a Spanish word is an important strength, but it does not automatically rule out a language delay. Because both his family and teacher have observed limited spoken language, further information and developmental evaluation may be appropriate (ASHA, n.d.-a). Educators should recognize multilingual strengths while remaining responsive to possible developmental concerns.

Applying the Intentional Teaching Cycle

Ms. Katrina can use the chapter's teaching cycle to guide her response.

Table 5.3.11: Intentional Teaching Responses

Step	Ms. Katrina's Intentional Response
Observe	Notice Sebastian's gestures, spoken words, understanding, and communication during different activities.
Learn About Languages	Ask his family about the languages he hears and uses, his communication at home, and their developmental concerns.

Step	Ms. Katrina's Intentional Response
Support	Accept Spanish words, gestures, and other communication attempts while providing meaningful opportunities to participate.
Expand	Build on Sebastian's interest in pumpkins by introducing vocabulary in meaningful conversations and play.
Observe Again	Document changes in his communication across activities and collaborate with his family and appropriate professionals regarding developmental concerns.

Example 5.3.29

Responsive Teaching

When Sebastian points to a pumpkin and says *"Cabasasa!"*, Ms. Katrina might respond: **"Yes! Calabaza! That's a big pumpkin. Look at how orange it is!"**

She might then point to a smaller pumpkin and say: **"Here's a little pumpkin. Big pumpkin, little pumpkin!"**

Ms. Katrina acknowledges Sebastian's communication, connects Spanish and English vocabulary, and expands the interaction.

She does not require Sebastian to repeat the English word before continuing.

At the same time, she recognizes that responsive classroom interactions do not replace further evaluation when developmental concerns are present.

Check Your Thinking

1. **Why would it be inappropriate for Ms. Katrina to conclude that Sebastian has a language delay based only on his limited English speech? Answer** Sebastian may have language knowledge and communication abilities that are not demonstrated in English. Ms. Katrina needs information about his communication across languages and settings before drawing conclusions.
2. **Does Sebastian's use of the word "Cabasasa" mean that there is no reason to be concerned about his language development?** Answer: No. His word approximation demonstrates an emerging expressive language skill, but both his family and teacher report limited spoken communication. Additional observation and evaluation may be appropriate.
3. **What information should Ms. Katrina gather from Sebastian's family?** Answer: She should ask which languages Sebastian hears and uses, how he communicates his needs and ideas, what words and gestures he uses, how he understands familiar directions, and whether his family has noticed changes or ongoing concerns.
4. **How can Ms. Katrina support Sebastian's language development while additional information is gathered?** Answer: She can acknowledge communication in any language, respond to gestures and spoken words, model and expand vocabulary during meaningful activities, provide opportunities for back-and-forth interaction, and maintain communication with his family.

The Big Idea

One observation **rarely tells the whole story** of a multilingual child's language development.

Sebastian's use of a Spanish word reveals an important communication strength that was not apparent during English classroom activities. However, his family's concerns and limited spoken communication across settings also deserve attention.

Effective educators avoid assuming that limited English proficiency indicates a language delay—or that multilingualism explains away every developmental concern.

By combining classroom observations, family information, knowledge of language exposure, and appropriate professional collaboration, educators can make more informed decisions that support the whole child.

Vocabulary Alert

Multilingual Learner: A child who is learning or using two or more languages in their home, school, or community environments.

Home Language: A language used within a child's family or home environment. A child may have more than one home language.

Simultaneous Multilingual Development: The process of learning two or more languages from birth or very early childhood.

Sequential Multilingual Development: The process of learning an additional language after developing some knowledge of a first language.

Receptive language: The ability to understand language, including spoken or signed language.

Expressive Language: The ability to communicate thoughts, needs, feelings, and ideas through words, sentences, gestures, signs, or other forms of expression.

Code-Switching: Moving between two or more languages during a conversation or interaction.

Code-Mixing: Combining words or grammatical features from different languages within the same sentence or expression.

Translanguaging: Using one's full range of language knowledge and resources to communicate, understand information, and support learning.

Silent Period: A term sometimes used to describe a time when a child speaks little in a new language environment while developing language understanding. It is not a universal or required stage of multilingual development.

Language Difference: A variation in communication that reflects a child's language experiences or cultural and linguistic background rather than an underlying developmental difficulty.

Language Delay: Language skills developing more slowly than expected for a child's age and developmental experiences.

Language Disorder: Persistent difficulties understanding or using language that affect communication and learning.

Intentional Language Support: Purposeful teaching practices that build on children's existing language knowledge and provide meaningful opportunities to develop communication skills.

Exercise 5.3.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the difference between simultaneous and sequential multilingual development?
2. Why is it important to consider a child's receptive and expressive language abilities across all the languages they know and use?
3. What are code-switching and translanguaging, and why should educators recognize these as natural parts of multilingual development?
4. How can educators distinguish between typical multilingual differences and communication difficulties that may require further evaluation?

Apply Your Knowledge

5. Four-year-old Sofia speaks Spanish in complete sentences at home but rarely speaks English during preschool activities. She follows familiar classroom directions, uses gestures to communicate, and occasionally combines Spanish and English words during play. Her teacher wonders whether Sofia has a language delay. What should Sofia's teacher consider before drawing conclusions, and what teaching strategies could support her language development?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 5.3.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Simultaneous multilingual development occurs when children begin learning two or more languages from birth or very early childhood. Sequential multilingual development occurs when children begin learning an additional language after developing some knowledge of a first language. Both are typical pathways to multilingual development.
2. Multilingual children may understand and communicate differently in each language depending on their experiences and opportunities to use it. Assessing only one language may overlook vocabulary, comprehension, and communication skills developed in another language. Considering all languages provides a more complete understanding of the child's development.
3. Code-switching involves moving between languages during communication. Translanguaging involves drawing on one's full range of language resources to communicate and learn. These practices allow children to use their existing language knowledge and do not, by themselves, indicate confusion or a language delay.
4. Educators should observe children's receptive and expressive communication across languages and settings, gather information from families, and consider children's language experiences. Differences that occur primarily in a newer language may reflect multilingual development. Persistent communication difficulties across familiar languages and environments may warrant further evaluation. Educators should not delay appropriate referrals simply because a child is learning multiple languages.

Answers to Apply Your Knowledge

5. Sofia's teacher should recognize that using different languages across settings, combining languages, and understanding more English than she expresses may be characteristics of typical multilingual development.

The teacher should gather information from Sofia's family about her communication in Spanish, observe her receptive and expressive language skills, and consider her opportunities to hear and use English.

To support Sofia, the teacher can acknowledge her Spanish vocabulary, use visuals and gestures, model and expand English language naturally, provide opportunities for meaningful conversations, and encourage continued use of Spanish at home.

The teacher should not assume that limited English speech indicates a language delay or that multilingualism rules out a possible developmental concern. If concerns arise or persist, the teacher should collaborate with Sofia's family and appropriate professionals.

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5.4: Applying Language Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

Introduction

Children learn language through a complex process involving their experiences, thinking, relationships, and natural abilities. Over time, researchers have developed different theories to explain how children acquire language and develop increasingly complex communication skills.

Four influential perspectives come from B. F. Skinner, Noam Chomsky, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky. Each theorist emphasizes a different aspect of language development. Together, these perspectives help early childhood educators understand how children learn to communicate and why different types of support may be helpful.

Rather than viewing one theory as the complete explanation for language development, educators can use these perspectives as different lenses for understanding children's communication and making intentional teaching decisions.

These theories differ in important ways and should not be treated as equally supported explanations of every aspect of language development. The classroom applications in this section connect historical perspectives with contemporary teaching guidance; they are not teaching methods prescribed by each theorist.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 5.4: Apply child development theory related to language development and communication to early childhood practice.

After completing this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the central ideas of Skinner, Chomsky, Piaget, and Vygotsky related to children's language development and communication.
- Explain how biological abilities, cognitive development, reinforcement, and social interactions contribute to language development from different theoretical perspectives.
- Compare how different language development theories can inform an educator's understanding of children's communication and learning.
- Apply language development theories to select intentional, developmentally appropriate strategies that support children's language and communication during everyday early childhood experiences.

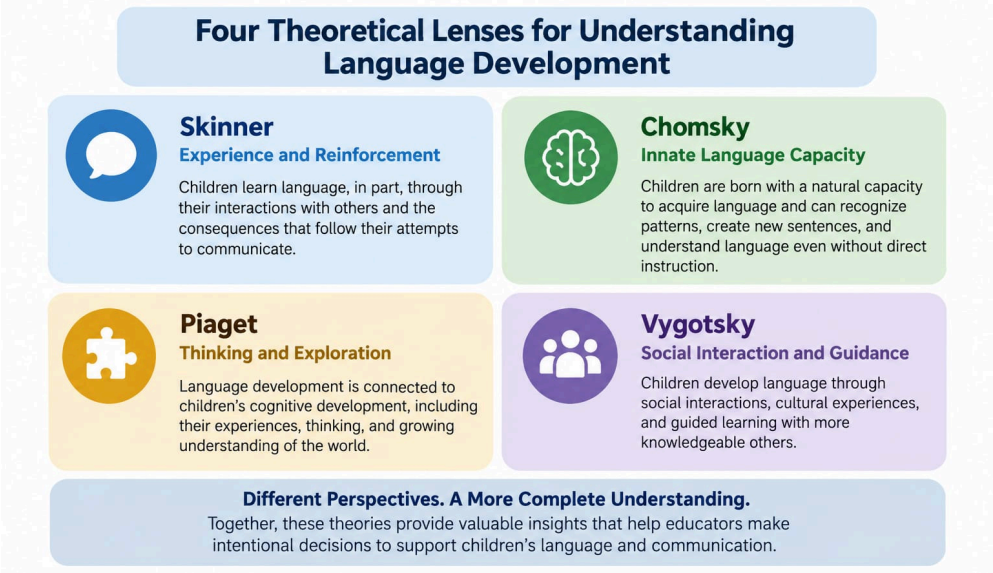


Figure 5.4.1: Four Theoretical Lenses for Understanding Language Development. This graphic illustrates how Skinner's behaviorist, Chomsky's nativist, Piaget's cognitive developmental, and Vygotsky's sociocultural perspectives contribute to understanding children's language development and inform intentional teaching practices (OpenAI, 2026a).

Skinner: Learning Language Through Experience and Reinforcement

B. F. Skinner's behaviorist perspective emphasizes the role of the environment, experience, and reinforcement in learning. Skinner proposed that children learn language, in part, through their interactions with others and the consequences that follow their attempts to communicate (Skinner, 1957).

One important concept in Skinner's theory is operant conditioning, which describes how behavior can become more or less likely depending on what happens afterward. When a child's communication produces a meaningful or encouraging response, the child may be more likely to use that communication again.

For example, a child points toward a cup and says, “Water.” The educator acknowledges the request and provides water. From a behaviorist perspective, this consequence functions as reinforcement if it increases the likelihood of similar communication in the future. An encouraging response is not automatically reinforcement; the term describes its effect on later behavior.

Skinner also emphasized the roles of imitation, prompting, and shaping in language learning. Children may imitate words and phrases they hear from adults or peers, respond to communication prompts, and gradually develop more complex language as their attempts are supported (Skinner, 1957).

Applying Skinner's Perspective in Early Childhood Practice

Educators can apply principles of reinforcement by responding positively and meaningfully to children's attempts to communicate. This does not mean rewarding every word with a prize or requiring children to repeat words correctly. Instead, natural, responsive interactions can encourage children to continue using and expanding their communication skills (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

For example, educators might:

- Respond to communication attempts. When a child points, gestures, uses a word, or asks a question, acknowledge the message and respond meaningfully.
- Model useful language. Provide words and phrases children can hear and use during familiar routines and experiences.
- Encourage participation. Create opportunities for children to request materials, share ideas, ask questions, and participate in conversations.
- Build on emerging communication. When a child begins using a new word or phrase, respond with a slightly more complete model without demanding repetition.

Example 5.4.1

Classroom Connection: Snack Time

During snack, a three-year-old child says, "More crackers."

The educator responds, "You would like more crackers. Here are two more!"

The child's words lead to a meaningful response that may encourage future communication. If this consequence increases similar communication over time, it functions as reinforcement. At the same time, the educator models a more complete sentence that the child may begin using in future interactions.

What Skinner's Theory Helps Educators Understand

Skinner's perspective highlights the importance of the responses children receive when they communicate. Educators can encourage communication by providing consistent, meaningful, and encouraging interactions throughout the day.

However, reinforcement and imitation alone do not fully explain language development. Children also create sentences they have never heard before, learn complex grammatical patterns, and communicate ideas without receiving direct reinforcement. These abilities suggest that language development involves processes beyond observable learning experiences.

> The key takeaway for educators: Responding to children's communication attempts and providing meaningful language models can encourage continued communication and participation. Reinforcement is one useful part of language learning, but it is not the complete explanation for how children develop language.

Chomsky: Children's Natural Capacity for Language

Noam Chomsky's nativist perspective emphasizes the biological foundations of language development. Unlike Skinner, who focused on how children learn language through experience and reinforcement, Chomsky proposed that humans are born with an innate capacity to acquire language (Chomsky, 1965).

Chomsky observed that young children learn complex language patterns even though adults do not directly teach them every grammatical rule. Children also create sentences they have never heard before, suggesting that language development involves more than imitation or reinforcement.

Chomsky introduced the idea of a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) to describe the proposed inborn capacity that helps children recognize and learn the patterns of language. He also proposed the concept of universal grammar, suggesting that human languages share underlying structural principles that reflect an innate foundation for language learning (Chomsky, 1965).

These ideas helped shift attention toward the role of biological abilities in language development. However, the LAD is a theoretical concept rather than an identified structure in the brain, and the idea of universal grammar remains debated (Dąbrowska, 2015). Contemporary research recognizes that language development involves biological capacities working together with social interaction, experience, and exposure to language.

Applying Chomsky's Perspective in Early Childhood Practice

Chomsky's perspective reminds educators that children are active language learners who can recognize patterns, develop grammatical understanding, and create original messages. Children do not need to be explicitly taught every language rule to begin using increasingly complex sentences.

Educators can support these developing abilities by creating environments rich in meaningful language and providing opportunities for children to hear, explore, and use language in different ways (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

For example, educators might:

- Provide rich language experiences. Engage children in conversations, storytelling, shared reading, songs, and play that introduce varied vocabulary and sentence structures.
- Model natural language patterns. Use complete, meaningful sentences during everyday interactions so children hear how language is organized.
- Recognize emerging grammatical understanding. Notice when children create new sentences or use language rules in ways they have not been directly taught.
- Respond to language errors without discouraging communication. Model conventional language naturally rather than interrupting children to correct every mistake.
- Support children's home languages. Recognize that children have the capacity to learn more than one language and benefit from meaningful opportunities to hear and use their languages (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017).

Example 5.4.2

Classroom Connection: Learning Language Patterns

During outdoor play, a four-year-old child says, "Yesterday I goed to the park."

The educator responds, "You went to the park yesterday! What did you do there?"

The child's use of "goed" suggests that the child is applying a familiar grammatical pattern—adding -ed to describe something that happened in the past—even though the word went is an irregular past-tense form.

Rather than treating the statement simply as a mistake, the educator recognizes it as evidence of developing grammatical understanding. By naturally modeling the conventional form and continuing the conversation, the educator supports language development while encouraging the child to share more ideas.

This example shows that children do more than imitate exact sentences. However, overregularization alone does not establish that universal grammar is the explanation; different theories offer accounts of how children learn and apply language patterns.

What Chomsky's Theory Helps Educators Understand

Chomsky's perspective emphasizes that children are biologically prepared to acquire language and actively develop an understanding of language patterns. Their ability to create new sentences and apply grammatical rules demonstrates that language learning involves more than repeating what others say.

However, an innate capacity for language does not mean that language develops independently of experience. Children need meaningful exposure to accessible language, opportunities to communicate, and responsive interactions with others. The biological perspective alone does not fully explain how differences in children's experiences and environments influence language development.

> The key takeaway for educators: Children bring natural language-learning capacities to their experiences. Educators can support these capacities by providing rich, meaningful language interactions, recognizing emerging language patterns, and encouraging children to communicate without expecting every sentence to be grammatically correct.

Piaget: Language Development Through Thinking and Experience

Jean Piaget's cognitive developmental perspective emphasizes the relationship between children's thinking, exploration, and language development. Piaget believed that children actively construct knowledge as they interact with their environments. As children develop new ways of understanding the world, their ability to use language to describe objects, express ideas, and communicate experiences also develops.

Unlike Skinner, who emphasized reinforcement, and Chomsky, who emphasized innate language-learning abilities, Piaget focused on how children's developing cognitive abilities influence their understanding and use of language (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

An important concept in Piaget's theory is the schema, a mental framework children use to organize and understand information. As children encounter new experiences, they build on or modify their existing schemas through two processes:

- **Assimilation:** Incorporating new information into an existing schema. For example, a child who knows the word dog may initially call a wolf a dog because it resembles animals the child already recognizes.
- **Accommodation:** Modifying an existing schema or developing a new one when information does not fit. When the child learns that a wolf is different from a dog, the child adjusts their understanding and begins using the correct word.

These processes help explain how children's growing knowledge of the world supports vocabulary development and increasingly complex communication (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

Piaget also emphasized the development of symbolic thinking, or the ability to use one thing to represent another. During the preoperational stage, typically associated with ages 2–7, children increasingly use words, images, drawings, and pretend play to represent objects, people, and experiences (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

For example, a child might use a block as a pretend phone, create a story about a stuffed animal, or describe something that happened earlier in the day. These experiences demonstrate how children's developing thinking and language abilities are connected.

Applying Piaget's Perspective in Early Childhood Practice

Piaget's perspective reminds educators that language development is closely connected to children's active exploration and understanding of the world. Children benefit from opportunities to investigate objects, solve problems, engage in pretend play, and talk about their experiences.

Educators can support language development by providing hands-on learning experiences that encourage children to build new knowledge and communicate what they are discovering (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

For example, educators might:

- Connect language to hands-on experiences. Introduce vocabulary as children explore materials, investigate objects, and participate in everyday activities.
- Encourage pretend play. Provide opportunities for children to use language symbolically while creating stories, taking on roles, and representing familiar experiences.
- Build on existing knowledge. Connect new words and concepts to objects, events, and experiences children already understand.
- Ask questions that encourage thinking. Invite children to describe, compare, predict, and explain their ideas during play and exploration.
- Support developing concepts. Recognize that children may use words based on their current understanding and help them refine their ideas through additional experiences and conversations.

Example 5.4.3

Classroom Connection: Exploring Living Things

During an outdoor exploration, a four-year-old child notices a butterfly resting on a flower and says, "Look! A bird!"

The educator responds, "It does have wings like a bird. Let's look closely. What else do you notice?"

The child observes the butterfly and says, "It's little, and it has six legs!"

The educator explains, "That's a butterfly. Butterflies and birds both have wings, but butterflies are insects."

The child initially uses an existing understanding of flying animals to identify the butterfly. Through observation and conversation, the child begins to develop a new understanding and learns more precise vocabulary.

This experience illustrates how assimilation and accommodation can contribute to both conceptual understanding and language development.

What Piaget's Theory Helps Educators Understand

Piaget's perspective highlights the connection between cognitive development and language. As children explore their environments, develop new concepts, and organize information, they gain knowledge that supports their ability to understand and use language.

His theory also helps explain why children may use words differently from adults. A child who calls every large animal a "horse," for example, may be organizing new information using a familiar category rather than simply using the wrong word.

However, Piaget's perspective has limitations. His emphasis on cognitive development may underestimate the role of social interactions and language itself in shaping children's thinking. Contemporary research recognizes that thinking and language influence one another, and that conversations with adults and peers can actively support children's cognitive development.

The key takeaway for educators: Children's language development is closely connected to their growing understanding of the world. Educators can support both thinking and communication by offering meaningful hands-on experiences, encouraging pretend play, introducing vocabulary in context, and helping children connect new information to what they already know.

Vygotsky: Language Development Through Social Interaction and Scaffolding

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective emphasizes the importance of social interactions, relationships, and cultural experiences in children's language development. Vygotsky believed that children develop thinking and language skills through meaningful interactions with others, particularly adults and peers who can provide guidance and support (Vygotsky, 1978).

Unlike Piaget, who emphasized how children construct knowledge through their own exploration and developing cognitive abilities, Vygotsky focused on how social interactions and language help shape children's thinking and learning. He viewed language not only as a way to communicate with others but also as an important tool for organizing thoughts, solving problems, and guiding behavior.

Vygotsky believed that learning occurs within a social and cultural context. Children develop language as they participate in conversations, shared activities, play, and everyday routines with others. These experiences introduce children to new vocabulary, ways of expressing ideas, and communication patterns that reflect their families, communities, and cultures.

Two important concepts associated with Vygotsky's perspective are the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding.

- **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD):** The difference between what a child can accomplish independently and what the child can accomplish with guidance or collaboration from a more knowledgeable other (MKO), such as an adult or a peer with greater knowledge or skill in that activity. The ZPD helps educators identify opportunities to support skills that are beginning to emerge (Vygotsky, 1978).
- **Scaffolding:** Temporary, responsive support that helps a child accomplish something they cannot yet do independently. Support might include modeling language, asking guiding questions, offering choices, providing vocabulary, or giving verbal prompts. As the child becomes more capable, the educator gradually reduces the assistance.

Although scaffolding was developed as an instructional concept by later researchers, it closely reflects Vygotsky's ideas about supported learning (Wood et al., 1976).

Applying Vygotsky's Perspective in Early Childhood Practice

Vygotsky's perspective reminds educators that language develops through meaningful interactions with others. Educators can support language development by participating in conversations, modeling increasingly complex language, and providing assistance that matches each child's developing abilities.

The goal is not to complete communication tasks for children but to provide just enough support to help children express ideas and participate in interactions that may be difficult to manage independently.

For example, educators might:

- Engage in back-and-forth conversations. Respond to children's ideas, ask meaningful questions, and allow time for children to think and respond.
- Model and expand language. Build on children's words and sentences by introducing additional vocabulary or more complex sentence structures.
- Provide language scaffolds. Offer sentence starters, verbal prompts, choices, or visual supports to help children communicate their ideas.
- Encourage peer interactions. Create opportunities for children to collaborate, solve problems, negotiate roles, and communicate during play.
- Adjust support as children develop. Provide more assistance when a child is learning a new communication skill and gradually reduce prompts as the child becomes more independent.
- Value children's cultural and linguistic experiences. Recognize that children bring knowledge and communication practices from their families, home languages, and communities into the learning environment.

Example 5.4.4

Classroom Connection: Building a Block Structure

During block play, a four-year-old child is building a tall tower. When the tower falls, the child says, "It keeps falling!"

The educator responds, "Your tower keeps falling. What do you think we could do to make it stronger?"

The child looks at the blocks but does not respond.

The educator offers a prompt: "Maybe we could make the bottom wider. What would happen if we put two big blocks next to each other?"

The child places two blocks at the bottom and begins rebuilding. The educator asks, "What changed about your tower?"

The child responds, "It's bigger on the bottom. Now it stays!"

Later, during another building experience, the child tells a peer, "Put big blocks on the bottom so it doesn't fall."

This interaction illustrates how an educator can support language and thinking within a child's zone of proximal development. Through questions, vocabulary, and modeling, the educator helps the child explain observations and develop new ways of communicating ideas.

As the child becomes more confident, the educator can reduce the amount of support needed.

Language as a Tool for Thinking and Self-Regulation

Another important aspect of Vygotsky's theory is the relationship between language and self-regulation. Vygotsky proposed that children gradually begin using language to guide their own thinking and behavior.

Young children may initially rely on adults to provide verbal guidance during activities. Over time, they begin talking themselves through tasks, a process Vygotsky described as private speech (Vygotsky, 1978).

For example, a child completing a puzzle might say, "This one goes here. No, turn it. Try again." Although the child is speaking aloud, the words are helping organize thinking and guide actions.

As children develop, some of this spoken self-guidance becomes internalized as inner speech, allowing them to use language silently to plan, solve problems, and regulate their behavior.

Educators can support this process by modeling language that helps children plan, describe their actions, solve problems, and

reflect on their experiences.

What Vygotsky's Theory Helps Educators Understand

Vygotsky's perspective highlights the important role of social relationships and shared experiences in children's language development. Children learn new ways of communicating as they participate in meaningful interactions with adults and peers.

His theory also helps educators understand why a child may demonstrate more advanced communication skills with appropriate support than when working independently. By observing both what children can do on their own and what they can accomplish with guidance, educators can make more intentional instructional decisions.

However, social interaction alone does not fully explain language development. Children's biological capacities, cognitive development, individual differences, and opportunities to communicate also influence how language develops. Educators must consider these factors when determining the type and amount of support each child needs.

> The key takeaway for educators: Language development is supported through responsive relationships, meaningful conversations, and guided participation. Educators can encourage children's growing communication abilities by providing appropriate scaffolding, engaging children in collaborative experiences, and gradually supporting greater independence.

Four Perspectives, Four Useful Questions

Skinner, Chomsky, Piaget, and Vygotsky offer different explanations for how children develop language and communication skills. Although each theory emphasizes a different aspect of development, all four perspectives can help early childhood educators better understand children's communication and make intentional teaching decisions.

Rather than relying on one theory to explain every situation, educators can use these perspectives as complementary lenses for observing children, interpreting their communication, and choosing appropriate ways to support language development.

The following table connects each theoretical perspective to a practical question educators can ask when supporting children's language and communication.

Table 5.4.1: Connecting Language Development Theories to Intentional Teaching Practices

Theoretical Perspective	A Useful Question for Educators	Putting the Theory Into Practice
Skinner: Behaviorist — Language develops partly through experience, reinforcement, and responses from others.	How are my responses encouraging this child to communicate?	Acknowledge communication attempts, respond meaningfully, and model useful language during everyday interactions.
Chomsky: Nativist — Children have an innate capacity to acquire language and recognize language patterns.	Am I providing rich opportunities for this child to hear, explore, and use language?	Provide meaningful conversations, stories, and language models that allow children to develop and experiment with language patterns.

Theoretical Perspective	A Useful Question for Educators	Putting the Theory Into Practice
Piaget: Cognitive Developmental — Language development is connected to children's thinking, experiences, and growing understanding of the world.	How can I connect language to what this child already knows and is discovering?	Use hands-on exploration, pretend play, and conversations to connect new vocabulary and concepts to children's experiences.
Vygotsky: Sociocultural — Language develops through social interaction, cultural experiences, and guided learning.	What support could help this child communicate something they cannot yet express independently?	Use scaffolding, modeling, guiding questions, and peer interactions to support increasingly complex communication.

Note: Theoretical summaries draw on Chomsky (1965), Piaget and Inhelder (1969), Skinner (1957), and Vygotsky (1978). Classroom applications are illustrative connections informed by Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015). Scaffolding is associated with Wood et al. (1976).

Using Multiple Perspectives to Understand Children's Communication

Consider a four-year-old child who points toward a structure built with blocks and says, "Big tower!"

An educator might consider the interaction through several theoretical perspectives:

- Skinner: Respond positively to the child's communication by saying, "You built a big tower!" The meaningful response encourages continued communication.
- Chomsky: Recognize that the child is actively using developing language knowledge to express an original idea. Provide additional language models without requiring the child to repeat them.
- Piaget: Connect language to the child's exploration by asking, "What could you add to make your tower taller?" This encourages the child to connect new vocabulary with hands-on experiences.
- Vygotsky: Scaffold the child's communication by expanding the statement: "You built a very tall tower with the wooden blocks!" Then invite the child to explain how the tower was built.

Each perspective draws attention to something different, but all can contribute to an intentional response that supports the child's communication.

> The key takeaway for educators: Developmental theories are most useful when they help educators make decisions. By considering children's communication through multiple theoretical perspectives, educators can respond to individual strengths, provide meaningful language experiences, and offer appropriate support as children's communication skills develop.

Applying Language Development Theory in Everyday Practice

Understanding language development theories helps educators move beyond simply choosing activities and toward making intentional decisions about how to support children's communication. During everyday classroom experiences, educators observe how children use language, consider what may be influencing their communication, and respond in ways that support continued development.

Although Skinner, Chomsky, Piaget, and Vygotsky emphasize different aspects of language learning, their perspectives can work together to inform teaching practices. The goal is not to select one theory for every situation, but to use theoretical knowledge to understand children's communication and determine what type of support may be most helpful.

The following examples illustrate how educators can apply developmental theories during familiar early childhood experiences (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Conversations: Responding to Children's Emerging Language

Conversations provide opportunities for educators to observe how children express ideas, organize their thoughts, and respond to others. A child's communication may reveal developing vocabulary, an ability to connect ideas, or a need for additional support.

For example, a four-year-old child excitedly tells an educator, "We found a frog! It jumped! My brother was scared!"

The educator responds, "You found a frog with your brother! What happened when the frog jumped?"

The child explains, "It jumped in the water, and my brother ran away!"

This response reflects several theoretical perspectives:

- Piaget: The child draws on a familiar experience and developing understanding of events to communicate ideas.
- Skinner: The educator's interested and meaningful response encourages the child to continue sharing the experience.
- Vygotsky: The educator uses a guiding question to help the child organize and expand the story.

Intentional teaching decision: Recognize the child's ability to share an experience, respond with genuine interest, and use an open-ended question to encourage more detailed communication without taking over the conversation.

Play: Connecting Language to Thinking and Exploration

Play allows children to explore ideas, develop concepts, and use language to represent their experiences. Educators can observe how children communicate during play and determine when additional language or guidance may extend their learning.

For example, two children are pretending to run a grocery store. One child tells the other, "You buy food. I work here."

The educator notices that the children understand their pretend roles but are using short phrases to communicate. The educator joins briefly and says, "I'm shopping for dinner. Could you recommend something for my family?"

The children begin naming foods and explaining where items are located.

This interaction reflects:

- Piaget: Pretend play allows children to use symbolic thinking and connect language to their understanding of familiar experiences.
- Vygotsky: The educator introduces language and questions that support more complex communication during a shared activity.

Intentional teaching decision: Enter children's play when additional language or a thoughtful question could extend communication, while allowing children to maintain ownership of their play.

Shared Reading: Supporting Language and Understanding

Shared reading offers opportunities for children to hear language patterns, connect words to concepts, and communicate their understanding of stories. Theoretical knowledge helps educators determine how to respond to children's comments and questions rather than simply reading the printed words.

For example, while reading a picture book about animals, a child points to an unfamiliar animal and says, "That's a dog!"

The educator responds, "It does look a little like a dog. This animal is a fox. What do you notice about its ears and tail?"

The child studies the picture and begins describing the animal.

This interaction reflects:

- Piaget: The child initially uses an existing schema to identify an unfamiliar animal. New information helps the child refine that understanding.
- Vygotsky: The educator uses guiding questions and vocabulary to support the child's developing understanding.
- Chomsky: Exposure to meaningful language provides opportunities for the child to continue developing language knowledge and patterns.

Intentional teaching decision: Use children's comments as opportunities to connect new vocabulary with existing knowledge and support understanding through meaningful conversation.

Daily Routines: Making Communication Meaningful

Everyday routines provide natural opportunities for children to use language for meaningful purposes. Educators can observe children's communication during activities such as arrival, meals, transitions, and cleanup.

For example, during cleanup, a three-year-old child points toward a container of blocks and says, "There."

The educator responds, "You want to put the blocks in that container. Let's carry them over together."

The child picks up several blocks and begins placing them in the container.

This response reflects:

- Skinner: The educator acknowledges the child's communication and provides a meaningful response.
- Vygotsky: The educator models a more complete verbal message while supporting the child's participation in the routine.
- Piaget: Language is connected to a familiar, concrete experience that the child understands.

Intentional teaching decision: Recognize communication in all its forms, including gestures and emerging words, while providing language models that connect directly to children's actions and experiences.

Peer Interactions: Supporting Communication and Collaboration

Interactions with peers provide opportunities for children to practice expressing ideas, listening, negotiating, and solving problems. Educators can use their understanding of language development to determine when children can communicate independently and when additional guidance may be helpful.

For example, two five-year-old children both want to use the same set of magnetic tiles. One child says, "I need those!" while pulling the tiles away.

The educator observes that the children are having difficulty communicating their needs and responds, "You both want to build with the tiles. What could you say to help each other understand your ideas?"

One child says, "Can I have some?" The other responds, "I need the big ones."

The educator asks, "How could you make a plan so you both have tiles to build with?"

This interaction reflects:

- Vygotsky: The educator provides verbal scaffolding to help children communicate and solve a problem collaboratively.
- Skinner: Positive, meaningful responses to constructive communication can encourage children to use these skills again.
- Piaget: The children draw on their developing understanding of sharing, cooperation, and problem-solving as they communicate their ideas.

Intentional teaching decision: Provide enough guidance to support children's communication and problem-solving without immediately solving the disagreement for them.

Choosing the Right Support for the Child and Situation

These examples demonstrate that the same classroom experience can be understood through more than one theoretical

perspective. An educator might recognize a child's emerging grammatical understanding, respond meaningfully to a communication attempt, connect vocabulary to a hands-on experience, or scaffold a conversation with peers.

The most appropriate response depends on the individual child, the communication demands of the situation, and what the educator observes.

Before responding, educators can consider three questions:

1. What is the child showing me? Consider the child's current communication skills, understanding, interests, and attempts to express ideas.
2. What does developmental theory help me understand? Consider how experience, biological language-learning capacities, cognitive development, and social interaction may contribute to the child's communication.
3. What intentional response would support the child's next step? Decide whether to acknowledge, model, extend, provide guidance, or allow additional time for independent communication.

Educators should also recognize that children communicate in different ways and may use home languages, gestures, visual supports, or other forms of communication. Intentional practice builds on these strengths rather than expecting all children to communicate in the same way.

> The key takeaway for educators: Applying developmental theory means using what is known about language learning to make thoughtful teaching decisions. By observing children's communication and considering multiple theoretical perspectives, educators can provide responsive, developmentally appropriate support during everyday classroom experiences.

From Theory to Teaching Decisions: An Intentional Teaching Cycle

Understanding language development theories provides educators with valuable information about how children learn to communicate. However, knowing a theory is only the beginning. Educators must also determine how to use that knowledge when observing children, responding to their communication, and planning meaningful learning experiences.

An intentional teaching cycle helps educators connect developmental theory to everyday classroom decisions. Rather than selecting a strategy simply because it is familiar or commonly used, educators consider what the child is demonstrating, which theoretical perspectives may help explain the child's communication, and what type of support would be most appropriate (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

The cycle includes five connected steps:

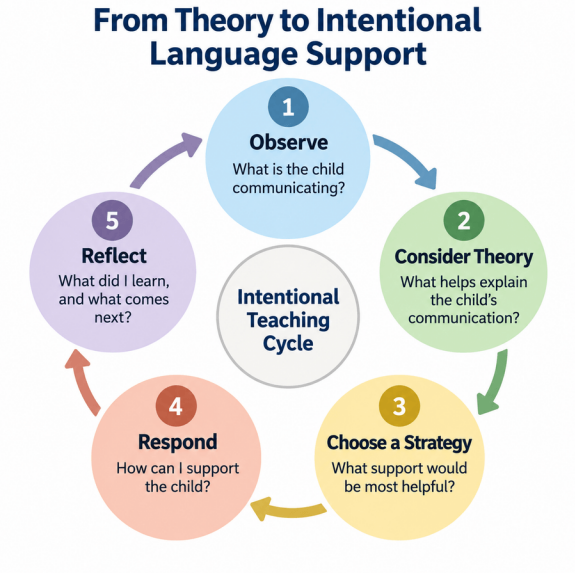


Figure 5.4.2: From Theory to Intentional Language Support. A five-step teaching cycle illustrating how educators observe children's communication, consider developmental theories, choose appropriate strategies, respond intentionally, and reflect to guide ongoing language support (OpenAI, 2026b).

Step 1. Observe: What Is the Child Communicating?

Begin by noticing how the child communicates during play, conversations, routines, and interactions with others. Look beyond the number of words a child uses to consider how the child expresses ideas, understands language, responds to others, and participates in communication.

For example, an educator notices that a four-year-old child frequently points to materials during art activities but rarely explains what they want. The child uses short phrases during familiar routines but appears hesitant when communicating in larger groups.

The educator considers what the child can already communicate, the situations in which communication occurs more easily, and the child's interests and strengths.

Step 2. Consider Theory: What Might Explain the Child's Communication?

Next, use developmental theories to consider factors that may be influencing the child's communication.

Different theoretical perspectives may lead educators to notice different aspects of the situation:

- Skinner: How have adults and peers responded to the child's previous communication attempts?
- Chomsky: What emerging language patterns and abilities does the child demonstrate?
- Piaget: How does the child's understanding of the activity influence their ability to communicate about it?
- Vygotsky: What language might the child be able to use with additional guidance or support?

These perspectives do not provide a diagnosis or a single explanation. Instead, they help educators consider possibilities and make more informed decisions.

Step 3. Choose a Strategy: What Support Would Be Most Helpful?

After considering the child's communication and relevant theoretical perspectives, the educator chooses a developmentally appropriate strategy.

In the art activity, the educator might decide to offer two material choices, model useful phrases, and encourage the child to express preferences during a smaller, more comfortable interaction.

The goal is to select a strategy that builds on the child's existing communication abilities while creating opportunities for further development.

Step 4. Respond: How Can I Support Communication in the Moment?

The educator puts the selected strategy into practice while remaining responsive to the child's participation.

For example, the child points toward a container of paint. The educator responds, "You want paint. Would you like blue or yellow?"

The child says, "Blue."

The educator replies, "You chose blue paint! Let's put some on your paper."

The educator provides a meaningful response, models language, and creates an opportunity for the child to communicate without demanding a longer or more complex response.

Step 5. Reflect: What Did I Learn, and What Should Happen Next?

After the interaction, the educator considers how the child responded and whether the strategy provided an appropriate level of support.

Questions might include:

- Did the child communicate more confidently or independently?
- Did the strategy help the child express an idea or participate in the activity?
- Was the amount of support appropriate?
- What might I adjust during the next opportunity?

For example, the educator notices that the child comfortably names colors when offered choices. During future art experiences, the educator may gradually offer more opportunities for the child to describe their ideas independently.

Reflection leads back to observation, allowing educators to adjust their approach as children's communication skills develop.

Putting the Cycle Together

This ongoing process helps educators connect what they know about child development with what they notice during everyday interactions. As children develop new communication skills, educators continue observing, reconsidering their understanding, and adjusting their support.

The cycle is not a rigid sequence that must be completed during every interaction. Experienced educators often move between observing, interpreting, and responding naturally throughout the day. What makes the process intentional is that teaching decisions are guided by knowledge of child development and the individual child's strengths, experiences, and needs.

> The key takeaway for educators: Developmental theory becomes meaningful when it informs teaching decisions. By observing children's communication, considering different theoretical perspectives, selecting appropriate strategies, responding thoughtfully, and reflecting on the results, educators can provide individualized support that promotes language development.

Putting Theory Into Practice

Understanding language development theories helps educators interpret children's communication and make intentional teaching decisions. However, the same behavior or communication pattern may be understood through more than one theoretical perspective.

The following classroom scenarios demonstrate how educators can draw on multiple theories to support children's language development. Each example connects observations of children's communication with theoretical understanding and developmentally appropriate teaching responses.

Scenario 1: Supporting Communication During Pretend Play

During center time, four-year-old Maya is playing in the dramatic play area with two classmates. The children are pretending to run a restaurant. Maya points toward the toy food and says, "Me cook. You eat."

When another child asks what she is making, Maya holds up a plastic vegetable but does not explain her idea. The other children continue playing, and Maya gradually stops participating in the conversation.

The educator notices that Maya understands the pretend-play scenario and wants to participate but is having difficulty expressing her ideas using longer phrases.

Connecting Theory to Practice

Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Perspective: Maya demonstrates symbolic thinking by using pretend food and participating in an imaginary restaurant. Her understanding of the activity provides a meaningful foundation for developing vocabulary and more complex language.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Perspective: Maya may benefit from scaffolding that helps her express ideas she cannot yet communicate independently. Support from an educator or peer may help her participate more fully in the conversation.

Intentional Educator Response

The educator joins the play briefly and says, "Maya is cooking something delicious! Maya, are you making vegetable soup or a salad?"

Maya responds, "Soup."

The educator continues, "You're making vegetable soup. What vegetables are you putting in your soup?"

Maya picks up a carrot and says, "Carrots!"

The educator responds, "Carrots are going into your soup! Who would like to order Maya's vegetable soup?"

The other children begin placing orders, and Maya continues participating in the pretend restaurant.

By connecting language to Maya's existing understanding of the play experience and providing appropriate verbal support, the educator encourages more complex communication without taking over the activity.

Applying the Theory: The educator uses Piaget's perspective to recognize Maya's symbolic thinking and Vygotsky's perspective to provide language scaffolding. The educator can gradually reduce support as Maya becomes more confident communicating with peers.

Scenario 2: Supporting Storytelling and Language Organization

During a first-grade writing and storytelling activity, seven-year-old Elijah is excited to share a story about a family camping trip.

He begins, "We went camping, and there was a big noise, and then my dad, and the tent, and it was dark!"

Elijah continues adding details, but his ideas are difficult for classmates to follow. When a peer asks what happened first, Elijah becomes frustrated and says, "I already told you!"

The educator recognizes that Elijah has ideas and experiences he wants to communicate but may need support organizing them into a clear sequence.

Connecting Theory to Practice

Piaget's Cognitive Developmental Perspective: Elijah is drawing on his memories and understanding of past experiences. Organizing events into a meaningful sequence requires him to connect language with developing cognitive abilities, including sequencing and understanding relationships between events.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Perspective: Elijah may be able to organize his story more effectively with temporary support. Guiding questions and visual prompts can help him communicate ideas that are difficult to organize independently.

Skinner's Behaviorist Perspective: The educator's encouraging and meaningful responses can reinforce Elijah's efforts to share his ideas and continue participating in storytelling.

Intentional Educator Response

The educator responds, "You have an exciting camping story to tell! Let's help everyone understand what happened."

The educator places three picture cards on the table labeled Beginning, Middle, and End.

"Let's start with the beginning. Where were you when you heard the noise?"

Elijah explains, "We were in our tent."

The educator continues, "What happened next?"

Elijah says, "We heard something outside, and Dad went to look."

As Elijah shares his ideas, the educator helps him organize the events using the picture cards. The educator then invites him to tell the story again using the sequence he created.

Elijah explains, "First, we were sleeping in our tent. Then we heard a noise outside. My dad looked, and it was a raccoon!"

The educator responds, "Now we understand what happened! You told us the events in order."

During later storytelling activities, the educator offers the picture cards when needed but encourages Elijah to organize more of his ideas independently.

Applying the Theory: The educator recognizes the relationship between thinking and language, provides scaffolding to support storytelling, and responds positively to Elijah's communication efforts. As Elijah becomes more capable, the educator gradually reduces assistance.

What These Scenarios Teach Us

Both scenarios demonstrate that children's communication can be understood through multiple theoretical perspectives. Maya and Elijah have different strengths, experiences, and communication needs, but each benefits from an educator who observes carefully and selects support intentionally.

In both situations, the educator:

- Recognizes the child's existing abilities rather than focusing only on what the child cannot yet do.
- Uses developmental theory to consider why the child may be communicating in a particular way.
- Provides meaningful support through language models, questions, and opportunities to communicate.
- Adjusts assistance as the child becomes more confident and independent.

These examples also demonstrate that theory does not provide a single correct response. Educators must consider the child's developmental abilities, language experiences, interests, cultural and linguistic background, and the demands of the situation when deciding how to respond.

The key takeaway for educators: Applying developmental theory involves more than identifying which theorist explains a child's behavior. It means using theoretical knowledge to understand children's communication, build on their strengths, and make intentional teaching decisions that support continued language development.

Vocabulary Alert

Behaviorism: A theoretical perspective emphasizing how learning is influenced by environmental experiences, reinforcement, and responses to behavior.

Operant Conditioning: A learning process in which the consequences of a behavior influence how likely that behavior is to occur again.

Reinforcement: A consequence that increases the likelihood that a behavior, such as an attempt to communicate, will occur again.

Nativist Perspective: A theoretical perspective emphasizing humans' innate biological capacity to acquire language.

Language Acquisition Device (LAD): Chomsky's proposed theoretical mechanism that represents children's inborn capacity to acquire language.

Universal Grammar: Chomsky's proposal that human languages share underlying structural principles related to an innate capacity for language.

Schema: A mental framework used to organize and understand information based on existing knowledge and experiences.

Assimilation: The process of incorporating new information into an existing schema.

Accommodation: The process of modifying an existing schema or developing a new one when new information does not fit.

Symbolic Thinking: The ability to use words, images, objects, or actions to represent something else, such as using a block as a pretend telephone.

Sociocultural Perspective: A theoretical perspective emphasizing how learning and development occur through social interactions, cultural experiences, and relationships.

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): The difference between what a child can accomplish independently and what the child can accomplish with guidance or collaboration.

Scaffolding: Temporary, responsive support that helps a child accomplish something they cannot yet do independently, with assistance gradually reduced as the child develops greater ability.

Private Speech: Spoken language children use to guide their own thinking, actions, and problem-solving.

Intentional Teaching: Making thoughtful teaching decisions based on knowledge of child development, individual children's strengths and needs, and observations of their learning.

Exercise 5.4.1

Check Your Understanding

1. How do Skinner's behaviorist perspective and Chomsky's nativist perspective differ in their explanations of how children develop language?

2. How do Piaget's concepts of assimilation and accommodation help explain the relationship between children's thinking and language development? Provide an example.
3. What is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and how can educators use scaffolding to support children's developing communication skills?

Apply Your Knowledge

4. During dramatic play, a four-year-old child points to a toy cash register and says, "Me money." The educator responds, "You need money for the cash register! How much money do you need?" Identify two language development theories that could help explain this interaction. Describe how the educator's response supports the child's communication.
5. A six-year-old child enjoys sharing stories but has difficulty explaining events in a clear order. The educator provides picture cards showing Beginning, Middle, and End and asks guiding questions to help the child organize the story. Which theoretical perspectives could inform this approach? Explain how the educator could gradually adjust the support as the child's storytelling abilities develop.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 5.4.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Skinner's behaviorist perspective emphasizes how children learn language through environmental experiences, reinforcement, imitation, and responses from others. Chomsky's nativist perspective emphasizes children's innate biological capacity to acquire language and recognize grammatical patterns. Skinner focuses on learning through experience and consequences, while Chomsky focuses on natural language-learning abilities.
2. Assimilation occurs when children incorporate new information into an existing schema, while accommodation occurs when they modify a schema to account for new information. For example, a child who calls every four-legged animal a "dog" may initially use an existing category to identify unfamiliar animals. After learning that a particular animal is a goat, the child adjusts their understanding and begins using more precise vocabulary. These processes demonstrate how developing knowledge supports language development.
3. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the difference between what a child can accomplish independently and what the child can accomplish with guidance or collaboration. Educators use scaffolding by providing temporary support, such as language models, sentence starters, guiding questions, or visual prompts. As children become more capable, educators gradually reduce assistance to encourage independent communication.

Answers to Apply Your Knowledge

4. Possible answers include Skinner's and Vygotsky's perspectives. From Skinner's perspective, the educator responds meaningfully to the child's communication

attempt, encouraging continued use of language. From Vygotsky's perspective, the educator models a more complete sentence and asks a question that encourages the child to communicate additional information. The educator supports language development without requiring the child to repeat the sentence or interrupting the play experience.

5. Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective helps explain how guiding questions and visual supports can scaffold the child's storytelling. Piaget's cognitive developmental perspective highlights the relationship between organizing experiences, sequencing events, and communicating ideas. The educator can initially provide picture cards and verbal prompts, then gradually reduce the questions or number of visual supports as the child becomes more confident organizing stories independently.

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5.5: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Language Development and Communication

Introduction

Children communicate long before they begin speaking in complete sentences. Through gestures, sounds, facial expressions, words, conversations, and storytelling, children gradually develop the ability to understand and communicate with others. Although language and communication develop along recognizable patterns, children vary in how and when they demonstrate particular skills.

Developmental screening helps identify children who may benefit from additional observation, support, or evaluation related to language and communication. Screening tools provide a structured way to gather information about a child's development, but they do not diagnose a language disorder (Lipkin & Macias, 2020).

Early childhood educators play an important role by observing children's communication during everyday experiences, recognizing possible concerns, working collaboratively with families, and supporting the screening and referral process when appropriate.

Understanding the purposes and limitations of screening tools helps educators make informed, responsive decisions while recognizing each child's developmental abilities, experiences, language background, and individual needs.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 5.5: Explore the types and purposes of developmental screening tools related to language development and communication.

Upon completion of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the purpose of developmental screening related to language and communication.
- Distinguish developmental screening from ongoing assessment and diagnostic evaluation.
- Identify types of developmental screening tools related to language and communication and explain their purposes.
- Describe factors educators should consider when interpreting screening information, including multilingual development and individual differences.
- Explain the educator's role in supporting screening, communicating with families, and connecting children with appropriate resources.

Understanding Developmental Screening for Language and Communication

Developmental screening is a brief, structured process used to identify children who may be at risk for developmental delays or differences that warrant closer attention. When screening focuses on language and communication, it examines how children understand and use language and how they communicate with others.

Language and communication screening may consider skills such as:

- **Receptive language:** Understanding words, questions, and directions.
- **Expressive language:** Communicating ideas, needs, and experiences through words, signs, gestures, or other forms of communication.
- **Speech production:** Producing speech sounds that help others understand spoken messages.
- **Social communication:** Using communication to interact, participate in conversations, and build relationships.
- **Early literacy-related language:** Developing skills such as vocabulary, narrative abilities, and awareness of sounds in

spoken language.

Not every screening tool examines all these areas. Some tools assess language as one part of overall development, while others focus more specifically on communication skills.

A screening result may indicate that a child's language and communication development appears to be progressing as expected or that additional evaluation may be beneficial. Screening does not determine whether a child has a language disorder, nor should one screening result be used to label a child (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association [ASHA], n.d.-c).

For example, an educator may notice that a four-year-old rarely answers questions during large-group activities. This observation alone does not establish a language concern. The educator needs to consider whether the child communicates differently during play, understands the language being used, feels comfortable in the setting, or uses additional languages at home.

Developmental screening can provide another source of information to help determine whether further exploration is needed.

Screening, Ongoing Assessment, and Diagnostic Evaluation

Although screening, ongoing assessment, and diagnostic evaluation all contribute to understanding children's development, they serve different purposes.

Table 5.5.1: Comparing Developmental Screening, Ongoing Assessment, and Diagnostic Evaluation

Process	**Purpose**	**Language and communication example**
Developmental Screening	Identifies children who may need closer observation or further evaluation.	A child completes an age-appropriate developmental screening that includes communication questions.
Ongoing Assessment	Documents children's abilities and progress during everyday experiences to guide teaching.	An educator records how a child uses vocabulary and participates in conversations during play.
Diagnostic Evaluation	Examines specific developmental concerns in greater depth to help determine whether a disorder or disability is present.	A speech-language pathologist conducts a comprehensive evaluation of a child's speech and language abilities.

Note. Adapted from distinctions described by Lipkin and Macias (2020) and the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (n.d.-c).

These processes are connected, but they are not interchangeable.

An educator might first notice that a child has difficulty following spoken directions. Through ongoing observation, the educator documents when the difficulty occurs and what helps the child understand. A developmental screening may then suggest that additional evaluation is appropriate.

If a concern is identified, a qualified professional, such as a speech-language pathologist, may conduct a more comprehensive evaluation (ASHA, n.d.-c).

The purpose is not simply to identify what a child cannot do. Instead, each process contributes to understanding the child's strengths, communication needs, and opportunities for meaningful support.

Types of Screening Tools Related to Language and Communication

Developmental screening tools help educators, families, and other professionals identify children who may need additional support or evaluation related to language and communication. Some tools examine communication as part of overall development, while others focus specifically on early language, speech, and social communication skills.

Screening tools differ in the ages they serve, the skills they examine, and how information is collected. Some rely primarily on parent or caregiver questionnaires, while others involve observing a child's communication behaviors or completing structured activities.

Understanding these differences helps early childhood educators recognize the purpose of each tool and how screening information can contribute to a broader understanding of children's development.

General Developmental Screening Tools

General developmental screening tools examine several areas of development, including language and communication. These tools are commonly used in early childhood programs, health care settings, and early intervention services.

Ages & Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition (ASQ-3)

The ASQ-3 is a developmental screening tool designed for children ages 1 through 66 months. Parents or caregivers complete age-specific questionnaires that examine five developmental areas: communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem-solving, and personal-social development.

The communication portion includes questions about how children understand language and express themselves. Depending on the child's age, questions may address responding to sounds, following directions, using words, or communicating ideas.

ASQ-3 helps identify children whose developmental skills may need additional monitoring or further evaluation (Brookes Publishing Co., n.d.-a).

Survey of Well-being of Young Children (SWYC)

The SWYC is a developmental and behavioral screening system with age-specific forms covering approximately 1–65 months. Its developmental milestones component includes language, cognitive, and motor skills. Families report what their children can do, helping professionals identify possible developmental concerns. The 60-month Milestones form has less robust validation evidence and no established screening cutoff in the developer's scoring guide; it can support developmental surveillance, but its total score should be interpreted cautiously (Perrin et al., 2016; TEAM UP Center, n.d.).

Because SWYC considers multiple areas of development, it can help professionals recognize when communication concerns occur alongside other developmental differences. Screening results should be interpreted using the guidance for the child's specific age form because not all SWYC developmental milestone forms have validated screening cutoffs (Perrin et al., 2016).

Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status–Revised (PEDS-R)

PEDS-R is a family-centered developmental screening and surveillance tool that gathers parents' concerns about their children's development, behavior, and mental health. It is designed for children from birth through 7 years, 11 months. Communication concerns include how children understand and use language.

A related tool, PEDS: Developmental Milestones (PEDS:DM), examines developmental skills. These tools gather information from families, who may observe communication abilities in familiar situations that educators do not see in the classroom (PEDStest.com, n.d.).

Communication-Specific Screening Tools

Some screening tools focus more directly on how children communicate. These may be especially useful when families or

educators notice differences in early communication development.

Communication and Symbolic Behavior Scales Developmental Profile (CSBS DP)

The CSBS DP Infant-Toddler Checklist focuses on early communication and symbolic development. The publisher describes its use with children whose functional communication skills fall within approximately 6–24 months, including some children with chronological ages up to six years. Qualified professionals should follow the manual's age, scoring, and interpretation guidance rather than assume that toddler screening cutoffs apply to an older child (Brookes Publishing Co., n.d.-b).

The checklist examines early communication behaviors, including:

- Eye gaze and emotional expression
- Gestures used to communicate
- Speech sounds and words
- Understanding words
- Use of objects during play
- Social communication with others

Families or caregivers provide information about the child's communication behaviors, and trained professionals interpret the results. The CSBS DP is particularly useful because it considers communication skills that develop before children begin using many spoken words (Brookes Publishing Co., n.d.-b).

Hearing Screening

Hearing status does not determine a child's capacity for language. Children who are deaf or hard of hearing need timely access to language through communication approaches appropriate to their needs, which may include signed language.

Hearing screenings help identify children who may need a more comprehensive hearing evaluation. They do not, by themselves, determine whether a child has a language disorder.

For example, an educator may notice that a child frequently does not respond when spoken to from across the classroom. Rather than assuming the child is ignoring directions, the educator should consider possible hearing or communication concerns and share observations with the family.

Children who do not pass a hearing screening should receive a follow-up evaluation from an appropriate hearing professional (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024).

Comparing Screening Tools Related to Language and Communication

The following table summarizes the purposes and developmental areas examined by commonly used screening tools.

Table 5.5.2: Types and Purposes of Screening Tools Related to Language and Communication

Screening Tool	Primary Purpose	Communication Focus
ASQ-3	Screens overall development	Understanding and expressing language
SWYC	Screens developmental and behavioral well-being	Language within broader development
PEDS / PEDS-R	Identifies developmental concerns reported by families	Concerns about understanding, speaking, and communication

CSBS DP Checklist	Screens early communication and symbolic development	Gestures, sounds, words, understanding, and play
Hearing Screening	Identifies possible hearing differences	Access to sound relevant to spoken communication

Note. Screening-tool information summarized from Brookes Publishing Co. (n.d.-a, n.d.-b), Perrin et al. (2016), PEDStest.com (n.d.), CDC (2024), and TEAM UP Center (n.d.).

Age-range reminder: These examples do not all cover the textbook's full three-to-eight age range. Programs must select tools appropriate for the child's chronological age, communication profile, language experiences, and screening purpose. Follow the developer's specific guidance when a tool also considers functional communication age.

Choosing the Appropriate Type of Screening

No single screening tool provides a complete picture of a child's language and communication development. The most appropriate tool depends on the child's age, the purpose of screening, the areas of concern, and the child's language experiences.

For example, a general developmental screening may help identify whether a child's communication skills are developing alongside other developmental abilities. A communication-specific screening may provide more focused information about early gestures, sounds, and social communication.

For children who are learning more than one language, screening information should be considered alongside their language experiences and communication abilities across languages. Limited use of English alone does not indicate a language disorder.

Educators should also recognize that screening tools are not interchangeable with comprehensive evaluations. When screening results or ongoing concerns suggest a need for further assessment, qualified professionals can determine appropriate next steps.

The purpose of screening is to identify possible support needs early, not to label children or make assumptions about their abilities (Lipkin & Macias, 2020).

What Do Language and Communication Screenings Examine?

Language and communication involve several interconnected skills that develop as children interact with people and participate in everyday experiences. Developmental screening tools examine selected aspects of these skills to help identify children who may benefit from additional observation, support, or evaluation.

Although the specific skills examined depend on the child's age and the screening tool being used, five important areas of language and communication development are receptive language, expressive language, speech production, social communication, and early literacy-related language skills (ASHA, n.d.-b, n.d.-c).

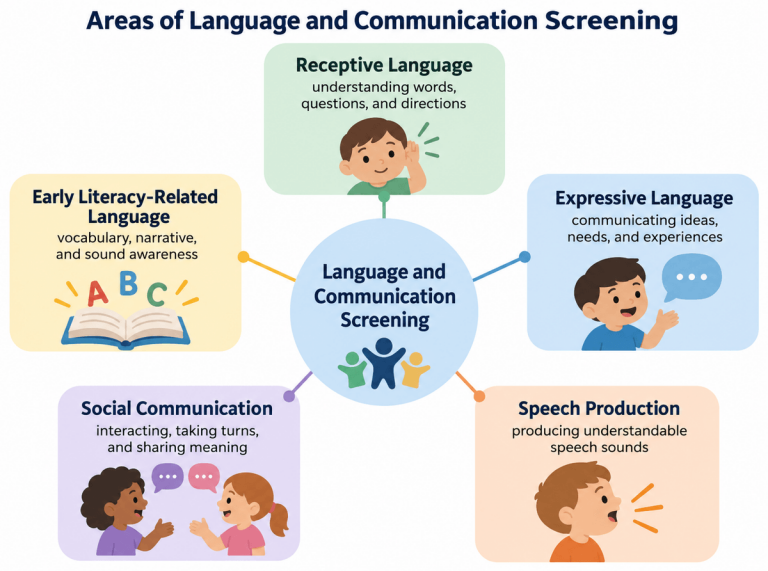


Figure 5.5.1: Areas of Language and Communication Screening. Five interconnected areas of language and communication development that may be examined during developmental screening (OpenAI, 2026a).

Receptive Language: Understanding Communication

Receptive language refers to a child's ability to understand language communicated by others. This includes recognizing words, understanding questions, following directions, and making meaning from spoken or signed language.

Screening questions related to receptive language may examine whether children:

- Respond to familiar words or phrases.
- Identify familiar people, objects, or actions.
- Follow directions appropriate for their developmental level.
- Understand simple questions.
- Understand increasingly complex sentences and conversations.

For example, a three-year-old may demonstrate receptive language by following a direction such as, "Put your shoes by the door." An older child may understand directions that involve several steps or more complex vocabulary.

Children may understand more language than they can express. Therefore, receptive and expressive language should be considered as related but distinct areas of development.

Expressive Language: Communicating Ideas and Needs

Expressive language refers to how children communicate their thoughts, feelings, needs, and experiences. Children may use gestures, signs, spoken words, or other communication methods to express themselves.

Screening questions related to expressive language may examine whether children:

- Use gestures, sounds, signs, or words to communicate.
- Name familiar people, objects, and actions.
- Combine words into phrases and sentences.
- Use vocabulary to express ideas and describe experiences.
- Ask questions and participate in conversations.
- Tell simple stories or explain events.

For example, a toddler might point toward a cup and say "more" to request a drink. A five-year-old might describe what happened during a family outing using several connected sentences.

Expressive language development involves more than the number of words a child speaks. Educators must also consider how children use language to communicate meaning in different situations.

Speech Production: Producing Speech Sounds

Speech production involves the physical production and organization of sounds used in spoken language. It includes how children coordinate their lips, tongue, jaw, and other speech structures to produce understandable speech.

Screening questions related to speech production may consider whether children:

- Produce speech sounds expected for their developmental level.
- Combine sounds to form recognizable words.
- Are understood by familiar and unfamiliar listeners.
- Demonstrate speech patterns that may require closer examination.

For example, a preschooler may substitute one speech sound for another when saying a word. Some sound substitutions are common during development, while others may warrant further evaluation depending on the child's age, speech patterns, and language background (ASHA, n.d.-b).

Speech and language are not the same. A child may understand and use complex sentences but have difficulty producing certain speech sounds. Another child may pronounce words clearly but have difficulty understanding questions or forming sentences.

Not all developmental screening tools assess speech production in detail. Concerns about speech sounds may require additional screening or evaluation by a speech-language pathologist.

Social Communication: Using Language With Others

Social communication refers to how children use verbal and nonverbal communication to interact with others. It includes communicating for different purposes, participating in conversations, interpreting social cues, and adjusting communication to fit different situations.

Screening questions related to social communication may examine whether children:

- Use gestures, facial expressions, or words to communicate with others.
- Initiate or respond to social interactions.
- Participate in back-and-forth communication.
- Take conversational turns as developmentally appropriate.
- Use communication to request help, share interests, or express feelings.
- Adjust communication based on the situation or communication partner.

For example, a two-year-old may point toward an airplane and look toward an adult to share interest in what they see. A six-year-old may take turns speaking during a conversation with classmates.

Social communication looks different across children, families, cultures, and communication styles. Behaviors such as eye contact, conversational patterns, and communication with adults should be interpreted within the child's cultural, developmental, and individual context.

A single social communication behavior should never be used by itself to determine whether a child has a developmental concern.

Early Literacy-Related Language Skills

Early literacy-related language skills are communication abilities that contribute to children's later reading and writing development. These skills begin developing well before formal reading instruction and are strengthened through conversations, storytelling, songs, books, and play.

Depending on the child's age and the purpose of the screening, early literacy-related language skills may include:

- Vocabulary: Understanding and using words to communicate meaning.

- Phonological awareness: Recognizing and working with sounds in spoken language, such as rhymes and syllables.
- Narrative skills: Understanding, retelling, and creating stories.
- Listening comprehension: Understanding information communicated through stories, conversations, and explanations.
- Knowledge of language structures: Understanding how words and sentences are organized to communicate meaning.

For example, a four-year-old might recognize rhyming words during a familiar song, while a six-year-old might retell a story using characters, events, and a sequence.

Not all language and communication screening tools examine early literacy-related skills. Some focus on developmental language milestones, while others are designed specifically to screen skills associated with later literacy development (ASHA, n.d.-c).

Understanding the Whole Child

These five areas of language and communication development are closely connected. A child uses receptive language to understand a question, expressive language to formulate a response, speech production to communicate spoken words, and social communication skills to participate in the interaction.

Developmental screening provides information about selected skills, but it cannot capture everything a child knows or can communicate.

When considering screening information, educators should remember that children's performance may be influenced by their developmental level, hearing, language experiences, cultural background, familiarity with the setting, and comfort with the adult conducting the screening.

For multilingual children, communication abilities should be considered across the languages they use. A child who communicates effectively in a home language but is still learning English should not automatically be considered to have a language delay (ASHA, n.d.-a).

The purpose of examining these developmental areas is to better understand children's communication abilities and identify when additional support or evaluation may be helpful.

Choosing and Using Screening Tools

Selecting and using developmental screening tools requires careful consideration. Screening results can help identify children who may benefit from additional support or evaluation, but the usefulness of those results depends on selecting an appropriate tool and using it correctly.

Early childhood educators should understand several important factors when participating in the screening process, including age appropriateness, reliability, validity, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and appropriate administration.

Age Appropriateness

Developmental screening tools are designed for specific age ranges because children's language and communication abilities change rapidly during early childhood. A tool appropriate for a two-year-old may not examine the skills expected of a six-year-old.

When selecting a screening tool, educators and other professionals should consider:

- The child's chronological age and the age range specified by the tool.
- Whether the screening examines communication skills appropriate for the child's developmental stage.
- Whether the tool's instructions provide guidance for children born prematurely or children with disabilities.
- Whether the tool addresses the specific developmental areas being examined.

For example, a screening tool designed to examine early gestures and first words may be appropriate for a toddler but would not provide enough information about a kindergarten child's conversational or narrative skills.

Using a tool outside its intended age range can make screening results inaccurate or difficult to interpret (Office of Head Start,

n.d.-a).

Reliability and Validity

Reliable and valid screening tools are important because screening results may influence decisions about additional observation, support, or referral. **Reliability** refers to the consistency of a screening tool's results. A reliable tool produces reasonably consistent results when used under similar conditions, considering the child's development and normal variation in performance. **Validity** refers to whether a screening tool adequately measures what it is intended to measure and whether evidence supports the interpretations and decisions made from its results (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

For example, a communication screening tool should provide meaningful information about communication development rather than primarily reflecting a child's familiarity with particular classroom materials or experiences.

Educators should use screening tools supported by research and should recognize that even well-designed tools have limitations. Screening results are not perfectly accurate, and some children who need further evaluation may not be identified by a particular screening. A screening result should therefore be considered alongside family information, educator observations, and other relevant developmental information (Lipkin & Macias, 2020).

Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness

Children's language and communication development occurs within the context of their families, cultures, communities, and language experiences. These factors must be considered when selecting and interpreting screening tools. Children who are learning more than one language may demonstrate different communication abilities depending on the language, setting, and communication partner.

For example, a four-year-old who primarily speaks Spanish at home may understand complex directions and tell detailed stories in Spanish but use shorter sentences when communicating in English at an early childhood program. Limited English proficiency alone does not indicate a language disorder.

When considering screening tools for multilingual children, educators and other professionals should:

- Gather information about all languages the child hears, understands, and uses.
- Determine whether an appropriate screening version is available in the child's language.
- Consider whether the tool has been studied with children from similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
- Involve families in describing communication abilities across home and educational settings.
- Avoid interpreting differences in language exposure or language-learning experiences as evidence of a developmental disorder.

A translated screening tool is not automatically valid for every language or cultural group. Professionals should follow the tool developer's guidance and recognize limitations when appropriate language-specific screening resources are unavailable (Office of Head Start, n.d.-b).

As discussed in Chapter 5.3, multilingual development should be understood as an important part of a child's language experience rather than viewed as a developmental concern.

Appropriate Administration

Screening tools must be administered according to their established procedures to produce meaningful results. Some tools rely on questionnaires completed by families, while others involve structured observations or activities completed with children. The qualifications and training required to administer, score, and interpret screening tools vary.

Appropriate screening practices include:

- Following directions: Use the procedures, materials, and scoring instructions provided by the tool developer.
- Using qualified personnel: Ensure the individuals administering or interpreting the screening meet any required training or professional qualifications.
- Creating a supportive setting: Consider the child's comfort, attention, communication needs, and familiarity with the

environment.
- Including families: Explain the purpose of screening and invite families to provide information about the child's communication in everyday situations.
- Maintaining confidentiality: Protect screening records and share information only with individuals authorized to receive it.
- Following up appropriately: Communicate results clearly and follow program procedures when additional observation or evaluation is recommended.

For example, a child who is tired, uncomfortable, or unfamiliar with the screening environment may not demonstrate communication skills typically observed during everyday play. Educators should document relevant circumstances and follow the screening tool's guidance when deciding whether additional information or another screening opportunity is appropriate.

Screening results should never be interpreted without considering the conditions under which information was collected (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Putting the Considerations Together

Choosing a screening tool involves more than selecting a questionnaire or checklist. Educators and other professionals must consider whether the tool fits the child's developmental level, whether research supports its use, and whether it can provide meaningful information about the child's communication abilities.

For example, an educator notices that a four-year-old rarely speaks during group discussions. Before assuming the child has a language delay, the educator considers the child's home language, communication during play, family observations, and comfort in the classroom.

If developmental screening is appropriate, the program works with the family and qualified personnel to identify a suitable tool and follow its administration procedures.

The goal is not simply to obtain a screening score. It is to gather meaningful information that helps children and families access appropriate support when needed.

Understanding Screening Results in Context

Developmental screening provides valuable information about children's language and communication development, but screening results should never be interpreted in isolation. A screening score represents information gathered through a particular tool at a particular time. It does not provide a complete picture of a child's communication abilities, experiences, or developmental needs.

Children demonstrate language skills differently depending on their environments, relationships, experiences, and individual characteristics. Understanding these factors helps educators interpret screening information responsibly and recognize when additional observation or evaluation may be appropriate.

Looking Beyond the Screening Score

Developmental screening tools typically use established scoring guidelines to identify whether a child's development appears to be progressing as expected or whether additional monitoring or evaluation may be beneficial. A screening result may suggest that a child's communication skills fall within the expected range, need closer monitoring, or warrant further evaluation. However, screening tools are not perfectly accurate, and results do not establish a diagnosis.

For example, a four-year-old may receive a screening score suggesting possible difficulty with expressive language. However, classroom observations may show that the child participates in conversations with familiar peers and communicates effectively during pretend play.

These observations do not automatically invalidate the screening result. Instead, they provide additional information that helps educators and families better understand the child's communication across different situations. Similarly, a child may receive a screening score within the expected range even when educators or families continue to notice communication difficulties. Ongoing concerns should not be dismissed simply because a child passed a screening (Lipkin & Macias, 2020). Screening results

are one source of information, not a final conclusion about a child's development.

Considering Individual Differences

Children develop language and communication skills at different rates and may demonstrate those skills in different ways.

Several factors can influence how children respond during screening:

- Developmental variation: Children may acquire communication skills at different times within a typical developmental range.
- Temperament and comfort: Some children communicate more readily with familiar adults or in small groups than in unfamiliar situations.
- Attention and well-being: Fatigue, illness, stress, or distractions may affect participation.
- Communication methods: Children may use gestures, signs, spoken language, or augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) to express themselves.
- Language experiences: Children may have different opportunities to use particular vocabulary, languages, or communication styles across settings.
- Hearing and sensory needs: Hearing differences or other sensory factors may influence how children receive and respond to communication.

For example, a child who rarely responds verbally during a structured screening may communicate frequently through gestures and spoken words during familiar classroom routines.

This information helps educators consider whether the child's screening performance reflects a consistent communication difficulty or whether the screening conditions influenced participation. Individual differences should be considered carefully without assuming that all developmental concerns are simply the result of children developing at their own pace (Lipkin & Macias, 2020).

Considering Multilingual Development

For children learning more than one language, screening results must be interpreted within the context of their complete language experiences. Multilingual children may demonstrate different vocabulary knowledge, sentence structures, or communication abilities across languages. Their skills may also vary depending on the people with whom they communicate and the settings in which they use each language.

For example, a preschooler may tell detailed stories in Hmong with family members but use shorter sentences in English at an early childhood program. Evaluating only the child's English communication could lead to an incomplete understanding of their language abilities.

When considering screening information for multilingual children, educators should:

- Gather information about the child's communication across all languages used.
- Ask families about language development in familiar home and community settings.
- Consider the child's opportunities to hear and use each language.
- Recognize that limited proficiency in an additional language does not, by itself, indicate a language disorder.
- Collaborate with qualified professionals when concerns persist or screening results are difficult to interpret.

When a language disorder is suspected, qualified professionals consider evidence across the child's languages while accounting for differences in language exposure, use, and development. Multilingualism is not a cause of language disorders. Educators should avoid confusing the process of learning an additional language with a developmental concern (ASHA, n.d.-a).

Recognizing Patterns That May Need Closer Attention

While individual differences are expected, some communication patterns may indicate that additional screening or professional evaluation is appropriate.

Educators may notice concerns when a child:

- Has persistent difficulty understanding developmentally appropriate communication.

- Demonstrates limited progress in communication skills over time.
- Experiences ongoing difficulty communicating needs or participating in interactions.
- Loses previously demonstrated language or communication abilities.
- Shows communication difficulties across familiar settings and languages that are not adequately explained by differences in language exposure or opportunity.

For example, an educator may notice that a five-year-old consistently has difficulty understanding familiar directions during classroom routines. The family reports observing similar difficulties at home.

This pattern provides more meaningful information than an isolated instance when the child did not follow a direction. However, educators should not wait for difficulties to appear in every setting before sharing concerns or seeking appropriate follow-up. Family concerns, developmental regression, or other significant observations may warrant prompt attention even when the child communicates more successfully in some environments (Lipkin & Macias, 2020).

The educator's responsibility is to document observations, communicate respectfully with families, and follow appropriate procedures for additional screening or referral rather than attempting to diagnose a communication disorder.

Putting Screening Information Together

Interpreting screening information responsibly involves considering multiple sources of information.

Educators and other professionals may ask:

1. What does the screening result suggest? Does the tool indicate development within the expected range, a need for monitoring, or a recommendation for further evaluation?
2. What do everyday observations show? How does the child communicate during play, routines, conversations, and interactions with familiar people?
3. What do families notice? How does the child communicate at home and in other familiar settings, including across languages?
4. What individual and contextual factors matter? Could hearing, communication methods, language experiences, developmental differences, or screening conditions influence the results?
5. What follow-up is appropriate? Is additional observation, rescreening according to the tool's guidance, or referral for professional evaluation recommended?

For example, a teacher notices that a three-year-old uses few spoken words during classroom activities. The child's family explains that the child uses more words at home but also relies heavily on gestures to communicate.

Rather than drawing a conclusion from the classroom observations alone, the educator documents communication across routines, gathers information from the family, and collaborates with appropriate professionals to determine whether screening or further evaluation is needed.

This approach considers both the child's strengths and potential developmental concerns. Developmental screening is most useful when results are understood within the broader context of a child's development and experiences. The goal is not to assign a label or make a decision based on one score, but to understand whether additional support or evaluation may help the child communicate and participate successfully (ASHA, n.d.-c).

The Educator's Role in Language and Communication Screening

Early childhood educators play an important role in recognizing and supporting children's language and communication development. Because educators interact with children throughout the day, they have opportunities to observe communication skills during play, routines, conversations, and learning experiences.

Although educators do not diagnose language or communication disorders, they contribute valuable information to the screening process. Their responsibilities include observing and documenting communication skills, sharing concerns respectfully with families, participating appropriately in screening procedures, and supporting children when additional services or evaluation may be needed (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Observing Children's Communication

Ongoing observation allows educators to recognize how children understand and use language in familiar, everyday situations.

Educators can observe communication during:

- Play: How children request materials, negotiate roles, share ideas, and interact with peers.
- Daily routines: How children understand directions, communicate needs, and participate in transitions.
- Conversations: How children respond to questions, use vocabulary, and exchange ideas.
- Books and storytelling: How children understand stories, describe pictures, and retell events.
- Small-group activities: How children communicate with peers and adults in familiar learning experiences.

For example, an educator may notice that a four-year-old participates enthusiastically in pretend play but rarely responds to questions during large-group discussions.

Rather than assuming the child has a language difficulty, the educator observes communication across different situations to better understand the child's strengths and possible support needs.

Observations should focus on what children can do while also recognizing patterns that may require closer attention.

Documenting Communication Skills

Documentation provides a record of children's communication abilities and helps educators recognize developmental patterns over time.

Useful documentation methods include anecdotal notes, observation checklists, language samples, and recordings when permitted by program policies and family permissions.

Effective documentation should be:

- **Objective:** Describe what the child says or does rather than making assumptions about abilities.
- **Specific:** Include examples of communication behaviors and the circumstances in which they occur.
- **Ongoing**: Gather information across multiple days, routines, and interactions.
- **Strengths-based:** Document successful communication as well as areas that may need additional support.
- **Confidential:** Store and share information according to program policies and applicable privacy requirements.

Example 5.5.1

For example, instead of writing, "Ava has poor language skills," an educator might document:

"During snack, Ava pointed to the pitcher and said 'juice.' When the educator asked, 'Would you like more juice?' Ava nodded and held out her cup."

This observation provides specific information about Ava's expressive language, gestures, and participation in a familiar interaction without assigning a developmental label.

Documentation can also help educators and families recognize whether communication skills are changing over time (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Communicating Concerns With Families

Families are essential partners in understanding children's language and communication development. They often observe communication skills in settings and languages that differ from those used in early childhood programs. When an educator notices a possible concern, communication with families should be respectful, confidential, and focused on the child's abilities and experiences.

Educators should:

- Begin by sharing the child's communication strengths.
- Describe specific observations rather than suggesting a diagnosis.
- Invite families to share what they notice at home.
- Ask about the languages and communication methods used by the child.
- Explain the purpose of developmental screening when appropriate.
- Discuss possible next steps without creating unnecessary alarm.

For example, an educator might say:

"I've noticed that Mateo often points or brings us objects when he needs something, but I haven't heard him use many words during classroom activities. How does he usually communicate what he wants at home?"

The family's response may provide important information about Mateo's vocabulary, gestures, home language, or communication in familiar situations. Families should be included as partners in decisions about screening and follow-up, and educators should follow applicable consent and confidentiality requirements (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Participating Appropriately in Screening

Early childhood educators may participate in developmental screening in different ways depending on their program's procedures, the screening tool, and their training. Some educators may administer screening tools when appropriately trained and authorized. Others may help families complete questionnaires, provide documentation, or share observations with qualified professionals (ASHA, n.d.-c).

The educator's role may include:

- Explaining the general purpose of screening to families.
- Gathering observations of children's communication during everyday activities.
- Assisting with screening procedures when trained and authorized.
- Following the screening tool's administration and scoring instructions.
- Sharing relevant information with professionals involved in the screening process.
- Helping families understand the recommended follow-up steps.

Educators should never change screening questions, scoring procedures, or administration requirements simply to help a child achieve a higher score.

For example, if a screening tool requires a child to demonstrate a particular communication skill without additional prompting, the educator should follow those directions rather than provide extra assistance that could affect the result.

When accommodations or adaptations are needed, educators should follow the tool developer's guidance and collaborate with qualified professionals. Educators contribute to the screening process, but screening results must be interpreted within the limits of the tool and the educator's professional responsibilities.

Supporting Children Through the Follow-Up Process

When screening results or ongoing observations indicate a possible concern, educators help ensure that children and families receive appropriate information and support. Follow-up may include additional developmental monitoring, consultation with a health care provider, hearing evaluation, or referral to early intervention or special education services.

Depending on the child's age and needs, families may be connected with:

- Early intervention services: Programs that evaluate and support eligible infants and toddlers with developmental delays or disabilities.
- Early childhood special education: Services that evaluate and support eligible children beginning at age three.
- Speech-language pathologists: Professionals who evaluate speech, language, and communication abilities and provide appropriate services.
- Audiologists: Professionals who evaluate hearing and identify hearing-related needs.

Educators should follow program procedures and help families understand how to access appropriate evaluation resources. Families do not necessarily need to wait for another screening when significant developmental concerns have already been identified (Lipkin & Macias, 2020). While a child is awaiting further evaluation or services, educators can continue supporting communication through developmentally appropriate teaching practices.

For example, an educator might use visual supports, model useful words and phrases, allow additional response time, provide communication choices, or encourage peer interactions. These strategies support children's participation without requiring educators to diagnose or treat a communication disorder.

Putting It Into Practice: Observe, Document, Communicate, Support, and Follow Up

The educator's role in language and communication screening can be understood as an ongoing process.

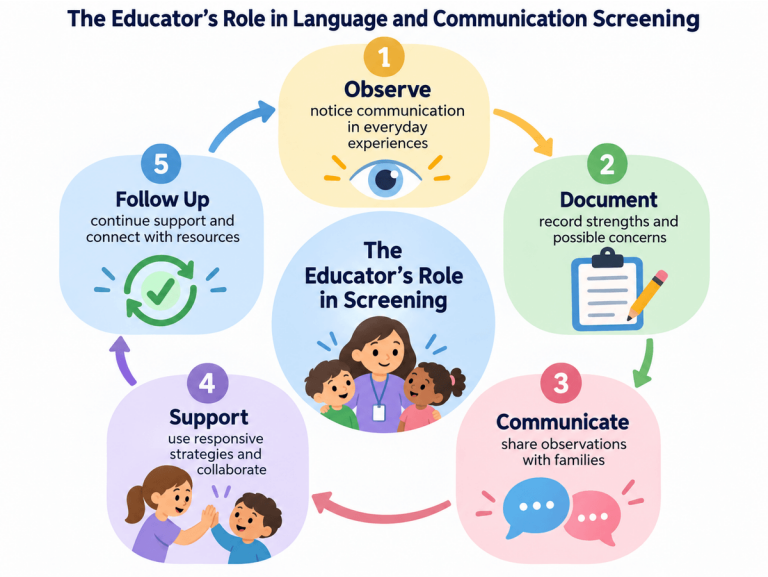


Figure 5.5.2: The Educator's Role in Language and Communication Screening. A five-step cycle illustrating how educators observe, document, communicate, support, and follow up on children's language and communication development (OpenAI, 2026b).

Observe: Notice how the child understands and communicates during everyday experiences.

Document: Record specific examples of communication strengths and possible concerns across settings and activities.

Communicate: Share observations with families and invite information about communication at home and in other familiar environments.

Support: Use responsive teaching strategies and collaborate with families and professionals when additional screening or evaluation is appropriate.

Follow Up: Continue observing development, implementing appropriate supports, and collaborating with families and professionals as needed.

For example, an educator notices that a preschooler rarely uses words to request materials during play. The educator records examples of the child's gestures, sounds, and spoken communication across several activities.

During a family conversation, the educator learns that the child also uses few words at home. The educator shares information about developmental screening and follows program procedures to help the family explore appropriate next steps.

Meanwhile, the educator continues modeling language, responding to the child's communication attempts, and providing opportunities for meaningful interactions.

This process helps connect screening information with responsive teaching and family partnerships.

The educator's role is not to diagnose a communication disorder but to recognize developmental patterns, share meaningful information, support children's communication, and help families access additional resources when needed.

Partnering With Families

Families play an essential role in understanding children's language and communication development. Because children communicate across different relationships, environments, and languages, families often have valuable knowledge about abilities that may not be observed in early childhood settings.

Meaningful family partnerships help educators and other professionals develop a more complete understanding of children's communication strengths and possible developmental concerns. When families are respected as knowledgeable partners, developmental screening becomes a collaborative process focused on supporting the child's growth and well-being (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Families as Partners in Understanding Communication

Families are often the first to recognize changes in their children's communication. They observe how children express needs, respond to conversations, interact with family members, and use language during familiar routines.

Family perspectives can provide information about:

- Words, gestures, signs, or other communication methods children use at home.
- How children understand directions and conversations with familiar people.
- Communication skills demonstrated in home languages.
- Changes in communication abilities over time.
- Family strengths, priorities, and concerns related to communication development.

For example, an educator may observe that a three-year-old rarely speaks during classroom activities. However, the family may explain that the child frequently tells stories, asks questions, and participates in conversations at home.

This information provides a broader understanding of the child's communication abilities and helps professionals determine whether additional screening or evaluation may be appropriate.

Family observations should be valued as an important source of developmental information rather than treated as secondary to screening scores.

Respectful Conversations About Screening

Conversations about developmental screening can raise questions or concerns for families. Some may welcome screening as an opportunity to learn more about their child's development, while others may feel uncertain about what the results could mean. A family-centered approach involves listening carefully, providing clear information, and avoiding language that labels or judges the child.

Helpful practices include:

- Beginning with strengths: Recognize the child's interests, successful communication, and developing abilities.
- Using clear language: Explain screening without unnecessary technical terminology.
- Listening to family concerns: Invite questions and acknowledge families' observations and priorities.
- Avoiding assumptions: Recognize that families may have different experiences with developmental services.
- Respecting family decisions: Support informed participation while following applicable program requirements and referral procedures.

For example, rather than saying, "Your child is behind in language development," an educator might explain:

"We've noticed that Maya uses gestures and facial expressions to communicate many of her needs. We're interested in learning more about how she's developing her language skills. What kinds of words or communication does she use at home?"

This approach invites conversation without suggesting that a developmental disorder has already been identified (Office of Head Start, n.d.-c).

Respecting Cultural and Linguistic Differences

Families' cultural values, communication practices, and language experiences influence how children learn and use language. Some children communicate primarily in one language at home and another language in an early childhood program. Others use multiple languages throughout the day. Families may also have different expectations for how children communicate with adults, participate in conversations, or demonstrate respect. These differences should be understood as part of the child's communication environment rather than automatically viewed as developmental concerns.

Family partnerships that support culturally and linguistically responsive screening may include:

- Learning which languages children hear, understand, and use.
- Encouraging families to describe communication abilities in their preferred language.
- Providing qualified interpreters when needed for accurate communication.
- Explaining screening procedures and results in accessible language.
- Respecting family communication practices and priorities.
- Recognizing home languages as strengths that support children's development.

For example, a child who speaks Oneida with family members may demonstrate communication abilities at home that are not immediately apparent in an English-speaking classroom.

Gathering information about the child's communication across languages can help prevent inaccurate assumptions about their development.

Families should not be encouraged to stop using their home language because of concerns about language development. Maintaining meaningful communication in the languages families know best supports children's relationships, identity, and opportunities for language learning (ASHA, n.d.-a).

Collaborative Decision-Making and Follow-Up

When screening results suggest that additional monitoring or evaluation may be helpful, families should be actively involved in understanding the information and discussing appropriate next steps. Collaborative decision-making means that families receive understandable information, have opportunities to ask questions, and participate in decisions affecting their children.

For example, after a developmental screening identifies a possible language concern, a family may have questions about what further evaluation involves or how additional services could support their child. Educators and other professionals can help families understand the available options without pressuring them toward a particular conclusion.

Family-centered collaboration recognizes that:

- Families have valuable knowledge about their children.
- Screening results do not provide a diagnosis.
- Families may need time and information to understand recommendations.
- Developmental concerns should be addressed promptly through appropriate follow-up.
- Communication and support should continue as children develop.

When additional evaluation or services are recommended, educators can help families navigate appropriate procedures while respecting their choices and maintaining confidentiality. The goal is to establish an ongoing partnership in which families and professionals share information, recognize children's strengths, and work toward meaningful developmental support (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Putting Family Partnerships Into Practice

Example 5.5.2

Consider a four-year-old named Amara who uses very few English words during classroom conversations. Her educator learns that Amara speaks Somali with family members and regularly participates in conversations at home.

During a family discussion, Amara's mother explains that she tells stories about family activities, asks questions, and enjoys singing familiar songs in Somali.

This information helps the educator recognize that Amara's limited English communication does not necessarily indicate a language delay. The educator continues supporting her participation in the classroom while considering her communication abilities and language experiences across settings.

If concerns arise about Amara's communication development in Somali as well as English, the educator can collaborate with the family and appropriate professionals to determine whether further screening or evaluation is needed.

This example illustrates why family knowledge is essential to responsible screening practices. Understanding a child's communication requires attention to the languages, relationships, and experiences that shape development. Family partnerships help ensure that developmental screening is not simply a procedure completed with children, but part of a collaborative process that respects families and supports children's communication development (Office of Head Start, n.d.-b).

Putting It Into Practice: Understanding Liam's Communication Development

Example 5.5.3

Liam is a four-year-old attending a preschool program. He enjoys building with blocks, participating in outdoor activities, and playing alongside his classmates. He communicates his needs using gestures, short phrases, and occasional complete sentences.

During classroom activities, Liam's educator notices that he sometimes has difficulty following directions involving more than one step. When asked questions about a story, Liam often responds with one or two words rather than longer explanations. However, during pretend play, he sometimes uses longer sentences when interacting with familiar peers.

Liam's educator begins documenting his communication during different classroom experiences. She records examples of how he follows directions, answers questions, communicates with peers, and describes events. She also notes situations in which he demonstrates stronger communication skills.

During a conversation with Liam's family, his educator shares these observations and asks about his communication at home. His family explains that Liam enjoys talking about his favorite toys but sometimes becomes frustrated when others do not understand what he is trying to explain. They have also noticed that he occasionally has difficulty following directions.

With the family's participation, Liam completes an age-appropriate developmental screening that includes communication skills. The results indicate that further evaluation of his language development may be beneficial.

The educator explains that screening does not diagnose a language disorder. Instead, the results suggest that a more comprehensive evaluation could help clarify Liam's communication strengths and needs.

Following program procedures, the educator helps the family obtain information about a speech-language evaluation through the appropriate services.

Meanwhile, she continues supporting Liam's communication by using clear directions, visual supports, language modeling, and opportunities for conversations during play. She also allows additional time for Liam to respond and acknowledges his attempts to communicate.

Liam's educator continues documenting his progress and collaborating with his family as they explore appropriate next steps.

This example illustrates how observations, developmental screening, family knowledge, and responsive teaching work together to support children's communication development.

Reflect and Apply

Consider the following questions:

1. What communication strengths and possible concerns did Liam's educator observe?
2. Why was it important to gather information about Liam's communication during different classroom activities and at home?
3. What did Liam's developmental screening results indicate, and what could they not determine?
4. How did Liam's educator involve his family in the screening and follow-up process?
5. What additional strategies could the educator use to support Liam's communication while the family pursues further evaluation?

Applying What You Have Learned

Liam's experience demonstrates that recognizing a possible communication concern involves more than noticing a single behavior or reviewing one screening score.

His educator considered multiple sources of information, including classroom observations, family perspectives, and developmental screening results. Rather than diagnosing a disorder, she used the information to identify appropriate next steps while continuing to support Liam's communication.

Effective screening practices connect observation, family partnerships, appropriate referral, and responsive teaching to support each child's language and communication development (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Vocabulary Alert:

Understanding the following terms will help you distinguish developmental screening from other assessment practices and recognize how screening information supports children's language and communication development.

Developmental Screening: A brief, structured process used to identify children who may benefit from further evaluation or monitoring of developmental skills.

Receptive Language: The ability to understand language communicated by others, including words, questions, directions, and conversations.

Expressive Language: The ability to communicate thoughts, feelings, needs, and ideas through words, signs, gestures, or other communication methods.

Speech Production: The process of producing and organizing speech sounds to communicate spoken messages.

Social Communication: The use of verbal and nonverbal communication to interact with others, participate in conversations, and communicate for different purposes.

Phonological Awareness: The ability to recognize and work with sounds in spoken language, including rhymes, syllables, and individual speech sounds.

Reliability: The degree to which a screening tool produces consistent results under similar conditions.

Validity: The extent to which evidence supports a screening tool's intended purpose and the interpretations made from its results.

Diagnostic Evaluation: A comprehensive assessment conducted by qualified professionals to examine developmental concerns and help determine whether a disorder or disability is present.

Referral: The process of connecting a child and family with appropriate professionals or services for additional evaluation or support.

Exercise 5.5.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the primary purpose of developmental screening related to language and communication, and how does it differ from a diagnostic evaluation?
2. Identify three developmental screening tools that may be used to examine children's language and communication development. Explain how a general developmental screening tool differs from a communication-specific screening tool.
3. Why are reliability, validity, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness important when selecting and using developmental screening tools?
4. Why should screening results be considered alongside classroom observations, family perspectives, and children's individual language experiences?
5. Apply Your Knowledge: A preschool educator notices that a four-year-old child, Sofia, rarely speaks during classroom discussions and often responds to questions using gestures. Sofia's family explains that she speaks Spanish at home and communicates comfortably with family members. **What should the educator consider before identifying a possible language concern? Describe at least three appropriate actions the educator could take to better understand and support Sofia's communication development.**

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 5.5.1

1. Purpose of Developmental Screening: Developmental screening is a brief, structured process used to identify children who may benefit from additional monitoring or evaluation. Screening does not diagnose a language or communication disorder. A diagnostic evaluation is a more comprehensive assessment conducted by qualified professionals to examine specific concerns and determine whether a disorder or disability is present.
2. Types of Screening Tools: Examples include the Ages & Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition (ASQ-3), Survey of Well-being of Young Children (SWYC), Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status–Revised (PEDS-R), and Communication and Symbolic Behavior Scales Developmental Profile (CSBS DP). General developmental screening tools examine communication alongside other developmental areas, such as motor and problem-solving skills. Communication-specific screening tools focus more directly on skills such as gestures, speech sounds, words, and social communication.
3. Selecting Appropriate Tools: Reliability refers to the consistency of screening results, while validity concerns whether evidence supports the tool's intended purpose and interpretation of results. Cultural and linguistic responsiveness helps ensure that screening practices appropriately consider children's languages, communication experiences, and cultural backgrounds. These factors reduce the risk of drawing inaccurate conclusions about children's development.
4. Interpreting Screening Results: Screening provides information gathered through a particular tool at a specific time and does not capture every aspect of a child's communication abilities. Classroom observations, family perspectives, and language experiences provide additional information about how children communicate across settings. Considering multiple sources helps educators recognize strengths, understand individual differences, and identify when further evaluation may be appropriate.
5. Applying Knowledge to Sofia's Situation: The educator should recognize that limited English communication does not automatically indicate a language disorder. Sofia may have well-developed communication skills in Spanish that are not yet demonstrated in English.

Appropriate actions include:

- Gathering information from Sofia's family about her communication abilities in Spanish.
- Observing and documenting Sofia's communication during different classroom activities, including interactions with familiar peers.
- Considering Sofia's language exposure and opportunities to use English and Spanish.
- Continuing to support communication through gestures, visual supports, responsive conversations, and meaningful language experiences.
- Collaborating with the family and qualified professionals to determine whether culturally and linguistically appropriate screening or further evaluation is needed if concerns persist.

The educator should consider Sofia's communication abilities across languages rather than making conclusions based only on her English participation in the classroom.

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5.6: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Language Development and Communication

Introduction

Children develop language and communication skills through everyday interactions with the people and environments around them. In early childhood settings, the quality of the learning environment plays an important role in creating opportunities for children to listen, communicate, build vocabulary, and express their ideas.

A language-rich environment involves more than providing books, writing materials, and classroom labels. It also includes the ways educators interact with children throughout the day. Responsive conversations, storytelling, open-ended questions, songs, and meaningful interactions during play and daily routines all provide opportunities for language learning. These experiences help children develop the communication skills needed to build relationships, participate in learning, and express their needs and ideas (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Environmental rating scales and other structured observation tools help educators examine the quality of these experiences. Rather than assessing an individual child's language abilities, these measures focus on characteristics of the learning environment, including the availability of materials, the quality of educator-child interactions, and opportunities for communication.

By understanding the types and purposes of environmental measures, educators can identify strengths, recognize areas for improvement, and make intentional changes that support the language and communication development of all children, including multilingual learners and children with diverse communication abilities.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 5.6: Explore the types and purposes of environmental rating scales related to language development and communication.

1. **Describe** the purpose of environmental rating scales in examining the quality of language and communication experiences in early childhood settings.
2. **Identify** environmental rating scales and observation tools used to evaluate aspects of language development and communication.
3. **Explain** how environmental measures examine language-rich environments, educator-child interactions, and opportunities for communication.
4. **Describe** how educators use environmental assessment findings to strengthen language and communication experiences for young children.

What Are Environmental Rating Scales?

Environmental rating scales are structured observation tools used to evaluate the quality of early childhood learning environments. They help educators and program administrators examine how classroom conditions, materials, routines, and interactions support children's learning and development (Environment Rating Scales Institute, n.d.).

When focusing on language development and communication, environmental measures help educators consider questions such as:

- Are children surrounded by meaningful opportunities to hear and use language?
- Do educators engage children in responsive, back-and-forth conversations?
- Are books, storytelling materials, and other communication resources accessible and appropriate for the children?
- Are children encouraged to communicate during play, routines, and everyday experiences?

- Does the environment support children with different languages, abilities, and communication needs?

Environmental rating scales do not measure how much language an individual child has developed. Instead, they examine the quality of the experiences and opportunities provided within the learning environment.

Process Quality and Structural Quality

Environmental assessment considers two important aspects of early childhood program quality: **process quality** and **structural quality**.

Process quality refers to children's everyday experiences and interactions within the learning environment. For language development, this includes how educators listen and respond to children, extend conversations, introduce vocabulary, and encourage children to express their ideas.

Structural quality refers to the conditions and resources that help support learning. These may include classroom space, group size, educator qualifications, available materials, and the organization of the learning environment.

Both aspects contribute to the quality of children's experiences, although different environmental assessment tools emphasize different features (National Research Council, 2008).

Table 5.6.1: Process Quality and Structural Quality in Language-Rich Environments

Aspect	What It Examines	Language and Communication Example
Process Quality	The interactions and experiences children have throughout the day	An educator asks open-ended questions, listens to children's responses, and extends a conversation during block play.
Structural Quality	The conditions, resources, and organization that support learning	A classroom has accessible books, a comfortable reading area, and materials that reflect children's home languages.

Note. Illustrative examples informed by National Research Council (2008).

Environmental Assessment vs. Developmental Screening

Environmental assessment and developmental screening serve different purposes, but both can contribute to supporting children's language and communication development.

Environmental assessment examines the quality of the learning environment and the opportunities it provides for children's development.

Developmental screening uses standardized tools to help identify whether an individual child may need further evaluation in one or more developmental areas, including language and communication.

For example, an environmental assessment might reveal that educators rarely engage children in extended conversations during play. This information could lead a program to strengthen its language-rich interactions.

In contrast, a developmental screening might indicate that an individual child is not demonstrating certain communication skills expected for their age and may benefit from additional evaluation.

Environmental assessment and developmental screening provide different kinds of information and should not be used interchangeably (National Research Council, 2008).

Remember: Environmental assessment focuses on the quality of the experiences provided to children, while developmental screening focuses on an individual child's developmental skills and potential concerns.

Understanding this distinction helps educators select appropriate tools and use assessment information to make intentional decisions that support children's language and communication development.

Types of Environmental Measures Related to Language and Communication

Several environmental rating scales and observation tools help early childhood educators examine how learning environments support children's language development and communication. Although these measures evaluate different aspects of program quality, they share a common purpose: helping educators understand and improve the experiences provided to children.

Some tools examine the overall learning environment, including materials, activities, routines, and interactions. Others focus more specifically on the quality of interactions between educators and children.

The following measures are commonly used in early childhood and school-age settings. The Environment Rating Scales are designed for different program settings and age groups, while CLASS focuses primarily on educator-child interactions (Environment Rating Scales Institute, n.d.; Teachstone, n.d.).

Common Environmental Rating Scales and Observation Tools

Table 5.6.2: Environmental Measures Related to Language Development and Communication

Environmental Measure	Setting or Age Group	Purpose and Connection to Language and Communication
Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3)	Center-based preschool programs serving children ages 3–5	Evaluates overall classroom quality, including language and literacy experiences, books, vocabulary development, and educator-child interactions.
Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ITERS-3)	Center-based programs serving children from birth through age 2	Examines the quality of infant and toddler environments, including responsive communication, early language experiences, books, and interactions during routines and play.
Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (FCCERS-3)	Home-based programs serving children from birth through age 12	Evaluates the quality of family child care environments, including opportunities for conversation, language learning, books, and developmentally appropriate communication experiences.
School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale, Updated Edition (SACERS-U)	Before-school, after-school, and other out-of-school-time programs for children ages 5–12	Examines program quality, including opportunities for reading, communication, social interactions, and activities that encourage children to express ideas.
Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)	Age-specific versions differ. The CLASS 2nd Edition includes Infant–Toddler and Pre-K–3rd groupings	Focuses on the quality of educator-child interactions, including responsive communication, conversations, language modeling, feedback, and support for children's thinking and learning.

Note. Tool descriptions and age ranges summarized from Environment Rating Scales Institute (n.d.) and Teachstone (n.d.).

Language and communication examples are illustrative rather than official scoring criteria.

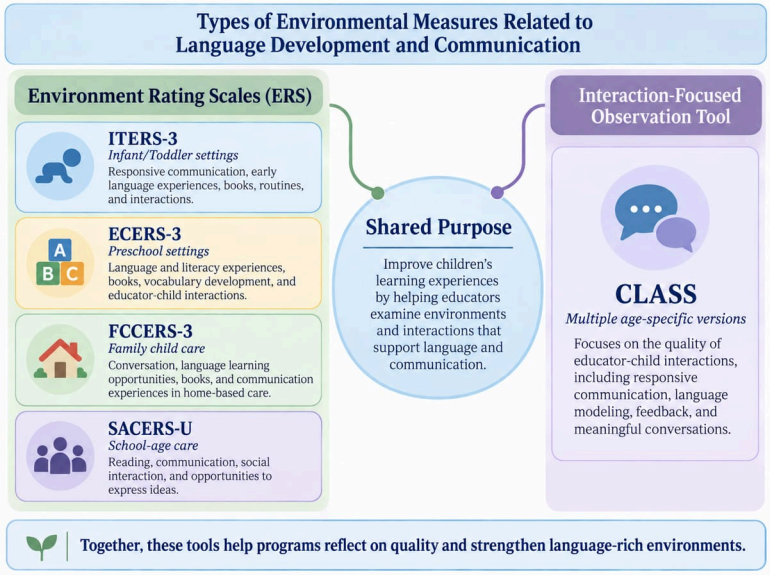


Figure 5.6.1: Types of Environmental Measures Related to Language Development and Communication. Environment Rating Scales (ERS) and CLASS examine different aspects of program quality to help educators strengthen language-rich learning environments (OpenAI, 2026b).

Environment Rating Scales (ERS)

The Environment Rating Scales (ERS) are designed to examine the overall quality of early childhood environments. ECERS-3, ITERS-3, FCCERS-3, and SACERS-U address different age groups and program settings. These scales consider multiple aspects of the environment, including materials, routines, activities, and interactions that contribute to children's learning and development (Environment Rating Scales Institute, n.d.).

For example, an educator using ECERS-3 might examine whether children have access to appropriate books and whether adults use conversations to introduce vocabulary and encourage children to express their ideas.

In an infant and toddler classroom, ITERS-3 can help educators examine how adults respond to children's sounds, gestures, words, and other attempts to communicate.

Although each scale addresses overall program quality, the information can help educators identify ways to strengthen language and communication opportunities.

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) differs from the Environment Rating Scales because its primary focus is on the quality of educator-child interactions. While some CLASS versions and related components also consider aspects of the learning environment, the central emphasis remains on how educators support learning and development through meaningful interactions. CLASS includes age-appropriate versions, and programs may use either earlier versions or CLASS 2nd Edition, depending on their assessment needs and requirements (Teachstone, n.d.).

For language development and communication, CLASS helps educators examine practices such as:

- Responding to children's verbal and nonverbal communication.
- Engaging children in meaningful, back-and-forth conversations.
- Introducing and extending vocabulary during everyday experiences.
- Asking questions that encourage children to explain their thinking.
- Providing feedback that extends children's ideas and understanding.

For example, during block play, an educator might move beyond naming objects by asking, "*How could we make your tower stronger?*" The educator can then listen to the child's response, introduce relevant vocabulary, and encourage further

conversation.

CLASS provides a way to examine the quality of these interactions and identify opportunities for more intentional language support.

Understanding the Differences Between Measures

Environmental measures are not interchangeable. Each tool is designed for a particular purpose, age group, or setting.

For example, ECERS-3 provides information about multiple aspects of preschool classroom quality, while CLASS focuses more directly on how educators interact with children.

An early childhood program may use more than one measure to develop a broader understanding of its learning environment. However, educators and administrators should choose tools based on the information they need and follow the guidance for the specific measure.

> **Remember:** Environmental rating scales examine the overall quality of learning environments, while interaction-focused tools such as CLASS provide a closer look at how educators communicate and engage with children. Both can help educators improve the language and communication experiences they provide.

What Do Environmental Measures Assess?

Environmental measures examine how classroom environments, materials, routines, and educator-child interactions create opportunities for language development and communication. Although individual tools differ in what they measure, many consider how children experience and use language throughout the day.

A language-rich environment is not defined simply by the number of books, labels, or learning materials available. The quality of interactions and the ways educators use these resources are equally important. Environmental measures help educators examine whether children have meaningful opportunities to listen, communicate, build vocabulary, and express their ideas.

Key Areas of Language and Communication Quality

The following areas illustrate important features that environmental measures may examine, depending on the specific tool (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Table 5.6.3: Key Areas of Language and Communication Quality in Early Childhood Environments

Area	What Educators Examine	Example of Quality Practice
Responsive Interactions	How educators notice, interpret, and respond to children's verbal and nonverbal communication	An educator responds to a toddler pointing at a bird by saying, "You see a bird! It's flying across the sky."
Conversations and Language Modeling	How educators engage children in back-and-forth exchanges and model meaningful language	During block play, an educator asks a child to explain how they built a bridge and responds to the child's ideas.
Books and Early Literacy Experiences	The accessibility and use of developmentally appropriate books and literacy materials	Children explore books independently, and educators engage them in interactive read-alouds.
Vocabulary Development	How educators introduce and extend vocabulary during meaningful experiences	While planting seeds, an educator introduces words such as *soil*, *sprout*, and *roots*.

Language During Play and Routines	Opportunities for children to communicate throughout the day	During snack, children describe foods, make requests, and participate in conversations.
Inclusive Communication Opportunities	How educators create opportunities for children with different languages, abilities, and communication needs to participate	An educator uses gestures, pictures, home-language words, and communication supports to encourage participation.

Note. Illustrative practices informed by Office of Head Start (n.d.-a, n.d.-c). These examples are not an official scoring checklist for any individual measure.

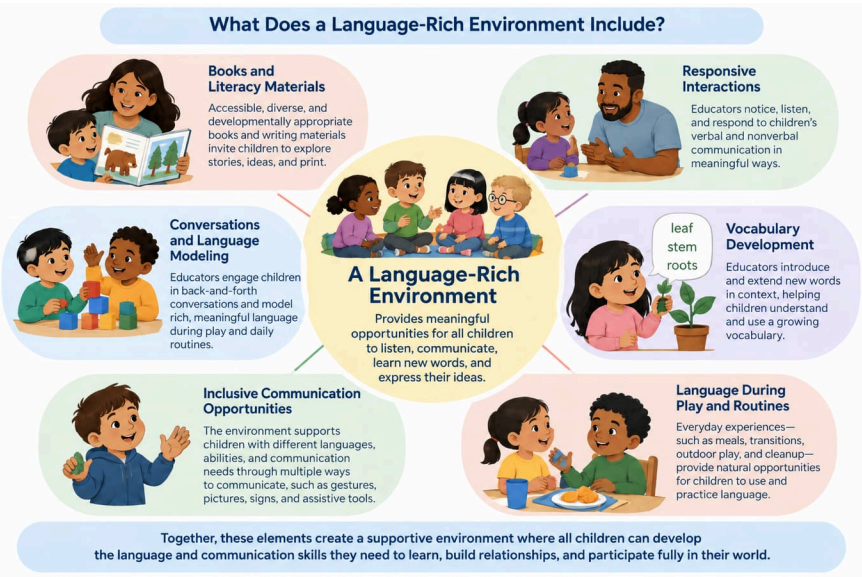


Figure 5.6.2: What Does a Language-Rich Environment Include? A language-rich environment supports children's communication through responsive interactions, conversations, books and literacy materials, vocabulary development, inclusive communication opportunities, and language experiences during play and daily routines (OpenAI, 2026c).

Responsive Educator-Child Interactions

Responsive interactions occur when educators notice children's communication attempts and respond in meaningful ways. These interactions help children understand that their words, gestures, sounds, and ideas are valued.

For infants and toddlers, responsive communication may involve attending to children's facial expressions, gestures, and vocalizations; responding to babbling; imitating sounds; naming objects; or expanding a child's early words.

For preschool and early elementary children, responsive interactions may include longer conversations, comments, questions, and opportunities to explain ideas or tell stories. Educators match these supports to each child's communication abilities, using choices, gestures, pictures, or other communication supports when helpful.

Environmental measures may examine whether these interactions occur consistently and whether educators provide children with opportunities to participate actively in communication (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Language-Rich Materials and Early Literacy Experiences

Books, storytelling materials, pictures, writing tools, and other resources can support children's language and early literacy development. However, simply having materials available does not guarantee meaningful learning experiences. Educators strengthen language development when they use materials to encourage conversation, storytelling, questioning, and exploration.

For example, a classroom library may contain many books, but the quality of language experiences also depends on whether

children can access the books and whether educators engage them in conversations about stories, pictures, and ideas.

Environmental measures may examine both the availability of appropriate materials and how those materials are used to support learning.

Conversations and Vocabulary Development

Meaningful conversations provide opportunities for children to hear new words, express ideas, ask questions, and build understanding. Educators strengthen language development when they extend children's comments, introduce vocabulary in context, and encourage children to participate in sustained exchanges (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

For example, if a child says, "My tower is big," an educator might respond, "Your tower is very tall! What could you add to make it even taller?"

This response acknowledges the child's communication, introduces descriptive vocabulary, and invites further conversation. Environmental measures that focus on interactions may examine how educators model language, respond to children's ideas, and create opportunities for extended communication.

Language Opportunities Throughout the Day

Language learning occurs during everyday classroom experiences, not only during planned literacy activities. Arrival, meals, transitions, outdoor play, art, music, and cleanup routines all provide opportunities for children to communicate with adults and peers.

For example, during outdoor play, an educator might describe how leaves move in the wind, encourage children to compare their observations, or introduce words such as *flutter*, *sway*, and *gust*.

Environmental measures can help educators recognize whether communication opportunities are integrated into everyday experiences or limited primarily to teacher-directed activities.

Supporting Diverse Languages and Communication Needs

High-quality language environments recognize that children communicate in different ways and bring varied language experiences to the classroom. Multilingual learners may use their home languages, English, gestures, or combinations of communication methods as they participate in classroom experiences. Children with communication disabilities may use speech, gestures, signs, picture-based communication, or augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).

Educators support inclusive communication by responding to children's communication attempts, respecting home languages, providing appropriate communication supports, and creating meaningful opportunities for participation.

Environmental measures can support reflection on how well classroom practices include children with diverse communication needs. However, not every measure evaluates multilingual and inclusive practices in the same depth (National Research Council, 2008; Office of Head Start, n.d.-c).

Looking at the Whole Environment

No single classroom feature determines whether an environment provides high-quality language experiences. Educators must consider how materials, routines, interactions, and opportunities for communication work together.

For example, a classroom may have an inviting reading area and a wide variety of books. However, if educators rarely engage children in conversations or encourage storytelling, important opportunities for language development may be missed.

Environmental assessment helps educators move beyond asking whether materials and activities are present to examining **how children experience language and communication throughout the day**.

Remember: A language-rich environment is created through both accessible materials and meaningful interactions. The goal of environmental assessment is to understand the quality of the communication opportunities children experience and identify ways to strengthen those experiences.

Why Use Environmental Measures?

Environmental measures help early childhood educators understand how well their learning environments support children's language development and communication. Rather than relying only on general impressions, these tools provide a structured way to examine classroom materials, routines, and interactions.

The purpose of environmental assessment is not simply to assign a rating. It is to provide meaningful information that educators and programs can use to strengthen children's learning experiences.

Environmental measures can help educators:

- **Identify strengths:** Recognize practices that already support language development, such as responsive conversations, accessible books, and meaningful communication opportunities during play.
- **Recognize opportunities for improvement:** Identify areas where children may have limited opportunities to communicate, hear new vocabulary, or participate in extended conversations.
- **Reflect on teaching practices:** Consider how everyday interactions, routines, and instructional decisions influence children's opportunities to use and develop language.
- **Guide intentional changes:** Use assessment findings to improve materials, classroom routines, and educator-child interactions.
- **Support continuous program improvement:** Examine changes over time, establish improvement goals, and guide professional development and collaborative planning.

For example, an environmental assessment might reveal that a preschool classroom has a well-stocked library but limited opportunities for children to participate in conversations during free play. Educators could use this information to plan more intentional interactions, introduce vocabulary during play, and encourage children to explain their ideas.

By using environmental assessment findings to guide reflection and improvement, educators can create more responsive, inclusive, and language-rich learning environments (National Research Council, 2008).

Choosing and Using Environmental Measures

Choosing an appropriate environmental measure is important for gathering meaningful information about the quality of language and communication experiences in early childhood settings. Different tools examine different aspects of the learning environment, so educators and program administrators must consider the purpose of the assessment, the children being served, and the type of information needed.

Selecting an Appropriate Measure

When choosing an environmental measure, educators and program administrators should consider (National Research Council, 2008):

- **Age and Setting:** Select a tool designed for the children's age group and type of program, such as an infant and toddler classroom, preschool classroom, family child care home, or school-age program.
- **Purpose of Assessment:** Determine whether the goal is to examine overall environmental quality, language and literacy opportunities, or the quality of educator-child interactions.
- **Reliability and Validity:** Consider whether the tool produces sufficiently consistent results and whether evidence supports its use for the intended purpose.
- **Observer Training:** Follow the tool's administration and scoring requirements. Some measures require specific training or

certification to conduct formal assessments accurately.
- **Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness:** Consider whether the measure appropriately recognizes children's home languages, cultural experiences, communication practices, and diverse abilities.

For example, a preschool program interested in examining its overall classroom environment might select ECERS-3. A program seeking more detailed information about the quality of educator-child interactions might use an age-appropriate version of CLASS.

Understanding Reliability and Validity

Two important considerations when selecting environmental measures are **reliability** and **validity**.

Reliability refers to the consistency of assessment results. For example, when two appropriately trained observers assess the same classroom using the same tool, their ratings should demonstrate an acceptable level of agreement.

Validity refers to the evidence supporting whether an assessment measures what it is intended to measure and whether its results are appropriate for a particular use.

A tool may have evidence of reliability and validity for a particular age group or setting without necessarily being appropriate for every classroom or assessment purpose (National Research Council, 2008).

Recognizing Limitations

Environmental measures provide useful information, but they do not capture every aspect of children's learning experiences.

For example, a classroom observation may not fully reflect the language opportunities children experience across different days, activities, or relationships. Some measures may also give limited attention to multilingual communication practices, cultural differences, or the ways children use alternative forms of communication.

Educators should interpret results within the context of their program and avoid drawing conclusions from a single observation or score alone.

Environmental assessment findings are most useful when combined with ongoing observations, professional reflection, family perspectives, and other relevant information about the learning environment (National Research Council, 2008).

> **Remember:** The most appropriate environmental measure is one that matches the assessment purpose, age group, and program setting. Reliable and valid tools, used and interpreted appropriately, can help educators make meaningful improvements to children's language and communication experiences.

The Educator's Role in Environmental Assessment

Early childhood educators play an important role in creating and maintaining environments that support children's language development and communication. Although formal environmental assessments may be conducted by trained observers, educators can use the information from these assessments to reflect on their daily practices and identify opportunities for improvement.

Environmental assessment is most useful when the information leads to intentional changes in teaching practices and learning experiences. Educators can use a continuous improvement cycle to examine the environment, identify strengths and areas for growth, make changes, and evaluate whether those changes are creating more meaningful communication opportunities (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

From Environmental Assessment to Improved Practice

The following cycle illustrates how educators can use environmental assessment information to strengthen language and communication experiences.



Figure 5.6.3: Environmental Assessment to Improved Practice. Educators use a continuous cycle of observing, reflecting, planning, improving, and observing again to strengthen language and communication opportunities in early childhood environments (OpenAI, 2026a).

Step 1. Observe

Notice and gather information about the classroom environment, materials, routines, and educator-child interactions.

For example, an educator may notice that children have access to many books but that few conversations occur during independent reading or play.

Step 2. Reflect

Consider what the observations reveal about the quality of children's language experiences. Identify strengths and opportunities for improvement.

The educator might ask, "*Am I providing enough opportunities for children to discuss stories, ask questions, and share their ideas?*"

Step 3. Plan

Identify specific, realistic strategies to strengthen language and communication opportunities.

For example, the educator might plan to participate in small-group reading experiences, ask more open-ended questions, and introduce new vocabulary during play.

Step 4. Improve

Put the planned strategies into practice by making intentional changes to materials, routines, interactions, or teaching approaches.

The educator begins engaging children in conversations about books, encouraging predictions, and extending children's comments.

Step 5. Observe Again

Examine whether the changes have improved children's opportunities to communicate. Continue monitoring the environment and adjusting practices as needed.

The educator might notice that children now have more opportunities to participate in conversations, share ideas, and use new vocabulary.

The cycle then begins again as educators continue refining their practices.

Using Assessment Information Responsibly

Environmental assessment findings should be used to support reflection and improvement rather than simply to assign a rating or identify weaknesses. Educators should consider the ages, abilities, languages, cultures, and individual needs of the children when interpreting assessment information. A practice that works well in one classroom may need to be adapted for another group of children.

For example, a classroom serving multilingual learners may provide meaningful language opportunities through home-language conversations, gestures, visual supports, and other communication strategies. These practices should be considered when interpreting observations of children's communication experiences.

Educators should also remember that environmental assessment provides information about the quality of the learning environment, not a diagnosis or evaluation of an individual child's language development. When assessment findings are combined with professional reflection, collaboration, and knowledge of the children and families being served, they can guide meaningful improvements in everyday teaching practices (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

Partnering With Families

Families play an important role in children's language development and communication. Children bring language experiences, cultural practices, and ways of communicating from their homes and communities into early childhood settings. Understanding these experiences helps educators create learning environments that recognize children's strengths and support meaningful communication (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

Environmental assessment can help educators reflect on how well their classrooms represent and respond to the languages, cultures, and communication needs of the children and families they serve. Although environmental measures vary in how they address family partnerships and linguistic diversity, family perspectives provide valuable information that may not be fully captured through classroom observations alone.

Learning From Families

Families can share information about how their children communicate at home, the languages they hear and use, favorite stories and songs, and the ways family members interact during everyday routines. Educators can use this information to make classroom experiences more familiar, meaningful, and responsive to children's backgrounds.

For example, a family might share that their child enjoys hearing stories in Spanish at home. The educator could incorporate Spanish-language books, familiar songs, and opportunities for the child to use Spanish during classroom activities.

These practices help children recognize that their home languages and experiences are valued within the learning environment.

Creating Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Environments

Culturally and linguistically responsive environments reflect and respect the languages, traditions, and communication practices of the children and families they serve.

Educators can strengthen these environments by:

- Including books, songs, pictures, and materials that represent children's families, languages, and cultures.
- Learning key words and phrases in children's home languages when possible.
- Encouraging families to share meaningful stories, songs, or communication practices.
- Recognizing that communication styles, such as eye contact, conversational turn-taking, and storytelling traditions, may vary

across families and cultures.
- Providing accessible communication supports and using interpreters when needed so families can participate in meaningful conversations about their children's experiences.

These practices help create environments where children feel a sense of belonging and have opportunities to communicate in ways that reflect their individual strengths and experiences (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; Office of Head Start, n.d.-c).

Using Family Perspectives to Improve the Environment

Family input can also guide how educators interpret environmental assessment findings and plan improvements.

For example, an environmental assessment might identify opportunities to strengthen classroom conversations and language experiences. Educators could invite families to share familiar words, stories, or songs that could be incorporated into daily routines.

A family whose child uses augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) might also share communication strategies or supports used successfully at home. Educators can collaborate with the family and appropriate professionals to support consistent, meaningful communication opportunities across settings. By combining environmental assessment information with family perspectives, educators can make more informed decisions about classroom materials, routines, and interactions.

Family partnerships are an ongoing part of improving the learning environment. When educators listen to families, respect different ways of communicating, and incorporate children's home experiences into classroom practices, they create more inclusive opportunities for language development and communication (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; Office of Head Start, n.d.-b).

Putting It Into Practice: Creating More Opportunities for Conversation

Example 5.6.1

In a preschool classroom serving children ages 3–5, an environmental assessment identifies several strengths. Children have access to a variety of books, storytelling materials, and learning centers. Educators regularly read aloud to the group and introduce new vocabulary during planned activities.

However, the assessment also identifies an area for improvement. During free play, educators frequently supervise activities, provide directions, and answer children's questions, but they rarely engage children in extended, back-and-forth conversations.

Observing and Reflecting

Ms. Rivera, one of the preschool educators, begins paying closer attention to her interactions during play. She notices that when children build with blocks, she often makes brief comments such as "*That's a tall tower!*" or "*Good job!*" before moving to another area.

Although these responses are positive, they provide limited opportunities for children to explain their ideas or continue conversations.

Ms. Rivera reflects on how she could use everyday play experiences to encourage more meaningful communication.

Planning and Making Changes

Ms. Rivera decides to focus on extending conversations during block play. Instead of relying primarily on brief comments, she begins asking questions, listening carefully to children's responses, and adding language that builds on their ideas.

One morning, four-year-old Mateo builds a bridge using wooden blocks.

Ms. Rivera says, "*Tell me about what you're building.*"

Mateo responds, "*It's a bridge for my cars.*"

Ms. Rivera asks, "*How will the cars get across without the bridge falling?*"

Mateo explains, "*I need more blocks underneath.*"

Ms. Rivera responds, "*You're adding supports to make your bridge stronger. Where should we put them?*"

The conversation encourages Mateo to explain his thinking, use descriptive language, and consider new vocabulary within a meaningful play experience.

Partnering With Families

Ms. Rivera also invites families to share topics, experiences, and vocabulary that interest their children.

Mateo's family explains that he enjoys building roads and bridges with his grandfather and frequently talks about construction vehicles at home. They also share that their family uses both English and Spanish.

Ms. Rivera adds books and pictures of bridges and construction vehicles to the block area and incorporates familiar Spanish words when appropriate. These materials provide additional opportunities for Mateo and his classmates to connect classroom conversations with their experiences outside the program.

Observing Again

Over the following weeks, Ms. Rivera observes how children respond to the changes. She notices more opportunities for children to describe their structures, ask questions, explain their ideas, and engage in conversations with educators and peers.

She continues reflecting on her interactions and considers how similar strategies could strengthen communication during art, outdoor play, and other daily experiences.

The environmental assessment did not evaluate Mateo's individual language abilities. Instead, it helped Ms. Rivera identify ways to improve the communication opportunities available to all children in the classroom.

Connecting Assessment to Intentional Practice

This example demonstrates how environmental assessment can guide meaningful improvements in teaching practices. By observing interactions, reflecting on assessment findings, making intentional changes, and collaborating with families, educators can create richer opportunities for children's language development and communication.

Vocabulary Alert:

Environmental Rating Scale: A structured observation tool used to evaluate the quality of early childhood learning environments, including materials, routines, activities, and interactions.

Environmental Assessment: The process of examining the quality of a learning environment to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Process Quality: The quality of children's everyday experiences and interactions, including how educators communicate, respond, and engage with children.

Structural Quality: The conditions and resources that support learning, such as group size, educator qualifications, classroom space, and available materials.

Language-Rich Environment: A learning environment that provides meaningful opportunities for children to listen, communicate, build vocabulary, and express ideas throughout the day.

Responsive Interactions: Meaningful exchanges in which educators notice, interpret, and respond to children's verbal and nonverbal communication.

Language Modeling: The intentional use of language by educators to demonstrate vocabulary, sentence structures, and ways of expressing ideas during everyday interactions.

Reliability: The consistency of assessment results, including whether appropriately trained observers produce similar ratings when using the same measure under comparable conditions.

Validity: The extent to which evidence supports the interpretation and use of assessment results for their intended purpose.

Continuous Quality Improvement: An ongoing process of observing, reflecting, planning, making improvements, and evaluating changes to strengthen the quality of learning experiences.

Exercise 5.6.1

Check Your Understanding

1. **What is the primary purpose of environmental rating scales in early childhood settings?** How do they differ from developmental screening tools?
2. **What is the difference between process quality and structural quality?** Provide one example of each related to language development and communication.
3. **How do Environment Rating Scales (ERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) differ in what they evaluate?** Explain how both can help educators strengthen children's language experiences.
4. **Why is it important to include family perspectives when evaluating and improving language-rich learning environments?** Provide one example of how an educator might use information shared by a family.

Apply Your Knowledge

5. An environmental assessment reveals that a preschool classroom has a variety of books, storytelling materials, and literacy activities. However, educators rarely engage children in extended conversations during play and daily routines. **What are two changes the educators could make to strengthen children's language and communication experiences? How could they determine whether those changes are improving the learning environment?**

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 5.6.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. **Purpose of Environmental Rating Scales:** Environmental rating scales examine the quality of learning environments, including materials, routines, activities, and educator-child interactions. They help educators identify strengths and opportunities for improvement. Developmental screening tools, in contrast, help identify whether an individual child may need further evaluation in a developmental area.
2. **Process Quality and Structural Quality:** Process quality refers to children's everyday interactions and experiences, such as an educator engaging a child in a back-and-forth conversation. Structural quality refers to the conditions and resources that support learning, such as having accessible books and appropriate literacy materials in the classroom.
3. **ERS and CLASS:** Environment Rating Scales examine multiple aspects of the learning environment, including materials, routines, activities, and interactions. CLASS focuses more specifically on the quality of educator-child interactions. Both can help educators recognize ways to improve communication opportunities and support children's language development.
4. **Family Perspectives:** Families provide valuable information about children's home languages, cultural experiences, interests, and communication practices. For example, an educator might use songs or stories shared by a family to create more familiar and meaningful language experiences in the classroom.

Answers to Apply Your Knowledge

5. Educators could begin engaging children in longer, back-and-forth conversations during play and introduce new vocabulary during everyday routines. They could also ask open-ended questions that encourage children to explain their ideas. To evaluate the changes, educators could observe classroom interactions again, reflect on whether children have more opportunities to communicate, and continue adjusting their practices based on what they notice.

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6: ANALYZING THE APPROACHES TO THE LEARNING OF CHILDREN

6.1: How Approaches to Learning Impact Individualization in Development

6.2: Influences of Family, Society, and Culture on Childhood

6.3: Strategies that Support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

6.4: Applying Approaches to Learning Theories to Early Childhood Practice

6.5: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Approaches to Learning

6.6: Environmental Rating Scales Related to Approaches to Learning

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6.1: How Approaches to Learning Impact Individualization in Development

Every Child Approaches Learning Differently

Imagine two preschool children exploring a new set of building materials. One child eagerly begins experimenting, trying different ways to connect the pieces and continuing even when a structure falls apart. Another child watches carefully before participating, taking time to become comfortable with the materials and observing how others use them. Both children are learning, but they approach the experience in different ways.

Approaches to learning describe how children engage with experiences, explore their environments, respond to challenges, and develop new skills. Characteristics such as curiosity, initiative, attention, persistence, and flexibility influence how children participate in learning opportunities. These approaches are shaped by a combination of temperament, developmental abilities, previous experiences, relationships, and environmental influences.

Recognizing these individual differences is essential to developmentally appropriate practice. Rather than expecting all children to learn or respond in the same way, early childhood educators use their understanding of each child's characteristics to individualize learning experiences. By adjusting interactions, materials, expectations, and the learning environment, educators can support children's engagement, confidence, and continued development (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Individualization is not about changing who children are. It is about creating learning opportunities that respond to who they are and how they learn.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 6.1: Describe how approaches to learning impact individualization in development.

After completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Describe approaches to learning and how they influence children's engagement and development.
2. Identify temperament characteristics that contribute to individual differences in how children approach learning.
3. Explain how goodness of fit supports children's individual approaches to learning.
4. Describe how early childhood educators individualize teaching practices, interactions, and learning environments to support children's development.

Understanding Approaches to Learning

Approaches to learning describe how children engage with experiences, explore their environments, and respond to opportunities and challenges. Rather than focusing on what children know, approaches to learning emphasize how children participate in the process of learning (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Children demonstrate approaches to learning through their curiosity, initiative, attention, persistence, creativity, and willingness to try new experiences. These characteristics influence how children explore materials, interact with others, solve problems, and develop new skills.

For example, during a classroom science investigation, one child may immediately begin experimenting with materials, while another carefully observes before participating. A third child may ask questions and suggest different ways to conduct the investigation. Each child demonstrates a different approach to learning, and each approach provides opportunities for development.

Approaches to learning are influenced by children's temperament, developmental abilities, interests, previous experiences, and

interactions with their environments. They are not fixed characteristics. Children develop and strengthen their approaches to learning through supportive relationships, meaningful experiences, and opportunities to explore (NAEYC, 2020).

Key Characteristics of Approaches to Learning

The following characteristics reflect important ways children engage in learning, consistent with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Table 6.1.1: Key Characteristics of Approaches to Learning and Classroom Examples

Characteristic	Description	Classroom Example
Curiosity	Interest in exploring, discovering, and learning about the world	A child examines different leaves and wonders why they have different shapes
Initiative	Willingness to begin activities, make choices, and explore independently	A child selects materials and begins creating a structure without adult direction
Attention and Engagement	Ability to focus and remain involved in a learning experience	A child concentrates on completing a puzzle
Persistence	Willingness to continue working toward a goal despite challenges	A child repeatedly experiments with blocks to create a stable tower
Creativity	Ability to use imagination and explore different ideas or possibilities	A child uses cardboard boxes to create a pretend spaceship
Flexibility and Problem Solving	Ability to adjust strategies and explore solutions when challenges arise	A child changes a building design when the original structure does not work

These characteristics are interconnected and often develop together. For example, curiosity may encourage a child to investigate how a toy works, while persistence helps the child continue experimenting when the toy does not respond as expected.

Children may demonstrate these characteristics differently depending on the activity, environment, and level of support available. A child who participates enthusiastically in outdoor exploration may be more hesitant during a structured group activity. Similarly, a child who appears quiet during a classroom discussion may demonstrate considerable curiosity and creativity during independent play.

An important principle for educators is that children do not need to approach learning in the same way to be successful learners. Recognizing these differences helps educators identify strengths, understand individual needs, and provide learning experiences that encourage participation and development.

Temperament and Individual Differences

Temperament refers to biologically influenced characteristics that affect how children respond to people, experiences, and their environments. These characteristics are observable early in life and contribute to individual differences in activity level, emotional responses, attention, and adaptability.

Although temperament has a biological foundation, children's experiences, relationships, and environments influence how these characteristics are expressed over time. Temperament does not determine a child's intelligence, abilities, or future success. Instead, it helps explain why children may respond differently to similar learning experiences (Office of Head Start, n.d.-c).

For example, during a new classroom activity, one child may eagerly explore unfamiliar materials, while another prefers to watch before participating. Some children enjoy active, stimulating environments, while others concentrate more easily in quieter settings. These differences do not mean that one child is more capable or motivated than another.

Understanding temperament helps educators recognize that children's behaviors often reflect individual ways of responding to the environment rather than a lack of interest, effort, or ability.

Dimensions of Temperament

In their foundational temperament research, Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess identified nine dimensions of temperament that describe differences in how children respond to their environments (Thomas & Chess, 1977).

The following table describes these dimensions and illustrates how they may influence children's participation in early childhood learning experiences.

Table 6.1.2: Dimensions of Temperament and Classroom Examples

Temperament Dimension	Description	Classroom Example
Activity Level	The amount of physical movement a child typically demonstrates	One child frequently moves between learning areas, while another prefers quieter, seated activities
Regularity	The predictability of biological routines, such as sleeping, eating, and periods of alertness	One child has predictable patterns of hunger and rest, while another's patterns vary from day to day.
Approach or Withdrawal	A child's initial response to unfamiliar people, experiences, or situations	One child immediately joins a new activity, while another watches before participating
Adaptability	How easily a child adjusts to changes in routines, expectations, or environments	One child transitions easily between activities, while another needs additional time to adjust
Intensity of Reaction	The strength of a child's emotional responses	One child expresses excitement or frustration strongly, while another responds more quietly
Threshold of Responsiveness	The amount of sensory stimulation needed to produce a response	One child notices subtle sounds or changes in lighting, while another responds only to more noticeable changes
Quality of Mood	The tendency to express a more positive or more negative emotional tone.	One child frequently smiles and expresses enjoyment during familiar activities, while another more often expresses displeasure or discomfort.
Distractibility	How easily outside stimulation shifts a child's attention	One child becomes distracted by nearby conversations, while another continues working despite surrounding activity
Attention Span and Persistence	How long a child remains engaged in an activity and continues despite challenges	One child works on a challenging puzzle for an extended period, while another moves on after several attempts

Note. Temperament dimensions adapted from the framework described by Thomas and Chess (1977). Classroom examples illustrate how these dimensions may appear in early childhood settings.

These dimensions help educators understand patterns in children's behavior, but they should not be used to label children or make assumptions about their abilities.

A child may demonstrate different responses depending on the situation. For example, a child who is easily distracted during a large-group activity may remain deeply engaged when exploring a preferred activity independently. Similarly, a child who approaches unfamiliar experiences cautiously may become confident and enthusiastic once the environment feels familiar.

How Temperament Influences Approaches to Learning

Temperament can influence how children demonstrate curiosity, initiative, engagement, persistence, and other approaches to learning. Temperament and approaches to learning are related, but they are not interchangeable. Temperament describes patterns of responding, while approaches to learning include developing skills and behaviors that educators can support through relationships, experiences, and intentional teaching.

For example, a child with a high activity level may demonstrate curiosity by moving throughout the classroom and exploring several materials. A child with a lower activity level may demonstrate the same curiosity through careful observation and extended investigation of a single material.

Likewise, a child who approaches unfamiliar experiences cautiously may need additional time before participating in a new activity. This does not necessarily indicate a lack of initiative or interest. Instead, it reflects an individual way of responding to something unfamiliar.

Temperament may also influence how children handle challenges. Some children continue working despite frustration, while others benefit from encouragement, reassurance, or a brief break before trying again.

These examples demonstrate that the same approach to learning can look different from one child to another.

The goal is not to change a child's temperament but to understand how individual characteristics influence learning and development. When educators recognize these differences, they are better prepared to provide appropriate opportunities and support for each child.

Understanding Temperament Patterns

In addition to identifying nine dimensions of temperament, Thomas and Chess (1977) described three general temperament patterns based on how children typically respond to their environments. These patterns were traditionally called easy, difficult, and slow-to-warm-up.

Although these classifications helped researchers understand individual differences, they are best viewed as historical descriptions rather than fixed categories. Children demonstrate unique combinations of temperament characteristics, and not all children fit neatly into one pattern.

Traditional Temperament Patterns

Table 6.1.3: Traditional Temperament Patterns, Common Characteristics, and Classroom Examples

Temperament Pattern	Common Characteristics	Classroom Example
Easy Temperament	Generally adapts readily to new experiences, follows predictable routines, and responds positively to changes	A child comfortably joins a new classroom activity and adjusts quickly when the schedule changes
Difficult Temperament	May demonstrate intense emotional reactions, irregular routines, and greater difficulty adjusting to unfamiliar situations	A child becomes upset during unexpected transitions and needs additional time and support to adjust

Temperament Pattern	Common Characteristics	Classroom Example
Slow-to-Warm-Up Temperament	Often approaches unfamiliar experiences cautiously, demonstrates lower initial activity levels, and gradually becomes comfortable with new situations	A child observes a new learning activity before deciding to participate

Note. Traditional temperament patterns based on Thomas and Chess (1977). These classifications are historical descriptions rather than fixed labels for children.

These patterns do not determine children's learning abilities, personalities, or future developmental outcomes. The original research also found that many children did not fit neatly into any one category.

Moving Beyond Temperament Labels

In early childhood practice, educators should avoid using temperament classifications as fixed labels for children. Instead, educators should focus on describing specific, observable behaviors and understanding the circumstances in which they occur.

For example, rather than describing a child as having a difficult temperament, an educator might observe that the child becomes frustrated during unexpected transitions and responds positively when given advance notice.

Similarly, a child who watches an activity before joining should not automatically be described as shy or uninterested. The child may simply need additional time to become comfortable with unfamiliar experiences. Understanding temperament patterns helps educators recognize individual differences, but effective individualization requires responding to the child rather than the label. This understanding leads to the concept of goodness of fit, which explains how educators can adjust learning environments, interactions, and expectations to better support each child's temperament and approaches to learning.

Goodness of Fit: Matching Support to the Child

Understanding a child's temperament is an important part of individualizing learning experiences. However, temperament alone does not determine how a child learns or develops. The relationship between a child's individual characteristics and the expectations, interactions, and supports within the environment also plays an important role.

Thomas and Chess (1977) introduced the concept of goodness of fit to describe how well a child's temperament aligns with the demands and expectations of their environment. A positive goodness of fit occurs when adults recognize individual differences and adjust their responses to support children's needs.

Goodness of fit does not mean that educators and children must have similar personalities or temperaments. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of creating environments and learning experiences that are responsive to each child.

For example, a highly active child may struggle during an extended seated activity but remain engaged when learning involves movement and hands-on exploration. A child who approaches unfamiliar experiences cautiously may participate more confidently when given time to observe before joining.

In both situations, the educator improves the goodness of fit by adjusting the learning experience rather than expecting the child to change their natural way of responding.

How Goodness of Fit Supports Approaches to Learning

A positive goodness of fit supports children's curiosity, engagement, persistence, and willingness to explore. When learning experiences are responsive to individual characteristics, children have more opportunities to participate successfully and develop confidence in their abilities (Office of Head Start, n.d.-c).

The following examples illustrate how educators can support a positive goodness of fit.

Table 6.1.4: Supporting Goodness of Fit in Early Childhood Classrooms

Child's Individual Characteristics	Potential Classroom Challenge	Responsive Educator Approach
High activity level	Difficulty remaining seated during extended activities	Incorporate movement, hands-on materials, and opportunities for active participation
Cautious approach to unfamiliar experiences	Hesitation to join new activities	Allow time to observe, offer reassurance, and provide opportunities to participate gradually
High sensitivity to sensory stimulation	Discomfort in noisy or highly stimulating environments	Provide quieter spaces and adjust sensory experiences when possible
Strong emotional reactions	Frustration when activities become challenging	Acknowledge feelings, provide co-regulation, and encourage trying different strategies
Difficulty adapting to changes	Distress during unexpected transitions	Use predictable routines, visual schedules, and advance notice of changes
High distractibility	Difficulty maintaining attention in busy environments	Reduce unnecessary distractions and provide appropriate spaces for focused exploration

Note. Illustrative classroom adaptations informed by Thomas and Chess (1977), Office of Head Start (n.d.-c), and NAEYC (2020).

These adaptations do not eliminate challenges or remove opportunities for growth. Instead, they provide children with the support needed to participate in meaningful learning experiences.

For example, a child who becomes frustrated when a puzzle is difficult still benefits from opportunities to solve problems. The educator might offer encouragement, model one strategy, or simplify part of the task while allowing the child to continue working independently.

The goal is to provide an appropriate balance between challenge and support.

Goodness of Fit Is an Ongoing Process

Children's needs and responses change as they develop and gain new experiences. A teaching approach that works well in one situation may not be effective in another. Educators maintain a positive goodness of fit by remaining responsive and adjusting their expectations and support as children's needs change.

Goodness of fit shifts the educator's question from "How can I make this child fit the activity?" to "How can I adjust the activity to support this child's learning?"

Individualizing Teaching Practices

Individualizing teaching practices means intentionally adjusting learning experiences, materials, interactions, and routines to respond to children's unique characteristics and approaches to learning. Rather than expecting every child to participate in the same way, educators recognize that children may need different types and levels of support to engage successfully (NAEYC, 2020).

Effective individualization begins with understanding how children approach learning. Some children eagerly explore unfamiliar materials, while others prefer to observe before participating. Some persist independently when challenges arise, while others benefit from encouragement or adult guidance. These differences help educators determine how to support each child's curiosity, initiative, engagement, and persistence.

Individualization does not require creating a separate activity for every child. Instead, educators make intentional adjustments within everyday learning experiences so that children can work toward meaningful learning goals in ways that reflect their individual strengths and needs.

Strategies for Individualizing Learning Experiences

Educators can support individual approaches to learning by adjusting materials, interactions, routines, and expectations. The goal is to provide an appropriate level of challenge while allowing children to participate in ways that support their continued development (NAEYC, 2020; Office of Head Start, n.d.-b).

Table 6.1.5: Individualizing Teaching Practices to Support Approaches to Learning

Area of Individualization	Teaching Strategy	Classroom Example
Learning Materials	Offer materials with different levels of complexity and opportunities for exploration	During a building activity, provide large blocks for children beginning to explore structures and smaller blocks for children ready for more detailed construction
Educator Interactions	Adjust the amount and type of adult guidance	Encourage one child to solve a problem independently while offering another child a demonstration or verbal prompt
Participation	Provide different ways for children to engage in the same experience	During a science investigation, allow children to observe, handle materials, ask questions, or describe discoveries
Learning Environment	Adjust the physical environment to support engagement and attention	Provide a quieter workspace for a child who becomes distracted by surrounding activity
Routines and Transitions	Modify the amount of preparation and support children receive	Give advance notice and a visual reminder to a child who needs additional time to transition between activities
Time and Pace	Allow flexibility in how long children explore and complete activities	Provide additional time for a child who prefers careful investigation before trying something new
Challenge and Support	Adjust task difficulty and assistance based on children's responses	Offer encouragement or a starting strategy when a child becomes frustrated, while allowing the child to continue problem-solving

Note. Illustrative teaching strategies informed by NAEYC (2020) and Office of Head Start (n.d.-b).

These adjustments help children participate in shared classroom experiences while receiving support that reflects their individual approaches to learning.

Balancing Support and Independence

An important part of individualization is determining when to provide assistance and when to allow children to explore independently.

Too much adult direction may limit children's opportunities to demonstrate initiative, creativity, and problem-solving. Too little support may cause children to become frustrated or disengaged when a task feels overwhelming.

Educators can maintain an appropriate balance by observing children's responses and adjusting their involvement.

For example, when a child struggles to complete a puzzle, the educator might ask, "What could you try next?" rather than immediately placing the piece for the child. If the child continues to struggle, the educator may model a strategy or offer a small hint.

This approach supports persistence while allowing the child to experience the satisfaction of solving a problem.

Similarly, a child who is hesitant to join a new activity may benefit from watching others before participating. Providing this opportunity respects the child's individual approach while encouraging increasing confidence and independence.

Individualization Changes With the Child

Individualized teaching practices should change as children develop new skills, confidence, and independence. A child who initially needs adult guidance may eventually participate independently or benefit from new challenges.

The purpose of individualization is not to make learning easier for every child, but to provide the appropriate combination of challenge, opportunity, and support that helps each child develop as a learner.

From Observation to Individualized Support

Individualizing teaching practices is an ongoing process that begins with understanding how each child approaches learning. Educators use everyday observations to recognize children's interests, strengths, responses to challenges, and patterns of engagement. This information helps them make intentional decisions about how to support each child's development (NAEYC, 2020; Office of Head Start, n.d.-b).

A simple four-step cycle—**Observe → Understand → Adapt → Reflect—can guide educators in making and evaluating individualized teaching decisions.**

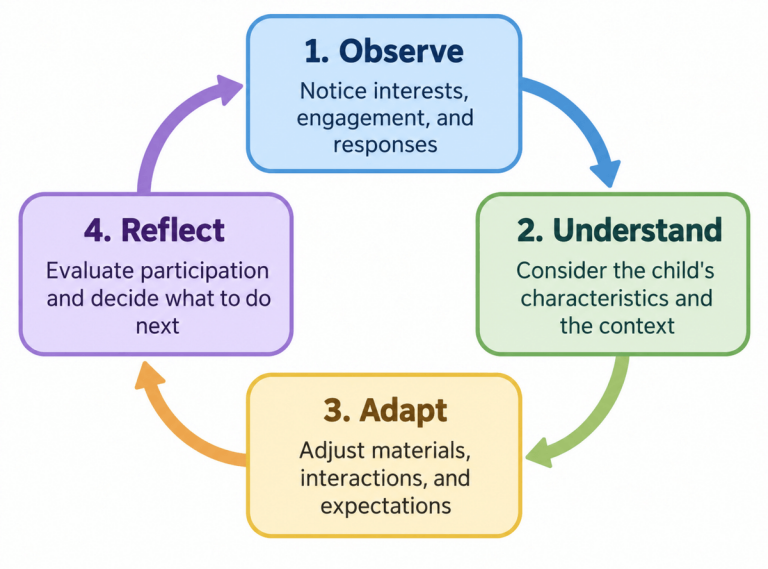


Figure 6.1.1: The Individualization Cycle. Educators observe children's learning behaviors, understand individual differences, adapt teaching practices, and reflect on children's responses to guide ongoing individualization OpenAI. (2026).

Note. Educator-focused synthesis of the observation, planning, implementation, and reflection processes described by the Office of Head Start (n.d.-b).

Using the Individualization Cycle

1. **Observe:** Notice how the child participates in learning experiences, responds to challenges, interacts with materials, and demonstrates curiosity or persistence.
2. **Understand:** Consider how the child's temperament, interests, developmental abilities, and experiences may influence participation. Look for patterns rather than drawing conclusions from a single observation.
3. **Adapt:** Make intentional adjustments to materials, interactions, routines, or expectations that support the child's individual approach to learning.
4. **Reflect:** Observe how the child responds to the adjustments. Determine whether the support encouraged engagement, independence, and continued learning or whether another approach is needed.

For example, an educator observes that a child repeatedly leaves a table activity but remains engaged during hands-on floor play. Rather than assuming the child lacks attention, the educator considers whether movement and the type of materials influence participation. The educator adapts the activity by offering similar learning materials on the floor and then observes whether the child becomes more engaged.

This cycle helps educators make decisions based on children's actual experiences rather than assumptions about how they should behave or learn.

Individualization is a continuous process of observing, responding, and adjusting. As children develop and their needs change, educators revisit their decisions to ensure that learning experiences remain meaningful and appropriately challenging.

Putting It Into Practice: Two Children, Different Approaches to Learning

During center time in a preschool classroom, Ms. Rivera introduces a new collection of magnetic building tiles. The children are invited to explore the materials and create structures of their own choosing.

Four-year-old Maya eagerly selects several tiles and begins building a tall tower. When the tower collapses, she becomes frustrated, pushes the materials away, and says, "I can't do it!" Maya enjoys experimenting with new materials but sometimes has strong emotional reactions when activities do not go as expected.

Across the table, four-year-old Liam watches the other children building. Although he appears interested, he does not immediately touch the materials. When Ms. Rivera invites him to begin, he quietly shakes his head. Liam often prefers to observe unfamiliar activities before participating and becomes more comfortable once he understands what to expect.

Recognizing Individual Differences

Ms. Rivera recognizes that Maya and Liam demonstrate different temperament characteristics and approaches to learning.

Maya shows curiosity and initiative by eagerly exploring the materials. However, her strong emotional response to frustration sometimes makes it difficult for her to persist when challenges arise.

Liam demonstrates interest through careful observation, but his cautious approach to unfamiliar experiences means he may need additional time before participating.

Rather than interpreting Maya's frustration as misbehavior or Liam's hesitation as a lack of interest, Ms. Rivera considers how she can support each child's individual approach to learning.

Individualizing the Learning Experience

Ms. Rivera sits beside Maya and acknowledges her feelings, saying, "It's frustrating when your tower falls. You worked hard on it." She then asks, "What could you try to make the bottom stronger?" Maya decides to use larger tiles for the base and begins building again. Ms. Rivera remains nearby but allows Maya to experiment independently.

For Liam, Ms. Rivera provides a different type of support. She allows him to continue observing and begins constructing a small building nearby. After a few minutes, she invites Liam to choose a tile to add to her structure. Liam selects a piece and gradually begins building on his own.

Over the next several days, Ms. Rivera observes that Maya begins trying different strategies when her structures collapse. Liam becomes more comfortable exploring the magnetic tiles and eventually joins other children in cooperative building activities.

Connecting the Scenario to Individualization

Ms. Rivera uses her understanding of temperament and approaches to learning to create a positive goodness of fit for both children.

For Maya, individualized support focuses on acknowledging frustration, encouraging problem-solving, and strengthening persistence. For Liam, support focuses on providing observation time, familiarity, and gradual opportunities for participation.

Both children participate in the same learning experience, but the educator adjusts her interactions and expectations to support their individual needs.

The scenario also demonstrates the individualization cycle:

- **Observe:** Ms. Rivera notices Maya's frustration and Liam's hesitation.

- **Understand:** She considers how each child's temperament and approach to learning may influence participation.
- **Adapt:** She offers problem-solving support to Maya and opportunities for gradual participation to Liam.
- **Reflect:** She observes how both children respond and adjusts her support as their confidence and independence increase.

The goal of individualization is not for every child to respond or participate in the same way. It is to provide meaningful opportunities and appropriate support so that each child can engage, explore, and develop as a learner.

Vocabulary Alert

Approaches to Learning: The ways children engage in learning experiences, including curiosity, initiative, attention, persistence, creativity, and problem-solving.

Temperament: Biologically influenced characteristics that affect how children respond to people, experiences, and their environments.

Temperament Dimensions: Characteristics that describe individual differences in activity level, adaptability, emotional responses, attention, and other patterns of behavior.

Goodness of Fit: The relationship between a child's individual characteristics and the expectations, demands, and supports provided by the environment.

Individualization: Intentionally adjusting teaching practices, interactions, materials, and learning experiences to respond to children's individual strengths and needs.

Persistence: Continuing to work toward a goal or engage in an activity despite challenges or difficulties.

Adaptability: The ease with which a child adjusts to changes, unfamiliar experiences, or new situations.

Responsiveness: Recognizing and appropriately responding to children's individual characteristics, cues, and needs.

Exercise 6.1.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What are approaches to learning, and how do they influence children's participation in learning experiences?
2. Identify three dimensions of temperament and explain how each may influence a child's approach to learning.
3. What is goodness of fit, and why is it important when individualizing learning experiences for young children?
4. Describe two ways an early childhood educator can individualize teaching practices to support children with different approaches to learning.

Apply Your Understanding

5. During a preschool art activity, four-year-old Emma immediately begins experimenting with paint and different brushes. When her painting does not turn out as expected, she becomes frustrated and wants to stop. Meanwhile, four-year-old Noah watches the other children but hesitates to begin painting. How could the educator use an understanding of temperament, goodness of fit, and individualization to support both children?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 6.1.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Approaches to learning describe how children engage with experiences, explore their environments, and respond to challenges. Characteristics such as curiosity, initiative, attention, persistence, and creativity influence how children participate in learning activities and develop new skills.
2. Examples include:
    1. Activity Level: A highly active child may prefer learning experiences that involve movement and hands-on exploration.
    2. Approach or Withdrawal: A child who is cautious about unfamiliar experiences may need time to observe before participating.
    3. Adaptability: A child who has difficulty adjusting to changes may benefit from predictable routines and advance notice of transitions.
3. Goodness of fit refers to how well a child's individual characteristics align with the expectations, demands, and supports of the environment. It is important because educators can adjust learning experiences and interactions to support children's individual needs rather than expecting all children to respond in the same way.
4. Educators can individualize teaching by adjusting learning materials, providing different levels of adult guidance, modifying the environment, or allowing flexible participation. For example, an educator might provide a quieter workspace for a child who is easily distracted or allow additional observation time for a child who approaches unfamiliar activities cautiously.

Answers to Apply Your Understanding

5. Application: The educator could acknowledge Emma's frustration and encourage her to try a different painting technique, supporting her persistence and problem-solving without completing the activity for her. For Noah, the educator could provide time to observe, demonstrate how to use the painting materials, and invite him to participate when he feels comfortable. These responses create a positive goodness of fit by adapting support to each child's temperament and approach to learning.

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6.2: Influences of Family, Society, and Culture on Childhood

Introduction

We examined how individual characteristics influence children's approaches to learning. This section broadens that view by examining how family relationships, cultural experiences, community resources, and societal conditions interact with those characteristics to shape development.

Every child grows and develops within a family and a cultural community. From everyday routines and family relationships to language, traditions, and expectations, these experiences help shape how children understand themselves, interact with others, and approach learning.

Families influence development in many ways. The relationships children experience, the responsibilities they are encouraged to take on, the languages spoken at home, and the opportunities available to them all contribute to their development. Families also differ in their structures, caregiving practices, traditions, and resources. These differences are a natural part of the diversity found in early childhood settings.

Culture is closely connected to family life. Cultural values and beliefs influence how children communicate, express emotions, develop independence, interact with adults, and participate in learning experiences. However, children and families within the same cultural group are not all alike. Each family brings its own combination of experiences, values, and strengths.

Children's development is also influenced by their communities and the larger society. Access to resources, community relationships, economic conditions, and societal expectations can create opportunities or challenges for children and families.

For early childhood educators, understanding these influences is essential to developmentally appropriate practice. Rather than making assumptions about children based on their family structure, cultural background, or circumstances, educators seek to understand each child's experiences and build respectful partnerships with families (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

In this section, you will explore how family and culture influence children's development, examine the connections between children and their larger environments, and consider how educators can use this understanding to create inclusive, responsive learning experiences.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 6.2: Explore the impact of family and culture on development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

1. **Describe** how family relationships, structures, routines, and experiences influence children's development.
2. **Explain** how cultural values, beliefs, traditions, and expectations shape children's development and learning.
3. **Examine** how family, community, and societal influences interact using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.
4. **Identify** culturally responsive, family-centered practices that support the development of children from ages 3–8.

Understanding Family and Culture in Child Development

Children do not develop in isolation. Their growth and learning are shaped by relationships, experiences, and the environments in which they live. Two important influences are **family** and **culture**. Together, they help shape children's identities, behaviors, relationships, communication, and approaches to learning. Understanding these influences helps early childhood educators recognize that children bring different experiences, expectations, and strengths into the classroom.

What Is Family?

Family refers to the people who share meaningful, ongoing relationships and responsibilities for caring for and supporting one another. Families may include parents, grandparents, siblings, extended relatives, foster parents, adoptive parents, or other important caregivers.

Families take many forms, and no single family structure determines a child's developmental success. What matters most is the quality of relationships, the support children receive, and the opportunities available for growth and learning (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2016).

Families influence development through everyday experiences such as:

- **Relationships and emotional support:** Responsive, caring interactions help children develop trust, security, and a sense of belonging.
- **Routines and expectations:** Daily activities such as mealtimes, bedtime, and shared responsibilities help children develop independence, self-regulation, and organizational skills.
- **Language and communication:** Conversations, storytelling, songs, and shared reading support language development and social connections.
- **Values and beliefs:** Families communicate expectations about respect, cooperation, responsibility, and relationships with others.
- **Learning opportunities:** Play, family activities, community experiences, and everyday problem-solving contribute to cognitive, physical, and social development.

Example of Family Routines and Independence

Four-year-old Mateo helps his grandmother prepare dinner by washing vegetables, counting ingredients, and setting napkins on the table. Through this everyday routine, Mateo practices fine-motor coordination, counting, communication, cooperation, and responsibility.

Although this activity takes place at home rather than in a classroom, it provides meaningful developmental opportunities.

What Is Culture?

Culture refers to the shared and changing values, beliefs, traditions, languages, practices, and ways of interacting that people learn and experience as members of families and communities. Culture influences how people communicate, build relationships, express emotions, solve problems, and understand the world. It is reflected in everyday experiences as well as celebrations and traditions (Rogoff, 2003).

Cultural influences may include:

- **Language and communication:** The languages children use and the ways they communicate with adults and peers.
- **Family and community relationships:** Expectations about cooperation, caregiving, respect, and responsibilities.
- **Traditions and celebrations:** Family gatherings, holidays, stories, foods, music, and cultural practices.
- **Beliefs about learning:** Expectations about independence, collaboration, asking questions, and learning from others.
- **Emotional expression:** Ways children are encouraged to express feelings and respond to the emotions of others.
- **Play and social interactions:** Familiar games, pretend-play experiences, and expectations for interacting with peers and adults.

Culture is not the same for every member of a group. Families may share cultural traditions while differing in their beliefs, practices, and expectations. Cultural practices may also change over time as families encounter new experiences and communities.

Example of Different Ways to Show Respect

Six-year-old Amara has learned from her family that listening quietly while an adult speaks is a way to demonstrate respect. During a classroom discussion, she listens attentively but rarely raises her hand.

Her educator initially wonders whether Amara is uncomfortable participating. After learning more about her family's expectations, the educator recognizes that participation can take different forms. The educator provides opportunities for Amara to share her ideas through partner conversations, small-group discussions, and individual interactions.

Rather than assuming that quiet participation reflects a lack of interest or understanding, the educator considers the child's experiences and adjusts teaching practices to support her learning.

What Is Socialization?

Socialization is the process through which children learn the values, behaviors, expectations, and ways of interacting that are important within their families, communities, and society. Socialization begins early in life and continues as children develop relationships and participate in new environments.

Families are among children's earliest influences, but socialization also occurs through interactions with:

- Peers and friends
- Early childhood educators and teachers
- Extended family members and caregivers
- Community members and organizations
- Books, media, and digital experiences

Through socialization, children learn how to communicate, cooperate, solve conflicts, express emotions, and participate in group activities (Rogoff, 2003).

However, expectations are not always the same across environments. A behavior encouraged at home may differ from what is expected in an early childhood classroom.

Example of Learning Expectations Across Environments

Five-year-old Sofia is accustomed to helping her younger siblings and participating in group activities at home. When she enters kindergarten, she frequently offers to help classmates complete tasks.

Her teacher notices that Sofia sometimes completes activities for other children rather than allowing them to work independently.

Instead of discouraging Sofia's helpfulness, the teacher acknowledges her cooperation and explains that helping can also mean offering encouragement, sharing ideas, or giving someone time to try.

Sofia learns to balance her familiar ways of helping with new classroom expectations.

How Family, Culture, and Socialization Work Together

Family, culture, and socialization are closely connected, but they are not the same.

- **Family** provides many of the relationships, experiences, and everyday interactions through which children learn.
- **Culture** influences the values, beliefs, practices, and expectations that are meaningful within those relationships.
- **Socialization** describes the ongoing process through which children learn and respond to these expectations as they interact with others.

These influences are not one-directional. Children actively participate in their environments. Their personalities, interests, abilities, and responses also influence family interactions and relationships.

For example, a family may value cooperation and shared responsibilities. A child may learn these values by participating in family activities and helping younger siblings. When the child enters an early childhood classroom, these experiences may influence how the child approaches group activities, friendships, and problem-solving.

At the same time, classroom experiences may introduce new perspectives and expectations that the child brings back into family life.

Recognizing Individual Differences

Although family and culture influence development, **they do not determine exactly how a child will think, behave, or learn**.

Two children growing up in the same household may develop different interests, personalities, abilities, and ways of responding to experiences. Similarly, children who share a cultural background may have different family practices, communication styles, and learning preferences (NAEYC, 2020).

For early childhood educators, this means that understanding family and culture should never lead to assumptions or stereotypes.

Instead, educators seek to:

- Learn about each child's individual experiences and strengths.
- Recognize that families may have different values, priorities, and expectations.
- Respect home languages, traditions, and caregiving practices.
- Communicate with families to better understand children's experiences.
- Adapt learning environments and interactions to support each child's development.

The goal is not to treat every child exactly the same, but to **understand each child within the context of their relationships, family, and culture.**

This understanding provides a foundation for examining how families, communities, institutions, and society interact to influence development through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Children's development is influenced by more than their individual characteristics or immediate family experiences. Relationships, schools, communities, cultural values, and societal conditions all contribute to the environments in which children grow and learn.

Developmental psychologist **Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917–2005)** developed Ecological Systems Theory to explain how children's development occurs within interconnected environmental systems. His theory emphasizes that children are influenced by their surroundings while also actively participating in and shaping the relationships they experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Bronfenbrenner identified five interconnected systems: the **microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem**. Each system represents a different level of environmental influence on development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Understanding these systems helps early childhood educators look beyond a child's behavior or performance in the classroom and consider the family, cultural, community, and societal experiences that may influence development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

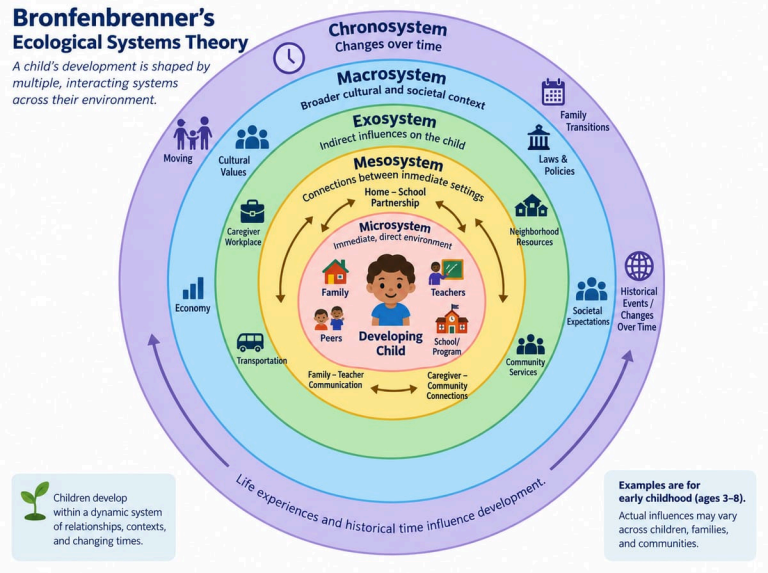


Figure 6.2.1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory illustrates how family relationships, community resources, cultural values, societal influences, and changes over time interact to shape children's development (OpenAI, 2026a).

The Five Ecological Systems

Microsystem: Immediate Relationships and Environments

The **microsystem** includes the people and environments with which a child interacts directly. These may include family members, caregivers, teachers, peers, and early childhood settings.

Children develop through everyday interactions within these environments. Responsive relationships, opportunities for play, communication, and consistent support can strengthen children's social, emotional, language, and cognitive development.

Example 6.2.1

Four-year-old Elijah spends time with his grandfather after preschool. They cook together, share stories, and work in a small garden. These interactions support Elijah's language development, problem-solving, fine-motor skills, and sense of belonging.

Mesosystem: Connections Between Immediate Environments

The **mesosystem** describes the relationships and interactions between different parts of a child's microsystem. For example, the connection between a child's family and early childhood program is part of the mesosystem.

When families and educators communicate and work together, they can develop a shared understanding of a child's strengths, needs, and experiences. These connections can help children experience continuity and support across environments.

Example 6.2.2

Five-year-old Aaliyah's family shares that she enjoys storytelling and regularly hears stories in her family's home language. Her kindergarten teacher invites the family to recommend familiar stories and incorporates books and storytelling activities that reflect Aaliyah's experiences. The connection between home and school supports her language development and sense of belonging.

Exosystem: Indirect Environmental Influences

The **exosystem** includes settings and circumstances that children may not participate in directly but that still influence their development.

Examples include caregivers' workplaces, community services, local policies, transportation systems, and access to affordable child care.

These influences can affect family schedules, stress levels, resources, and opportunities available to children.

Example 6.2.3

Six-year-old Jackson's parent begins working an evening shift. Although Jackson does not participate in the parent's workplace, the schedule change affects family routines and the time available for shared activities. His family adjusts by establishing a consistent morning routine and arranging support from a trusted relative.

This example demonstrates how a circumstance outside the child's immediate environment can influence everyday experiences.

Macrosystem: Cultural Values and Societal Influences

The **macrosystem** includes the broader cultural beliefs, values, customs, laws, economic conditions, and societal expectations that influence children's environments.

Cultural expectations may shape beliefs about independence, cooperation, family responsibilities, education, communication, and relationships.

The macrosystem also includes societal policies and structures that influence the resources and opportunities available to families.

Example 6.2.4

Seven-year-old Mei attends a school where the curriculum, school policies, and community expectations emphasize cooperation and shared responsibility. These broader expectations influence classroom routines and opportunities for group learning. Mei's family also values cooperation, although families within the community may interpret and practice this value differently.

Chronosystem: Changes Over Time

The **chronosystem** recognizes that children's development is influenced by changes and experiences that occur over time.

These changes may involve personal or family transitions, such as the birth of a sibling, moving to a new home, or changes in caregiving arrangements. They may also involve larger historical or societal events that affect children's lives.

The effects of these experiences can vary depending on a child's age, available supports, and individual circumstances.

Example 6.2.5

Eight-year-old Noah moves to a new community after his family relocates for employment. He experiences changes in his school, friendships, and daily routines. Over time, supportive relationships with his family, teacher, and new classmates help him adjust and develop a sense of belonging.

Connecting the Ecological Systems to Family and Culture

Although each system represents a different level of environmental influence, the systems are interconnected. Changes in one system may influence experiences within another.

Table 6.2.1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems and Their Influence on Development

Ecological System	What It Includes	Example of Family or Cultural Influence
Microsystem	People and environments the child interacts with directly	Family members share stories, participate in routines, and provide emotional support.
Mesosystem	Connections between the child's immediate environments	Families and educators communicate about home languages, traditions, and learning experiences.
Exosystem	Settings and circumstances that indirectly affect the child	Caregiver work schedules, transportation, and community resources influence family routines and opportunities.
Macrosystem	Broader cultural values, beliefs, laws, and societal conditions	Cultural expectations about independence, cooperation, caregiving, and education influence children's experiences.
Chronosystem	Personal, family, and societal changes over time	Moving, changing family circumstances, or major community events influence children's routines and relationships.

Note. System descriptions are summarized from Bronfenbrenner (1994). Examples illustrate possible family and cultural influences rather than fixed developmental outcomes.

Why Ecological Systems Theory Matters for Early Childhood Educators

Bronfenbrenner's theory encourages educators to recognize that children's development is influenced by multiple, interacting environments.

For example, a child who appears tired or distracted during classroom activities may be experiencing changes in family routines, transportation challenges, or other circumstances outside the classroom. These factors do not necessarily explain the child's behavior, but they remind educators to seek a fuller understanding before making assumptions.

Ecological Systems Theory can help educators:

- **Understand children within their environments:** Consider how relationships, routines, cultural experiences, and community conditions may influence development.
- **Strengthen family partnerships:** Recognize the importance of communication and meaningful connections between home and school.
- **Respect cultural differences:** Understand that expectations for learning, behavior, and relationships may vary among families and communities.
- **Recognize external influences:** Consider how work schedules, access to resources, and community supports may affect children's experiences.
- **Respond to change:** Support children and families during transitions and other significant life experiences.

The central idea is that understanding a child's development requires **looking beyond the individual child to the relationships, experiences, and systems that influence their life.**

For early childhood educators, this perspective supports developmentally appropriate, culturally responsive, and family-centered teaching practices.

How Families Influence Development

Families are among the earliest and most influential parts of a child's environment. Through everyday relationships, interactions, routines, and experiences, families help shape how children develop, learn, communicate, and understand the world around them.

Family influences are not limited to what adults intentionally teach children. Development also occurs through shared activities, conversations, play, caregiving, and the ways family members respond to one another.

Families differ in their structures, values, traditions, resources, and caregiving practices. Although these differences shape children's experiences, no single family structure or parenting approach guarantees a particular developmental outcome. Understanding family influences requires looking at the quality of relationships, the child's individual experiences, and the supports available to the family.

Family Structures and Relationships

Children grow up in many different family structures. Some live with one or two parents, while others live with grandparents, extended family members, foster families, adoptive families, or other caregivers. Families may also include blended households, multigenerational relationships, and family members who live in different homes.

Regardless of structure, families can provide children with important relationships that support emotional security, identity, communication, and learning (NASEM, 2016).

Children benefit from relationships in which caregivers:

- Respond to their needs with warmth and consistency.
- Provide opportunities for communication, exploration, and play.
- Offer encouragement and guidance as children learn new skills.
- Help children understand and manage emotions.
- Support a sense of belonging and connection.

Example of Relationships That Support Development

Six-year-old Lena lives with her father and grandmother. Her father helps her with homework and encourages her interests, while her grandmother shares family stories and spends time gardening with her.

Through these relationships, Lena experiences emotional support, develops language and problem-solving skills, and strengthens her connection to her family's history.

This example demonstrates that children's development can be supported through meaningful relationships with different family members.

Caregiving Practices and Expectations

Caregiving practices are the ways families provide care, guidance, support, and opportunities for children to learn. These practices are influenced by family experiences, cultural values, available resources, and beliefs about child development (NASEM, 2016).

Families may differ in their expectations for independence, cooperation, responsibilities, communication, and behavior. For example, some families encourage young children to complete tasks independently, while others emphasize working together and helping family members. Both approaches can provide valuable opportunities for children to develop skills.

Caregiving practices can influence how children:

- Develop confidence and independence.
- Learn to cooperate and contribute to group activities.
- Express emotions and respond to others.

- Approach challenges and solve problems.
- Understand expectations and responsibilities.

Example of Different Expectations for Responsibility

Seven-year-old Daniel is encouraged to organize his school materials and prepare his backpack independently each evening. Meanwhile, seven-year-old Priya regularly prepares for school alongside her older sister, with family members helping one another gather materials.

Both children are developing responsibility and organizational skills, but their experiences reflect different approaches to learning and family participation.

Educators should recognize these differences rather than assuming that one approach is developmentally superior.

Family Routines and Everyday Experiences

Family routines provide repeated opportunities for children to practice skills and participate in meaningful activities. These routines may include meals, bedtime, household responsibilities, transportation, celebrations, and time spent together.

Predictable routines can support children's sense of security and help them understand expectations. However, routines vary among families because of work schedules, cultural practices, caregiving arrangements, and other circumstances (NASEM, 2016). Everyday family experiences can support multiple areas of development.

For example:

- **Preparing meals** provides opportunities for counting, measuring, communication, and fine-motor coordination.
- **Sharing stories and conversations** supports language, memory, cultural identity, and relationships.
- **Participating in household responsibilities** encourages cooperation, problem-solving, and independence.
- **Playing outdoors or visiting community spaces** supports physical development, exploration, and social interaction.
- **Participating in family traditions** strengthens identity, belonging, and connections across generations.

Example of Learning Through Family Activities

Five-year-old Olivia helps her family sort laundry. She matches socks, identifies colors, compares sizes, and counts clothing items. She also practices following directions and completing a shared task.

What may appear to be a simple household responsibility provides opportunities for cognitive, language, fine-motor, and social development.

Recognizing Family Strengths

Every family brings experiences, knowledge, skills, relationships, and resources that can contribute to a child's development. These are often described as **family strengths**.

Family strengths may include:

- Supportive relationships with relatives and trusted caregivers.
- Home languages and cultural knowledge.
- Family traditions, stories, and shared experiences.
- Practical skills and knowledge developed through everyday activities.
- Community connections and support networks.
- Strategies families use to respond to challenges and support one another.

Educators can build on these strengths by learning about children's experiences and incorporating familiar knowledge, interests, and activities into the classroom (Moll et al., 1992).

For example, a child who helps care for a family garden may bring knowledge about plants, weather, insects, and seasonal changes. An educator can connect these experiences to classroom science investigations while recognizing the child's existing knowledge. Recognizing family strengths also means avoiding assumptions based on family structure, income, language, or circumstances.

A family's circumstances do not define its **strengths, commitment to children, or capacity to support development.**

What This Means for Early Childhood Educators

Understanding family influences helps educators recognize that children enter the classroom with different experiences, abilities, relationships, and expectations.

Educators can use this understanding to:

- Learn about children's family relationships, routines, and experiences.
- Recognize the developmental value of everyday family activities.
- Respect different caregiving practices and family expectations.
- Build on the knowledge and strengths children bring from home.
- Develop respectful, ongoing partnerships with families.
- Provide responsive learning opportunities that reflect children's individual experiences.

Rather than expecting all children to have the same experiences outside the classroom, educators consider how each child's family context contributes to development.

Understanding family influences is not about identifying one ideal way to raise children. **It is about recognizing how relationships, experiences, and opportunities contribute to children's development and using that knowledge to support each child.**

How Culture Influences Development

Culture influences how children understand themselves, communicate with others, build relationships, and participate in learning experiences. Through interactions with family members, caregivers, peers, and community members, children encounter values, beliefs, traditions, and expectations that help shape their development (Rogoff, 2003).

Cultural influences are often reflected in everyday experiences, including the languages children speak, how they show respect, the responsibilities they are given, and the ways they participate in family and community activities.

Although cultural practices may be shared within a community, **culture does not determine how every child thinks, behaves, or learns**. Families and individuals interpret and practice cultural traditions in different ways. Early childhood educators must understand these influences while recognizing each child's unique experiences and strengths.

Cultural Values and Beliefs

Cultural values are ideas about what is important, appropriate, or meaningful within a family or community. These values may influence expectations for children's behavior, relationships, responsibilities, and learning.

For example, families may place different emphases on independence, cooperation, respect for elders, family responsibilities, or individual achievement. These differences can influence the opportunities children experience and the expectations they encounter (Rogoff, 2003).

Cultural beliefs may shape how children are encouraged to:

- Communicate with adults and peers.
- Express opinions, questions, and emotions.
- Participate in family responsibilities.
- Cooperate with others and resolve disagreements.

- Demonstrate respect and responsibility.
- Approach learning activities and new challenges.

These expectations are learned through everyday interactions rather than formal instruction alone.

Home Languages and Communication

Language is an important part of culture. Through language, children communicate ideas, build relationships, share experiences, and develop connections to family and community.

Children may grow up hearing or speaking one language or multiple languages. Their experiences with language may also include regional dialects, culturally specific expressions, storytelling traditions, and different patterns of communication. Home languages contribute to children's identities and relationships. Maintaining connections to these languages can support communication with family members and a sense of cultural belonging (NASEM, 2024).

Cultural expectations may also influence communication practices, such as:

- When children are encouraged to speak during group conversations.
- How children communicate with adults and older family members.
- The use of storytelling, songs, gestures, and nonverbal communication.
- Expectations related to eye contact, conversational turn-taking, and listening.
- How children express agreement, disagreement, and requests for assistance.

These differences remind educators that communication behaviors must be understood within the child's individual and cultural context.

Example of Building on Home Language

Six-year-old Luis speaks Spanish with his family and English at school. During a classroom activity about community helpers, he uses both languages to describe his grandfather's work.

His teacher welcomes his Spanish vocabulary, encourages him to explain his ideas, and provides opportunities for classmates to learn familiar words from one another.

By recognizing Luis's home language as a strength, the teacher supports his classroom participation, communication, and sense of belonging.

Independence and Interdependence

Cultural values can influence how families encourage children to develop independence and relationships with others.

Independence involves developing the ability to make choices, complete tasks, and take responsibility for one's actions.

Interdependence emphasizes relationships, cooperation, shared responsibilities, and the understanding that people rely on one another.

Both independence and interdependence are important aspects of development. Families may emphasize these values differently, and many encourage children to develop both (Rogoff, 2003).

For example, one family may encourage a child to independently select clothing and prepare materials for school. Another family may encourage children to participate in shared household responsibilities and make decisions with family members.

Neither experience automatically indicates greater developmental competence.

Example of Different Approaches to Problem-Solving

Seven-year-old Ava is accustomed to completing puzzles and other activities independently before asking for assistance. Seven-year-old Omar often works with siblings and family members to solve problems together.

During a classroom building activity, Ava prefers to develop her own design, while Omar immediately invites classmates to collaborate.

Their teacher recognizes that both children are demonstrating valuable approaches to learning. She provides opportunities for independent exploration and cooperative problem-solving so children can develop flexibility in using both approaches.

Traditions, Identity, and Belonging

Cultural traditions help children develop connections to their families, communities, and histories. Traditions may include celebrations, storytelling, music, food, clothing, family gatherings, spiritual practices, and community activities. These experiences can help children develop a sense of **cultural identity**, or an understanding of their connections to cultural groups, traditions, and shared experiences (NAEYC, 2019).

Participating in meaningful family and community activities can contribute to children's sense of belonging and provide opportunities to learn from different generations.

For example, children may develop cultural connections through:

- Listening to family stories and learning about relatives.
- Participating in traditional songs, dances, or celebrations.
- Preparing foods associated with family or community traditions.
- Learning words, expressions, or stories in a heritage language.
- Participating in community gatherings and cultural events.

Not every family participates in the same traditions, even when families share a cultural background. Educators should learn about the traditions that are meaningful to individual children and families rather than assuming participation based on cultural identity.

Example of Sharing Family Traditions

Eight-year-old Maya enjoys helping her family prepare foods for an annual cultural celebration. During a classroom discussion about family traditions, she describes the special foods, music, and activities associated with the gathering.

Her teacher invites children to share traditions or everyday experiences that are meaningful to their families. Children may contribute through stories, drawings, photographs, or conversations, and participation is voluntary.

This approach helps children recognize similarities and differences among family experiences while supporting cultural identity and belonging.

Cultural Expectations for Learning and Behavior

Culture also influences beliefs about how children learn and what behaviors are expected in different settings.

Some children may be accustomed to learning through observation and participation in everyday family activities. Others may have frequent experiences with direct explanations, questions, or structured learning activities (Rogoff, 2003).

Children may also encounter different expectations regarding:

- Asking questions and speaking during group activities.
- Learning through observation, demonstration, or hands-on participation.
- Working independently or cooperating with others.

- Interacting with adults and peers.
- Expressing emotions and resolving disagreements.
- Demonstrating responsibility and completing tasks.

These differences can influence how children respond to classroom expectations.

For example, a child who learns by observing family members before attempting a new task may prefer to watch an activity before participating. An educator who recognizes this approach can provide time for observation, modeling, and gradual participation.

Educators should avoid assuming that one approach to learning or behavior is more appropriate simply because it is more familiar within the classroom. Instead, they can provide varied opportunities for participation while helping children understand expectations across different environments.

How Family and Cultural Experiences Influence Development

Family and cultural experiences influence children's development across multiple domains. Although family relationships and cultural values are closely connected, they can shape children's opportunities and experiences in different ways.

The following table illustrates how these influences may contribute to physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development.

Table 6.2.2: Family and Cultural Influences Across Developmental Domains

Developmental Domain	Family Influences	Cultural Influences	Possible Developmental Connections
Physical Development	Outdoor play, cooking, household activities, and opportunities for movement	Traditional games, dance, movement activities, and everyday responsibilities	Coordination, strength, fine-motor abilities, and physical confidence
Cognitive Development	Puzzles, games, sorting, counting, and everyday problem-solving	Storytelling, observation, shared activities, and cultural approaches to problem-solving	Reasoning, memory, attention, curiosity, and problem-solving
Language Development	Conversations, shared reading, songs, and communication with family members	Home languages, oral storytelling, songs, and culturally familiar communication practices	Vocabulary, comprehension, communication, and language development
Social Development	Family gatherings, shared responsibilities, cooperative activities, and interactions with relatives	Expectations for cooperation, respect, relationships, and participation in groups	Cooperation, perspective-taking, relationships, and social understanding
Emotional Development	Responsive caregiving, encouragement, emotional conversations, and support during challenges	Expectations for emotional expression, seeking support, and responding to others	Emotional security, self-regulation, confidence, and a sense of belonging

Note

Examples are informed by research on family experiences, cultural context, and child development (NASEM, 2016; NAEYC, 2020; Rogoff, 2003).

These examples illustrate possible developmental connections rather than fixed outcomes. Family experiences and cultural influences often overlap, and children's development is also shaped by individual characteristics, relationships, and opportunities.

Everyday experiences may support several developmental domains at the same time. Understanding these connections helps educators recognize the knowledge and strengths children bring from home and build on them through meaningful classroom

experiences.

What This Means for Early Childhood Educators

Understanding cultural influences helps educators recognize that classroom expectations and teaching practices are not culturally neutral. Expectations related to communication, participation, independence, cooperation, and behavior may reflect particular cultural values (NAEYC, 2020).

Culturally responsive educators seek to understand children's experiences rather than expecting every child to participate or demonstrate learning in exactly the same way.

Educators can use this understanding to:

- Learn about each child's cultural experiences directly from children and families.
- Respect and incorporate home languages and meaningful family traditions.
- Provide different ways for children to participate and demonstrate understanding.
- Recognize independence, cooperation, observation, and collaboration as valuable learning experiences.
- Examine their own assumptions about appropriate behavior and participation.
- Create classroom environments where children see their families and cultures represented respectfully.

Culturally responsive teaching does not mean having a different set of expectations for every cultural group. **It means learning about individual children, recognizing the influence of cultural experiences, and providing equitable opportunities for participation and development.**

By understanding cultural influences, educators can create learning environments that respect children's identities, build on their strengths, and support meaningful connections between home, school, and community.

Family Circumstances, Resources, and Resilience

Children's development is influenced not only by family relationships and cultural experiences but also by the circumstances and resources available to their families. Economic conditions, housing stability, employment, access to child care, community services, and social support can shape children's everyday experiences and opportunities for development (NASEM, 2016).

All families experience challenges and changes over time. Some challenges are temporary, while others involve ongoing circumstances that affect daily routines and access to resources.

Understanding these influences helps early childhood educators recognize how circumstances outside the classroom may affect children's experiences within it.

Family circumstances do not determine a child's developmental outcomes. Families facing significant challenges may also have strong relationships, valuable resources, supportive communities, and effective strategies for meeting their children's needs.

Economic Resources and Opportunities

Economic resources can influence families' access to housing, nutritious food, transportation, health care, child care, and learning opportunities (NASEM, 2016). When families have difficulty meeting basic needs, they may experience additional stress or have fewer choices about the services and experiences available to their children.

For example, limited access to reliable transportation may affect a child's attendance at an early childhood program. A caregiver's unpredictable work schedule may make it difficult to attend school events or maintain consistent family routines.

However, financial resources are only one aspect of a family's circumstances. Income does not determine the quality of family relationships, the value of home learning experiences, or a family's commitment to supporting a child.

Families with limited financial resources may provide rich learning experiences through storytelling, shared activities, play, household responsibilities, and supportive relationships.

Example of Recognizing Learning Opportunities

Seven-year-old Marcus lives with his mother and two siblings. His family has limited financial resources, and they do not regularly participate in activities that require admission fees.

However, Marcus spends time cooking with his mother, playing games with his siblings, and visiting the public library. Through these experiences, he practices reading, mathematics, problem-solving, communication, and cooperation.

His teacher recognizes these experiences as valuable opportunities for development rather than assuming that limited financial resources mean limited learning.

Housing Stability and Family Transitions

Housing conditions and stability can influence children's routines, relationships, and opportunities for learning (NASEM, 2016). Families may experience housing changes because of employment, financial circumstances, family transitions, natural disasters, or other unexpected events.

For children, changes in housing may involve adjustments to:

- Daily routines and schedules.
- Transportation and school attendance.
- Access to familiar play spaces and learning materials.
- Relationships with neighbors, friends, and community members.
- Feelings of familiarity, security, and belonging.

Children respond differently to transitions. Some adapt relatively quickly, while others need additional reassurance and support.

Example of Supporting a Child Through Change

Four-year-old Riley and her family move into temporary housing after a fire damages their home. Riley begins arriving at preschool without some of her familiar belongings and occasionally becomes upset during transitions.

Rather than assuming that Riley's behavior reflects a lack of cooperation, her educator considers the recent changes in her life. The educator maintains predictable classroom routines, provides reassurance, and communicates with Riley's family about ways to support her adjustment.

This response recognizes how a change in family circumstances may influence a child's classroom experiences.

Family Stress and Development

Family stress refers to pressures or challenges that affect family members and their daily experiences. Stress may arise from financial concerns, employment changes, illness, caregiving responsibilities, relationship difficulties, discrimination, or other circumstances. Stress does not affect every family or child in the same way. Its influence depends on factors such as the duration and intensity of the stress, the child's individual characteristics, available resources, and supportive relationships (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015).

For example, a caregiver experiencing an unpredictable work schedule may have difficulty maintaining familiar routines. A child may respond to these changes by seeking additional reassurance, showing fatigue, or having difficulty adjusting to transitions.

These responses should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of a developmental delay or an unhealthy family environment. Supportive relationships and access to resources can help families manage challenges and reduce their effects on children.

For early childhood educators, the goal is not to determine what is happening within a family based on a child's behavior. Instead, educators observe carefully, communicate respectfully with families, and provide appropriate support within their professional

role.

Risk Factors and Protective Factors

Children's development is influenced by experiences and circumstances that may increase challenges or provide support.

A **risk factor** is a condition or experience associated with an increased likelihood of developmental difficulties. Examples may include prolonged housing instability, persistent economic hardship, exposure to violence, or limited access to needed services.

A **protective factor** is a relationship, resource, experience, or condition that can reduce the effects of challenges and support positive development.

Protective factors may include responsive caregivers, supportive family relationships, consistent routines, community connections, and access to educational or health services (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015). Risk and protective factors often exist together. A child may experience significant challenges in one area while benefiting from strong support in another.

Table 6.2.3: Family Circumstances, Potential Challenges, and Protective Factors

Family Circumstance	Potential Influence on Development	Possible Protective Factors
Economic hardship	May limit access to some resources or create additional family stress	Supportive relationships, community services, and access to essential resources
Housing instability	May disrupt routines, school attendance, or familiar relationships	Predictable classroom experiences, trusted caregivers, and housing support services
Changes in caregiver employment	May affect schedules, caregiving arrangements, and family routines	Flexible supports, extended family assistance, and consistent communication
Family illness or caregiving demands	May change daily responsibilities, routines, and available time	Family support networks, accessible services, and responsive relationships
Limited community resources	May reduce access to transportation, child care, health care, or recreational opportunities	Community partnerships, public services, and accessible educational opportunities

Note

Examples illustrate possible challenges and protective factors; individual outcomes vary (NASEM, 2016; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015).

These examples represent possible influences rather than inevitable outcomes. Educators should avoid assuming that a particular family circumstance will affect every child in the same way.

Resilience and Family Strengths

Resilience refers to the process of adapting and maintaining or regaining positive development when experiencing adversity or significant challenges.

Resilience does not mean that children or families are unaffected by difficulties. Rather, it reflects how individuals and families respond to challenges with the support of relationships, resources, and opportunities. Resilience develops through interactions between children and their environments. It is not simply a personality trait that some children possess, and others lack (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015).

Families may demonstrate resilience by:

- Maintaining supportive relationships during challenging circumstances.
- Adjusting routines to meet changing needs.
- Seeking assistance from relatives, friends, or community organizations.
- Drawing on cultural traditions, shared values, and community connections.
- Advocating for children's needs and accessing available services.

For example, a family experiencing a temporary housing change may rely on relatives for transportation, maintain familiar bedtime routines, and communicate with educators to help their child adjust. These actions illustrate how family strengths and protective factors can support children's development during challenging experiences.

Community Resources and Support Systems

Families exist within broader communities that may offer important resources and relationships.

Community supports can include:

- Extended family members, friends, and trusted neighbors.
- Early childhood programs and schools.
- Public libraries and community recreation programs.
- Health care and family support services.
- Food assistance and housing organizations.
- Cultural organizations and community groups.

Access to these resources varies. Transportation, eligibility requirements, service availability, costs, language access, and work schedules may influence whether families can use particular services.

Early childhood educators can support families by learning about available community resources, sharing information respectfully, and helping connect families with appropriate services when requested or needed (Office of Head Start, n.d.). Educators should approach these conversations as partnerships rather than assuming they know what a family needs.

Looking Beyond Family Circumstances

Children's behavior and development cannot be fully understood by examining a single family characteristic, such as income, housing, or family structure.

For example, two children may experience different levels of support even when their families have similar economic resources. Likewise, children experiencing housing instability may respond differently depending on their relationships, previous experiences, individual characteristics, and available supports.

This reflects Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory: multiple environmental influences interact to shape children's experiences.

When learning about a child's family circumstances, educators should consider four important questions:

1. **What do I know?** What have I observed or learned directly from the child or family?
2. **What am I assuming?** Am I drawing conclusions based on family income, structure, language, or circumstances?
3. **What strengths and supports are present?** What relationships, experiences, and resources contribute to the child's development?
4. **How can I respond?** What classroom practices, communication strategies, or resources might support the child and family?

These questions help educators move from assumptions toward a more complete understanding of the child's experiences.

What This Means for Early Childhood Educators

Recognizing the influence of family circumstances and resources helps educators respond to children and families with understanding, respect, and appropriate support.

Educators can:

- Recognize that external circumstances may influence children's classroom experiences.
- Maintain predictable, responsive, and inclusive learning environments.
- Identify and build on family strengths and protective factors.
- Communicate with families without making assumptions or judgments.
- Respect family privacy and maintain confidentiality.
- Share information about community resources when appropriate.
- Collaborate with families and other professionals within their roles and responsibilities.

Educators must also follow applicable child protection and mandated reporting requirements when concerns about abuse or neglect arise. Economic hardship or housing instability alone should not be treated as evidence of neglect.

Understanding family circumstances means **recognizing both the challenges families may experience and the strengths, relationships, and resources** that support children's development.

By considering these influences, educators can respond more intentionally to children's needs while building respectful, supportive partnerships with families.

Family and Cultural Influences on Play and Learning

Play and learning are shaped by children's experiences within their families and cultural communities. Through everyday activities, family traditions, interactions, and opportunities for exploration, children develop interests, skills, and expectations that influence how they participate in play and learning environments.

Although play is an important part of childhood across cultures, the types of play children experience, the materials available, and the ways adults participate may differ among families and communities. Understanding these differences helps early childhood educators recognize the knowledge and experiences children bring into the classroom.

Family Experiences and Play

Children often incorporate familiar family experiences into their play. Everyday routines, occupations, celebrations, and community activities may influence the roles children assume, the materials they use, and the stories they create. For example, children may pretend to prepare family meals, care for younger siblings, operate construction equipment, run a grocery store, or participate in community celebrations. These experiences provide a foundation for imagination, problem-solving, communication, and social interaction (NAEYC, 2020).

Families also differ in the opportunities they provide for play. Some children regularly participate in outdoor activities, while others spend more time playing indoors or engaging in family responsibilities. Some families frequently play games together, while others emphasize learning through observation and participation in everyday activities. These differences do not indicate that one family values play or learning more than another. Rather, they reflect the different experiences and opportunities available to children.

Example of Bringing Family Experiences Into Play

Four-year-old Ben enjoys helping his uncle repair bicycles. During classroom play, he uses blocks and pretend tools to create a bicycle repair shop.

His educator notices his interest and adds pictures of bicycles, child-safe tools, and materials for drawing repair plans. Ben begins explaining his work to classmates, using vocabulary and problem-solving strategies connected to his family experiences.

By recognizing Ben's existing knowledge, the educator creates additional opportunities for learning.

Cultural Influences on Play and Learning

Cultural experiences may influence the games children play, the stories they tell, and the ways they interact with others. Children may learn traditional games, songs, dances, storytelling practices, and ways of creating or exploring materials through family and community participation (Rogoff, 2003).

Cultural expectations can also influence how children approach learning. Some children may be familiar with observing others before participating, while others may be accustomed to asking questions, experimenting independently, or collaborating with family members.

These experiences may influence children's initial preferences in classroom activities, but they do not determine how a child will always learn or participate.

Example of Learning Through Observation

Six-year-old Hana enjoys watching her grandmother create traditional artwork. At home, she often observes the process carefully before trying a new technique.

During a classroom art activity, Hana watches her classmates before beginning her own project. Rather than immediately encouraging her to start, the educator provides time for observation and invites her to participate when she is ready.

The educator recognizes observation as one way children may gather information and prepare for learning.

Connecting Home Experiences to Classroom Learning

When educators recognize family and cultural influences on play, they can create experiences that are meaningful and familiar while also introducing children to new ideas (Moll et al., 1992).

Educators can:

- Incorporate familiar family and community experiences into dramatic play.
- Include books, music, materials, and stories that reflect children's diverse backgrounds.
- Invite families to share games, traditions, or activities that are meaningful to them.
- Provide opportunities for independent exploration and cooperative play.
- Recognize different ways children observe, participate, communicate, and solve problems.
- Expand children's interests by connecting familiar experiences to new learning opportunities.

For example, a child who regularly participates in family cooking activities may demonstrate knowledge about measuring, sequencing, and food preparation. An educator can build on these experiences by providing cooking-related dramatic play materials or opportunities to explore measurement.

The goal is not to recreate every child's home environment in the classroom. Instead, educators seek to **build meaningful connections between children's existing experiences and new opportunities for play and learning**.

By recognizing family and cultural influences, educators can create inclusive learning environments that value children's backgrounds, encourage exploration, and support different approaches to participation and learning.

Culturally Responsive and Family-Centered Teaching Practices

Understanding how family and culture influence development is an important part of developmentally appropriate practice. However, understanding these influences is only the beginning. Early childhood educators must also use this knowledge to make intentional decisions about classroom environments, interactions, learning experiences, and relationships with families (NAEYC, 2019; Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Culturally responsive teaching recognizes and values children's cultural identities, experiences, languages, and ways of

participating in learning. **Family-centered practice** recognizes families as important partners who bring valuable knowledge about their children, including their strengths, interests, experiences, and needs.

Together, these approaches help educators create learning environments where children feel respected, experience a sense of belonging, and have meaningful opportunities to participate and learn.

Learning About Children and Families

Educators cannot fully understand a child's experiences by observing classroom behavior alone. Learning about children's family relationships, routines, languages, cultural practices, and interests provides important context for understanding development (NAEYC, 2020).

Educators can learn about families through:

- Informal conversations during arrival, departure, or other appropriate times.
- Family questionnaires or conversations about children's interests, routines, and experiences.
- Ongoing communication through family-preferred methods and languages.
- Opportunities for families to share goals, priorities, and expectations for their children.
- Observations of children's interests, play, communication, and interactions.

Educators should invite families to share information without expecting them to disclose personal experiences or represent an entire cultural group.

For example, rather than asking a family to explain how people from their culture raise children, an educator might ask, "What activities does your child enjoy doing with family members?" or "Are there routines or traditions that are especially meaningful to your child?"

These questions encourage educators to learn about individual families rather than make assumptions based on cultural backgrounds.

Recognizing and Building on Family Strengths

A strengths-based approach focuses on the knowledge, relationships, abilities, and resources that children and families bring to the learning environment.

Families provide children with valuable experiences through everyday routines, shared responsibilities, storytelling, community participation, and cultural traditions. Educators can build on these strengths by connecting familiar experiences to classroom learning (Moll et al., 1992).

Example of Building on Family Knowledge

Five-year-old Elena regularly helps her grandfather care for a vegetable garden. She knows how to identify several vegetables, recognizes signs that plants need water, and enjoys discussing how plants grow.

During a classroom investigation about plants, her educator invites Elena to share what she knows and provides opportunities for children to explore gardening materials, compare seeds, and observe plant growth.

By recognizing Elena's family experiences, the educator builds on her existing knowledge while introducing new learning opportunities.

Avoiding Assumptions and Stereotypes

Culturally responsive educators recognize that family structures, traditions, communication styles, and expectations vary among children. Even when families share a language, cultural background, or community, their experiences and practices may differ (NAEYC, 2019).

Educators should avoid making assumptions about:

- Children's abilities or learning preferences based on cultural identity.
- Family involvement based on attendance at classroom events.
- Caregiving practices based on family structure.
- Children's language abilities based only on their use of English.
- Family priorities based on income, employment, or housing circumstances.

For example, a family that cannot attend an evening classroom event may be balancing employment responsibilities, transportation needs, or other commitments. Their absence does not indicate a lack of interest in their child's education. Educators can respond by offering different opportunities for communication and involvement rather than expecting every family to participate in the same way.

Respecting Home Languages, Traditions, and Identities

Children's home languages, family traditions, and cultural experiences are important parts of their identities. Educators can create inclusive environments by ensuring that classroom materials, interactions, and learning experiences reflect the children and families they serve (NAEYC, 2019; NASEM, 2024).

Examples include:

- Including books and materials representing a variety of family structures, languages, and cultural experiences.
- Learning and correctly pronouncing children's names.
- Incorporating meaningful words, songs, and stories from children's home languages.
- Inviting families to share traditions or experiences when they choose.
- Providing classroom materials that reflect children's everyday family and community experiences.
- Respecting differences in celebrations, family practices, and beliefs.

Representation should be meaningful and ongoing rather than limited to holidays or special events. Educators should also avoid expecting individual children or families to explain or represent an entire culture.

Example of Supporting Cultural Identity and Belonging

Seven-year-old Amir enjoys sharing stories about family gatherings and celebrations. His teacher notices that classroom books and materials rarely reflect some of the experiences Amir describes.

The teacher expands the classroom library to include stories representing different family traditions and invites all children to share meaningful family experiences through drawings, conversations, or photographs.

Participation is optional, and families are not expected to provide materials or share private information.

These practices create opportunities for children to see their experiences reflected in the classroom while learning about others.

Building Meaningful Family Partnerships

Family partnerships involve more than providing information about classroom activities or children's progress. Meaningful partnerships are based on mutual respect, communication, shared decision-making, and recognition of families' knowledge about their children (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Educators can strengthen partnerships by:

- Communicating regularly about children's strengths, interests, and development.
- Listening to family perspectives and priorities.
- Providing opportunities for families to share information and ask questions.
- Using accessible communication methods and qualified language supports when needed.

- Collaborating with families when making decisions about children's learning and support.
- Respecting family privacy, preferences, and circumstances.

Partnerships may look different across families. Some caregivers prefer in-person conversations, while others find phone calls, written communication, or digital messages more accessible. Educators should consider these preferences and avoid defining family involvement only through classroom volunteering or attendance at events.

From Understanding to Action

Knowledge about family and culture becomes most useful when educators apply it to everyday teaching decisions. The following four-step framework illustrates how educators can move from learning about children's experiences to providing responsive support. It draws on principles of developmentally appropriate practice, family engagement, and strengths-based teaching (NAEYC, 2020; Office of Head Start, n.d.).



Figure 6.2.2: From Understanding to Action illustrates the ongoing cycle of learning about families, recognizing strengths, adapting teaching practices, and reflecting to support responsive teaching (OpenAI, 2026b).

Note. Conceptual model based on Bronfenbrenner (1994). Examples are illustrative.

Step 1: Learn About the Child and Family

Gather information through respectful conversations, observations, and ongoing communication.

Guiding question: What do I know about this child's experiences, relationships, interests, and family priorities?

Step 2: Recognize Strengths and Consider Context

Identify the knowledge and abilities the child brings to the classroom. Consider how family routines, cultural experiences, and environmental circumstances may influence participation.

Guiding question: What strengths and experiences can I build on, and what assumptions should I reconsider?

Step 3: Adapt Teaching Practices

Use this understanding to make intentional decisions about classroom materials, communication, routines, interactions, and learning opportunities.

Guiding question: What adjustments could make this experience more meaningful, accessible, and responsive to the child?

Step 4: Reflect and Continue the Partnership

Observe how the child responds, seek family perspectives when appropriate, and make further adjustments.

Guiding question: How is the child responding, and what can I learn from the child and family to guide my next steps?

This process is ongoing. As children grow and family circumstances change, educators continue learning and adapting their practices.

Applying the Framework: A Classroom Example

Six-year-old Lucas rarely participates during large-group discussions. However, his educator notices that he talks enthusiastically with classmates during construction play.

Learn: Through conversations with Lucas's family, the educator learns that he enjoys building projects with relatives and often explains his ideas while working with others.

Recognize: The educator identifies Lucas's strong interest in construction and recognizes that his limited participation during large-group discussions does not necessarily reflect limited language abilities or understanding.

Adapt: The educator introduces photographs of buildings, construction materials, and opportunities for partner discussions before inviting children to share ideas with the larger group.

Reflect: Over time, Lucas begins contributing more frequently during small-group conversations and occasionally shares ideas during large-group discussions. The educator continues observing his participation and communicating with his family.

This example illustrates how learning about family experiences can help educators recognize children's strengths and make responsive teaching decisions.

Putting Family and Cultural Understanding Into Practice

Culturally responsive and family-centered teaching requires ongoing reflection. Educators must consider how their own experiences, beliefs, and expectations may influence the way they interpret children's behavior and interact with families.

A practice that feels familiar or appropriate to one educator may reflect particular cultural expectations rather than a universal standard.

Educators should remain curious, respectful, and willing to adjust their approaches as they learn more about individual children and families.

The goal is not to know everything about every culture or family. **It is to develop respectful relationships, recognize children's strengths, and use an understanding of family and cultural influences to make thoughtful teaching decisions.**

When educators approach families as partners and recognize the experiences children bring into the classroom, they create more inclusive environments that support development, learning, and belonging.

Putting It Into Practice: Looking Beyond Assumptions

Understanding the influence of family, culture, and community requires educators to look beyond first impressions. A family's income, housing situation, or structure may provide some information about a child's experiences, but these characteristics do not reveal the full picture of the relationships, strengths, and supports within a family.

Consider the following scenario and how an educator's understanding may change as additional information becomes available.

Part 1: What Do You Know?

Daequan and Matthew are both four years old and attend the same preschool classroom. Both children were born prematurely and receive ongoing developmental monitoring. Their teacher, Ms. Rivera, is working to understand their individual strengths, experiences, and support needs.

Daequan's Family

Daequan and Matthew are both four years old and attend the same preschool classroom. Their teacher, Ms. Rivera, is working to understand their individual strengths, experiences, and support needs.

Recently, Ms. Rivera has noticed that Daequan sometimes appears tired in the morning and seeks additional reassurance during transitions.

Matthew's Family

Matthew lives with his mother, father, and older brother in a financially secure household. His family has stable housing and reliable transportation. Matthew's parents have previously participated in classroom activities and school events.

Recently, Ms. Rivera has noticed that Matthew sometimes withdraws from group activities and becomes upset when routines change.

Stop and Think

Before reading Part 2, consider these questions:

1. What do you know about each child's family circumstances?
2. What might you be assuming about the children's experiences or the support available to them?
3. What additional information would help you better understand each child?
4. How might family circumstances influence each child's classroom experiences?

Part 2: Looking Beyond the First Impression

As Ms. Rivera continues building relationships with both families, she learns more about their experiences.

Additional Information About Daequan's Family

Although Shania and Daequan are experiencing temporary housing instability, they have a strong network of family support. Daequan's grandparents and aunt regularly provide transportation, spend time with him, and help maintain familiar routines.

Shania has connected with community organizations and expects to move into an apartment soon. She communicates regularly with Ms. Rivera and shares strategies that help Daequan feel comfortable during transitions.

At home, Daequan enjoys telling stories with his grandmother and playing counting games with his cousins.

Additional Information About Matthew's Family

Matthew's father has recently begun traveling frequently for work. His mother is managing a health concern while balancing caregiving and employment responsibilities. These changes have affected some of the family's familiar routines.

Matthew has been asking when his father will return and has become more sensitive to changes in his daily schedule.

His family cares deeply about his well-being but has not yet had an opportunity to discuss these recent changes with Ms. Rivera.

Reconsider Your Thinking

Now that you have additional information, reflect on the following questions:

1. How did your understanding of each child's experiences change?
2. What strengths and protective factors are present in each family?
3. What circumstances might be creating challenges for each child?
4. How could Ms. Rivera support both children without making assumptions about their families?
5. How does this scenario connect to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory?

From Understanding to Action

Ms. Rivera recognizes that both children may benefit from additional support during classroom transitions, but their experiences and needs may differ.

For Daequan, she maintains predictable routines, offers reassurance, and communicates with Shania about familiar strategies that help him adjust. She also recognizes the important role his extended family plays in supporting his development.

For Matthew, Ms. Rivera provides opportunities to talk about his feelings, prepares him for changes in routines, and invites his family to share strategies that may support his adjustment.

For both children, Ms. Rivera continues observing their experiences rather than assuming that family circumstances explain every behavior.

She recognizes that:

- **Family circumstances** are only one part of a child's developmental context.
- **Protective factors**, including supportive relationships and community resources, may help children navigate challenges.
- **Family strengths** may not be immediately visible to educators.
- **Respectful family partnerships** provide important information for making responsive teaching decisions.
- **Children respond differently** to changes and challenges, even when their circumstances appear similar.

Connecting the Scenario to Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory helps explain how different environmental influences interact in this scenario.

Daequan's relationships with his mother, grandparents, and teacher are part of his **microsystem**. Communication between Shania and Ms. Rivera represents the **mesosystem**. Housing services and employment circumstances are examples of **exosystem** influences.

Similarly, Matthew's family relationships are part of his **microsystem**, while his father's workplace demands are an **exosystem** influence.

Broader conditions, such as housing availability, employment policies, and access to family support services, reflect the **macrosystem**. The changes both families are experiencing over time illustrate the **chronosystem**.

This perspective reminds educators that children's development is influenced by interconnected relationships, experiences, and environmental conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Key Takeaways

The purpose of this scenario is not to determine which child has more challenges or which family provides better support. Instead, it illustrates why educators must seek a complete understanding of each child's experiences.

Effective educators look beyond assumptions, recognize family strengths, and use their understanding of family and environmental influences to provide responsive support for every child.

By building respectful partnerships with families, educators gain valuable information that helps them make intentional decisions and create learning environments where children feel supported and included.

Vocabulary Alert:

Family: People who share meaningful, ongoing relationships and responsibilities for caring for and supporting one another. Families may take many different forms.

Culture: Shared and changing values, beliefs, traditions, languages, practices, and ways of interacting that people learn through family and community experiences.

Socialization: The process through which children learn values, behaviors, expectations, and ways of interacting within their families, communities, and society.

Cultural Values: Beliefs and ideas about what is important, appropriate, or meaningful within a family or cultural community.

Cultural Identity: A person's sense of connection and belonging to cultural groups, traditions, languages, and shared experiences.

Microsystem: The people and environments with which a child interacts directly, such as family members, caregivers, teachers, and peers.

Mesosystem: The connections and interactions between a child's immediate environments, such as relationships between home and school.

Exosystem: Settings and circumstances that indirectly influence a child, such as caregiver workplaces, community services, and local policies.

Macrosystem: Broader cultural values, beliefs, laws, economic conditions, and societal expectations that influence children's environments.

Chronosystem: Changes and experiences over time, including family transitions and broader historical events, that influence development.

Risk Factor: A condition or experience associated with an increased likelihood of developmental difficulties.

Protective Factor: A relationship, resource, experience, or condition that helps reduce the effects of challenges and supports positive development.

Resilience: The process of adapting and maintaining or regaining positive development when experiencing adversity or significant challenges.

Culturally Responsive Teaching: Teaching practices that recognize, respect, and build on children's cultural identities, languages, experiences, and strengths to support meaningful participation and learning.

Exercise 6.2.1

Check Your Understanding

1. Explain two ways family relationships, routines, or everyday experiences can influence children's development. Include examples of developmental skills that may be supported.
2. How can cultural values and expectations influence children's communication, behavior, and approaches to learning? Why is it important for educators to avoid making assumptions based on a child's cultural background?
3. How does Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory help educators understand the impact of family, culture, and society on children's development? Identify two ecological systems and provide an example of each.

Apply What You Know

4. A five-year-old child and their family recently moved into temporary housing. The child's teacher notices that the child appears tired and has difficulty participating in some classroom activities. The teacher also learns that the child has supportive grandparents who help with transportation and maintain familiar family routines. What potential risk factors and protective factors are present? How could the educator respond in a strengths-based way?
5. During a kindergarten activity, six-year-old Leila carefully watches her classmates before beginning a new task. Her teacher initially interprets this behavior as hesitation or a lack of confidence. After talking with Leila's family, the teacher learns that Leila frequently learns new skills by observing family members before participating. How could the teacher use this information to provide culturally responsive instruction? Explain how this response demonstrates an understanding of family and cultural influences on development.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 6.2.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Family relationships and everyday experiences provide opportunities for children to develop skills across multiple domains. For example, supportive caregiver interactions can strengthen emotional security and communication, while participating in meal preparation may support counting, fine-motor coordination, cooperation, and problem-solving. The specific influences depend on the child's experiences, relationships, and opportunities.
2. Cultural values and expectations may influence how children communicate with adults, express emotions, demonstrate respect, cooperate with others, and participate in learning activities. For example, some children may be accustomed to listening and observing before speaking, while others may have frequent opportunities to ask questions and share ideas. Educators should avoid assumptions because children and families within the same cultural group may have different experiences, beliefs, and practices.
3. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains that development occurs within interconnected environmental systems. For example, the *microsystem* includes a child's direct relationships with family members and teachers, while the *mesosystem* includes connections between home and school. The theory helps educators recognize that children's development is influenced by relationships and experiences within their immediate environments as well as broader community and societal conditions.

Answers to Apply What You Know

4. Potential risk factors may include housing instability, disrupted routines, and additional family stress. Protective factors include supportive grandparents, reliable transportation assistance, and familiar routines maintained by family members. The educator could provide predictable classroom routines, offer reassurance, communicate respectfully with the family, and recognize the strengths and supports already present. The educator should avoid assuming that temporary housing determines the child's abilities, relationships, or developmental outcomes.
5. The teacher can recognize observation as a meaningful way Leila gathers information before attempting new tasks. She might provide demonstrations, allow time for observation, and offer opportunities for gradual participation while continuing to encourage exploration and independence. By learning about Leila's family experiences rather than assuming she lacks confidence, the teacher demonstrates culturally responsive practice and uses family knowledge to make intentional teaching decisions.

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6.3: Strategies that Support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Introduction

We examined individual differences and the influence of family, culture, and social context. This section applies that understanding to teaching strategies that remove barriers and support every child's participation, learning, and belonging.

Every child enters an early childhood setting with unique strengths, experiences, abilities, languages, cultural backgrounds, and family relationships. These differences enrich learning environments, but children do not always have the same opportunities to participate, develop relationships, or demonstrate what they know. Early childhood educators play an important role in recognizing differences, removing barriers, and creating environments where every child experiences belonging.

Supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion requires more than welcoming all children into a classroom. Educators must intentionally plan learning experiences, adapt environments, respond respectfully to differences, and collaborate with families so that children can participate meaningfully in everyday routines and play (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2019).

For example, an educator may provide picture cards to help a child communicate choices, include books that reflect different family structures, or adapt a sensory activity so that children with varying abilities can participate together. These strategies recognize that children may need different forms of support to experience equitable learning opportunities.

In this section, you will explore practical strategies that help educators create welcoming, responsive, and inclusive early childhood environments for children ages 3–8.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 6.3: Describe strategies that support diversity, equity, and inclusion.

After completing this section, you should be able to:

1. Explain the differences between diversity, equity, and inclusion in early childhood education.
2. Describe strategies for creating accessible, welcoming, and inclusive learning environments.
3. Identify culturally and linguistically responsive teaching strategies that respect children's identities and experiences.
4. Describe ways to support equitable participation through play, interactions, and intentional teaching.
5. Explain how educators collaborate with families to strengthen inclusion and belonging.

Understanding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Early childhood classrooms bring together children with different backgrounds, abilities, experiences, and ways of learning. Creating an environment where every child feels valued and can participate meaningfully requires educators to understand three connected concepts: **diversity, equity, and inclusion** (NAEYC, 2019).

Although these terms are often used together, each has a distinct meaning and helps educators make intentional decisions about teaching practices, learning environments, and interactions with children and families.

Diversity: Recognizing and Valuing Differences

Diversity refers to the many ways individuals and groups are alike and different. In early childhood education, diversity includes differences in culture, race, ethnicity, language, family structure, socioeconomic circumstances, abilities, gender, traditions, beliefs, and life experiences.

Diversity also includes individual differences in children's interests, personalities, developmental abilities, and approaches to

learning.

Recognizing diversity means understanding that children do not all enter the classroom with the same experiences, knowledge, or needs. Educators value these differences rather than expecting every child to learn, communicate, or participate in exactly the same way.

For example, a preschool classroom may include children who speak different home languages, live in different family arrangements, use assistive technology, or approach social interactions differently. An educator who recognizes diversity considers these differences when selecting books, organizing activities, and interacting with children.

Equity: Providing What Each Child Needs

Equity means providing children with the opportunities, resources, and individualized supports they need to participate, learn, and develop. Equity recognizes that children may encounter different barriers and may need different kinds or levels of support (NAEYC, 2019).

Equity is not the same as equality.

- **Equality** means providing everyone with the same resources or opportunities.
- **Equity** means responding to individual strengths, needs, and circumstances so that children have meaningful opportunities to participate and succeed.

For example, during an art activity, providing every child with the same paintbrush represents equality. Providing larger brushes, adaptive grips, or alternative painting surfaces for children who need them supports equity.

Equity does not mean lowering expectations or creating entirely separate activities for children who need additional support. Instead, educators maintain meaningful learning opportunities while adjusting the environment, materials, interactions, or teaching strategies.

Inclusion: Creating Belonging and Participation

Inclusion means ensuring that every child is welcomed, valued, and supported as a participating member of the learning community.

Inclusion goes beyond having children with different backgrounds and abilities physically present in the same classroom. Children must also have opportunities to develop relationships, make choices, participate in activities, and contribute to their learning environment (Division for Early Childhood [DEC] & NAEYC, 2009).

An inclusive classroom recognizes that children may demonstrate learning and participate in different ways. Educators intentionally remove barriers and provide supports that allow children to engage in shared experiences. Inclusion does not require every child to join every activity or participate continuously in a group. Children may need breaks, individual instruction, or specialized services. Educators coordinate these supports while maintaining meaningful access to classroom relationships and learning opportunities.

For example, during a group storytelling activity, an educator might encourage children to participate by speaking, pointing to pictures, using gestures, or communicating through an assistive communication device. Each child has an opportunity to contribute, even though their methods of participation may differ.

Inclusion benefits the entire classroom by supporting relationships, cooperation, respect, and a sense of belonging.

How Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work Together

Although diversity, equity, and inclusion have different meanings, they work together to support meaningful learning experiences.

Table 6.3.1: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Early Childhood Practice

Concept	What It Means	Example of Educator Practice
Diversity	Recognizing and valuing differences among children and families.	Selecting books, materials, and classroom displays that reflect varied cultures, languages, abilities, and family structures.
Equity	Providing the resources and supports children need to participate and learn.	Offering visual directions, adapted materials, or additional time based on individual needs.
Inclusion	Creating opportunities for every child to belong, participate, and contribute.	Planning play experiences that allow children with different abilities and communication styles to engage together.

Note. Definitions and illustrative examples informed by NAEYC (2019) and DEC and NAEYC (2009).

Note

These concepts are interconnected. Recognizing diversity helps educators identify individual strengths and experiences. Equity guides the supports educators provide, while inclusion focuses on children's meaningful participation and belonging.

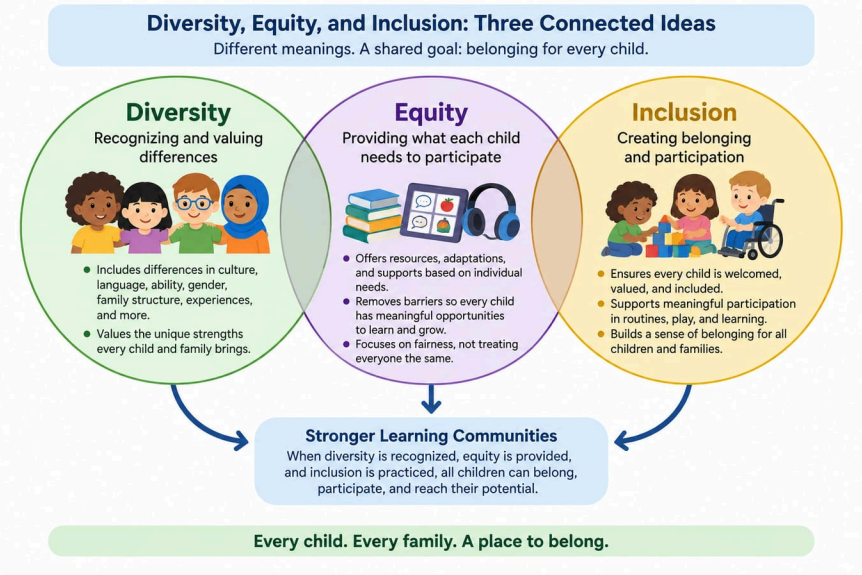


Figure 6.3.1: Diversity, equity, and inclusion are connected concepts that help educators create learning environments where every child can belong, participate, and learn (OpenAI, 2026a).

Example 6.3.1

During a preschool building activity, several children work together to construct a pretend city. One child is learning English, another has difficulty manipulating small blocks, and others have different interests and levels of experience with building materials.

The educator supports diversity, equity, and inclusion by:

- **Recognizing diversity:** Acknowledging that the children bring different languages, abilities, interests, and experiences to the activity.

- **Supporting equity:** Providing larger blocks, picture cards, and opportunities for children to communicate in different ways.
- **Promoting inclusion:** Encouraging every child to contribute ideas, make decisions, and participate in constructing the city.

Rather than expecting every child to complete the activity in the same way, the educator creates opportunities for meaningful participation while maintaining a shared learning experience.

The central goal of diversity, equity, and inclusion is not to make every child's experience identical. It is to ensure that every child is respected, supported, and given meaningful opportunities to learn and belong.

Recognizing Strengths, Differences, and Barriers

Creating equitable and inclusive learning environments begins with understanding each child as an individual. Children bring different strengths, interests, experiences, abilities, and ways of participating to early childhood settings. Educators must look beyond assumptions or labels to recognize what children can do, understand how they learn, and identify barriers that may limit their opportunities.

A **strengths-based approach** focuses on children's existing abilities, interests, knowledge, and potential rather than defining them by challenges or differences. This perspective helps educators maintain meaningful expectations while identifying supports that encourage participation and learning.

Seeing the Strengths in Every Child

The way educators view children influences their expectations, interactions, and teaching decisions. When educators see children as capable and active learners, they are more likely to recognize children's abilities and provide opportunities for independence, exploration, and participation (NAEYC, 2020).

For example, a child who uses few spoken words may communicate effectively through gestures, facial expressions, pictures, or an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) system. Rather than focusing only on limited speech, an educator recognizes the child's ability to communicate and provides opportunities to build on that strength.

Educators can develop a strengths-based perspective by:

- Observing what children can do independently and with support.
- Identifying interests, abilities, and experiences that contribute to learning.
- Recognizing multiple ways children communicate, solve problems, and participate.
- Asking families about children's strengths, preferences, and experiences outside the classroom.
- Maintaining meaningful expectations while adapting support to individual needs.

Recognizing strengths does not mean ignoring developmental concerns or challenges. Instead, it provides a more complete understanding of the child and helps educators identify appropriate ways to support learning.

Understanding Individual Differences

Children develop and learn in different ways. Some differences are related to developmental abilities, communication styles, sensory needs, or approaches to learning. Others reflect children's family experiences, cultural backgrounds, languages, and opportunities.

Educators should avoid assuming that one characteristic explains everything about a child. For example, children who share the same disability or home language may have very different strengths, interests, personalities, and support needs.

Understanding individual differences requires educators to observe children across everyday experiences and consider how the learning environment influences their participation (NAEYC, 2020).

An educator might notice that a child:

- Participates confidently in small groups but rarely speaks during large-group activities.
- Demonstrates understanding through actions or pictures rather than spoken responses.
- Enjoys building activities but has difficulty manipulating small materials.
- Communicates comfortably in a home language while developing English proficiency.
- Needs additional time, movement, or sensory support during transitions.

These observations provide information about how children experience the classroom. Differences alone do not indicate a developmental concern, and educators should avoid making assumptions or diagnoses based on isolated behaviors.

Identifying Barriers to Participation

A **barrier to participation** is something that limits a child's ability to access, engage in, or benefit from learning experiences. Barriers may exist in the physical environment, classroom routines, communication methods, teaching expectations, or social interactions.

A child may experience difficulty participating not because they lack an ability, but because an activity or environment does not provide an accessible way for them to engage (DEC, 2014; DEC & NAEYC, 2009).

For example, a child who uses a wheelchair may be unable to participate at a sensory table that is too high. The barrier is not the child's wheelchair; it is the design of the learning environment.

Table 6.3.2: Recognizing Barriers and Possible Educator Responses

Type of Barrier	Classroom Example	Possible Educator Response
Physical	Materials are placed beyond a child's reach.	Adjust the arrangement or height of materials to improve access.
Communication	Directions are provided only verbally.	Pair spoken directions with pictures, gestures, or demonstrations.
Linguistic	Classroom activities rely exclusively on English.	Incorporate home languages, visual supports, and opportunities for multiple forms of communication.
Sensory	A busy classroom area becomes overwhelming for a child.	Offer a quieter space or adjust sensory demands.
Social	A child is repeatedly excluded from group play.	Support peer interactions and model ways to invite others into play.
Instructional	Every child is expected to demonstrate learning in the same way.	Offer different ways to respond, participate, or demonstrate understanding.
Attitudinal	An educator assumes a child cannot participate because of a disability.	Focus on the child's strengths and identify adaptations that support participation.

Note. Illustrative barriers and adaptations informed by DEC (2014) and CAST (2024).

Note

Barriers may affect more than one child, and a single adaptation can improve participation for an entire group. Educators should consider children's preferences and family perspectives when selecting supports.

Looking Beyond the Child to the Environment

When a child has difficulty participating, educators should consider whether something about the environment, activity, or expectations creates an unnecessary challenge.

Instead of asking only, "What is the child having difficulty doing?" educators can ask:

1. What strengths and interests does the child demonstrate?
2. What appears to be limiting participation?
3. What could change in the environment, materials, interactions, or expectations?
4. How can I learn from the child and family about what supports might help?

These questions shift the focus from trying to change the child to identifying ways educators can create more accessible and supportive learning opportunities (DEC, 2014).

For example, when a child regularly leaves a large-group activity, an educator might initially interpret the behavior as a lack of interest or difficulty following expectations. Further observation may reveal that the group activity is lengthy, the seating arrangement is uncomfortable, or the child participates more successfully when movement or visual supports are available.

The educator can then consider adjustments that support participation rather than automatically expecting the child to adapt to an unchanged environment.

From Recognizing Differences to Taking Action

Recognizing strengths and identifying barriers are important first steps, but inclusion requires educators to act on what they learn. Educators use observations, family perspectives, and their knowledge of child development to make intentional decisions about classroom experiences. They then observe whether those changes increase the child's opportunities for participation.

Inclusive practice begins when educators **recognize children's strengths, look for barriers rather than deficits, and make intentional changes** that support meaningful participation.

Strategies for Creating Inclusive Learning Environments

An inclusive learning environment is one in which every child has meaningful opportunities to access materials, participate in activities, develop relationships, and experience a sense of belonging. Creating this environment requires educators to think intentionally about how classrooms are arranged, how materials are selected, and how daily routines support children with different strengths, abilities, and experiences.

Inclusive environments do not require every child to participate in exactly the same way. Instead, educators provide flexible opportunities that allow children to engage in shared learning experiences while receiving the support they need.

Arranging Accessible Learning Spaces

The physical arrangement of a classroom can support or limit children's independence and participation. Educators should consider whether children can move comfortably through the environment, access materials, and participate in learning areas (DEC, 2014).

Strategies for creating accessible spaces include:

- Arranging furniture to provide clear pathways and sufficient space for movement and mobility equipment.
- Placing frequently used materials where children can reach them independently.
- Providing flexible seating and workspaces that accommodate different physical and sensory needs.
- Organizing learning areas so children can locate materials and move between activities.
- Creating quieter spaces where children can regulate their emotions or take a break from busy classroom activities.

For example, a preschool educator notices that a child who uses a walker has difficulty entering the dramatic play area because

the furniture is crowded together. Rearranging the furniture creates a wider pathway, allowing the child to join peers more independently.

Accessible classroom design benefits the entire group by supporting independence, choice, and participation.

Adapting Materials and Learning Experiences

Children may need different materials or levels of support to participate in the same learning experience. **Adaptations** are intentional changes to materials, environments, or activities that improve accessibility while maintaining meaningful learning opportunities (CAST, 2024; DEC, 2014).

Adaptations may include:

- Providing larger manipulatives or easy-grip tools for children who have difficulty handling small objects.
- Offering materials with different textures, sizes, or levels of complexity.
- Adjusting the height or position of activity surfaces.
- Allowing additional time for children to complete tasks or respond.
- Providing alternative ways to demonstrate understanding, such as pointing, drawing, speaking, or using assistive technology.

For example, during a collage activity, some children cut paper with scissors, while another child uses pre-cut shapes and an adapted glue applicator. All children participate in creating collages, even though the materials and methods differ.

Adaptations remove unnecessary barriers and provide an appropriate level of challenge. Depending on the child's learning goals, educators may adjust materials, task complexity, time, or assistance so that participation remains meaningful.

Providing Visual and Communication Supports

Young children benefit from clear, consistent communication. Visual and communication supports can help children understand expectations, make choices, follow routines, and participate more independently.

These supports may be particularly helpful for children who are developing English proficiency, have communication differences, or benefit from additional processing time. They can also support the entire classroom (CAST, 2024; DEC, 2014).

Educators can:

- Use picture schedules to show the sequence of daily activities.
- Pair spoken directions with gestures, pictures, or demonstrations.
- Label learning areas and materials with pictures and words, including home languages when appropriate.
- Provide choice boards that allow children to communicate preferences.
- Use first–then visuals to help children anticipate transitions.
- Make communication systems, including AAC devices, available and respected throughout daily activities.

For example, an educator uses a picture schedule to show that outdoor play will be followed by lunch. Children can refer to the schedule throughout the morning, reducing uncertainty and supporting independence during transitions.

Visual supports should be appropriate for children's developmental abilities and used consistently rather than introduced only when a child experiences difficulty.

Representing Children and Families in the Environment

Children develop a sense of belonging when their identities, families, languages, and experiences are respected and reflected in the learning environment.

Representation means including authentic materials, images, experiences, and perspectives that reflect the diversity of children, families, and communities (NAEYC, 2019).

Educators can strengthen representation by:

- Selecting books that portray people from different cultural backgrounds, family structures, and abilities in meaningful, everyday roles.
- Including dolls, puzzles, dramatic play materials, and classroom images that reflect a variety of identities and experiences.
- Incorporating children's home languages into classroom labels, greetings, songs, and communication.
- Displaying children's work and, with family permission, photographs that reflect their experiences and relationships.
- Ensuring children see both familiar experiences and people whose lives may differ from their own.

For example, a kindergarten educator reviews the classroom library and notices that most books portray similar family structures. The educator intentionally adds books featuring grandparents raising children, single-parent families, multigenerational households, and children living with adoptive or foster families.

Meaningful representation goes beyond displaying diverse materials. Educators should ensure that these resources are accurate, respectful, and integrated into everyday learning rather than limited to special celebrations or isolated activities.

Establishing Predictable and Flexible Routines

Consistent routines help children understand what to expect and develop confidence in navigating the classroom. However, routines must also be flexible enough to respond to individual needs and circumstances (DEC, 2014).

Educators can support predictable and inclusive routines by:

- Establishing consistent daily sequences while allowing adjustments when needed.
- Providing advance notice before transitions.
- Using songs, pictures, gestures, or verbal reminders to communicate upcoming activities.
- Allowing different ways to participate in group experiences.
- Adjusting transition times or providing additional support for children who need it.
- Offering appropriate choices that encourage independence and agency.

For example, during morning meeting, some children sit on the carpet, while another child uses supportive seating and another stands near the group. Each child is encouraged to participate in ways that are comfortable and accessible while remaining part of the shared experience.

Flexibility does not mean eliminating classroom expectations. Instead, educators maintain consistent goals while recognizing that children may need different supports or approaches to meet those expectations.

Matching Inclusive Strategies to Children's Needs

Educators select inclusive strategies by considering the barriers children encounter and the supports that may improve participation.

Table 6.3.3: Inclusive Environment Strategies in Everyday Practice

Inclusive Strategy	Educator Action	How It Supports Participation
Accessible spaces	Adjust pathways, furniture, and material placement.	Allows children to move, explore, and access learning areas more independently.
Adapted materials	Offer different tools, sizes, or ways to use materials.	Enables children with varying abilities to participate in shared activities.
Visual and communication supports	Use picture schedules, gestures, choice boards, or AAC.	Helps children understand expectations, communicate, and make choices.
Meaningful representation	Include authentic books, materials, languages, and family images.	Supports children's identities, respect for differences, and sense of belonging.
Predictable and flexible routines	Maintain familiar routines while adjusting participation and transitions.	Supports independence, confidence, and meaningful engagement.

Note

Educators may use several strategies together. Supports should be selected based on the child's strengths, preferences, needs, and the demands of the activity rather than assumptions about a diagnosis or background.



Figure 6.3.2: Children participate in a shared painting activity using different supports, demonstrating how equitable adaptations promote inclusion (OpenAI, 2026c).

Example 6.3.2

During a preschool sensory activity, children explore containers of water using cups, funnels, and floating objects. An educator notices that one child has difficulty reaching the materials, another becomes uncomfortable when water splashes, and a third child is unsure how to join the activity.

Rather than creating separate activities, the educator makes several adjustments:

- Moves some materials to a lower, accessible surface.
- Offers scoops and cups with different handles.
- Provides towels and tools that allow participation without direct contact with water.
- Uses pictures and demonstrations to show possible ways to explore the materials.
- Models how children can invite others to participate.

These adjustments allow children to engage in the same learning experience in different ways.

The educator continues observing how children use the materials and whether the changes support greater independence, interaction, and participation. Additional adjustments are made when needed.

Creating an inclusive environment is **an ongoing process of recognizing barriers, providing appropriate supports, and adjusting learning experiences** so that every child has meaningful opportunities to participate and belong.

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching

Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching recognizes that children's cultural identities, languages, experiences, and ways of communicating are valuable parts of the learning environment. Educators use this understanding to make intentional decisions about classroom interactions, learning experiences, and teaching practices (NAEYC, 2019, 2020).

Being responsive does not mean expecting educators to know everything about every culture or language. Instead, it requires a willingness to learn from children and families, reflect on assumptions, and create opportunities for all children to see their identities respected.

Respecting Children's Cultural Identities

Children benefit from learning environments where their cultural identities and everyday experiences are recognized as meaningful. Educators demonstrate respect by learning about children's experiences and incorporating that knowledge into classroom practices (NAEYC, 2019).

Strategies include:

- Learning how children and families prefer to be addressed, including the correct pronunciation of names.
- Inviting families to share information about meaningful traditions, routines, languages, and experiences without expecting them to represent an entire cultural group.
- Incorporating children's familiar experiences into stories, play, conversations, and learning activities.
- Selecting books and learning materials that present cultures accurately and respectfully.
- Recognizing that children and families within the same cultural group may have different practices, preferences, and beliefs.

For example, an educator notices that several children enjoy pretending to prepare meals in the dramatic play area. Rather than assuming which foods represent their cultures, the educator invites families to share ideas about familiar cooking utensils, recipes, or mealtime experiences. The educator then incorporates appropriate materials into the play area.

The goal is to create meaningful connections between children's experiences and classroom learning without making assumptions about cultural identity.

Supporting Children's Home Languages

Children's home languages are important parts of their identities, relationships, and learning experiences. Educators can support children who are learning English while continuing to value and encourage their home languages (Office of Head Start, n.d.-b).

A **multilingual learner** is a child who is learning or using two or more languages. Children may demonstrate different levels of understanding and communication across their languages and settings.

Educators do not need to speak every language represented in the classroom to provide meaningful support.

Strategies include:

- Learning and using familiar greetings, children's names, and important words from home languages, checking pronunciation and meaning with knowledgeable speakers.
- Including books, songs, labels, and materials in languages used by children and families.
- Encouraging children to communicate through their home languages, gestures, pictures, and other available methods.
- Pairing spoken English with visual supports, demonstrations, and meaningful experiences.
- Providing additional time for children to understand questions and express their ideas.
- Working with families to understand how children communicate and demonstrate knowledge across languages.

For example, during a classroom discussion about animals, a child identifies a rabbit using a word from their home language. The educator acknowledges the child's contribution and connects the word to the English word *rabbit*, using a picture to support understanding.

This approach values the child's existing language knowledge while supporting continued language development.

Educators should not assume that a child's developing English proficiency reflects limited knowledge, ability, or understanding (NAEYC, 2019).

Avoiding Stereotypes and Examining Assumptions

A **stereotype** is an oversimplified belief about people based on their membership in a particular group. Stereotypes can influence

what educators expect from children and the opportunities they provide (NAEYC, 2019).

Educators may unintentionally reinforce stereotypes through classroom materials, comments, activity choices, or assumptions about families.

For example, an educator might assume that all children from a particular cultural background celebrate the same holidays, that boys prefer construction activities, or that children who speak limited English need less challenging learning experiences.

To avoid these assumptions, educators can:

- Reflect on how personal experiences and beliefs influence expectations.
- Use inclusive language that does not assume all children have the same family structure, traditions, or interests.
- Provide opportunities for all children to explore the full range of classroom activities.
- Review books, pictures, songs, and materials for inaccurate or limited portrayals of people.
- Ask respectful questions rather than assuming what a child or family prefers.
- Present people from different backgrounds in varied, meaningful roles rather than only during special celebrations.

For example, instead of assigning boys to build with blocks and girls to organize the pretend kitchen, an educator invites all children to choose activities based on their interests.

Reflecting on assumptions is part of professional practice. It helps educators recognize when expectations or classroom practices may unintentionally limit children's opportunities.

Responding Thoughtfully to Children's Questions About Differences

Young children notice differences in appearance, language, abilities, and family experiences. Their observations and questions provide opportunities for educators to support accurate understanding, respect, and inclusion.

Educators should respond calmly, honestly, and in developmentally appropriate ways rather than ignoring questions or communicating that differences should not be discussed (NAEYC, 2019).

Helpful strategies include:

- Listening carefully to understand what the child is asking.
- Providing brief, accurate explanations using respectful language.
- Acknowledging differences without suggesting that one way of being is better than another.
- Correcting hurtful comments or inaccurate assumptions while maintaining children's dignity.
- Encouraging empathy and respectful interactions.

For example, a preschool child asks, "Why does Maya use a wheelchair?"

The educator might respond, "A wheelchair helps Maya move from place to place. People move in different ways. Some walk, and some use wheelchairs or other equipment."

If the child wants to know more about Maya's personal experience, the educator can explain that Maya may choose what she wants to share. This respects her privacy and allows her to speak for herself.

When a child makes a hurtful statement, educators should respond directly and respectfully. For example, if a child says, "You can't play because you talk differently," the educator might say, "Everyone can be part of our play. People communicate in different ways. Let's find a way to play together." These responses help children learn that differences are a natural part of their communities and that everyone deserves respect.

Putting Responsive Teaching Strategies Into Everyday Practice

Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching is not limited to special holidays, multicultural events, or occasional classroom activities. It is reflected in the everyday decisions educators make about materials, conversations, interactions, and learning opportunities.

Table 6.3.4: Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching Strategies

Teaching Focus	Educator Strategy	Classroom Example
Cultural identity	Learn about and incorporate children's meaningful experiences.	Include familiar cooking materials in dramatic play based on family input.
Home languages	Value and support children's use of multiple languages.	Use multilingual labels, pictures, and familiar words during routines.
Avoiding stereotypes	Examine assumptions and provide varied opportunities.	Invite all children to explore construction, caregiving, art, and active play.
Respectful conversations	Respond accurately and positively to questions about differences.	Explain that people communicate, move, and learn in different ways.

Note

Responsive teaching strategies should reflect the actual children and families in the program rather than assumptions about cultural, linguistic, or social groups.

Example 6.3.3

During a preschool drawing activity, Mateo tells another child that he is making a picture for his *abuela*. The other child asks, "What's an abuela?"

The educator responds, "Abuela is a Spanish word for grandmother. Mateo is drawing a picture for his grandmother."

Another child shares that they call their grandmother "Nana," while a third child explains that they live with their grandparents.

The educator encourages the conversation by acknowledging that families may use different names for important people and that families can be structured in many ways. Later, the educator considers adding books and drawing materials that reflect the different family relationships and languages represented in the classroom.

In this example, the educator:

- **Values language diversity** by recognizing and explaining a familiar home-language word.
- **Respects family experiences** by allowing children to share their own relationships.
- **Avoids assumptions** by not expecting all children to use the same words or live in the same family arrangements.
- **Supports inclusion** by making space for children to contribute their experiences to the conversation.

The educator uses an everyday interaction to build understanding and strengthen children's sense of belonging.

Culturally and linguistically responsive teaching is an ongoing practice of **listening, learning, reflecting, and making intentional decisions that respect children's identities** and support equitable participation.

Supporting Equity and Inclusion Through Play and Interactions

Play provides opportunities for children to explore ideas, develop relationships, solve problems, and express their understanding of the world. In inclusive early childhood settings, educators recognize that children may approach play differently based on their interests, abilities, experiences, and communication styles.

Supporting equity and inclusion through play requires more than providing access to activities. Educators must intentionally support children's interactions, offer flexible ways to participate, and create opportunities for every child to contribute to shared experiences (NAEYC, 2020).

Using Intentional Teaching to Support Inclusion

Intentional teaching involves making thoughtful, purposeful decisions about when and how to support children's learning. During play, educators observe children's interactions, recognize opportunities for learning, and provide support when it can strengthen participation (DEC, 2014; NAEYC, 2020).

Intentional teaching strategies that promote inclusion include:

- **Modeling respectful interactions:** Demonstrating how to invite others into play, share ideas, and respond to differences.
- **Scaffolding participation:** Offering just enough support to help children engage successfully while encouraging growing independence.
- **Using open-ended questions:** Encouraging children to share ideas and solve problems in ways appropriate to their communication abilities.
- **Acknowledging contributions:** Recognizing different ways children participate and contribute to group experiences.
- **Adjusting adult involvement:** Knowing when to provide guidance and when to step back so children can direct their own play.

For example, during dramatic play, an educator notices that a child watches classmates operate a pretend restaurant but does not join. The educator approaches and says, "They're getting ready to serve food. Would you like to help make a menu or take an order?"

By offering a meaningful role connected to the play, the educator provides an opportunity for participation without requiring the child to enter the activity independently. Intentional teaching is most effective when educators respond to children's interests and support needs rather than directing every aspect of play.

Providing Flexible Ways to Participate

Children do not need to demonstrate the same skills or use identical approaches to participate in shared play experiences. **Flexible participation** allows children to engage in activities through different roles, communication methods, or levels of involvement while remaining part of the learning community (CAST, 2024).

For example, during a group storytelling activity, children may participate by:

- Suggesting characters or events in the story.
- Acting out actions or emotions.
- Selecting pictures that represent story events.
- Using gestures, spoken language, or AAC to contribute ideas.
- Helping organize props or illustrations.

Each contribution supports the shared experience, even though children participate in different ways.

Educators can strengthen flexible participation by offering choices about roles, recognizing nonverbal contributions, and adjusting expectations without reducing the value of children's involvement. The goal is to maintain meaningful participation and appropriate learning challenges while respecting individual differences.

Encouraging Positive Peer Interactions

Relationships with peers are important parts of children's social and emotional development. Inclusive play environments provide opportunities for children to develop friendships, cooperate, negotiate, and learn from one another (DEC, 2014).

However, children may not automatically know how to include others in play. Educators can actively support positive peer interactions by:

- Modeling simple invitations such as "Would you like to build with us?"
- Helping children identify roles that allow others to join ongoing play.
- Encouraging cooperation and shared problem-solving.
- Supporting children in communicating their ideas and preferences.
- Responding respectfully and promptly when a child is excluded or treated unfairly.

For example, several children are building a pretend animal shelter. One child tells another, "You can't play because we already have enough people."

The educator responds, "It looks like you have several jobs at the shelter. Let's think about whether there's another way someone could help."

The children decide that the new participant can care for the animals while others build their homes.

In this situation, the educator supports inclusion by helping children consider another person's participation without taking complete control of the play.

Positive peer interactions are strengthened when children experience respect, cooperation, and shared responsibility as regular parts of classroom life.

Supporting Children's Choices and Agency

Child agency refers to children's ability to make choices, express preferences, influence experiences, and participate in decisions that affect them.

Supporting agency is important for equity and inclusion because children may have different ways of communicating what they want, need, or enjoy. Educators must ensure that all children have meaningful opportunities to express preferences and influence their participation (CAST, 2024; NAEYC, 2020).

Strategies for supporting child agency include:

- Offering developmentally appropriate choices about activities, materials, and play roles.
- Listening to children's ideas and incorporating them into learning experiences.
- Allowing children to choose how they participate when appropriate.
- Encouraging children to solve problems and make decisions with support.
- Respecting children's communication methods, preferences, and appropriate boundaries.

For example, during a movement activity, an educator invites children to choose how they will represent different animals. Some children jump like frogs, others stretch like cats, and one child moves their arms to represent a flying bird.

Rather than expecting identical movements, the educator encourages children to express their ideas in ways that are meaningful and accessible. Providing choices does not mean removing expectations or allowing unsafe behavior. Educators continue to establish appropriate boundaries while supporting children's growing independence and decision-making skills.

Putting the Strategies Together

Educators often use several strategies at once to support inclusive play. The specific approach depends on the children, the activity, and the opportunities or barriers observed.

Table 6.3.5: Strategies That Support Equity and Inclusion During Play

Strategy	Educator Action	How It Supports Inclusion
Intentional teaching	Model, scaffold, and respond thoughtfully during play.	Helps children engage successfully and develop skills for participation.
Flexible participation	Offer different roles and ways to contribute.	Allows children with varied abilities and communication styles to join shared experiences.
Positive peer interactions	Support invitations, cooperation, and conflict resolution.	Encourages friendships, respect, and belonging.
Child choice and agency	Provide meaningful choices and listen to children's preferences.	Supports independence, confidence, and active participation.

Note. Illustrative strategies informed by DEC (2014), CAST (2024), and NAEYC (2020).

Note

These strategies are most effective when educators respond to children's individual strengths, interests, and preferences rather than expecting all children to participate in the same way.

Example 6.3.4

During a kindergarten block-building activity, four children are constructing a pretend neighborhood. Ava suggests building houses, Liam wants to create roads, and Sofia begins arranging small figures near the buildings. Noah, who uses an AAC device to communicate, approaches the group and watches.

One child tells Noah, "We're already building. You can just watch."

The educator recognizes an opportunity to support inclusion. She responds, "Noah can have ideas about our neighborhood, too. Let's find out what he would like to add."

The educator gives Noah time to communicate using his AAC device. Noah selects a message indicating that he wants to build a park.

The educator acknowledges his idea and asks the group, "Where could the park go in your neighborhood?"

The children begin discussing possible locations. Noah chooses a space near the houses and joins Sofia in arranging trees and figures.

Throughout the experience, the educator:

- **Uses intentional teaching** by recognizing exclusion and guiding the interaction.
- **Supports flexible participation** by encouraging different roles and communication methods.
- **Promotes positive peer interactions** by helping children listen to and build on Noah's contribution.
- **Encourages child agency** by allowing Noah to express his own idea and make decisions about the shared construction.

The educator continues observing the group, providing support when necessary while allowing the children to direct their play.

This example demonstrates that inclusion does not require every child to participate in exactly the same way. Instead, educators create opportunities for children to contribute meaningfully, develop relationships, and influence shared experiences.

Equitable and inclusive play occurs when educators **intentionally support participation, encourage respectful relationships, and ensure that every child's ideas and contributions are valued.**

Partnering With Families to Support Inclusion

Families provide valuable knowledge about their children's strengths, interests, experiences, communication styles, and support needs. When educators work collaboratively with families, they gain a more complete understanding of each child and can make informed decisions that support equitable participation and belonging (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Inclusive family partnerships go beyond sharing information about classroom activities or children's progress. They involve listening to families, respecting their perspectives, and working together to identify and remove barriers that may affect children's learning and participation.

Learning From Families

Families often recognize strengths, preferences, and abilities that children may not demonstrate in an early childhood setting. Educators can use this knowledge to plan meaningful experiences and identify supports that build on children's existing abilities (DEC, 2014; Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Strategies for learning from families include:

- Asking about children's interests, strengths, routines, and preferred ways of communicating.
- Inviting families to share strategies that help their children participate successfully in everyday activities.
- Learning about children's experiences and abilities across home and classroom settings.
- Asking families about their priorities and goals for their children.
- Incorporating family knowledge into classroom planning and individual supports.

For example, an educator notices that a child rarely participates in classroom singing activities. During a conversation, the family shares that the child enjoys music at home but prefers songs with familiar movements. The educator introduces a movement song and provides opportunities for children to participate through gestures, movement, or singing.

By learning from the family, the educator identifies a way to build on the child's interests while supporting participation.

Providing Accessible and Respectful Communication

Effective family partnerships require communication that is welcoming, understandable, and accessible. Families may have different language preferences, schedules, communication needs, or access to technology (NAEYC, 2019; Office of Head Start, n.d.-a).

Educators can strengthen communication by:

- Asking families about their preferred language and method of communication.
- Providing translated information or qualified interpretation when needed.
- Using clear, respectful language rather than unfamiliar professional terminology.
- Offering flexible opportunities for conversations, including in-person meetings, phone calls, or other accessible methods.
- Sharing children's strengths and successes along with questions or concerns.
- Listening to family perspectives and responding without judgment.

For example, a family may prefer to communicate in a language other than English. Rather than relying on the child to interpret important information, the educator works with the program to arrange appropriate language support.

Accessible communication helps families understand information, share their perspectives, and participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their children.

Collaborating to Remove Barriers

Some children benefit from coordinated support involving families, educators, and other professionals. Depending on the child's needs, these professionals may include speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, early childhood special educators, or other specialists.

Educators play an important role in connecting recommended supports to children's everyday classroom experiences (DEC, 2014).

Collaborative strategies include:

- Identifying participation barriers through observation and family conversations.
- Working with families to establish shared priorities for supporting the child.
- Collaborating with appropriate professionals to identify practical classroom strategies.
- Incorporating agreed-upon supports into everyday routines, play, and learning experiences.
- Sharing observations about what is working and making adjustments when needed.
- Protecting family privacy and obtaining appropriate permission before sharing confidential information.

For example, a child has difficulty communicating choices during classroom activities. The educator collaborates with the family and speech-language pathologist to identify communication supports. Together, they develop a consistent approach that allows the child to make choices using pictures or an AAC system during play, meals, and transitions.

The goal is not to create an entirely separate program for the child but to support meaningful participation within everyday classroom experiences.

Putting Family Partnerships Into Practice

Family partnerships are most effective when educators treat families as knowledgeable and valued participants in decisions about their children.

Example 6.3.5

A preschool educator notices that Amira becomes upset when transitioning from outdoor play to lunch. The educator has tried giving verbal reminders, but Amira continues to have difficulty leaving the playground.

During a conversation, Amira's family shares that she responds well to picture reminders and a familiar transition song at home.

The educator uses this information to introduce a visual reminder before outdoor play ends and incorporates a short transition song. Amira is also offered a simple choice about how to move to the next activity.

Over the following days, the educator observes that Amira begins transitioning with greater confidence and less adult assistance. The educator shares this progress with the family and invites feedback about whether additional adjustments might help.

This example demonstrates how learning from families, maintaining two-way communication, and adjusting classroom practices can remove barriers to participation.

Inclusive family partnerships are built through **listening, respectful communication, and shared decision-making** that supports every child's opportunities to participate, learn, and belong.

Putting Inclusive Strategies Into Practice

Creating an inclusive early childhood environment requires ongoing observation, intentional decision-making, and reflection. Educators use their understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion to recognize barriers, select appropriate strategies, and support every child's meaningful participation (DEC, 2014; NAEYC, 2020).

Inclusive practices are not one-time adjustments. As children develop, relationships change, and learning experiences become more complex, educators continually evaluate whether their approaches are meeting children's needs.

The Inclusive Decision-Making Cycle

Educators can use a four-step process to guide inclusive teaching decisions. The following cycle is an instructional synthesis of recommended practices for observing participation, planning individualized supports, implementing strategies, and evaluating their effectiveness (DEC, 2014; NAEYC, 2020).

Step 1: Notice Barriers

Observe how children participate in classroom routines, interactions, and learning experiences. Identify strengths and interests while considering what may be limiting participation.

Ask: *What is preventing this child from participating meaningfully?*

Step 2: Plan Supports

Identify strategies that build on the child's strengths and remove unnecessary barriers. Consider adjustments to materials, communication, teaching approaches, peer interactions, or routines. Include the child's preferences and family perspectives when appropriate.

Ask: *What could I change or provide to support participation?*

Step 3: Include

Implement the selected strategies within everyday classroom experiences. Encourage the child to participate alongside peers while providing appropriate support and opportunities for choice.

Ask: *How can this child participate meaningfully in the shared experience?*

Step 4: Reflect

Observe how the child responds to the supports. Consider whether participation, independence, and opportunities for interaction have improved. Collaborate with the child, family, and other professionals when appropriate to determine whether adjustments are needed.

Ask: *Is the strategy helping, and what might I change next?*

This process is ongoing. Educators may return to earlier steps as children, activities, and needs change.



Figure 6.3.3: The Inclusive Decision-Making Cycle illustrates how educators identify barriers, plan supports, promote participation, and reflect on the effectiveness of their strategies (OpenAI, 2026b).

Example 6.3.6

During a preschool gardening project, children work together to plant seeds in small containers. The educator invites the children to scoop soil, place seeds in the containers, water their plants, and talk about what plants need to grow.

As the activity begins, the educator notices several differences in how children participate.

- **Leo** enjoys gardening but has difficulty using the small scoop to transfer soil.

- **Sofia**, who is developing English proficiency, watches the demonstration but appears unsure about the sequence of steps.
- **Maya** wants to participate but is repeatedly told by two classmates that their gardening group is already full.

The educator uses the inclusive decision-making cycle to guide her response.

Step 1: Notice Barriers

The educator recognizes that all three children are interested in the gardening project, but different barriers are limiting their participation.

Leo is having difficulty manipulating the materials. Sofia may need additional communication supports to understand the activity. Maya is encountering a social barrier because classmates are excluding her.

Step 2: Plan Supports

The educator considers strategies that address each barrier while keeping the children involved in the shared activity.

She decides to:

- Offer Leo a larger scoop and a container that is easier to stabilize.
- Provide Sofia with picture cards showing the gardening steps and demonstrate each action.
- Support the children in identifying ways Maya can contribute, such as preparing containers or watering plants.

Step 3: Include

The educator introduces the supports and encourages all children to participate.

Leo uses the larger scoop to transfer soil. Sofia follows the picture sequence and begins placing seeds in her container. The educator helps the group recognize that everyone can contribute to the gardening project, and Maya joins the children in preparing and watering the containers.

The educator remains available to provide assistance while encouraging children to make choices and work together.

Step 4: Reflect

As the activity continues, the educator observes that Leo is able to transfer soil more independently and Sofia begins following the activity sequence with fewer prompts.

Maya participates in watering the plants, but the educator notices that the same classmates continue to make decisions without including her ideas.

The educator recognizes that the material and communication supports are helping, while the peer interaction strategy needs additional attention. During the next gardening experience, she plans to model collaborative decision-making and support the children in taking turns sharing their ideas.

Connecting the Strategies to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

This gardening experience demonstrates how several strategies can work together:

- **Diversity:** The educator recognizes that children bring different abilities, communication experiences, and social needs to the activity.
- **Equity:** The educator provides individualized materials, visual supports, and assistance with peer interactions.
- **Inclusion:** The educator creates opportunities for each child to participate meaningfully in the shared gardening project.

Rather than expecting every child to participate in the same way, the educator responds to individual barriers while maintaining a common learning experience.

The reflection step is particularly important. A strategy that supports one aspect of participation may not address every barrier,

and educators must continue observing and adjusting their practices.

Inclusive teaching is an ongoing process of noticing barriers, planning supports, creating opportunities for participation, and reflecting on what works. The goal is to ensure that every child has meaningful opportunities to learn, contribute, and belong.

Vocabulary Alert:

Diversity: The differences and similarities among individuals, including culture, language, abilities, family structure, experiences, and identities.

Equity vs. Equality: Equality means providing everyone with the same resources or opportunities. Equity means providing individualized supports and removing barriers so that everyone has meaningful opportunities to participate and succeed.

Inclusion: Creating environments where every child is welcomed, valued, supported, and able to participate meaningfully.

Strengths-Based Approach: Focusing on children's abilities, interests, knowledge, and potential rather than defining them by challenges or limitations.

Barrier to Participation: A condition in the environment, activity, communication, or interactions that limits a child's ability to participate.

Adaptation: An intentional adjustment to materials, activities, environments, or teaching approaches that supports accessibility and participation.

Stereotype: An oversimplified belief or assumption about individuals based on their membership in a particular group.

Intentional Teaching: Making purposeful, thoughtful decisions about teaching strategies and interactions to support children's learning and participation.

Child Agency: A child's ability to make choices, express preferences, contribute ideas, and influence experiences that affect them.

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching: Teaching practices that recognize, respect, and build on children's cultural identities, languages, and experiences.

Exercise 6.3.1

Check Your Understanding

1. **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:** What is the difference between diversity, equity, and inclusion? Explain how these three concepts work together in an early childhood classroom.
2. **Recognizing Barriers:** Why is it important for educators to use a strengths-based approach and identify barriers to participation rather than focusing only on a child's challenges or limitations?
3. **Inclusive Teaching Strategies:** Describe three strategies educators can use to create inclusive learning environments. Explain how each strategy supports equitable participation.
4. **Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching:** Describe two strategies educators can use to respect children's cultural identities and home languages. How do these strategies help children experience belonging?

Apply What You Know

5. During a preschool art activity, children are creating pictures using paint, brushes, and paper. The educator notices that one child has difficulty holding a paintbrush, another child is learning English and appears unsure about the directions, and a third child is repeatedly excluded when classmates choose painting partners.

Using the **Notice Barriers → Plan Supports → Include → Reflect** decision-making cycle, describe how the educator could respond to support all three children's meaningful participation.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 6.3.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion:** Diversity refers to the differences and similarities among children and families. Equity involves providing individualized resources and supports that remove barriers to participation. Inclusion means ensuring that every child is welcomed, valued, and able to participate meaningfully. Together, these concepts help educators recognize differences, provide appropriate supports, and create opportunities for every child to belong and learn.
2. **Recognizing Barriers:** A strengths-based approach helps educators recognize children's abilities, interests, and potential rather than defining them by challenges. Identifying barriers encourages educators to consider how the environment, materials, communication methods, or interactions may limit participation. This perspective supports meaningful expectations and helps educators make changes that increase children's opportunities for learning.
3. **Inclusive Teaching Strategies:** Answers may vary. Examples include:
    1. **Adapting materials:** Providing easy-grip tools or alternative materials so children with different abilities can participate.
    2. **Using visual supports:** Pairing spoken directions with pictures or demonstrations to support understanding and independence.
    3. **Providing flexible participation:** Allowing children to contribute through different roles, communication methods, or levels of involvement.

    Each strategy helps remove unnecessary barriers while maintaining meaningful learning opportunities.
4. **Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching:** Educators can incorporate children's home languages into classroom activities, greetings, and materials. They can also select books and learning experiences that respectfully reflect children's cultural identities and family experiences. These strategies communicate that children's backgrounds are valued and help them feel recognized and included in the learning community.

Answers to Apply What You Know

5. **Notice Barriers:** The educator recognizes that one child experiences difficulty manipulating the paintbrush, another may need additional communication supports, and a third is encountering social exclusion.
    1. **Plan Supports:** The educator selects an adapted paintbrush or easy-grip tool, prepares picture directions and demonstrations, and identifies ways to support inclusive peer interactions.
    2. **Include:** The educator introduces the supports, encourages children to participate using appropriate materials and communication methods, and helps classmates establish welcoming partnerships.
    3. **Reflect:** The educator observes whether the children are participating more independently and meaningfully, considers their responses and preferences, and adjusts strategies as needed.

These actions demonstrate how an educator can provide equitable supports while maintaining a shared learning experience for all children.

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6.4: Applying Approaches to Learning Theories to Early Childhood Practice

Introduction

Children approach learning in different ways. Some eagerly explore unfamiliar materials, while others prefer to observe before participating. One child may persist through several attempts to solve a problem, while another may seek help or try a different strategy. These differences reflect the many ways children develop curiosity, initiative, creativity, persistence, and engagement in learning.

Developmental theories provide educators with perspectives for understanding these differences and making intentional teaching decisions. Rather than expecting every child to learn or participate in the same way, educators can consider children's individual strengths, experiences, relationships, and learning environments (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Two theories offer useful perspectives for understanding approaches to learning:

- **Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences** emphasizes that human abilities are varied and encourages educators to recognize children's different strengths while providing multiple opportunities to explore and demonstrate learning (Gardner, 1983, 1999).
- **Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory** emphasizes that children's development is influenced by interconnected relationships and environments, including families, early childhood programs, communities, and the broader society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994).

Neither theory is a direct model of approaches to learning. Gardner addresses human abilities, while Bronfenbrenner addresses development within interacting environments. Educators can use these perspectives to consider influences on engagement, curiosity, persistence, and participation without treating them as complete explanations of these behaviors.

Together, these theories encourage educators to look beyond a child's immediate behavior or performance and consider the individual and environmental factors that influence learning. By applying these perspectives, educators can create responsive learning experiences that support children's participation, exploration, confidence, and continued growth.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 6.4: Apply child development theory related to approaches to learning in early childhood practice.

By the end of this section, you should be able to:

1. **Describe** how Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory contribute to understanding children's approaches to learning.
2. **Explain** how children's individual strengths, relationships, and environments influence their engagement in learning experiences.
3. **Identify** intentional teaching strategies that support curiosity, initiative, creativity, persistence, and problem-solving.
4. **Apply** developmental theories to classroom situations to support children's diverse approaches to learning.

Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Psychologist Howard Gardner proposed the **Theory of Multiple Intelligences** in 1983. Gardner challenged the idea that intelligence could be fully represented by a single score on an intelligence test. Instead, he suggested that human abilities involve different forms of intelligence that may develop and be expressed in different ways (Gardner, 1983).

Gardner initially identified seven intelligences and later added naturalistic intelligence. He also explored existential intelligence as a possible ninth intelligence (Gardner, 1999). His theory encourages educators to recognize that children demonstrate abilities and strengths in many areas, including language, movement, music, relationships, and problem-solving.

In early childhood settings, this perspective can encourage educators to provide varied learning experiences and recognize strengths that might not be evident through traditional academic activities.

Understanding the Multiple Intelligences

Table 6.4.1: Gardner's Multiple Intelligences and Early Childhood Examples

Intelligence	Description	Early Childhood Example
Linguistic	Using language—including spoken, signed, or written forms—to communicate ideas.	A child creates stories, participates in conversations, or explains ideas during play.
Logical-Mathematical	Using reasoning, patterns, and problem-solving	A child sorts objects, recognizes patterns, or experiments with ways to balance blocks.
Spatial	Understanding shapes, spaces, and visual relationships	A child builds structures, completes puzzles, or creates designs with blocks.
Musical	Recognizing and expressing rhythm, melody, and musical patterns	A child repeats rhythmic patterns, sings songs, or experiments with instruments.
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Using body movements and physical coordination to express ideas or accomplish tasks	A child acts out a story, dances, or uses movement to explore a concept.
Interpersonal	Understanding and interacting with others	A child cooperates during group play, notices others' feelings, or helps solve a disagreement.
Intrapersonal	Developing awareness of one's own feelings, interests, and abilities	A child recognizes frustration, identifies a personal interest, or chooses a strategy for completing a task.
Naturalistic	Recognizing and understanding patterns and differences in the natural world	A child examines insects, sorts leaves, or notices changes in plants and weather.
Existential (Proposed)	Considering larger questions about life, existence, and meaning	A child asks questions about life, death, or the world. Gardner considered this a possible intelligence rather than an established part of his model.

Note

Intelligence categories are based on Gardner (1983, 1999). Early childhood examples illustrate possible classroom applications.

These categories provide one way to consider the range of abilities children may demonstrate. However, children should not be labeled as having only one type of intelligence. A child may use language, movement, reasoning, and social interaction together during a single learning experience.

Multiple Intelligences and Approaches to Learning

Gardner's theory can encourage educators to look beyond traditional academic performance and recognize the different strengths children bring to learning experiences.

For example, during a classroom investigation of plants, children might observe leaf patterns, compare plant growth, describe their discoveries, or represent their observations through music and movement. These varied experiences provide opportunities to demonstrate curiosity, creativity, initiative, and problem-solving.

The goal is not to identify each child's strongest intelligence and teach only through that category. Instead, educators can offer a variety of meaningful experiences that allow children to build new skills, explore interests, and participate in learning in different ways (NAEYC, 2020).

Understanding the Limitations of Multiple Intelligences Theory

Although Gardner's theory has influenced educational practice, researchers have questioned whether the proposed intelligences are scientifically distinct from one another. Research has not established that teaching children according to a particular intelligence category leads to better learning outcomes (Waterhouse, 2006).

Multiple intelligences should also not be confused with **learning styles**, which suggest that children learn best when instruction matches a preferred style, such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. Research does not provide strong support for improving learning by matching instruction to these fixed preferences (Pashler et al., 2008).

For early childhood educators, the useful takeaway is to recognize children's varied strengths without assigning fixed labels or limiting their opportunities. Developmentally appropriate teaching provides children with multiple ways to explore concepts, communicate ideas, solve problems, and develop new abilities (NAEYC, 2020).

Rather than asking, "*What type of learner is this child?*" educators can ask, "*What strengths, interests, and experiences can I build upon, and what additional opportunities will help this child grow?*"

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner's **Ecological Systems Theory** emphasizes that children's development is shaped by their interactions with the people, relationships, environments, and broader systems around them. Rather than focusing only on an individual child's abilities or behaviors, the theory encourages educators to consider the many interconnected influences that affect learning and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

As discussed in Section 6.2: **Influences of Family, Society, and Culture on Childhood**, Bronfenbrenner identified five interconnected environmental systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Each system contributes to the experiences and opportunities that shape children's development.

When applied to approaches to learning, Bronfenbrenner's theory helps educators understand how relationships, family experiences, classroom environments, and community conditions may influence children's curiosity, initiative, persistence, creativity, and engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

How Ecological Systems Influence Approaches to Learning

Table 6.4.2: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems and Approaches to Learning

Ecological System	Connection to Approaches to Learning	Early Childhood Example
Microsystem	Direct interactions with family members, educators, and peers influence children's confidence, curiosity, and willingness to explore.	An educator encourages a child to keep experimenting with blocks after a structure falls, supporting persistence and problem-solving.
Mesosystem	Connections between a child's immediate environments, such as home and school, can strengthen consistency and engagement in learning.	A family shares that their child enjoys cooking at home. The educator incorporates measuring and mixing into classroom activities to build on the child's interests.

Ecological System	Connection to Approaches to Learning	Early Childhood Example
Exosystem	Community resources, workplace conditions, and policies can affect the learning opportunities and support available to children.	A parent's changing work schedule affects the family's routines, which may influence the child's energy and participation in classroom activities.
Macrosystem	Cultural values, societal expectations, and broader beliefs about education influence how children are encouraged to explore, communicate, and participate.	An educator recognizes that families may have different expectations about children's independence and incorporates multiple ways for children to participate in group activities.
Chronosystem	Life transitions and changes over time can influence children's confidence, persistence, and engagement.	A child who recently moved to a new community initially observes classroom activities before gradually participating as relationships and familiarity develop.

Note

Ecological systems are based on Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994). Connections to approaches to learning and classroom examples illustrate applications in early childhood education.

These systems do not operate independently. A child's approach to learning may be influenced by several systems at the same time. For example, a child's willingness to participate in a new activity may reflect relationships with educators, experiences at home, cultural expectations, and recent changes in the child's life.

Applying Ecological Systems Theory in the Classroom

Bronfenbrenner's theory reminds educators that learning behaviors do not occur in isolation. A child who hesitates to participate, becomes frustrated with a challenging task, or shows limited interest in an activity may be responding to factors beyond the immediate learning experience.

Rather than assuming the child lacks motivation or ability, educators can consider questions such as:

- **Relationships:** Does the child feel safe, supported, and connected to educators and peers?
- **Family experiences:** What interests, routines, languages, and experiences from home might help the child engage?
- **Learning environment:** Are materials, expectations, and activities accessible, meaningful, and appropriate for the child?
- **Broader influences:** Could changes in family circumstances, community conditions, or daily routines be affecting participation?

By considering these influences, educators can make intentional adjustments to classroom environments, strengthen partnerships with families, and provide responsive support (NAEYC, 2020).

The key idea is that children's approaches to learning are shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by the relationships, experiences, and environments surrounding them.

Two Theories, Two Useful Questions

Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory offer different perspectives for understanding children's approaches to learning. Gardner emphasizes the variety of abilities children may demonstrate, while Bronfenbrenner emphasizes the relationships and environments that influence learning and development.

Together, these perspectives encourage educators to consider both children's individual strengths and the experiences that shape their opportunities to learn.

Table 6.4.3: Two Theories, Two Useful Questions

Theory	Useful Question	What Educators Consider
Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory	What strengths and abilities does this child demonstrate, and how can I provide varied opportunities for learning?	Children's interests, abilities, and opportunities to explore, communicate, create, and solve problems in different ways.
Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory	How might this child's relationships, experiences, and environments influence their approach to learning?	Family experiences, relationships, classroom environments, cultural contexts, and changes that may affect participation and engagement.

Note

Note. Theoretical comparison based on Gardner (1983, 1999) and Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994). Educator questions are illustrative applications informed by NAEYC (2020).

Applying Theory to Support Approaches to Learning

Developmental theories become most useful when educators apply them to everyday classroom decisions. Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory encourages educators to recognize children's varied abilities and provide different opportunities for participation. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory reminds educators to consider how relationships, environments, family experiences, and broader circumstances influence children's engagement in learning.

Together, these perspectives can help educators create learning experiences that build on children's strengths while reducing barriers to participation. The goal is not to match children to a particular intelligence or expect them to approach every activity in the same way. Instead, educators observe how children engage, consider the influences on their learning, and respond intentionally (NAEYC, 2020).

Intentional Strategies That Support Approaches to Learning

Children develop curiosity, initiative, creativity, persistence, and problem-solving through meaningful experiences, supportive relationships, and opportunities to explore. Educators can strengthen these approaches to learning by providing choices, encouraging experimentation, and responding to children's individual needs (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Table 6.4.4: Intentional Teaching Strategies That Support Approaches to Learning

Approach to Learning	Intentional Teaching Strategy	Classroom Example
Curiosity	Provide interesting materials, encourage questions, and allow time for exploration.	An educator introduces magnets and invites children to investigate which classroom objects are attracted to them.
Initiative	Offer meaningful choices and opportunities for children to begin and direct activities.	Children select materials and decide how to create a structure in the block area.
Creativity	Provide open-ended materials and encourage children to express ideas in different ways.	Children use clay, drawing, movement, or storytelling to represent what they observed during a nature walk.
Persistence	Provide manageable challenges, acknowledge effort, and offer support without immediately solving problems.	When a child struggles to complete a puzzle, the educator asks, "What else could you try?" and allows time for another attempt.

Approach to Learning	Intentional Teaching Strategy	Classroom Example
Problem-Solving	Encourage children to test ideas, consider alternatives, and reflect on outcomes.	When a ramp does not allow a toy car to travel very far, children experiment with changing its height and angle.

Note

Strategies are informed by NAEYC (2020) and Office of Head Start (n.d.). Classroom examples illustrate intentional teaching practices.

These strategies support children's development without requiring every child to participate or demonstrate learning in identical ways. Educators can adapt materials, interactions, and expectations while maintaining meaningful opportunities for exploration and growth.

Recognizing Strengths and Expanding Opportunities

Gardner's perspective encourages educators to recognize the range of abilities children demonstrate during everyday activities. A child who enjoys movement, for example, may eagerly participate in acting out a story, while another may prefer constructing a setting with blocks or describing the characters.

Rather than assigning children to fixed intelligence categories, educators can provide varied experiences that encourage children to use familiar strengths while developing new abilities.

For example, during a classroom exploration of bridges, children might:

- Build bridges with blocks and test their stability.
- Draw designs or describe how their bridges work.
- Work with peers to solve construction challenges.
- Use movement to demonstrate how people or vehicles cross bridges.

Each experience offers opportunities for curiosity, creativity, persistence, and problem-solving. Children can participate in multiple activities, experiment with unfamiliar approaches, and develop confidence as they discover new possibilities (NAEYC, 2020).

Considering Relationships and Environmental Influences

Bronfenbrenner's perspective reminds educators that children's engagement is influenced by more than the materials or activities provided. Relationships, routines, cultural experiences, and changes in children's lives can affect their willingness and opportunities to explore.

For example, a child who rarely chooses the art area may not necessarily lack creativity or interest. The child may be unfamiliar with the materials, uncertain about expectations, or more comfortable participating alongside a trusted peer.

An educator might respond by:

- Observing when and how the child participates in creative activities.
- Learning about the child's interests and experiences from family members.
- Offering familiar materials alongside new choices.
- Inviting participation with a trusted peer or educator.
- Allowing the child to observe, explore, and participate at a comfortable pace.

These adjustments help educators respond to the child's experiences and environment rather than making assumptions about ability or motivation (NAEYC, 2020).

Balancing Support and Independence

Intentional teaching involves knowing when to provide assistance and when to allow children to explore independently. Too much adult direction can limit children's opportunities to experiment, make decisions, and solve problems. Too little support may leave children frustrated or unable to participate meaningfully.

Educators can provide a **just-right challenge** by observing children's current abilities, offering manageable challenges, and adjusting the level of support as needed.

For example, when a child is building a tower that repeatedly falls, the educator might ask, "What do you notice about the blocks at the bottom?" rather than rebuilding the tower for the child. If the child continues to struggle, the educator might demonstrate one strategy and then encourage the child to try again.

The purpose is to support persistence and problem-solving while preserving the child's opportunity to make decisions and experience success (NAEYC, 2020; Office of Head Start, n.d.).

From Theory to Intentional Teaching Decisions

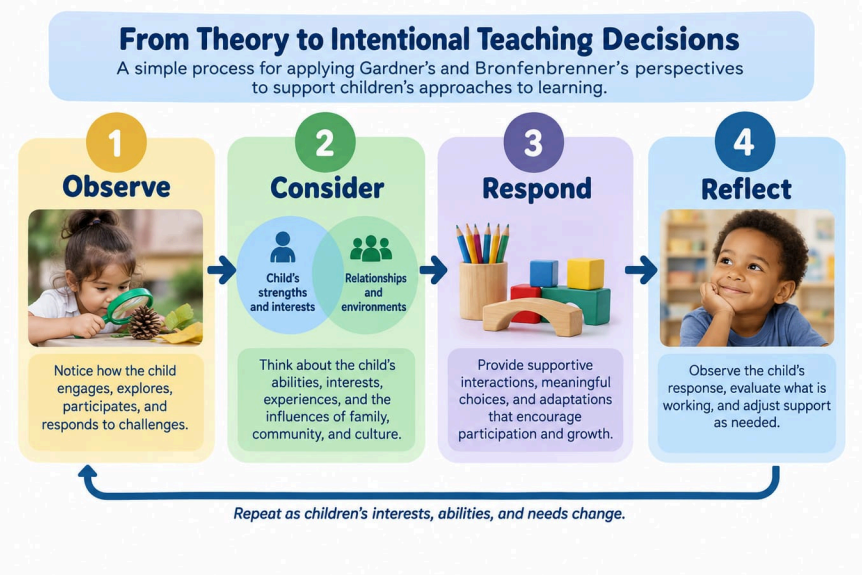


Figure 6.4.1: From Theory to Intentional Teaching Decisions. Educators use an ongoing cycle of observing, considering, responding, and reflecting to support children's approaches to learning (OpenAI, 2026).

Note. This instructional cycle synthesizes responsive teaching practices informed by NAEYC (2020) and Office of Head Start (n.d.); it is not a formal model proposed by Gardner or Bronfenbrenner.

Using developmental theory does not require educators to identify a single explanation for a child's behavior. Instead, theory provides perspectives that help educators ask thoughtful questions and make responsive decisions.

A practical process includes four steps:

1. **Observe:** Notice how the child explores, participates, responds to challenges, and interacts with others.
2. **Consider:** Identify the child's strengths and interests while thinking about relationships, experiences, and environmental influences.
3. **Respond:** Offer appropriate materials, choices, interactions, or adaptations that support meaningful participation.
4. **Reflect:** Observe how the child responds and determine whether additional adjustments would be helpful.

This ongoing process connects theoretical understanding with intentional teaching. By recognizing children's strengths and considering the environments surrounding them, educators can create learning opportunities that support curiosity, initiative, creativity, persistence, and problem-solving (NAEYC, 2020).

The goal of applying theory is not to explain every difference in children's learning, but to **make thoughtful teaching decisions**

Putting Theory Into Practice

Developmental theories can help educators better understand children's approaches to learning and make intentional teaching decisions. The following scenario demonstrates how an educator uses Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to support a child's strengths while encouraging participation in new learning experiences.

Example of Building Confidence Through Block Play

Mateo, a four-year-old preschooler, enjoys building elaborate structures in the block area. He spends extended periods experimenting with different arrangements, testing whether his buildings will stand, and making adjustments when they fall. His educator notices that Mateo demonstrates curiosity, persistence, and problem-solving during these experiences.

However, Mateo rarely volunteers to speak during large-group storytelling activities. He often watches and listens but hesitates when invited to share his ideas.

Rather than assuming that Mateo lacks language skills, confidence, or interest, his educator considers how developmental theories might help her better understand his participation.

Applying Gardner's Perspective

Gardner's theory encourages the educator to recognize Mateo's strengths in spatial reasoning and problem-solving while providing opportunities to explore other abilities (Gardner, 1983, 1999).

The educator invites Mateo to build a setting for a familiar classroom story using blocks and small figures. She asks open-ended questions about his construction and encourages him to describe what the characters might do.

This approach builds on Mateo's interests while creating additional opportunities for communication, creativity, and storytelling. The educator does not label Mateo as a particular type of learner or limit his participation to construction activities.

Applying Bronfenbrenner's Perspective

Bronfenbrenner's theory encourages the educator to consider how relationships and environments may influence Mateo's participation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994).

During a conversation with Mateo's family, the educator learns that he enjoys telling stories while building with his older sibling at home. She also notices that Mateo communicates more freely with one or two familiar peers than during large-group activities.

Using this information, the educator provides opportunities for Mateo to create and share stories with a small group of children in the block area. She gradually offers additional opportunities for him to contribute during group storytelling while respecting his comfort and readiness.

Intentional Teaching Decisions

The educator applies both perspectives through a process of observation, consideration, response, and reflection.

1. **Observe:** Notice Mateo's persistence and problem-solving during block play and his hesitation during large-group storytelling.
2. **Consider:** Recognize his strengths and interests while examining how relationships, family experiences, and group expectations may influence participation.
3. **Respond:** Connect storytelling to block play, provide small-group opportunities, and encourage communication without

pressuring Mateo to speak.
4. **Reflect:** Observe whether Mateo becomes more comfortable sharing ideas and adjust opportunities and support based on his responses.

Over time, Mateo begins sharing more ideas during small-group storytelling. The educator continues to provide varied learning opportunities rather than expecting him to participate in every activity in the same way.

What This Example Demonstrates

Gardner's perspective helps the educator recognize Mateo's strengths and offer varied opportunities for learning. Bronfenbrenner's perspective helps her consider how relationships and environments influence his participation.

Together, the two perspectives support intentional teaching decisions that build on Mateo's interests while expanding opportunities for communication, creativity, initiative, and engagement.

The goal is not to change how Mateo naturally approaches learning, but to support his existing strengths while helping him develop confidence and new abilities.

Vocabulary Alert:

- **Multiple Intelligences Theory:** Howard Gardner's theory proposing that intelligence involves different forms of human ability rather than a single general ability.
- **Spatial Intelligence:** The ability to understand and reason about shapes, spaces, and visual relationships.
- **Approaches to Learning:** The ways children engage in learning, including curiosity, initiative, creativity, persistence, and problem-solving.
- **Learning Styles:** The idea that individuals learn best through a preferred method, such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic instruction. Research does not support matching instruction to fixed learning styles as an effective way to improve learning (Pashler et al., 2008).
- **Intentional Teaching:** Making purposeful decisions about learning experiences, interactions, and environments based on children's strengths, needs, and development.
- **Responsive Teaching:** Adjusting teaching strategies, materials, and interactions in response to children's interests, experiences, abilities, and participation.
- **Just-Right Challenge:** A learning experience that provides an appropriate level of difficulty and support to encourage effort, persistence, and growth.

Exercise 6.4.1

Check Your Understanding

1. How does Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory encourage educators to recognize and support children's different strengths and abilities?
2. Why should educators avoid labeling children according to a particular intelligence or fixed learning style?
3. How can Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory help educators understand why a child may participate differently in classroom activities?

Apply What You Know

4. A preschool child enjoys exploring insects outdoors and spends considerable time observing and comparing them. However, the child shows little interest in participating in teacher-directed counting activities. How could the educator apply Gardner's perspective to encourage mathematical exploration while building on the child's interests?
5. A four-year-old who previously participated enthusiastically in classroom activities has recently become hesitant to try new experiences. The educator learns that the child's family has experienced several changes in their daily routines.

Using Bronfenbrenner's perspective and the Observe → Consider → Respond → Reflect process, explain how the educator could support the child's engagement and willingness to participate.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Contributors and Attributions

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Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. SimplePsychology.org.

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Answers

Exercise 6.4.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. **Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory** encourages educators to recognize that children demonstrate a variety of abilities and strengths. Educators can provide meaningful learning experiences involving language, movement, music, reasoning, creativity, and social interaction. The goal is to offer varied opportunities for learning rather than focus on a single measure of ability.
2. Labeling children according to a particular intelligence or learning style may limit expectations and opportunities for growth. Research does not support the idea that matching instruction to fixed learning styles improves learning. Educators should recognize children's strengths while encouraging them to explore unfamiliar activities and develop new abilities.
3. **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory** emphasizes that children's learning and development are influenced by relationships, family experiences, classroom environments, cultural contexts, and changes over time. A child's participation may reflect these interconnected influences rather than simply individual motivation or ability. Educators can use this understanding to make responsive teaching decisions.

Answers to Apply What You Know

4. **Possible Answer** The educator could connect mathematical exploration to the child's interest in insects by inviting the child to count insects, compare their sizes, sort insect figures, or create patterns using pictures of insects. This approach recognizes the child's interest in the natural world while providing opportunities to develop mathematical reasoning. The educator should continue offering other learning experiences rather than limiting the child to nature-related activities.

5. **Possible Answer**

- **Observe:** Notice when the child hesitates, which activities remain engaging, and how the child responds to interactions and support.
- **Consider:** Think about how recent changes in family routines, relationships, and daily experiences may be influencing the child's comfort and engagement without assuming a single cause.
- **Respond:** Provide predictable classroom routines, supportive relationships, meaningful choices, and opportunities to participate at a comfortable pace. Communicate with the family to better understand the child's experiences and identify helpful supports.
- **Reflect:** Observe whether the child becomes more comfortable exploring and participating. Continue adjusting support based on the child's responses and family input.

This approach demonstrates how educators can consider environmental influences while making intentional teaching decisions that support curiosity, initiative, persistence, and engagement.

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6.5: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Approaches to Learning

Introduction

Children approach learning in different ways. Some eagerly explore unfamiliar materials, while others prefer to observe before participating. Some persist when activities become challenging, while others need encouragement, additional time, or support to remain engaged. These differences reflect children's developing approaches to learning, including curiosity, initiative, persistence, attention, and flexibility (Office of Head Start, n.d.).

Early childhood educators use observations and assessments to understand how children participate in learning experiences and what support they may need. Developmental screening is one part of this process. Screening tools help identify children who may benefit from closer monitoring or further evaluation in areas of development that can influence learning and participation.

Although approaches to learning are not typically assessed as a separate developmental domain through screening, certain screening tools provide information about developmental skills and behaviors related to attention, self-regulation, communication, and social-emotional functioning. Educators must interpret this information carefully, recognizing that children's engagement and learning behaviors are also influenced by temperament, developmental experiences, culture, language, relationships, and the learning environment.

Screening is not intended to diagnose a developmental condition or determine a child's ability to succeed in school. Instead, it provides information that, when considered alongside ongoing observations and family perspectives, can help educators recognize developmental concerns, identify strengths, and connect children and families with appropriate support.

In this section, you will explore different types of developmental screening tools, their purposes and limitations, and how educators use screening information responsibly to support children's approaches to learning.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 6.5: Explore the types and purposes of developmental screening tools related to approaches to learning.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the purpose of developmental screening and how it relates to approaches to learning.
- Identify types of developmental screening tools that may provide information about children's attention, engagement, self-regulation, and other behaviors associated with learning.
- Distinguish between developmental screening, ongoing assessment, and diagnostic evaluation.
- Describe how educators use screening information, classroom observations, and family perspectives to better understand and support children's approaches to learning.
- Recognize the importance of using developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive screening practices.

Understanding Developmental Screening and Approaches to Learning

Developmental screening is a brief, structured process used to identify children who may need additional monitoring or further evaluation in one or more areas of development. Screening tools typically use standardized questions, observations, or activities to gather information about children's developmental skills and behaviors. Results help educators, families, and other professionals determine whether additional assessment or support may be appropriate (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2026).

Approaches to learning describe how children engage in learning experiences (Office of Head Start, n.d.). These include

curiosity, initiative, persistence, attention, flexibility, and the ability to manage emotions and behaviors during learning activities. Although these characteristics influence children's participation and learning, most developmental screening tools do not assess approaches to learning as a separate developmental domain.

Instead, screening tools may provide information about developmental skills and behaviors that influence how children approach learning. For example, a screening may identify concerns related to communication, attention, or self-regulation that could affect a child's participation in classroom activities.

What Can Developmental Screening Tell Us?

Developmental screening can help educators and families:

- Identify possible developmental concerns that may affect learning and participation.
- Recognize when additional monitoring or a more comprehensive evaluation may be needed.
- Gather information to support conversations with families and other professionals.
- Connect children and families with appropriate developmental resources and services.

However, screening does not diagnose developmental conditions, explain why a child behaves in a particular way, or provide a complete picture of how a child learns. Screening results represent information gathered through a specific tool at a particular point in time.

Why Is Screening Only One Part of Understanding Approaches to Learning?

Children's approaches to learning vary across activities, relationships, and environments. A child who demonstrates persistence when building with blocks may become frustrated during a challenging art activity. Another child may participate quietly during group discussions but demonstrate curiosity and initiative during outdoor exploration.

These differences do not necessarily indicate developmental concerns. They may reflect children's interests, temperament, experiences, cultural expectations, language development, or familiarity with an activity (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

To develop a more complete understanding of children's approaches to learning, educators combine screening information with ongoing classroom observations, documentation, and family perspectives. Observing children across different activities and settings helps educators identify patterns, recognize strengths, and determine which teaching strategies or environmental adjustments may support engagement and participation.

The key distinction is that developmental screening helps identify possible concerns, while ongoing observation helps educators understand how children approach learning in everyday experiences. Both sources of information can contribute to responsive, individualized teaching.

Screening, Ongoing Assessment, and Diagnostic Evaluation

Early childhood educators use different assessment processes to understand children's development and learning. Although developmental screening, ongoing assessment, and diagnostic evaluation all provide valuable information, each serves a different purpose. Understanding these differences helps educators use assessment information appropriately and recognize when additional support may be needed.

Table 6.5.1: Comparing Developmental Screening, Ongoing Assessment, and Diagnostic Evaluation

Assessment Process	Purpose and What It Involves	How Educators Use the Information
Developmental Screening	A brief, structured process using standardized tools to identify possible developmental concerns. Screening may include questionnaires, observations, or activities completed with children and families.	Recognize possible concerns that may affect learning and participation, communicate with families, and support referrals for further evaluation when appropriate.
Ongoing Assessment	A continuous process of gathering information through observations, documentation, work samples, and interactions during everyday activities.	Identify children's interests, strengths, and approaches to learning; plan individualized experiences; adjust teaching strategies; and monitor progress over time.
Diagnostic Evaluation	A more comprehensive assessment conducted by qualified professionals to investigate specific developmental concerns, determine whether a condition or delay is present, and identify support needs.	Collaborate with families and specialists, understand recommended supports, and implement appropriate teaching strategies or accommodations within the classroom.

Note. Assessment distinctions summarized from CDC (2026) and NAEYC (2020). Educator applications are illustrative.

These processes work together rather than replace one another. For example, an educator may observe that a child frequently has difficulty sustaining attention during activities. Ongoing observations help determine when the difficulty occurs and what supports improve participation. If additional developmental concerns are identified, a screening may help determine whether further evaluation is appropriate. A qualified professional may then conduct a diagnostic evaluation if needed.

Developmental screening identifies possible concerns, ongoing assessment informs everyday teaching, and diagnostic evaluation provides a more detailed understanding of specific developmental needs. No single process provides a complete picture of a child's approaches to learning (CDC, 2026; NAEYC, 2020).

Types of Screening Tools Related to Approaches to Learning

Developmental screening tools help identify possible developmental concerns that may influence how children engage in learning experiences. Although approaches to learning include curiosity, initiative, persistence, attention, and flexibility, most screening tools do not measure these characteristics as a separate developmental domain.

Instead, screening tools examine broader areas of development, such as communication, problem-solving, social-emotional development, and self-regulation. These areas can influence a child's ability to participate in activities, respond to challenges, interact with others, and remain engaged in learning.

Three commonly used developmental screening tools are the Ages & Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition (ASQ-3); Ages & Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional, Second Edition (ASQ:SE-2); and Survey of Well-being of Young Children (SWYC).

Common Developmental Screening Tools

Table 6.5.2: Developmental Screening Tools and Their Connections to Approaches to Learning

Screening Tool	Purpose and Developmental Areas	Connection to Approaches to Learning
Ages & Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition (ASQ-3) (Brookes Publishing Co., n.d.-a)	Screens communication, gross motor, fine motor, problem-solving, and personal-social development in children ages 1–66 months.	May identify developmental concerns related to skills children use when exploring materials, solving problems, communicating, and participating in learning activities.
Ages & Stages Questionnaires: Social-Emotional, Second Edition (ASQ:SE-2) (Brookes Publishing Co., n.d.-b)	Screens social-emotional functioning, including self-regulation, autonomy, social communication, adaptive functioning, and interactions with others, in children ages 1–72 months.	May identify concerns related to emotional and behavioral regulation that influence children's engagement, independence, and participation in learning experiences.
Survey of Well-being of Young Children (SWYC) (Perrin et al., 2016)	A screening system that includes developmental milestones, behavioral and emotional functioning, and family-related questions. Components vary by age.	May identify developmental or behavioral concerns that affect children's attention, interactions, problem-solving, and participation in everyday learning experiences.

Note. Tool descriptions summarized from Brookes Publishing Co. (n.d.-a, n.d.-b) and Perrin et al. (2016). Connections to approaches to learning are illustrative interpretations, not separate screening scores.

Age-range reminder: These examples primarily serve younger children and do not cover the textbook's full three-to-eight age range. Educators and programs must select tools appropriate for each child's age, language experiences, and screening purpose. Children beyond a tool's age range need an appropriate alternative rather than an older questionnaire from that tool.

Understanding the Connections

Each screening tool provides information about developmental skills and behaviors that may influence children's participation in learning experiences. However, these tools do not directly measure approaches to learning. For example, a child's performance on a problem-solving screening item does not establish how curious or persistent that child is during everyday classroom experiences.

Using Screening Information Responsibly

Screening results should be interpreted according to the instructions and scoring guidelines for each tool. Educators should consider the child's age, developmental experiences, home language, cultural background, and family perspectives when discussing results.

A screening result suggesting a possible concern does not automatically mean that a child has a developmental delay or difficulty with approaches to learning. Additional observations, family conversations, and, when appropriate, professional evaluation help determine what support may be needed.

The purpose of screening is to recognize possible developmental concerns, not to label children's curiosity, motivation, persistence, or potential to learn.

What Can Screening Tell Us About Approaches to Learning?

Developmental screening can provide information about skills and behaviors that influence how children approach learning experiences. Although screening tools do not directly measure characteristics such as curiosity, initiative, or persistence, they may identify developmental concerns related to attention, self-regulation, problem-solving, and engagement.

Educators can use this information alongside classroom observations to better understand children's strengths, recognize possible barriers to participation, and identify opportunities for additional support.

Connecting Screening Information to Classroom Experiences

Table 6.5.3: Understanding Screening Information Through Approaches to Learning

Area Related to Learning	Classroom Example	What Educators Can Consider
Attention	A child frequently shifts between activities and has difficulty remaining engaged during a small-group experience.	Does the child attend longer during preferred activities? Would shorter activities, movement, or fewer distractions support engagement?
Self-Regulation	A child becomes frustrated when a block structure falls and has difficulty returning to the activity.	How does the child respond to adult encouragement? Would modeling calming strategies or offering manageable challenges help?
Problem-Solving	A child repeatedly attempts the same strategy when completing a puzzle, even when it is unsuccessful.	Does the child try different strategies when given time or guidance? Would modeling another approach encourage flexible thinking?
Engagement	A child watches peers during a new activity but rarely joins without adult encouragement.	Does the child participate more readily in familiar activities or smaller groups? Would additional time, choice, or a supportive peer encourage participation?

Note. Illustrative classroom observations and teaching considerations informed by NAEYC (2020) and Office of Head Start (n.d.). These examples are not screening items or diagnostic criteria.

Looking Beyond a Single Result

A screening result may suggest that a child needs additional support, but it does not explain why the child behaves differently across learning experiences. Educators should consider children's strengths, interests, developmental skills, and learning environments when interpreting screening information.

Combining screening results with family perspectives and ongoing classroom observations helps educators recognize the conditions that support children's participation and determine whether additional developmental evaluation may be appropriate (NAEYC, 2020).

Choosing and Using Developmental Screening Tools

Selecting an appropriate developmental screening tool is important for obtaining meaningful information about children's development. Educators and programs should use screening tools that are appropriate for the child's age, supported by research, and responsive to the child's cultural and linguistic background. Screening must also be conducted and interpreted according to

the tool's guidelines (NAEYC, 2020).

Key Considerations When Using Screening Tools

- **Age Appropriateness:** Screening tools should be designed for the child's age and developmental stage. Using a tool outside its intended age range may produce misleading results.
- **Reliability and Validity:** Reliable tools produce consistent results under appropriate conditions, while valid tools have evidence supporting their ability to measure or identify the developmental concerns they are intended to assess. Educators should select tools with established reliability and validity for the population being screened.
- **Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness:** Children's language, culture, and experiences can influence how they respond to screening activities. Educators should use appropriate, validated language versions when available, consider the child's home language, and gather family perspectives to avoid misinterpreting developmental differences as concerns.
- **Appropriate Administration:** Screening tools should be administered and scored according to standardized instructions by individuals who meet the tool's training or qualification requirements. Changing questions, procedures, or scoring methods can affect the accuracy of results.

Note

Understanding Limitations -- Screening Is Not a Diagnosis

Screening provides information about possible developmental concerns but does not establish a diagnosis or fully describe a child's approaches to learning. Results should be considered alongside family input, ongoing observations, and other relevant developmental information (CDC, 2026; NAEYC, 2020). A result within the expected range does not rule out a developmental concern. Persistent family or educator concerns, loss of previously demonstrated skills, or significant difficulty participating warrant appropriate consultation or referral, even when a child has passed a screening.

Using Results to Support Children

When screening suggests a possible developmental concern, educators should communicate with families and follow program procedures for additional monitoring or referral. They should also continue observing the child during everyday activities to identify strengths, interests, and conditions that support participation.

For example, if screening information raises concerns about self-regulation, an educator might observe how a child responds to transitions, challenging activities, and interactions with peers. These observations can guide supportive classroom strategies while the family and appropriate professionals determine whether further evaluation is needed.

The goal is not simply to identify possible concerns, but to use screening information responsibly while maintaining a strengths-based understanding of each child.

Understanding Screening Results in Context

Developmental screening results provide valuable information, but they represent only one part of a child's developmental picture. Children's approaches to learning are influenced by their individual characteristics, relationships, experiences, and environments. A behavior that appears concerning in one setting may look different in another.

Educators must look beyond a screening score to understand how children participate in learning and what factors may influence their responses (NAEYC, 2020).

Factors That Influence Screening Results

Individual Developmental Variation: Children develop skills at different rates. Differences in attention, independence, problem-solving, or self-regulation may reflect typical developmental variation rather than a developmental concern. However, possible concerns should not be dismissed solely because children develop differently.

Temperament: Some children eagerly approach unfamiliar activities, while others prefer to observe before participating. A cautious child may need additional time to feel comfortable, while a highly active child may engage more successfully through movement and hands-on exploration. These differences do not automatically indicate developmental difficulties.

Cultural and Linguistic Influences: Children's home languages, cultural experiences, and expectations for communication and independence can influence how they respond to unfamiliar tasks. For example, a multilingual child may demonstrate skills more confidently in a familiar language or with familiar materials.

Family Perspectives: Families can describe how children approach challenges, explore interests, and demonstrate independence at home. A child who rarely speaks during classroom activities may actively ask questions, solve problems, and initiate activities with family members.

Classroom Environments: Noise levels, activity expectations, materials, relationships, and daily routines can affect children's engagement. A child who struggles to remain involved during lengthy group activities may demonstrate sustained attention during hands-on play or outdoor exploration.

Looking Beyond the Screening Score

Example 6.5.1

Consider a preschooler whose screening results suggest a possible concern related to attention or behavioral regulation. During large-group activities, the child frequently moves away from the group and has difficulty following directions. However, classroom observations show that the same child remains engaged for extended periods when building with blocks and exploring outdoor materials.

Rather than assuming the child lacks attention or motivation, the educator considers how the learning environment and activity expectations influence participation. The educator may introduce shorter group experiences, provide opportunities for movement, and use hands-on materials to support engagement.

These adjustments can support the child's participation, but they do not replace appropriate follow-up when screening results indicate a need for further evaluation.

The key is to recognize that screening results identify possible developmental concerns, while understanding the child within everyday experiences helps educators respond appropriately. Considering developmental variation, temperament, cultural and linguistic experiences, family perspectives, and classroom environments supports more informed, strengths-based decisions (NAEYC, 2020).

The Educator's Role: From Screening to Support

Early childhood educators play an important role in recognizing developmental concerns and supporting children's approaches to learning. Although educators do not diagnose developmental conditions, they contribute valuable information through observations, family communication, and intentional teaching practices.

When screening information suggests a possible developmental concern, educators can follow a five-step process to understand the child's needs and support participation in everyday learning experiences.

The Screening-to-Support Process

Step 1: Observe

Gather information about the child's attention, self-regulation, problem-solving, and engagement across different activities and settings. Identify strengths, interests, patterns of behavior, and situations in which the child may need additional support.

Step 2: Communicate

Share observations and relevant screening information with families using clear, respectful, strengths-based language. Describe what has been observed without labeling the child or suggesting a diagnosis.

Step 3: Collaborate

Work with families, program staff, and appropriate professionals to determine next steps. When screening results indicate a need for further evaluation, follow program procedures for referrals and family support.

Step 4: Support

Use screening information and ongoing observations to guide intentional teaching strategies. Adjust materials, routines, interactions, or activity expectations to support the child's engagement, independence, and participation.

Step 5: Monitor

Continue observing and documenting how the child responds to classroom supports. Use this information to adjust teaching strategies, communicate with families, and determine whether additional support may be needed.

The Screening-to-Support Cycle

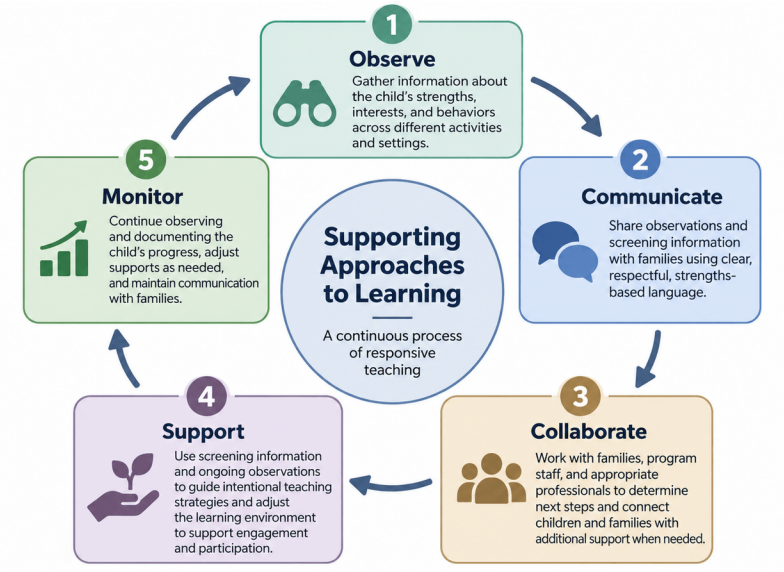


Figure 6.5.1: The Screening-to-Support Cycle. Educators observe, communicate, collaborate, support, and monitor to respond to children's developmental needs and approaches to learning (OpenAI, 2026).

Partnering With Families

Families are essential partners in understanding children's development and approaches to learning. They provide valuable information about how children explore, solve problems, manage challenges, and engage in activities outside the classroom. When educators combine family perspectives with screening information and classroom observations, they gain a more complete understanding of each child's strengths and developmental needs (NAEYC, 2020).

Building Respectful and Collaborative Partnerships

Effective family partnerships involve:

- **Valuing Family Perspectives:** Invite families to share their child's interests, strengths, behaviors, and learning experiences at home. Recognize that children may demonstrate different skills across settings and relationships.
- **Communicating Respectfully:** Explain screening purposes and results using clear, strengths-based language. Avoid labels, assumptions, or statements that suggest a diagnosis. Provide interpretation or translated materials when needed to support meaningful communication.
- **Supporting Shared Decision-Making:** Include families in discussions about developmental concerns, classroom strategies, and possible next steps. Respect families' knowledge, priorities, and questions when considering appropriate supports.
- **Protecting Confidentiality:** Share screening results and developmental information only with authorized individuals and in accordance with applicable privacy requirements and program policies. Obtain appropriate consent before sharing information with outside professionals.
- **Collaborating on Additional Support:** When screening results suggest that further evaluation may be needed, help families understand available resources and referral options. Continue supporting the child in the classroom while families and qualified professionals determine appropriate next steps.

Family Partnerships in Practice

Example 6.5.2

For example, an educator notices that a child often gives up when classroom activities become challenging. During a conversation, the family shares that the child enjoys completing complicated building projects at home and persists when working alongside an older sibling.

Together, the educator and family consider ways to build on this strength, such as offering familiar construction materials, encouraging peer collaboration, and gradually introducing new challenges. The educator continues observing the child's engagement while maintaining communication with the family.

This collaboration helps the educator recognize that persistence may vary depending on the activity, relationships, and environment rather than assuming the child lacks motivation.

Families are not simply recipients of screening results; they are active partners in understanding children's development and supporting their approaches to learning.

Putting It Into Practice

Developmental screening information is most useful when educators consider it alongside classroom observations and family perspectives. The following scenario illustrates how an educator can use multiple sources of information to better understand a child's approaches to learning and provide appropriate support.

Classroom Scenario: Supporting Engagement and Persistence

The Situation

In a preschool classroom, four-year-old Maya enjoys dramatic play and outdoor exploration but often leaves table activities before completing them. When puzzles or construction tasks become challenging, she sometimes pushes the materials away and says, “I can't do it.”

A recently completed developmental screening indicates a possible concern related to behavioral regulation and recommends additional follow-up. The educator recognizes that this result does not establish a diagnosis or fully explain Maya's learning behaviors.

Gathering a More Complete Picture

Through ongoing observations, the educator notices that Maya remains engaged for extended periods during pretend play,

especially when working with peers. She is more likely to become frustrated when activities involve unfamiliar materials or require several steps.

During a family conversation, Maya's parents share that she enjoys building elaborate structures with magnetic tiles at home. They explain that she is more willing to attempt difficult tasks when someone models the first step and encourages her to try independently.

Responding Through Intentional Teaching

Using this information, the educator introduces familiar construction materials alongside new challenges, breaks complex activities into manageable steps, and models problem-solving language such as, “Let's try another way.” Maya is also given opportunities to choose activities and work with supportive peers.

Over time, the educator documents Maya's responses to these strategies and communicates with her family about her participation and persistence. Because the screening results recommended additional follow-up, the educator also supports the family in understanding available evaluation resources and follows program referral procedures.

The educator continues providing individualized learning experiences while any additional developmental concerns are explored.

Reflect and Apply

1. What information from Maya's screening, classroom observations, and family helped the educator develop a more complete understanding of her approaches to learning?
2. Why would it be inappropriate to conclude that Maya lacks persistence or motivation based only on her behavior during table activities?
3. How do the educator's instructional adjustments support Maya's engagement, problem-solving, and persistence?
4. Why is it important to continue classroom support while also following up on screening results that indicate a possible developmental concern?

Vocabulary Alert:

Developmental Screening: A brief, structured process using standardized tools to identify possible developmental concerns that may require additional monitoring or further evaluation.

Approaches to Learning: The ways children engage in learning experiences, including curiosity, initiative, persistence, attention, flexibility, and willingness to explore new challenges.

Ongoing Assessment: The continuous process of gathering information through observations, documentation, and everyday interactions to understand children's development and guide teaching decisions.

Diagnostic Evaluation: A comprehensive assessment conducted by qualified professionals to investigate developmental concerns, determine whether a developmental condition or delay is present, and identify appropriate supports.

Self-Regulation: The developing ability to manage emotions, attention, and behavior in ways that support participation in activities, relationships, and learning experiences.

Reliability: The degree to which an assessment tool produces consistent results when used under appropriate and comparable conditions.

Validity: The extent to which evidence supports the intended interpretation and use of an assessment tool's results.

Strengths-Based Approach: An approach that emphasizes children's existing abilities, interests, and potential while identifying supports that promote continued development and learning.

Exercise 6.5.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What is the primary purpose of developmental screening, and how does it differ from ongoing assessment and diagnostic evaluation?
2. How can developmental screening tools such as the ASQ-3, ASQ:SE-2, and SWYC provide information related to children's approaches to learning, even though they do not directly measure curiosity, initiative, or persistence?
3. Why are reliability, validity, and cultural and linguistic responsiveness important when selecting and using developmental screening tools?

Apply What You Know

4. A preschooler frequently leaves large-group activities but remains engaged for extended periods during block play and outdoor exploration. What factors should the educator consider before interpreting this behavior as a developmental concern?
5. A developmental screening indicates a possible concern related to a child's self-regulation. The child's family reports that the child manages frustration more successfully at home than in the classroom. How should the educator use the screening results, family perspectives, and classroom observations to determine appropriate next steps?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 6.5.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Developmental screening is a brief, structured process used to identify possible developmental concerns that may require additional monitoring or further evaluation. Ongoing assessment involves continuous observation and documentation to understand children's development and guide teaching decisions. Diagnostic evaluation is a more comprehensive process conducted by qualified professionals to investigate specific developmental concerns and determine appropriate supports.
2. These screening tools assess broader developmental skills and behaviors, including communication, problem-solving, social-emotional functioning, and self-regulation. These areas may influence how children participate in activities, respond to challenges, and engage with others. However, screening results do not directly measure a child's curiosity, motivation, or persistence and must be considered alongside other information.
3. Reliability helps ensure that a screening tool produces consistent results under appropriate conditions, while validity provides evidence that the results can be interpreted and used for their intended purpose. Cultural and linguistic responsiveness helps educators recognize how children's languages, experiences, and cultural backgrounds may influence screening performance. Together, these considerations support more accurate, equitable, and developmentally appropriate screening practices.

Answers to Apply What You Know

4. The educator should consider the child's interests, temperament, developmental abilities, cultural and linguistic experiences, and classroom environment. Large-group expectations, activity length, noise levels, and opportunities for movement may influence participation. Observing the child across different

settings and activities can help identify strengths and determine whether additional support or evaluation may be appropriate.

5. The educator should consider the screening results alongside observations from home and school to identify situations in which the child demonstrates successful self-regulation. Conversations with the family may reveal helpful strategies that can be adapted for classroom use. The educator should provide appropriate supports, monitor the child's responses, and follow recommended screening procedures for additional monitoring or referral when indicated.

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6.6: Environmental Rating Scales Related to Approaches to Learning

Introduction

Children's approaches to learning develop through their experiences with people, materials, activities, and routines. An environment that offers meaningful choices, accessible materials, time to explore, and responsive educator support can encourage children to ask questions, try new ideas, and persist when challenges arise (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Environmental rating scales and interaction measures help educators examine these learning conditions. Rather than assessing an individual child's abilities, these tools focus on the quality of the setting and the experiences provided within it. Findings can help educators identify strengths, recognize barriers to participation, and make intentional improvements.

This section explores environmental measures related to approaches to learning and explains how educators can use the information to support children's curiosity, initiative, persistence, creativity, and engagement.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 6.6: Explore the types and purposes of environmental rating scales related to approaches to learning.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

1. Explain how environmental assessment differs from developmental screening and individual child assessment.
2. Compare the purposes and focus of environmental rating scales and interaction measures.
3. Describe how learning environments and educator interactions support approaches to learning.
4. Identify considerations for selecting, using, and interpreting environmental measures.
5. Use environmental assessment findings to plan improvements in early childhood practice.

What Are Environmental Measures?

Environmental measures are tools used to examine the quality of an early childhood setting, including its spaces, materials, routines, activities, and interactions. Some provide a broad picture of the learning environment, while others focus more closely on educator–child interactions (ERS Institute, n.d.; Teachstone, n.d.-b).

These measures help educators consider whether children have opportunities and support to explore, make choices, solve problems, and stay engaged. For example, an assessment may examine whether materials are accessible, children have enough time to develop their play, and educators encourage children to test their ideas.

Program quality includes both **process quality** and **structural quality**. Process quality refers to children's everyday experiences, including their interactions with educators, peers, and materials. Structural quality refers to program characteristics such as group size, staff-to-child ratios, and staff qualifications. Environmental measures differ in how much attention they give to these aspects of quality (Zaslow et al., 2010).

Environmental Assessment and Individual Child Assessment

Environmental assessment focuses on **the conditions provided for learning**. Developmental screening and ongoing child assessment focus on **an individual child's development and learning**. These approaches provide different, complementary information.

Table 6.6.1: Different Purposes of Environmental Assessment, Developmental Screening, and Ongoing Child Assessment.

Assessment approach	Primary focus	Example question
Environmental assessment	The quality of the setting and interactions children experience	Do children have meaningful choices, time to explore, and support to work through challenges?
Developmental screening	Whether a child may need further evaluation of development	Do screening results suggest a developmental concern that needs follow-up?
Ongoing child assessment	A child's strengths, interests, progress, and support needs over time	How does this child approach unfamiliar activities, and what helps the child persist?

Note

This comparison synthesizes environmental measurement and child assessment guidance (ERS Institute, n.d.; NAEYC, 2020; Teachstone, n.d.-b).

Educators can use these sources of information together. If observations show that children frequently abandon activities, an environmental assessment may help educators examine possible contributing conditions, such as interrupted play, inaccessible materials, or limited support during challenging tasks.

Note

Assess the Environment, Not the Child

An environmental assessment score describes the setting or interactions observed. It does not measure an individual child's curiosity, motivation, persistence, or ability. Educators use the findings to improve learning conditions while continuing to observe and support each child.

Types of Environmental Measures Related to Approaches to Learning

Environmental measures differ in what they examine. Some assess the overall learning environment, while others focus on the interactions children experience with educators. Both can help educators identify conditions that support approaches to learning.

Environment Rating Scales (ERS)

The **Environment Rating Scales (ERS)** examine multiple aspects of an early childhood setting, including spaces, furnishings, care routines, materials, learning activities, interactions, and program structure. Different scales are designed for infant and toddler settings, preschool classrooms, family child care homes, and school-age programs (ERS Institute, n.d.).

ERS findings can help educators examine whether the environment offers accessible materials, varied learning opportunities, and routines that support children's participation. These conditions matter when children choose activities, explore ideas, and continue working through challenges.

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)

The **Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)** focuses on the quality of educator–child interactions. Its emphasis differs from measures that broadly examine physical spaces and materials. CLASS tools vary by developmental level and edition. CLASS Second Edition includes Infant–Toddler and Pre-K–3rd tools; programs should select the version appropriate to their setting and assessment requirements (Teachstone, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

CLASS findings can help educators reflect on how they respond to children's interests, support participation, and extend thinking. For example, an educator might consider whether conversations encourage children to explain an idea, try another strategy, or take an active role in learning.

Table 6.6.2: Environmental Measures and Their Connections to Approaches to Learning.

Measure	Primary focus	Appropriate setting	Connection to approaches to learning
Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ITERS-3)	The quality of infant and toddler environments, routines, activities, and interactions	Group settings serving infants and toddlers	Helps educators examine opportunities for safe exploration, active participation, and responsive support
Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3)	The quality of preschool environments, routines, activities, and interactions	Preschool group settings	Helps educators examine choices, materials, play opportunities, and support for sustained engagement
Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (FCCERS-3)	The quality of environments and experiences in family child care	Family child care homes, often serving mixed ages	Helps educators examine how spaces, materials, and routines support exploration and participation across ages
School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale, Updated Edition (SACERS-U)	The quality of environments and experiences in school-age care	Before-school, after-school, and other school-age care programs	Helps educators examine opportunities for initiative, collaboration, problem-solving, and independent activity
Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)	The quality of educator–child interactions	Settings matching the developmental level of the selected CLASS version	Helps educators examine how interactions support children's engagement, initiative, and thinking

Note

Tool descriptions and settings are based on ERS Institute (n.d.) and Teachstone (n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Connections to approaches to learning are instructional applications informed by NAEYC (2020), rather than official scoring categories.

These tools examine conditions that can support approaches to learning; they do not directly measure each child's curiosity, creativity, or persistence. Educators select the appropriate tool and edition for their setting and use its findings alongside observations of children and information from families.

What Do These Measures Assess?

Environmental measures examine features of a setting that shape children's everyday learning experiences. Although each tool has its own focus and criteria, findings can help educators consider how the environment and their interactions support approaches to learning.

Having materials available is only part of the picture. Children also need opportunities to use them, time to develop their ideas, and responsive support when they encounter challenges.

Table 6.6.3: Learning Conditions Related to Approaches to Learning.

Area to examine	What educators consider	Connection to approaches to learning
Spaces and accessible materials	Can children reach, choose, and use materials? Can children with different abilities participate?	Accessible spaces and materials support initiative and exploration.
Variety of learning experiences	Do children have opportunities to investigate, create, build, pretend, and solve problems?	Varied, open-ended experiences encourage curiosity and creativity.
Schedules and routines	Do children have time to become involved in activities? Are transitions predictable and manageable?	Time and predictability support sustained engagement and persistence.
Emotional climate and responsive support	Do educators respond warmly, recognize children's cues, and support them during frustration?	Supportive relationships help children feel comfortable trying unfamiliar activities and seeking help.
Meaningful choices and participation	Can children contribute ideas and make choices within appropriate limits?	Meaningful participation supports initiative and ownership of learning.
Interactions that extend thinking	Do educators invite children to explain, predict, investigate, and try different strategies?	Thoughtful interactions support flexible thinking and problem-solving.

Note

These learning conditions synthesize developmentally appropriate teaching guidance (NAEYC, 2020); they are not an official assessment checklist.

These areas provide a way to connect environmental assessment findings to teaching decisions. They are not a substitute for a tool's official criteria, and not every tool assesses every area listed.

Why Use Environmental Measures?

Environmental measures help educators examine the learning conditions children experience and identify specific ways to improve them. Findings are most useful when they lead to reflection, planning, and changes in everyday practice.

Educators and programs can use environmental measures to:

- **Identify strengths.** Recognize spaces, routines, materials, and interactions that support children's exploration and engagement.
- **Recognize barriers to participation.** Examine conditions that may limit children's choices, access, or opportunities to develop their ideas.
- **Guide intentional improvements.** Select manageable changes, such as extending play periods, making materials easier to reach, or supporting children's problem-solving.
- **Focus professional learning.** Identify areas where coaching, training, or shared reflection could strengthen practice.
- **Review progress.** Revisit learning conditions after making changes and consider whether children have more opportunities to participate, explore, and persist (Teachstone, n.d.-b; Zaslow et al., 2010).

For approaches to learning, these measures help educators look beyond a child's behavior to consider the conditions surrounding it. If children rarely initiate activities, for example, educators might examine whether choices are meaningful, materials are inviting and accessible, and adults allow children time to act on their interests.

Use Findings to Guide Improvement

> An assessment score is a starting point for reflection. The purpose is to use the findings to strengthen children's everyday experiences. A useful improvement plan identifies what will change, who will support the change, and how educators will review its effects.

Choosing and Using Environmental Measures

An environmental measure is most useful when it matches the setting, answers a clear question, and provides information educators can use to improve practice. Selecting a tool requires attention to its purpose, quality, and relevance to the children and families served.

Match the Tool to the Purpose and Setting

Begin by identifying what the program wants to examine. A broad environmental rating scale may be appropriate for reviewing spaces, materials, routines, and interactions. An interaction measure may be more useful when the goal is to strengthen how educators respond to children and extend their thinking.

Select the tool and edition intended for the children's developmental levels and program type. Review the manual for administration procedures, observer qualifications, and interpretation guidance. Formal assessment may require training or certification; informal reflection using a tool's concepts does not replace a properly administered assessment (ERS Institute, n.d.; Teachstone, n.d.-b).

Consider Reliability and Validity

Reliability refers to the consistency of assessment results. For example, trained observers using the same criteria should reach reasonably consistent judgments about the same observed experiences.

Validity concerns whether evidence supports interpreting and using results for a particular purpose (Zaslow et al., 2010). A tool designed to assess educator–child interactions should not be used to draw conclusions about an individual child's developmental abilities.

Follow the tool's procedures rather than changing criteria or scoring rules. Educators can adapt classroom practices in response to findings while preserving the assessment procedures needed for meaningful interpretation.

Use a Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Approach

Interpret findings with attention to children's languages, family practices, abilities, and community contexts. Consider whose experiences are represented in the materials and whether children have meaningful ways to participate (NAEYC, 2020; Zaslow et al., 2010).

For example, a multilingual child may show initiative through gestures, actions, or a home language. An educator who recognizes these forms of communication can respond to the child's ideas and support continued engagement. Family perspectives can help educators understand participation that might otherwise be overlooked.

Cultural responsiveness also requires examining whether the selected tool is appropriate for the setting and recognizing limitations in its evidence or criteria.

Recognize the Limits of the Results

Environmental assessment provides information about the conditions observed during a particular period. Daily variations, attendance, activities, and observer judgments can influence what is captured. A single observation may not represent the full range of children's experiences.

Use findings alongside ongoing observations, family input, educator reflection, and other relevant program information. Look at specific findings as well as overall scores to determine what needs attention (Zaslow et al., 2010).

Note

One Measure Cannot Answer Every Question

An environmental measure does not provide a complete picture of program quality or explain every child's behavior. It should be used for its intended purpose and combined with other information to guide thoughtful improvements.

The Educator's Role: From Findings to Improvement

Educators turn environmental assessment findings into changes in everyday practice. This involves examining children's experiences, choosing a focused improvement, and reviewing whether the change supports participation and learning (NAEYC, 2020; Teachstone, n.d.-b).

Review the Findings

Identify strengths and areas needing attention. Look beyond the overall score to consider specific spaces, routines, activities, and interactions. Connect findings with classroom observations: When do children initiate activities, stay engaged, or seek help? When do they encounter barriers?

Identify a Priority

Choose a manageable improvement that addresses a meaningful need. For example, educators might focus on making materials accessible, reducing interruptions during play, or giving children more opportunities to solve problems before adults step in.

Describe the priority in terms of children's experiences: "Children will have more opportunities to choose and use materials independently" gives clearer direction than "Improve the materials score."

Make Intentional Changes

Plan what will change, who will help, and what resources are needed. Changes may involve rearranging a space, adjusting a routine, introducing adapted materials, or practicing a different interaction strategy.

Use responsive support. Some children may need a visual cue, a demonstration, or help getting started before they can participate more independently.

Observe and Reflect

After implementing the change, observe how children respond over time. Are more children participating? Do they initiate activities, try different strategies, or remain engaged longer?

Use these observations to decide whether to continue, adjust, or expand the improvement. When repeating a formal environmental assessment, follow the tool's administration procedures.

The Environmental Improvement Cycle

Environmental improvement is an ongoing process. Educators use assessment findings and children's responses together to guide their next decisions.

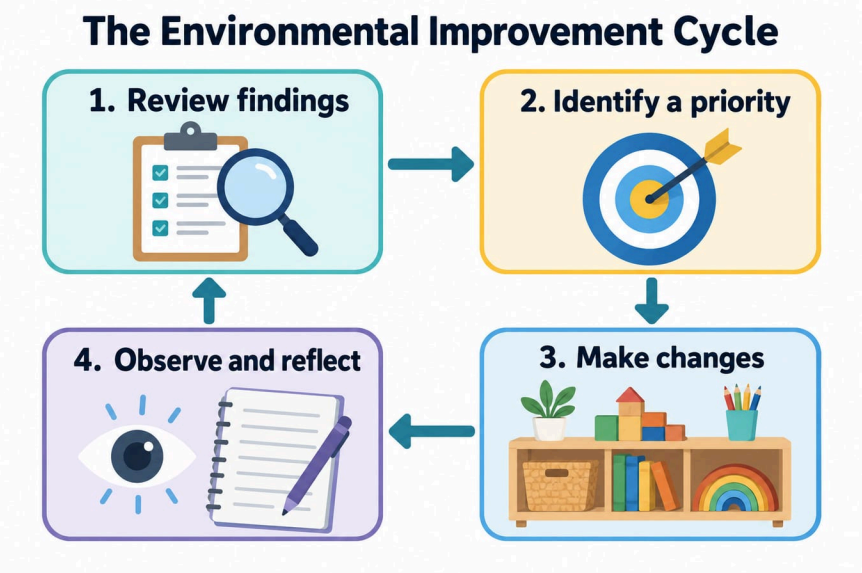


Figure 6.6.1: Educators use an ongoing cycle to review findings, identify a priority, make changes, and observe and reflect (OpenAI, 2026).

Note. This instructional cycle synthesizes improvement practices informed by NAEYC (2020) and Teachstone (n.d.-b); it is not an official scoring procedure for an environmental measure.

Partnering With Families

Families offer valuable perspectives on what captures children's interest, how they approach challenges, and what helps them participate. Educators can use this information alongside environmental assessment findings to plan improvements that reflect the children and families in the program (NAEYC, 2020).

Invite Family Perspectives

Ask specific, strengths-based questions that connect to children's everyday experiences:

- What does your child enjoy exploring or figuring out?
- When something is difficult, what helps your child keep trying?
- How does your child communicate ideas or ask for help?
- What familiar activities, materials, languages, or experiences could we include in the classroom?

Offer accessible ways for families to contribute, such as conversations, translated messages, photographs, or brief written responses. Participation should be voluntary and should not depend on families purchasing materials.

Share Findings Clearly

Explain what the environmental assessment examined and how the program will use the findings. Use plain language and concrete examples rather than relying on scores or tool terminology.

For example, an educator might explain: "We noticed that some materials were difficult for children to reach independently. We are rearranging the shelves so children can make more choices during play."

Make clear that environmental findings describe learning conditions and interactions, rather than rating individual children or families.

Use Family Input and Follow Up

Family input can help educators select meaningful materials, recognize children's communication, and understand interests that may be less visible in the classroom. Combine these perspectives with observations and assessment findings when planning changes.

After making an improvement, share what educators are noticing and invite families to describe related experiences at home. Children may participate differently across settings; these differences provide useful information for continued reflection.

Example 6.6.1

Building on a Familiar Interest

An environmental assessment identifies limited variety in the classroom's open-ended materials. An educator asks families what their children enjoy creating and investigating. Several describe children pretending to cook and building with boxes.

The educator adds pretend cooking materials that reflect family experiences, along with sturdy boxes for construction. Over the following weeks, the educator observes whether these additions invite more children to initiate play, contribute ideas, and remain engaged.

Putting It Into Practice

Environmental assessment findings become useful when educators connect them to children's experiences and make intentional changes. The following example shows how an educator uses findings, observations, and family input to support approaches to learning.

Example 6.6.2

More Time to Investigate

In a preschool classroom, children often begin building roads and bridges in the block area but must clean up before developing their ideas. When structures collapse, the educator frequently steps in to fix them.

An environmental assessment identifies frequent interruptions during play and limited opportunities for children to work through problems. Classroom observations show that some children stop building after a collapse or wait for the educator to repair their structures. Families share that several children enjoy building at home and often return to unfinished projects.

The educator uses the environmental improvement cycle:

Table 6.6.4: Using Environmental Assessment Findings to Support Persistence and Problem-Solving.

Step	Educator action
Review findings	Connects assessment findings about the schedule and interactions with observations of interrupted projects and children waiting for help
Identify a priority	Chooses to give children more time and responsive support to develop and test their building ideas
Make changes	Adjusts the schedule to provide a longer play period and creates a designated space for selected unfinished structures. When problems arise, pauses, acknowledges frustration, and invites children to consider another strategy. Offers hints or demonstrations when needed

Step	Educator action
Observe and reflect	Documents whether children return to projects, test different approaches, seek help, and remain involved after setbacks. Uses these observations to adjust the support provided

Note. Original classroom example illustrating developmentally appropriate teaching and reflection informed by NAEYC (2020). This example is not an official assessment item or scoring guide.

Connecting the Changes to Approaches to Learning

The changes create opportunities for children to demonstrate **initiative** by choosing and returning to projects, **curiosity and creativity** by testing designs, and **persistence** by trying another approach after a setback. Longer play periods also allow children to sustain their **engagement**.

These observations help the educator judge whether the changes are useful. They do not establish that every child will respond in the same way or that a higher environmental score alone guarantees progress.

Vocabulary Alert:

Environmental assessment: The process of examining the quality of a setting's spaces, materials, routines, activities, and interactions.

Environmental rating scale: A standardized tool with criteria for assessing multiple aspects of a learning environment.

Interaction measure: A tool that focuses on the quality of educator–child interactions.

Process quality: The quality of children's everyday experiences, including interactions with educators, peers, and materials.

Structural quality: Program characteristics such as group size, staff-to-child ratios, and staff qualifications.

Reliability: The consistency of assessment results when a tool is used under appropriate conditions.

Validity: The extent to which evidence supports interpreting and using assessment results for a particular purpose.

Culturally and linguistically responsive practice: Practice that recognizes and responds to children's and families' cultures, languages, and experiences.

Continuous quality improvement: An ongoing process of reviewing information, making intentional changes, and examining their effects to strengthen program practices.

Exercise 6.6.1

Check Your Understanding

1. **Distinguish assessment purposes.** How does environmental assessment differ from developmental screening and ongoing child assessment?
2. **Compare tools.** What is the main difference between the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)?
3. **Apply environmental findings.** A preschool classroom has many interesting materials, but most are stored where children cannot reach them. Children frequently wait for an adult to select an activity. What change could the educator make, and which approaches to learning could it support?

4. **Use responsive interpretation.** During classroom play, a multilingual child contributes ideas through gestures, actions, and a home language. An educator describes the child as showing little initiative because the child rarely speaks English. What should the educator reconsider, and how could family input help?
5. **Plan and review improvement.** An environmental assessment identifies frequent interruptions during play. Children often leave projects unfinished and rarely return to them. Use the environmental improvement cycle to describe how the educator could respond.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 6.6.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. **Environmental assessment** examines learning conditions, including spaces, materials, routines, activities, and interactions. **Developmental screening** identifies whether an individual child may need further evaluation. **Ongoing child assessment** documents a child's strengths, interests, progress, and support needs over time. These approaches provide complementary information.
2. **ERS** examines multiple aspects of the overall environment, including spaces, materials, routines, activities, and interactions. **CLASS** focuses on the quality of educator–child interactions. Educators select the appropriate tool and version for their purpose and setting.
3. The educator could place developmentally appropriate materials on accessible shelves and use picture labels or adapted storage as needed. This would give children more opportunities to choose and begin activities, supporting **initiative, curiosity, and engagement**. Materials requiring adult supervision would remain appropriately managed.
4. The educator should recognize that initiative can be expressed through multiple languages and forms of communication. Gestures, actions, and home-language contributions may demonstrate active participation. Families can explain how the child communicates interests and ideas, helping the educator recognize these contributions and respond meaningfully.
5. Possible responses include:

- **Review findings:** Connect the assessment findings with observations of when play is interrupted and how children respond.
- **Identify a priority:** Increase opportunities for children to develop and revisit their ideas.
- **Make changes:** Provide a longer play period, reduce unnecessary transitions, and establish a way to save selected projects or document them with photographs.
- **Observe and reflect:** Examine whether children remain engaged longer, return to projects, and try additional strategies. Adjust the plan based on their responses.

These changes could support **engagement, initiative, creativity, and persistence**, with individualized assistance for children who need it.

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7: ANALYZING THE COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AND GENERAL KNOWLEDGE OF CHILDREN

7.1: The Progression of Cognitive Development and General Knowledge

7.2: Theories of Cognitive Development

7.2.1: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

7.2.2: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development

7.2.3: Information Processing

7.3: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Cognition and General Knowledge

7.4: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Cognition and General Knowledge

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7.1: The Progression of Cognitive Development and General Knowledge

Introduction

Children use thinking every day as they explore materials, remember experiences, ask questions, and solve problems. A preschooler may pretend a block is a telephone, sort objects by color, or try different ways to build a tower. An older child may organize objects using several characteristics, explain why something happened, or use a familiar strategy to solve a new problem.

Cognitive development refers to changes in how children think, learn, remember, reason, and solve problems. **General knowledge** includes the concepts and information children build about people, objects, events, and the world around them. These areas develop together: children use their thinking abilities to build knowledge, and their growing knowledge helps them make sense of new experiences.

Between ages 3 and 8, children increasingly use symbols, connect ideas, and explain their thinking. Development varies across children and across tasks. A child may demonstrate complex thinking during familiar play while needing support with an unfamiliar activity. Understanding these patterns helps educators recognize children's current abilities and interpret what they observe during everyday experiences (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 7.1: Describe the progression of cognitive development and general knowledge.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the relationship between cognitive development and general knowledge.
- Explain how symbolic thinking, memory, attention, reasoning, and problem-solving change across ages 3–8.
- Identify ways children build concepts and knowledge through everyday experiences.
- Recognize individual variation in cognitive development.
- Use classroom observations to describe children's developing thinking and understanding.

Understanding Cognitive Development and General Knowledge

Cognitive development involves the mental processes children use to make sense of their experiences. These processes include noticing information, remembering, using symbols, comparing, reasoning, and solving problems. Children demonstrate these abilities when they plan a pretend-play scene, work out how puzzle pieces fit together, or explain why they think an object will float.

General knowledge is the understanding children build about their world. It includes knowledge about living things, physical materials, quantities, space, time, people, and everyday events. Knowing that plants need water, recognizing familiar community roles, and understanding that a larger container may hold more than a smaller one are examples of general knowledge.

Cognitive development and general knowledge support each other (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015)**.** Thinking processes help children gain and organize knowledge. What children already know also influences what they notice, the questions they ask, and how they approach new problems. For example, a child who has observed ice melting may draw on that experience when predicting what will happen to snow brought indoors.

Thinking Becomes Visible Through Everyday Experiences

Educators cannot directly observe a child's mental processes, but they can gather clues through the child's actions, communication, and representations. A child may demonstrate understanding through spoken or signed language, gestures,

drawings, construction, pretend play, or an assistive communication system.

During block play, for example, a child might:

- Remember how a previous tower was built.
- Compare blocks to find a suitable base.
- Predict what will happen if another block is added.
- Change the design after the tower falls.
- Describe or show what made the new tower more stable.

One experience can reveal several connected thinking processes. The child is also building knowledge about balance, size, shape, and how materials behave.

Development Involves More Than Knowing the Correct Answer

Children's explanations and strategies can reveal as much as their final answers. A child may give an incorrect prediction while demonstrating thoughtful reasoning based on previous experience. Another child may provide a correct answer without understanding why it is correct.

For example, a child might predict that every large object will sink because a large rock sank during an earlier exploration. When a large piece of wood floats, the child has an opportunity to reconsider that idea. This process of connecting experiences, testing ideas, and revising understanding is part of cognitive development.

Children's opportunities to build knowledge differ across families, cultures, languages, and communities. An unfamiliar word, material, or classroom task may affect how a child demonstrates understanding. Educators therefore consider both the child's thinking and the experiences the child brings to the situation (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

> **Look at the Thinking Behind the Response**
>
> To understand children's cognitive development, notice what they try, what they remember, how they connect ideas, and how they respond when something unexpected happens. Consider their actions and communication alongside whether an answer is correct.

Symbolic Thinking and Representation

Symbolic thinking is the ability to use one thing to stand for something else. Children use symbols when they pretend a block is a telephone, draw a picture of their family, or use words to describe something that is not present. **Representation** involves expressing an object, experience, or idea through another form, such as a drawing, model, gesture, or written symbol.

Symbolic thinking allows children to move beyond what they can see and touch at a particular moment. They can remember an experience, imagine a possibility, and communicate an idea to someone else.

Symbolic Thinking in the Preschool Years

During the preschool years, children increasingly use objects, actions, and language to represent their experiences. In pretend play, a child may use a bowl as a pet's water dish or arrange chairs to create a bus. As play becomes more elaborate, children connect roles and events into shared stories. They may decide who will drive the bus, where passengers will sit, and what will happen when the bus reaches its destination.

Drawings and constructions also become ways to represent ideas. A child may identify a collection of lines as "my dog" or explain that a block structure is a grocery store. The representation may not closely resemble the object to an adult, but the child's explanation reveals its meaning.

Children begin connecting familiar symbols with meanings, such as recognizing a picture that identifies where materials belong or understanding that a written name represents a particular person. Their understanding of one kind of symbol may be stronger than their understanding of another (DeLoache, 2004).

Representation in the Early Elementary Years

Children begin learning conventional symbols during the preschool years and extend this understanding during the early elementary years. They increasingly understand how letters and letter combinations represent speech sounds, numerals represent quantities, and maps use marks and shapes to represent places. Children become more able to create and interpret drawings, diagrams, models, and written explanations.

They also become more able to connect different representations of the same idea. For example, a child may show a quantity using counters, draw the counters, and write a numeral to represent how many there are. These connections develop through experience; being able to recognize or copy a symbol does not necessarily mean the child understands its meaning (DeLoache, 2004; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Table 7.1.1: Examples of Symbolic Thinking and Representation

Form of representation	Preschool example	Early elementary example
Pretend play	Uses a block as a telephone.	Plans a pretend store with signs, prices, and assigned roles.
Drawing	Draws marks and explains, “This is my house.”	Draws a house with details intended to communicate features to others.
Models and construction	Builds a road with blocks for toy cars.	Builds a model of a neighborhood and explains its parts.
Mathematical symbols	Uses objects to show how many plates are needed.	Connects objects, drawings, and numerals to represent a quantity.
Maps and diagrams	Uses a simple picture cue to locate an activity area.	Creates or follows a simple map using symbols for familiar places.

Note

Classroom examples are illustrative and informed by research on symbolic understanding and early learning (DeLoache, 2004; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

These examples illustrate possible changes in representation rather than a checklist of skills every child must demonstrate at a particular age.

Interpreting Children’s Representations

To understand a child’s representation, educators consider the meaning the child gives it. Asking “Tell me about what you made” can reveal ideas that are not obvious from the finished product.

A child's ability to express an idea also depends on language, experience, and access to materials. Drawing skill, handwriting, or spoken language alone may not fully show what the child understands. Observing several forms of representation provides a fuller picture of the child's thinking.

Example 7.1.1

A Block Becomes a Bridge

During block play, Maya places a long block across two shorter blocks and moves a toy animal underneath it. "It's the bridge by my grandma's house," she explains.

Maya is using a construction to represent a familiar place. Her actions and explanation show that she connects the model with a real bridge and understands that there is space to travel beneath it.

Memory, Attention, and Thinking

Children use attention and memory together to learn from their experiences. **Attention** allows children to focus on information, while **memory** allows them to retain and use it. These processes help children follow a story, remember where materials belong, and connect a new experience with something they already know.

Between ages 3 and 8, children generally become more able to direct their attention, hold information in mind, and use strategies to remember. These changes support increasingly complex thinking, although performance depends on the activity, the setting, and the child's familiarity with the task (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011).

Attention in the Preschool Years

Preschool children may become deeply engaged in an interesting activity while finding it difficult to focus on something less familiar or less meaningful. Their attention can shift quickly when something new catches their interest. Focusing on relevant information while ignoring distractions is still developing.

For example, a child may spend considerable time building a roadway but lose track of a group discussion when another child moves nearby. This difference shows how attention varies with interest, activity demands, and surroundings.

Across the preschool years, children increasingly sustain involvement, return to an activity after an interruption, and shift attention when needed. These abilities remain uneven and often depend on adult support.

Memory in the Preschool Years

Preschool children remember familiar people, places, routines, and experiences. They may recall what happened on a family outing or anticipate the next event in a familiar story. Remembering information without reminders, organizing events in sequence, and deliberately using memory strategies are still developing.

Working memory is the ability to hold information in mind while using it. A child uses working memory when remembering which materials to collect while moving across the classroom or keeping a game's rule in mind while deciding what to do (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Tasks that require children to hold several pieces of information in mind can be challenging. A child who remembers one direction may lose track when several unfamiliar steps are presented together. This does not necessarily mean the child failed to listen; the task may place greater demands on working memory.

Changes in the Early Elementary Years

During the early elementary years, children generally become more able to focus on relevant details, manage distractions, and hold information in mind while completing a task. They can increasingly coordinate several steps, although complex or unfamiliar activities may still require reminders (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011).

Children also begin using memory strategies more deliberately. They may repeat information, group related items, or connect something new with what they already know. These strategies become more effective with experience and guidance rather than appearing automatically at a particular age.

For example, a child may remember materials for a project by grouping them into “things for cutting” and “things for decorating.” Another child may repeat a short sequence aloud while carrying it out.

Becoming Aware of Thinking

As children develop, they become more aware of what they know and how they learn. **Metacognition** means awareness of, and thinking about, one’s own mental processes.

A preschool child might say, “I forgot what comes next,” or recognize that a puzzle is difficult. An early elementary child may increasingly explain a strategy, notice an error, or decide to try another approach. This awareness is still developing; children may overestimate what they will remember or need help recognizing why a strategy did not work (Flavell, 1979).

> **Attention and Memory Depend on Context**
>
> Children’s attention and recall vary with interest, prior knowledge, language demands, fatigue, stress, and distractions. Observe these abilities across several experiences before drawing conclusions about a child’s thinking.

Reasoning and Problem-Solving

Reasoning involves using information and making connections to reach an explanation or conclusion. **Problem-solving** involves working toward a goal when the solution is not immediately clear. Children use these processes when they figure out why a tower falls, decide how to share materials, or find a way to move water between containers.

Between ages 3 and 8, children increasingly coordinate planning, comparison, testing, and explanation when solving problems. Preschool children can already make predictions and reason about causes, especially in familiar situations. With development and experience, their approaches often become more organized and deliberate. Hands-on exploration remains important throughout this progression (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Reasoning and Problem-Solving in the Preschool Years

Preschool children often solve problems through direct action. They try an approach, observe what happens, and make changes. A child completing a puzzle may turn a piece several times before finding how it fits. With experience, the child may begin looking at its shape or picture before trying it.

Children also develop an understanding of **cause and effect**, or how one action or event influences another. They may notice that pushing a toy car harder makes it travel farther or that adding too many blocks makes a tower fall. Their explanations often draw on what they can readily see and what they have experienced before.

Preschool reasoning can be thoughtful while still focusing on only part of a situation. For example, a child may decide that a taller container holds more water without considering its width. Children’s conclusions reveal which features they notice and how they connect them.

As their thinking develops, preschool children increasingly anticipate results and try solutions based on earlier experiences. They may choose a larger block for a tower’s base because a narrow base did not work previously. Planning and trial and error often occur together.

Changes in the Early Elementary Years

During the early elementary years, children generally become more able to organize information and consider several relevant features of a problem. They increasingly compare options, follow a sequence of steps, and explain why a solution might work.

Their reasoning becomes more logical in situations involving familiar objects and observable events. For example, when comparing containers, a child may consider both height and width or suggest measuring the water to check a prediction. Reasoning about abstract or unfamiliar ideas can remain challenging.

Children also become more able to use a successful strategy in a related situation. A child who discovers that a wider base stabilizes a block tower may apply that idea when building a different structure. However, recognizing when a strategy applies to a new problem is still developing.

Flexible Thinking and Revising Ideas

Cognitive flexibility is the ability to shift attention, perspectives, or strategies as a situation changes. In problem-solving, it helps children move beyond an approach that is not working (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011).

A preschool child may repeatedly try the same solution before considering another possibility. Across the early elementary years, children increasingly recognize when they need to change their plan, although frustration or unfamiliar demands can make this difficult at any age.

An unsuccessful attempt can provide useful information. Children develop their thinking when they notice what happened, reconsider an explanation, and test another possibility. An immediate correct answer may reveal less about their reasoning than the process they use to reach it.

Finding a Way Across

Four-year-old Leo places a long block between two stacks to make a bridge for a toy truck. The block falls because the stacks are too far apart. Leo first tries putting it back in the same position. Then he moves the stacks closer together, and the bridge stays in place.

Seven-year-old Amira faces a similar challenge. Before building, she compares several blocks and chooses one long enough to span the gap. When the bridge tips as the truck crosses, she adjusts the supports and tests it again.

Both children use reasoning and problem-solving. Leo's actions illustrate learning through attempts and adjustments. Amira's actions illustrate more advance planning and deliberate testing. These examples show possible differences in approach, rather than fixed expectations for every child of those ages.

Interpreting Children's Problem-Solving

Children may show their reasoning through actions, gestures, drawings, or spoken and signed explanations. Their ability to describe a solution may differ from their ability to carry it out.

Educators look for how children identify a problem, choose an approach, respond to results, and use previous experience. Observing this process across familiar and unfamiliar activities provides a fuller picture of developing reasoning.

Notice the Process

A child's first answer or unsuccessful attempt does not fully show what the child understands. Notice how the child tests ideas, makes adjustments, and explains or demonstrates a solution.

Building Concepts and General Knowledge

Children build general knowledge as they explore, participate in routines, interact with others, and encounter new information. They gradually organize this knowledge into **concepts**, or mental groupings that help them understand objects, events, and relationships. Concepts such as *animal*, *more*, *under*, and *before* help children connect individual experiences with broader ideas.

Between ages 3 and 8, children's knowledge generally becomes more detailed, organized, and connected. They increasingly recognize that an idea learned in one situation may apply in another. This progression depends on both developing thinking abilities and opportunities to learn (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Categories and Relationships

Preschool children often group objects by noticeable features, such as color, shape, or size. They also form categories based on familiar purposes, such as things people eat or items used for drawing. Their categories may differ from those an adult would choose. A child might place a whale with fish because both live in water.

As children gain experience, they increasingly consider less obvious features and relationships. During the early elementary years, they become more able to understand that an object can belong to several categories. A dog can be a pet, an animal, and a mammal. Children also become more able to explain a grouping rule and reorganize the same materials using a different rule.

Number, Quantity, and Patterns

In the preschool years, children build connections among number words, objects, and quantities. Reciting a counting sequence does not necessarily mean a child can accurately count a collection or understand that the last number counted tells how many objects there are.

Through everyday experiences, children increasingly compare amounts, match one object to another, and explore what happens when objects are added or removed. They also notice and create repeating patterns, such as alternating red and blue blocks.

Across the early elementary years, children develop more connected understandings of number relationships. They increasingly recognize that a quantity can be separated and combined in different ways. For example, six objects can be arranged as two groups of three or a group of four and a group of two. Children also become more able to describe a pattern's rule and predict what comes next (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Space, Measurement, and Time

Preschool children develop spatial concepts as they move through their surroundings and handle objects. Words and relationships such as *inside*, *beside*, *above*, and *behind* become meaningful through experience. Children explore measurement by comparing objects and using informal units, such as blocks placed along the length of a table.

Their early understanding of time is often connected to familiar routines: snack comes after outdoor play, or a family member arrives after rest time. Words such as *yesterday* and *tomorrow* may be used before children consistently understand them.

During the early elementary years, children increasingly use spatial relationships to interpret maps, plan constructions, and describe locations. Their measurement becomes more systematic as they learn to use equal units and measurement tools. Understanding sequences, duration, calendars, and clock time also develops, although these concepts do not all emerge at once.

Knowledge About the Natural and Social World

Preschool children build knowledge about living things, materials, weather, family life, and community activities. They may recognize that plants grow, certain materials absorb water, and people use different tools for different jobs. Their explanations often combine direct observations with information from other people, books, and media.

Across the early elementary years, children increasingly connect facts into broader explanations. They may relate a plant's growth to its access to water and light or explain how several community roles contribute to a shared activity. They also become more able to compare information and revise an earlier understanding when new evidence appears (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Table 7.1.2: Examples of Developing Concepts and General Knowledge

Area	Preschool examples	Early elementary examples
Categories	Groups objects by color, shape, or familiar use.	Explains grouping rules and recognizes overlapping categories.
Number and quantity	Counts small collections and explores adding or removing objects.	Uses relationships among quantities to combine and separate groups.
Patterns	Copies or extends a simple repeating pattern.	Describes a pattern's rule and predicts missing or later elements.
Space and measurement	Uses positional words and compares lengths with informal units.	Interprets simple maps and measures more systematically.
Time	Connects events with familiar routines.	Increasingly understands sequence, duration, and calendar relationships.
Natural and social world	Notices features of living things, materials, and community activities.	Connects observations and information into more detailed explanations.

Note

Examples summarize broad patterns in concept development and early learning; they are not age-specific milestones (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

These examples describe possible developmental patterns rather than fixed age requirements. A child's understanding may be more advanced in a familiar area than in one the child has had fewer opportunities to explore.

Knowledge Reflects Children's Experiences

Children bring different knowledge to the classroom. One child may know about gardening, another about caring for younger siblings, and another about public transportation. These experiences provide valuable foundations for learning.

Knowledge expressed in a home language, through practical actions, or in a culturally familiar activity may not be immediately apparent in an unfamiliar classroom task. Educators consider what children understand across settings and forms of communication.

Familiarity Influences What Children Show

A child's unfamiliarity with a particular word, object, or experience does not by itself indicate limited cognitive ability. Consider the child's opportunities to learn and the knowledge demonstrated in other situations.

Cognitive Development Across Ages 3–8

Cognitive development involves connected changes in how children represent ideas, attend to information, remember experiences, solve problems, and build knowledge. These abilities develop together, but they do not progress at the same rate in every child or every situation.

The following table summarizes broad developmental patterns using approximate age groupings. These groupings provide a way to organize the discussion; they do not establish fixed boundaries or a validated sequence of skills. Development is gradual, and children may demonstrate abilities described in more than one column.

Table 7.1.3: Broad Patterns of Cognitive Development and General Knowledge Across Ages 3–8

Area of development	Approximately ages 3–4	Approximately ages 4–5	Approximately ages 6–8
Symbolic thinking and representation	Uses objects in pretend play and gives meaning to drawings and constructions.	Connects pretend roles and events into longer scenarios; creates representations with more details.	Increasingly connects models, drawings, words, and conventional symbols to represent the same idea.
Attention	Focuses on interesting activities but may be easily drawn to competing events.	Increasingly sustains engagement and returns to an activity with reminders or support.	Becomes more able to focus on relevant information, manage distractions, and shift attention as a task requires.
Memory	Recalls familiar routines and experiences; often benefits from cues.	Remembers more details and increasingly holds short sequences in mind during familiar tasks.	Coordinates more information during tasks and begins using deliberate memory strategies more consistently.
Reasoning and problem-solving	Frequently learns through direct action, repeated attempts, and noticing results.	Increasingly predicts outcomes and chooses solutions based on earlier experiences.	More often compares options, plans steps, tests solutions, and explains reasoning about concrete situations.
Categories and concepts	Groups objects by noticeable features or familiar purposes.	Increasingly explains grouping choices and sorts familiar materials using different rules.	Understands more complex relationships, including that an object can belong to several categories.
Number, space, and time	Explores quantities, positions, comparisons, and sequences within everyday activities.	Builds stronger connections among counting, quantity, patterns, measurement, and familiar event sequences.	Develops more organized number relationships and increasingly uses measurement tools, maps, calendars, and other representations.
General knowledge	Builds knowledge closely connected to familiar people, places, materials, and events.	Connects experiences and information to describe patterns and offer explanations.	Organizes knowledge into broader concepts and increasingly uses it to interpret unfamiliar situations.
Awareness of thinking	May recognize that something is difficult or that information has been forgotten.	Begins describing approaches and recognizing some mistakes, often with prompting.	Increasingly explains strategies and, with experience and support, checks work and considers changing an approach.

Note

This author-created synthesis is informed by research on cognitive development, executive function, symbolic understanding, and metacognition (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011; DeLoache, 2004; Flavell, 1979; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015). Age groupings are approximate and should not be used as screening criteria.

Developmental Patterns and Milestones

Broad developmental patterns help educators understand how thinking changes over time. Developmental milestones serve a more specific purpose: they describe selected abilities that most children demonstrate by a particular age and support developmental monitoring (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2026).

This table is a summary of developmental progression, **not a milestone checklist, screening tool, or diagnostic measure**. Its examples should not be used to determine whether an individual child has a developmental delay.

Note

Read Across Areas, Not Just Ages

A child may demonstrate more complex reasoning during construction than during an unfamiliar number activity. Consider patterns across experiences rather than assigning the child one overall “cognitive age.”

Individual Variation in Cognitive Development

Children follow broad patterns of cognitive development, but their progress varies across areas and situations. A child may remember detailed information about animals while needing reminders during a classroom routine. Another child may solve a construction problem through actions but find it difficult to explain the solution in words. These differences show why one task cannot provide a complete picture of a child’s thinking.

Uneven Development Across Areas

Symbolic thinking, attention, memory, reasoning, and general knowledge are connected, but they do not develop at identical rates. Children may demonstrate particular strengths alongside abilities that are still emerging.

Performance also varies within an area. A child may remember the steps of a familiar game more easily than a new set of directions. Solving a problem independently, solving it with a prompt, and solving it after watching someone else provide different information about the child’s current understanding.

Experiences, Language, and Culture

Children’s opportunities to explore materials, participate in activities, and learn from others influence the knowledge they build. Family routines, cultural practices, community experiences, and personal interests help shape what is familiar and meaningful.

Language also affects how children demonstrate understanding. A multilingual child may know a concept in one language while still learning the word for it in another. A child who communicates through gestures, signs, or an assistive communication system may demonstrate reasoning that is not fully reflected in spoken responses.

Educators therefore distinguish between unfamiliarity with a task’s language or content and difficulty with the thinking the task requires (NAEYC, 2020).

Conditions That Affect Performance

Fatigue, hunger, stress, sensory demands, and distractions can affect children’s attention, recall, and problem-solving. Feeling comfortable with the people and materials involved can also influence participation (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Disabilities and developmental differences may affect how children process information or express their knowledge. Accessible materials and communication options can make understanding more visible. For example, a child who has difficulty manipulating small puzzle pieces may demonstrate spatial reasoning by selecting where a piece belongs while someone else places it.

Recognizing Patterns Over Time

Understanding individual variation requires observations across activities, settings, and time. Educators consider what children do consistently, when they need support, and which conditions help them demonstrate their abilities. Family observations contribute information about knowledge and skills that may not appear in the classroom (NAEYC, 2020).

Recognizing variation does not mean dismissing concerns. Persistent difficulties that affect participation or learning, or the loss of previously demonstrated skills, warrant discussion with families and appropriate follow-up (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2026).

Describe What the Child Demonstrates

Use specific observations rather than broad labels. “Sorts objects by shape and explains the grouping” provides more useful information than “advanced.” “Remembers one step but needs a reminder for the next” is more informative than “poor memory.”

Putting the Progression Together

Cognitive development becomes visible when children use several thinking processes within one experience. A construction, game, or investigation may involve symbolic thinking, attention, memory, reasoning, and general knowledge at the same time. Looking at these connections helps educators describe how children’s thinking is developing.



Figure 7.1.1: One Experience, Many Thinking Processes. Children use symbolic thinking, attention, memory, reasoning, and general knowledge together during neighborhood construction play (OpenAI, 2026).

Note. Illustrative classroom connections informed by Institute of Medicine and National Research Council (2015).

Example 7.1.2

Building a Neighborhood

Four-year-old Nora uses blocks to build a neighborhood. She identifies one structure as her home and another as a grocery store. She places a road between them and moves a toy car along it.

When the car cannot fit between two buildings, Nora tries pushing it through, then moves one building to widen the road. She remembers that the grocery store needs a parking area because she has visited one with her family. After another child interrupts, she returns to the construction but asks, “Where was I going to put the parking?”

Seven-year-old Eli works on a similar project. He first draws a simple plan showing buildings and roads. While building, he compares the available space with his drawing and changes the position of a building. He groups blocks by their intended use and tests whether the car can turn at an intersection. When the turn is too narrow, he explains, “I need more space here,” and adjusts the road.

Both children demonstrate connected cognitive abilities:

- **Symbolic thinking:** Their constructions represent places, and Eli's drawing represents his planned construction.
- **Attention and memory:** They maintain a goal, draw on previous experiences, and keep track of parts of the project.
- **Reasoning and problem-solving:** They notice obstacles, try solutions, and adjust their designs.
- **Concepts and general knowledge:** They use knowledge about buildings, transportation, size, position, and how spaces are used.
- **Awareness of thinking:** Nora recognizes that she has forgotten part of her plan. Eli identifies a problem and explains the change he intends to make.

The examples illustrate a possible progression toward more deliberate planning and explanation. They do not establish what every four-year-old or seven-year-old should do. Familiarity with construction materials and neighborhood experiences may influence either child's approach.

Describing the Progression

Understanding cognitive development involves noticing changes in both **what children know** and **how they use that knowledge**. Over time, children generally create more detailed representations, coordinate more information, consider additional features of a problem, and explain their strategies more clearly.

A useful description identifies the child's actions, the context, and any support involved. For example, "Nora widened the road after the car did not fit" captures her use of feedback to solve a spatial problem. "Eli compared his construction with a drawing and revised the layout" captures his coordination of representations and planning.

Together, these observations show how cognitive development and general knowledge support increasingly organized and flexible thinking.

Vocabulary Alert:

Cognitive development: Changes in how children think, learn, remember, reason, and solve problems.

General knowledge: The concepts and information children build about people, objects, events, and the world around them.

Symbolic thinking: The ability to use one thing to stand for something else, such as using a block as a pretend telephone.

Representation: A way of expressing an object, experience, or idea through a drawing, model, gesture, word, or other symbol.

Attention: The process of focusing on information or an activity.

Working memory: The ability to hold information in mind while using it to complete a task.

Reasoning: Using information and making connections to reach an explanation or conclusion.

Problem-solving: Working toward a goal when the solution is not immediately clear.

Cognitive flexibility: The ability to shift attention, perspectives, or strategies as a situation changes.

Concept: A mental grouping or idea that helps organize knowledge about objects, events, or relationships.

Metacognition: Awareness of, and thinking about, one's own mental processes.

Exercise 7.1.1

Check Your Understanding

1. **Cognitive development and general knowledge:** How do these two areas support each other? Give one example.

2. **Developmental progression:** Describe two ways children's thinking generally changes between the preschool and early elementary years. Explain why these changes should not be treated as fixed expectations for every child of the same age.
3. **Symbolic thinking:** A four-year-old arranges chairs in a row, calls them a bus, and gives classmates paper "tickets." What evidence of symbolic thinking and representation is present?
4. **Reasoning and problem-solving:** A child predicts that a large piece of wood will sink because a large rock sank earlier. When the wood floats, the child says, "Maybe being big doesn't always make things sink." What does this reveal about the child's reasoning and cognitive flexibility?
5. **Individual variation:** A multilingual child accurately sorts objects by shape and shows a classmate how to complete a construction. During an English-language group discussion, the child gives few verbal responses. What can the educator conclude from these observations, and what additional information would help describe the child's cognitive development?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 7.1.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. **Cognitive development and general knowledge:** Cognitive processes help children gain, organize, and use knowledge. Existing knowledge helps them interpret new experiences and choose possible solutions. For example, remembering that a narrow block tower fell may help a child predict that a wider base will make a new tower more stable.
2. **Developmental progression:** Children generally become more able to plan before acting, hold information in mind, connect different representations, and explain their reasoning. Any two of these changes would be appropriate. Development is gradual and varies with experience, familiarity, language demands, and the situation. A child may demonstrate different levels of complexity across activities.
3. **Symbolic thinking:** The chairs represent a bus, and the papers represent tickets. The child uses objects to stand for other things and organizes them into a pretend scenario. This demonstrates an ability to represent an experience beyond the objects' immediate uses.
4. **Reasoning and problem-solving:** The child initially uses a previous experience to predict an outcome. After observing conflicting evidence, the child begins revising the explanation. This demonstrates reasoning about cause and effect and cognitive flexibility. The child does not need a complete explanation of floating and sinking to show meaningful thinking.
5. **Individual variation:** The child demonstrates classification, spatial reasoning, and an ability to communicate a solution through actions. Limited verbal participation in English does not establish limited cognitive understanding. Useful additional information includes observations across familiar activities, opportunities to communicate in the child's home language or other forms, and family descriptions of the child's knowledge and problem-solving.

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7.2: THEORIES OF COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Introduction

Section 7.1 described changes in children's symbolic thinking, attention, memory, reasoning, and general knowledge. This section examines theoretical perspectives that help educators interpret those changes and choose appropriate teaching support.

Children build understanding as they explore materials, interact with others, and connect new experiences with what they already know. Child development theories help educators interpret this learning and make intentional decisions about materials, questions, interactions, and support.

This section emphasizes two major perspectives. **Piaget's theory of cognitive development** examines how children actively construct and reorganize their understanding. **Vygotsky's sociocultural theory** examines how social interaction, language, and cultural experiences contribute to learning. A shorter introduction to **information processing** considers how attention, memory, and thinking strategies influence children's participation in learning experiences.

These perspectives offer different questions educators can ask about the same situation. What does the child's explanation reveal about current understanding? What could the child accomplish with appropriate assistance? How might the demands on attention or memory affect performance? Using these questions helps educators connect theory with everyday practice.

These perspectives differ in their assumptions and evidence. Piaget emphasized changes in the organization of thinking, Vygotsky emphasized learning through social and cultural participation, and information-processing approaches examine processes such as attention, memory, and strategy use. Educators consider each perspective's contributions and limitations rather than treating any one as a complete explanation.

The goal is to use theory thoughtfully while considering each child's abilities, experiences, languages, and context. The following pages connect key concepts with classroom examples and teaching decisions for children ages 3–8.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 7.2: Apply child development theory related to cognitive development and general knowledge to early childhood practice.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain key concepts from Piaget's theory, including schemas, assimilation, accommodation, and preoperational and concrete operational thinking.
- Apply Piaget's ideas to interpret children's thinking and plan experiences that support exploration and concept development.
- Explain Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction, culture, language, and the zone of proximal development.
- Apply scaffolding and collaborative learning approaches informed by Vygotsky's perspective.
- Use information-processing concepts to adjust demands on attention and memory and support children's thinking strategies.
- Compare the three perspectives and justify teaching decisions using theory, observations, and knowledge of the individual child.

- Topic hierarchy

7.2.1: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development
7.2.2: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development
7.2.3: Information Processing

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7.2.1: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

Children actively build understanding as they explore, compare, experiment, and reflect on what happens. Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development offers a way to examine how children organize their experiences and revise their ideas. His work emphasized that children's explanations can reveal ways of thinking that differ from those of adults (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

For early childhood educators, Piaget's perspective encourages attention to **how children reach an answer**. A child who says that a taller glass contains more water may be focusing on height without considering width. Rather than simply correcting the answer, an educator can invite the child to compare, pour, observe, and explain. These experiences make the child's reasoning visible and provide opportunities to reconsider an idea.

This section examines how children construct knowledge through schemas, assimilation, and accommodation. It then explores Piaget's descriptions of preoperational and concrete operational thinking, with particular attention to their implications for teaching children ages 3–8.

Piaget's theory provides a useful lens for interpreting children's thinking, but its stages should not be used as rigid labels or individual assessments. Educators consider children's explanations alongside their experiences, the demands of the task, and the support available.

How Children Construct Knowledge

Piaget viewed children as active participants in their own cognitive development. Through actions and interactions, children build ways of understanding the world. They use existing ideas to interpret new experiences and change those ideas when they no longer provide a useful explanation (Piaget, 1964).

This process is central to **constructivism**, the perspective that learners actively construct knowledge. From this viewpoint, learning involves organizing and reorganizing understanding, rather than simply receiving information.

Schemas: Organizing Experiences

A **schema** is an organized pattern of action or thought that helps a child interpret and respond to experiences. Schemas can involve actions, such as grasping and shaking an object, or concepts, such as understanding what counts as a dog (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

For example, a child's dog schema might include four legs, fur, a tail, and barking. This schema helps the child recognize familiar dogs and make predictions about unfamiliar animals. As the child encounters more animals, the schema may become more detailed and accurate.

Schemas are useful starting points, but they may not account for every new experience. Piaget described two connected processes through which children adapt their understanding: assimilation and accommodation.

Assimilation: Using an Existing Schema

Assimilation occurs when a child interprets a new experience using an existing schema (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

A child who recognizes an unfamiliar dog as a dog is applying an existing schema to a new example. A child who calls a goat "dog" may also be assimilating: the child notices familiar features, such as four legs and fur, and interprets the animal using the available dog schema.

Assimilation does not always produce a correct conclusion. It shows how the child's current understanding guides interpretation.

Accommodation: Changing a Schema

Accommodation occurs when a child modifies an existing schema or develops a new one to account for information that does not fit (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

After observing that the goat has hooves, makes a different sound, and is identified as a goat, the child may begin distinguishing goats from dogs. The child's understanding of dogs becomes more specific, and a separate goat schema develops.

Accommodation can also involve changing an approach. A child who usually stacks blocks directly on top of one another may revise that approach after discovering that a bridge requires supports with a space between them.

Table 7.2.1.1: Schemas, Assimilation, and Accommodation in Everyday Experiences

Concept	What happens	Classroom example
Schema	The child uses an organized pattern of action or thought to understand an experience.	Expects wheeled toys to move when pushed.
Assimilation	The child interprets a new experience using an existing schema.	Pushes an unfamiliar toy truck, using the same approach used with other wheeled toys.
Accommodation	The child changes an existing schema or develops a new one.	Discovers that a wind-up vehicle moves after winding and releasing it, and develops an additional way to operate wheeled toys.

Note

Definitions summarize Piaget's concepts; classroom examples are author-created illustrations (Piaget, 1964; Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

Equilibration: Reorganizing Understanding

Piaget used **equilibration** to describe the process of moving toward a balance between existing understanding and new experiences. When an experience does not fit what a child expects, it can create **disequilibrium**, or a mismatch between the child's current explanation and what happens (Piaget, 1964).

For example, a child may believe that all large objects sink. When a large piece of wood floats, the observation challenges that explanation. Through further exploration and discussion, the child may develop a more useful idea: size alone does not determine whether something sinks.

The child does not need to reach a complete scientific explanation immediately. Reorganizing understanding may involve several experiences, partial explanations, and further revisions. Disequilibrium refers to a mismatch in understanding; it does not necessarily mean the child is emotionally upset.

Emphasis: A Mistake Can Reveal a Schema

An unexpected answer may show how a child is organizing information. Before correcting it, consider: What features did the child notice? What existing idea might explain the response? What experience could help the child reconsider or extend that idea?

Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development

Piaget proposed that cognitive development involves changes in the organization of children's thinking. He described four stages, each characterized by different ways of understanding and reasoning about experiences (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

The stages provide a broad framework for examining his theory. Their age ranges are approximate, and children's performance varies across tasks, experiences, and contexts. A stage description should not replace observations of what an individual child understands.

Table 7.2.1.2: Overview of Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development

Stage	Approximate age range in Piaget's theory	Central characteristics
Sensorimotor	Birth–2 years	Builds understanding through sensory experiences and actions; develops object permanence and increasingly intentional behavior.
Preoperational	2–7 years	Uses language, pretend play, and other symbols; may have difficulty coordinating perspectives or considering several features of a problem at once.
Concrete operational	7–11 years	Increasingly uses logical mental operations to reason about concrete objects and situations, including conservation, classification, and reversibility.
Formal operational	Approximately 12 years and beyond	Develops the capacity to reason about abstract ideas, hypothetical possibilities, and systematic relationships. This reasoning varies with experience and the task.

Note

This table summarizes Piaget's proposed stages rather than a developmental assessment tool. Age ranges are approximate (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

The Stages Most Relevant to Ages 3–8

For educators working with children ages 3–8, **preoperational** and **concrete operational** thinking are especially relevant. These descriptions help explain why children may interpret the same materials differently.

For example, when two equal rows of counters are arranged differently, one child may judge the more spread-out row as having more counters. Another child may explain that the amounts remain equal because no counters were added or removed. The difference involves how the children coordinate number, spacing, and the transformation they observed.

In Piaget's theory, an **operation** is a mental action that can be coordinated with other mental actions and reversed in thought. The term *preoperational* therefore refers to thinking before these organized operations are consistently available. It does not mean that preschool children cannot think, reason, or solve problems (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

Note

Age Ranges Are Not Assessment Criteria

A birthday does not automatically move a child into a new stage. Use the age ranges to understand Piaget's proposed framework, while interpreting each child's abilities through observations across experiences.

Understanding Preoperational Thinking

Piaget described the **preoperational stage**, approximately ages 2–7, as a period of expanding symbolic thought. Children increasingly use words, images, objects, and pretend actions to represent experiences. At the same time, they may find it difficult to coordinate several features of a situation or mentally reverse a change (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

These descriptions help educators interpret children's reasoning. They should be considered alongside children's strengths, familiarity with the activity, and the language and materials involved.

Symbolic Thought and Pretend Play

Symbolic thought allows children to represent something that is not immediately present. A child may use a block as a telephone, draw a familiar place, or pretend to prepare a meal. In Piaget's perspective, these actions reveal children's growing ability to represent experiences mentally.

Educators can extend this thinking by providing flexible materials and inviting children to explain their representations. A child's description of a drawing or construction may reveal meaning that is not apparent from its appearance.

Egocentrism and Perspective-Taking

Egocentrism refers to difficulty distinguishing one's own perspective from another person's perspective. In Piaget's theory, it does not mean selfishness or a deliberate refusal to consider others (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

For example, a child may hold a picture facing themselves and assume a classmate can see it. An educator can make the different viewpoints visible by asking, "What can your friend see from there?" and inviting the children to change positions.

Perspective-taking varies with the situation. A child may recognize what another person can see in a familiar activity while struggling with an unfamiliar task that requires interpreting pictures or remembering several viewpoints.

Centration and Conservation

Centration involves focusing on one noticeable feature while overlooking other relevant information. A child comparing containers may focus on the height of the water without considering the width of the container (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

Conservation is the understanding that a quantity remains the same when its appearance or arrangement changes, provided nothing is added or removed. In Piaget's classic liquid task, equal amounts of water are placed in identical containers. Water from one container is then poured into a taller, narrower container. A child who focuses on height may conclude that the taller container now holds more.

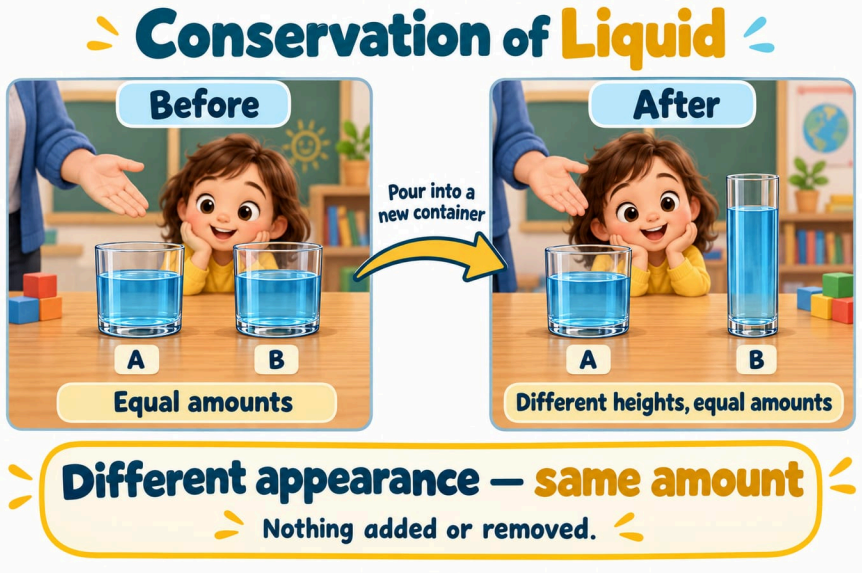


Figure 7.2.1.1: Pouring water into a differently shaped container changes its height but not its amount (OpenAI, 2026).

An educator can invite children to predict, pour the water back, compare, and discuss what changed. Simply teaching the phrase "It is the same" does not establish that the child understands why the amount remains unchanged.

Classification and Class Inclusion

Children in the preschool years can sort objects in many meaningful ways. Piaget's concern was with more complex relationships, especially **class inclusion**: understanding that a smaller category belongs within a larger category.

For example, a collection might contain four toy dogs and two toy cats. A child may correctly identify every toy as an animal but still answer "dogs" when asked whether there are more dogs or more animals. The question requires considering the dog subgroup and the whole animal group at the same time.

Educators can explore these relationships through familiar materials and clear language. They also consider whether the child understood the question before interpreting the response (Politzer, 2016).

Animism and Children's Explanations

Animism involves attributing life or lifelike qualities to nonliving things. A child might explain that the sun follows them because it wants to accompany them, or say that a chair deliberately hurt them (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

Such statements require careful interpretation. A child may be expressing a belief, using imaginative language, repeating a story, or participating in pretend play. Saying that a stuffed animal is tired does not by itself demonstrate that the child believes it is alive.

Asking "What makes you think that?" or "Are we pretending?" can help clarify the child's meaning.

Table 7.2.1.3: Interpreting Preoperational Thinking in Practice

Concept	Possible observation	Educator response
Symbolic thought	Uses a block to represent a telephone.	Invite the child to describe the pretend situation and extend the play.
Egocentrism	Assumes another child can see a picture facing away from them.	Help children compare what each person can see.
Centration	Judges the amount of water using height alone.	Invite comparison of both height and width.

Concept	Possible observation	Educator response
Conservation	Says a spread-out row has more counters than an equal, closely spaced row.	Encourage counting and examining whether any counters were added or removed.
Class inclusion	Says there are more dogs than animals in a mixed collection.	Explore how dogs belong within the larger animal group.
Animism	Says a toy is tired.	Clarify whether the child is pretending or expressing a belief about the toy.

Note

Concepts are drawn from Piaget's theory. Observations and educator responses are illustrative applications, not assessment criteria (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020; Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969; Politzer, 2016).

Interpret the Explanation Before Choosing Support

An answer can reflect the child's reasoning, the wording of the question, or the demands of the task. Observe what the child does and invite an explanation before deciding what the response means.

Understanding Concrete Operational Thinking

Piaget described the **concrete operational stage**, approximately ages 7–11, as a period when children increasingly coordinate logical mental operations. They become more able to consider several features of a situation, understand relationships among categories, and mentally reverse actions (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

The term *concrete* refers to reasoning grounded in objects, events, and situations children can understand through experience. Children do not need to physically handle objects every time they reason, but familiar materials and observable relationships can support their understanding.

For educators working with children ages 3–8, this perspective is particularly useful when interpreting emerging reasoning in the early elementary years. The abilities described below develop unevenly across tasks and should not be treated as skills that appear together at a particular birthday.

Decentration: Considering More Than One Feature

Decentration is the ability to consider multiple relevant features rather than focusing on only one.

When comparing containers, a child may consider both height and width. During construction, the child may recognize that a bridge needs to be long enough to span a gap and strong enough to support a vehicle.

Educators can make these relationships visible by inviting children to compare features and explain which ones matter. Questions such as "What else do we need to consider?" encourage children to examine their reasoning.

Conservation: Understanding What Stays the Same

Children demonstrating conservation recognize that changing an arrangement does not necessarily change the quantity. For example, spreading out a row of counters does not increase the number of counters.

A child may explain, "You only moved them. You didn't add any." This explanation provides stronger evidence of conservation than a correct answer alone.

Conservation develops across different kinds of quantities at different times. Understanding conservation of number does not automatically mean a child also understands conservation of liquid quantity, mass, or volume (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

Reversibility: Mentally Undoing an Action

Reversibility is the ability to mentally reverse an operation and consider how it returns to the starting point (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

A child may explain that water poured into a different container could be poured back into the original one. In mathematics, the child may recognize that adding three counters and then removing those same three restores the original quantity.

Reversibility concerns the child's reasoning about an operation. It is more than observing that some physical changes, such as melting and freezing, can occur in opposite directions.

Educators can connect actions with explanations: "We added three. What could we do to return to the amount we started with?"

Classification and Class Inclusion

Children increasingly understand how categories relate to one another. They may recognize that a toy dog belongs to the groups *dogs*, *animals*, and *toys*. They can also consider a subgroup in relation to the larger group that includes it.

For example, when examining four toy dogs and two toy cats, a child may explain that there are more animals than dogs because both the dogs and cats are animals.

Educators can support this reasoning by inviting children to organize familiar collections in several ways and explain how smaller groups fit within larger ones.

Seriation and Transitive Reasoning

Seriation involves arranging objects in order along a measurable dimension, such as length. Children increasingly organize a collection systematically, compare neighboring objects, and insert a new object into its appropriate position (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

Transitive reasoning involves using known relationships to infer another relationship. If stick A is longer than stick B, and stick B is longer than stick C, then stick A must be longer than stick C.

Educators can explore these ideas through ordering materials, comparing measurements, and asking children to explain how they know where an object belongs.

Table 7.2.1.4: Interpreting Concrete Operational Thinking in Practice

Concept	Possible evidence in the child's reasoning	Classroom application
Decentration	Considers both the length and stability of a bridge.	Compare designs using more than one relevant feature.
Conservation	Explains that spreading counters apart does not change their number.	Rearrange collections and discuss what changed and what remained the same.
Reversibility	Recognizes that removing the counters just added restores the starting quantity.	Connect adding and removing through objects, drawings, and explanations.
Class inclusion	Explains that dogs and cats both belong to the larger animal group.	Organize collections into groups and subgroups.
Seriation	Orders sticks by length and places an additional stick appropriately.	Invite systematic comparisons and explanations of ordering choices.

Concept	Possible evidence in the child's reasoning	Classroom application
Transitive reasoning	Uses two known length comparisons to infer a third.	Ask children to reason about relationships before checking with materials.

Note

Concepts summarize concrete operational thinking. Classroom applications are author-created examples informed by developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2020; Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969).

Connecting Logical Reasoning to Experience

Educators provide opportunities to act, predict, explain, and check ideas. Objects, drawings, models, and discussion can help children connect visible changes with mental operations.

A child who successfully completes one task may still need support with another that uses unfamiliar materials or language. Educators therefore look for explanations and patterns across experiences rather than assigning a stage based on one response.

Listen for the Relationship

Statements such as "Nothing was added," "We can put it back," and "These are all animals" reveal how children connect information. Use those explanations to decide which comparisons, questions, or experiences could extend their understanding.

Applying Piaget's Theory to Early Childhood Practice

Piaget's theory encourages educators to examine how children construct understanding through their actions and explanations. Applying this perspective involves identifying a child's current idea, offering experiences that make relevant relationships visible, and observing how the child's thinking changes.

The educator plays an active role by selecting materials, asking purposeful questions, and helping children examine results. Children also need time to explore, make decisions, and develop explanations of their own (NAEYC, 2020).

Begin With the Child's Current Understanding

Before choosing how to respond, notice what the child appears to understand. An unexpected answer may reflect a reasonable interpretation based on the features the child notices.

For example, a child who says a spread-out row has more counters may be using the row's length to judge quantity. Asking "How did you decide?" helps the educator identify that reasoning. The next experience can then focus on the relationship between spacing and number.

Specific observations are more useful than broad stage labels. "Uses height to compare the amounts of water" identifies a starting point for teaching more clearly than "is preoperational."

Offer Materials That Make Relationships Visible

Materials are useful when they help children examine a particular idea. Counters can make adding and removing visible, nested groups can show class inclusion, and differently sized sticks can support comparisons of length.

Hands-on activity alone does not guarantee understanding. Children need opportunities to connect what they do with what

happens. An educator might ask:

- “What changed when you moved the counters?”
- “Did we add any or take any away?”
- “How could you check whether these groups have the same number?”
- “Where would this stick fit? What makes you think so?”

Objects, pictures, gestures, and accessible communication tools can provide different ways to explore and express the same relationship.

Invite Predictions, Comparisons, and Explanations

A prediction reveals a child’s starting idea. Comparing the prediction with the result creates an opportunity to reconsider that idea.

During a floating investigation, an educator might ask which objects children expect to sink and why. If a child predicts that all large objects will sink, comparing a large floating object with a small sinking object may prompt further questions.

The educator can introduce relevant information and vocabulary while allowing children to examine the evidence. The goal is to help children connect explanations with experience, rather than memorize an answer they cannot yet explain.

Support Productive Challenges

An experience that does not match a child’s expectation may encourage accommodation. However, the challenge needs to be understandable and manageable. Confusion alone does not produce learning.

An educator can simplify the comparison, revisit a familiar example, or demonstrate an action while inviting the child to interpret the result. If several features change at once, the child may have difficulty identifying which change matters.

Children also need emotional support when an idea or approach does not work. Treating revisions as an ordinary part of learning makes it easier to explore another possibility (NAEYC, 2020).

Revisit Ideas in Different Situations

Repeating a correct response does not necessarily show that a concept is understood. Educators look for whether children can explain the relationship and use it in another situation.

A child who recognizes that spreading counters does not change their number might later compare a collection arranged in a circle with the same collection arranged in a line. A child exploring class inclusion might organize vehicles into cars and trucks, then explain how both groups belong within the larger vehicle group.

These experiences help educators distinguish a remembered answer from a developing understanding.

> **From Observation to a Teaching Decision**
>
> Notice the child’s idea → Offer a meaningful experience → Invite explanation → Observe again
>
> Use the child’s actions and explanations to decide whether to extend the challenge, provide additional support, or revisit the concept in another context.

Contributions and Limitations of Piaget’s Theory

Piaget’s theory helped draw attention to children as active thinkers whose explanations deserve careful examination. His work encouraged educators to look beyond correct answers and consider how children organize information, interpret changes, and

build concepts.

The theory remains useful for asking questions about children's reasoning. However, educators also need to recognize its limitations and consider evidence from later research.

Contributions to Early Childhood Practice

Piaget emphasized that children construct understanding through their activity and experience. This perspective supports opportunities to explore materials, compare results, and explain ideas.

His concepts also provide language for interpreting learning. Assimilation and accommodation help describe how children use and revise existing understanding. Centration, conservation, and reversibility draw attention to the relationships children consider when solving a problem.

These contributions encourage educators to treat an unexpected answer as information about thinking. Rather than assuming a child has failed to learn, the educator can investigate the explanation and choose an experience that addresses it.

Children May Demonstrate More Understanding Than a Task Reveals

Performance on a cognitive task reflects both conceptual understanding and how the task is presented. Question wording, repeated questions, and children's interpretations of an adult's intentions can influence their responses.

Rose and Blank (1974) found that first-grade children made fewer conservation errors when asked to judge the quantities only after rearrangement rather than both before and after. Their findings suggest that repeating a question can provide unintended cues about the answer an adult expects.

Research on class inclusion also shows that children may interpret a question differently from the researcher's intended meaning (Politzer, 2016). These findings do not mean that every incorrect answer conceals full understanding. They show why educators should consider task demands and children's explanations before drawing conclusions.

Development Is Less Uniform Than Stage Descriptions Suggest

Children do not necessarily demonstrate all the abilities associated with a stage at the same time. A child may conserve number in one situation while still having difficulty with another kind of quantity. Understanding can also vary across familiar and unfamiliar activities.

Piaget's stage framework should therefore be used cautiously when interpreting an individual child. Later research emphasizes that children's demonstrated abilities depend on the knowledge, language, attention, and other resources required by a particular task (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015).

Social and Cultural Context Deserve Greater Attention

Piaget recognized social interaction, but his theory placed particular emphasis on children's construction of knowledge through activity. It gives less detailed attention than sociocultural perspectives to how language, cultural tools, shared practices, and guidance shape learning.

Children's opportunities to explore concepts differ across communities and settings. Familiarity with particular materials and ways of asking questions can influence performance. Educators interpret observations within these contexts and consider knowledge demonstrated through different languages and forms of communication (NAEYC, 2020).

Using the Theory Alongside Other Perspectives

Piaget's ideas can help an educator ask, "How is this child organizing the experience?" Vygotsky's perspective adds questions about what the child can accomplish through interaction and appropriate support. Information processing adds questions about attention, memory, and the demands of the task.

Using these perspectives together provides a fuller basis for teaching decisions. An educator can offer meaningful exploration, participate in the learning, and adjust how information is presented.

Note

A Theory Is a Lens for Interpretation

Piaget's theory can guide observations and questions. It should not be used by itself to diagnose a delay, assign a fixed cognitive level, or decide that a child is unable to learn a concept.

Putting Piaget's Theory Into Practice

The following example illustrates how an educator uses Piaget's concepts to interpret a child's reasoning and choose a learning experience. The educator considers the child's explanation, invites exploration, and observes whether understanding changes. The illustrative classroom scenario below is not a report of a research study.

Example 7.2.1.1

Does a Longer Row Have More?

During a small-group activity, four-year-old Elena places one counter beside each counter in the educator's row. Both rows contain six counters, and Elena agrees that they have the same number.

The educator spreads out one row without adding or removing counters. Elena points to it and says, "That one has more. It goes farther."

Rather than immediately correcting her, the educator asks, "How could we check?" Elena counts each row and reaches six both times, but still says the longer row has more.

The educator invites Elena to move the counters back into pairs, with one counter from each row beside the other. Elena observes, "They all have a partner." The educator asks, "Did we add any counters when we made the row longer?" Elena says no.

Later, the educator offers a similar comparison using toy animals. Elena again matches the objects, then watches as one group is spread apart. This time she says, "They're farther apart, but nobody put more animals there."

Interpreting the Child's Thinking

Elena's first explanation suggests **centration**: she focuses on the length of the row when judging quantity. Although she counts six counters in each row, she does not initially coordinate that result with the change in spacing. Accurate counting alone does not establish **conservation of number**.

Matching the counters makes the relationship between the groups visible. Elena can examine whether every counter has a partner and whether any were added or removed. Her later explanation suggests emerging conservation understanding in that situation.

The new experience may also prompt **accommodation** as Elena revises the idea that a longer arrangement necessarily contains more objects. Further observations would help determine how consistently she uses this understanding.

Examining the Educator's Decisions

The educator:

- **Identifies the starting idea** by listening to Elena's explanation.
- **Offers a concrete comparison** through matching and rearranging.

- **Invites checking and explanation** rather than supplying an answer to repeat.
- **Revisits the relationship** using different materials.
- **Looks for changes in reasoning** rather than assigning a stage from one response.

The educator does not assume that one successful comparison means Elena understands conservation across all quantities or situations. The observations provide a starting point for further exploration.

Reflect on the Example

What would you observe next to find out whether Elena's explanation reflects a developing concept rather than a remembered response? Consider how you could vary the arrangement or materials while keeping the comparison clear.

Vocabulary Alert:

Constructivism: The perspective that learners actively build and reorganize knowledge through experiences and interactions.

Schema: An organized pattern of action or thought used to interpret and respond to experiences.

Assimilation: Interpreting a new experience using an existing schema.

Accommodation: Modifying an existing schema or developing a new one when information does not fit current understanding.

Equilibration: The process of moving toward a balance between existing understanding and new experiences through assimilation and accommodation.

Disequilibrium: A mismatch between a child's current understanding and a new experience or observation.

Preoperational thinking: Piaget's description of thinking characterized by expanding symbolic representation, with difficulty consistently coordinating logical mental operations.

Concrete operational thinking: Piaget's description of thinking that increasingly uses logical mental operations to reason about concrete objects and situations.

Egocentrism: Difficulty distinguishing one's own perspective from another person's perspective; it does not mean selfishness.

Centration: Focusing on one noticeable feature while overlooking other relevant information.

Decentration: Considering multiple relevant features of a situation.

Conservation: Understanding that a quantity remains unchanged when its appearance or arrangement changes, provided nothing is added or removed.

Reversibility: The ability to mentally reverse an operation and consider how it returns to the starting point.

Class inclusion: Understanding that a subgroup belongs within a larger category.

Seriation: Arranging objects in order along a measurable dimension, such as length or weight.

Transitive reasoning: Using known relationships to infer another relationship; for example, if A is longer than B and B is longer than C, then A is longer than C.

Animism: Attributing life or lifelike qualities to nonliving things.

Exercise 7.2.1.1

Check Your Understanding

1. **Constructing knowledge:** A child calls a goat "dog." After observing its hooves, hearing its sound, and discussing how it differs from a dog, the child begins identifying goats separately. Explain assimilation and accommodation in this example.
2. **Interpreting preoperational thinking:** A child says a taller, narrower container holds more water after watching water poured into it from one of two identical containers holding equal amounts. Which concepts help explain the response? Describe one appropriate educator response.
3. **Recognizing concrete operational thinking:** A child explains, "There are still eight counters because you only spread them out. You didn't add any. We could move them back." What evidence of conservation and reversibility is present?
4. **Applying theory:** During a sorting activity, a child groups four toy dogs and two toy cats correctly but says there are more dogs than animals. What relationship might the child find difficult? Describe how the educator could explore the child's understanding without simply supplying the answer.
5. **Using theory thoughtfully:** An educator says, "This child is only five, so conservation activities should wait until age seven." Explain why this conclusion is inappropriate and suggest a more useful way to make a teaching decision.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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The revised explanations, tables, and classroom scenarios were developed for this section. Original instructional images have been removed and replaced with a newly created conservation illustration.

Answers

Exercise 7.2.1.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. **Constructing knowledge:** Calling the goat "dog" illustrates assimilation because the child interprets a new animal through an existing dog schema. Distinguishing goats from dogs illustrates accommodation because the child modifies current understanding and develops a separate category. Assimilation can produce an inaccurate identification while still revealing how the child organizes information.
2. **Interpreting preoperational thinking:** Centration may explain the child's focus on height without considering width. The response also suggests difficulty demonstrating conservation of liquid quantity in this task. The educator could invite the child to pour the water back into the original container, compare the amounts, and explain what changed. The educator should also check that the child understood the question.
3. **Recognizing concrete operational thinking:** The child demonstrates conservation of number by explaining that rearranging the counters does not change their quantity when none are added or removed. "We could move them back" suggests reversibility because the child considers undoing the rearrangement mentally. This response does not establish conservation of every kind of quantity or place the child definitively within a stage.
4. **Applying theory:** The child may find **class inclusion** difficult: coordinating the dog subgroup with the larger animal group containing both dogs and cats. The educator could first clarify what the child understands by "animals," then invite the child to place all the animals in one large group and identify dogs and cats within it. Questions such as "Which toys belong in the whole animal group?" can reveal the child's reasoning. Difficulty with the wording should be considered alongside conceptual understanding.
5. **Using theory thoughtfully:** Piaget's age ranges describe his proposed framework; they are not fixed limits on what a child can learn. Understanding varies with experience, task demands, language, and support. The educator should observe the child's current reasoning and offer manageable opportunities to match, rearrange, compare, and explain. Teaching decisions should follow those observations rather than age alone.

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7.2.2: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development

Children develop understanding through participation in activities with other people. Conversations, shared play, family routines, and collaborative problem-solving provide opportunities to encounter ideas and learn ways of thinking. Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes how these interactions connect cognitive development with language, culture, and the tools people use (Vygotsky, 1978).

From this perspective, learning involves more than what a child can accomplish independently. An educator also considers **what the child can understand and do with appropriate support**. A child who cannot yet complete a puzzle alone may succeed when a partner helps identify a useful strategy. The interaction provides an opportunity for the child to participate actively and gradually take greater responsibility.

Vygotsky's ideas help educators make intentional decisions about conversations, collaboration, and assistance. Support may involve a question, gesture, demonstration, shared action, or culturally familiar tool. Its usefulness depends on how it connects with the child's current understanding and the demands of the activity.

This section examines social and cultural influences on thinking, the zone of proximal development, scaffolding, and the role of language and private speech. Classroom examples show how educators can offer responsive support while preserving children's agency and opportunities to think for themselves.

Learning Through Social Interaction and Culture

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory explains cognitive development as closely connected to children's participation in social and cultural activities. Children encounter ways of thinking as they communicate, observe, play, and work with others. They actively interpret and use these experiences, gradually making shared knowledge and strategies their own (Vygotsky, 1978).

Social Interaction Supports Thinking

An interaction can help a child notice a relationship, consider another explanation, or try a new approach. For example, two children building a road may discuss why a toy vehicle cannot turn a corner. One suggests widening the road, and the other tests the idea. Their conversation helps organize the problem and connect a proposed solution with its result.

Learning through interaction is not limited to formal instruction. It occurs during meals, storytelling, caregiving routines, pretend play, and shared investigations. Adults and peers contribute questions, demonstrations, explanations, and opportunities to participate.

Children remain active contributors. They bring ideas, ask questions, challenge suggestions, and influence the direction of an activity.

Culture Shapes What and How Children Learn

Culture includes shared practices, values, languages, knowledge, and ways of participating in everyday life. These influence which activities children encounter, what others consider important, and how knowledge is communicated.

A child may learn to compare quantities while helping prepare food, recognize patterns through music or weaving, or understand spatial relationships while arranging materials for a family activity. Such experiences connect cognitive development with meaningful participation.

Ways of learning also vary within and across communities. Children may learn through observation, direct explanation, shared responsibility, storytelling, or combinations of these approaches. Educators learn about each family's practices rather than assuming that everyone from a cultural group shares the same experiences (National Association for the Education of Young

Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Cultural Tools Help Organize Thought

Vygotsky emphasized the role of **cultural tools**: resources developed and shared by communities that help people act, communicate, and think. These include physical tools and symbolic systems (Vygotsky, 1978).

A measuring cup helps a child compare amounts. A picture schedule helps organize a sequence of events. Language allows people to name relationships, exchange explanations, and plan together. Number systems, writing, maps, and diagrams provide additional ways to represent and work with information.

Children learn how these tools function through participation with others. Knowing the name of a tool is different from understanding how to use it to solve a problem.

Table 7.2.2.1: Social Interaction, Cultural Tools, and Cognitive Learning

Shared experience	Tool or practice involved	Opportunity for cognitive learning
Preparing food with a family member	Measuring containers and discussion	Compare quantities and follow a sequence.
Retelling a familiar story	Language, pictures, and storytelling practices	Recall events, organize a narrative, and consider characters' actions.
Building with a peer	Construction materials and shared planning	Compare designs, explain ideas, and test solutions.
Participating in a classroom routine	Picture schedule and conversation	Anticipate events and connect symbols with actions.
Exploring a neighborhood	Maps, landmarks, and community knowledge	Describe locations and connect representations with real places.

Note

These author-created examples illustrate social and cultural learning and the use of cultural tools (Vygotsky, 1978).

These examples illustrate possible learning opportunities. The meaning of an activity depends on the child's experiences and how the participants use the tools together.

From Shared Activity to Individual Understanding

Internalization refers to the process through which socially shared ways of acting and thinking become part of an individual's own mental activity. It involves transforming and using an experience, rather than simply copying another person (Vygotsky, 1978).

For example, an educator and child may initially sort materials together while discussing which features matter. Later, the child may use the same comparison strategy independently and explain it to someone else. The child has begun taking responsibility for a way of thinking first practiced in a shared activity.

Independent use may emerge gradually and remain inconsistent. A child might use a strategy with familiar materials but need support to recognize how it applies in a new situation.

Connecting Family and Classroom Knowledge

Educators can use this perspective to recognize knowledge developed outside the classroom. Family observations help identify familiar activities, languages, tools, and responsibilities that provide starting points for learning (NAEYC, 2020).

An unfamiliar classroom response does not necessarily indicate unfamiliarity with the underlying concept. A child may understand

comparing amounts through cooking but need help connecting that knowledge with a classroom measuring task.

> **Learning Is Connected to Participation**
>
> Consider what the child contributes, what others contribute, and which tools help organize the activity. These connections reveal how shared experiences can support the child's developing understanding.

The Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky distinguished between what children can accomplish independently and what they can accomplish through guidance or collaboration. The **zone of proximal development (ZPD)** is the distance between these two levels: a child's current independent performance and the performance possible with adult guidance or collaboration with a **more knowledgeable other (MKO)** (Vygotsky, 1978).

The ZPD draws attention to abilities that are developing but are not yet available independently. It helps educators ask, **"What kind of participation and support could help this child take the next step?"**



Figure 7.2.2.1: **Figure 7.2.2.1:** A child's performance varies with task demands and available support; the ZPD involves what is possible through guidance or collaboration (OpenAI, 2026).

Independent and Supported Performance

Observing independent performance provides information about what a child can currently manage without assistance. Observing supported performance adds information about how the child responds to questions, demonstrations, shared actions, or other guidance.

For example, a child may independently complete a familiar puzzle but struggle with one containing more pieces. When an educator suggests looking for matching picture details, the child begins selecting and placing pieces successfully. The child's response shows how a particular kind of assistance supports participation in the more challenging task.

Success with assistance does not mean the child has already mastered the task. Further opportunities and observations are needed to determine whether the child can increasingly use the strategy independently.

Table 7.2.2.2: Considering Independent and Supported Performance

Relationship to the task	What the educator observes	Teaching implication
Currently accomplished independently	The child completes the task without assistance.	Offer opportunities to practice, extend, or apply the ability in another situation.
Possible through guidance or collaboration	The child participates meaningfully and succeeds with appropriate assistance.	Explore support that helps the child understand and take increasing responsibility.
Not yet manageable with the available support	The child cannot meaningfully carry out the task despite attempts to assist.	Reconsider the task, its accessibility, the support offered, and any foundational experiences needed.

Note. This table is an instructional interpretation of independent and supported performance, informed by Vygotsky's ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). It is not an assessment tool or a set of permanent categories for children.

The ZPD Depends on the Activity and Interaction

A child does not have one fixed ZPD that applies to every area of learning. What becomes possible through assistance depends on the activity, the child's experience, and the nature of the interaction.

A child may benefit from a brief question during construction but need a demonstration and shared practice when using an unfamiliar tool. Another child may understand a task more readily when it is explained in a familiar language or connected to an everyday experience.

If assistance is ineffective, the educator considers whether the instructions, materials, communication, or approach need to change. Difficulty with one form of support does not establish the limit of the child's potential.

Collaboration With More Knowledgeable Others

A more knowledgeable other is someone who can contribute useful knowledge or a strategy for the particular activity. This does not necessarily mean an older child or a child who performs more successfully in every area.

During a matching game, one child might demonstrate how to organize cards so they are easier to remember. During a construction activity, the other child might contribute a more effective building strategy. Their roles can change with the task.

The educator observes whether collaboration helps both children participate. A peer who completes the entire task while the other child watches may produce a finished result without providing sufficient opportunity for the learner to practice the thinking involved.

Using the ZPD to Make Teaching Decisions

Educators explore the ZPD through observation and responsive interaction:

- **Notice independent performance.** What does the child attempt and accomplish without help?
- **Offer purposeful assistance.** Which question, demonstration, or shared action might support the next step?
- **Observe the response.** Does the child understand, contribute, and use the support?
- **Adjust participation.** Can the child take greater responsibility, or is a different approach needed?
- **Revisit the task.** What can the child now accomplish with less assistance or independently?

These decisions focus on learning as it develops through interaction, rather than treating an initial independent response as a complete measure of ability.

Supported Success Requires Active Participation

A completed task is not enough to demonstrate learning within the ZPD. Notice what the child understands and contributes, which assistance makes a difference, and whether responsibility begins shifting toward the child.

Scaffolding: Providing Responsive Support

Scaffolding is temporary, responsive assistance that helps a learner participate in a task that would otherwise be difficult to accomplish independently. Support is adjusted as the child's understanding and responsibility increase.

Scaffolding is often connected with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, but Vygotsky did not introduce the term. Wood et al. (1976) introduced the scaffolding metaphor to describe how a tutor supports a child's problem-solving. Later research emphasizes responsiveness to the learner, gradual reduction of assistance, and transfer of responsibility as important characteristics of scaffolding (van de Pol et al., 2010).

The ZPD identifies the relationship between independent and supported performance. Scaffolding describes an approach to providing that support.

Match Support to the Child's Response

Effective scaffolding begins with observing what the child is attempting and where assistance could make a difference. The educator offers enough support to help the child move forward while preserving opportunities to make decisions and solve problems.

For example, when a child cannot find a suitable block for a bridge, the educator might ask, "What does the block need to reach?" If the question does not help, the educator could gesture toward the gap or demonstrate comparing a block's length with the space. The support changes in response to the child's understanding.

A question is not automatically better than a demonstration. Its usefulness depends on whether it helps the child notice and use relevant information (van de Pol et al., 2010).

Forms of Scaffolding

Support can take several forms. Educators choose an approach that fits the child, the activity, and the point of difficulty.

Table 7.2.2.3: Examples of Scaffolding in Early Childhood Practice

Form of support	Classroom example	Opportunity preserved for the child
Purposeful question	"How could you check whether both groups have enough?"	Chooses and tests a comparison strategy.
Gesture or visual cue	Points to matching picture details on two puzzle pieces.	Examines the details and decides how the pieces fit.
Modeling	Demonstrates aligning one end of two objects to compare their lengths.	Applies the strategy to other objects.
Reducing task complexity	Offers a smaller selection of pieces while the child learns a puzzle strategy.	Practices selecting and placing pieces.
Shared action	Holds a structure steady while the child positions a connecting piece.	Plans and completes the connection.
Language support	Introduces words such as "longer" and "shorter" while comparing materials.	Connects vocabulary with observable relationships and expresses an idea.
Feedback	"That support moved when the truck crossed. What could you change?"	Interprets the result and revises the design.

Note

Classroom examples illustrate possible forms of assistance. Their use constitutes scaffolding when support responds to the learner and responsibility increasingly shifts toward the child (van de Pol et al., 2010; Wood et al., 1976).

These are possible forms of assistance, not a fixed sequence. The educator observes whether the support helps the child understand and participate.

Gradually Shift Responsibility

As the child becomes more capable, the educator reduces assistance or changes its form. A demonstration may become a gesture, and a gesture may become a brief reminder. Eventually, the child may use the strategy without a prompt.

This gradual reduction is sometimes called **fading**. It follows evidence of growing understanding rather than a predetermined schedule (van de Pol et al., 2010).

For example, an educator may initially help a child organize materials for a project. On another occasion, the educator asks the child to explain the plan before collecting materials. Later, the child plans and gathers them independently.

Progress may be uneven. A new activity or unfamiliar material may require renewed support even when the child has used a similar strategy successfully before.

Preserve Agency and Access

Scaffolding should support the child's thinking rather than replace it. Completing every difficult step for the child can produce a finished product without helping the child understand how to proceed.

Educators also distinguish temporary instructional assistance from ongoing access supports. A communication system, adapted tool, or visual support may remain necessary and useful even as the child becomes more independent. Independence does not require removing tools that enable participation (NAEYC, 2020).

Observe Learning Beyond the Supported Moment

A successful interaction provides information about what the child can accomplish with help. To understand what was learned, educators also look for later use of the strategy.

Can the child explain or demonstrate the approach? Is less prompting needed? Can the child recognize when the strategy would be useful in another situation?

Adjust Support, Then Observe

Scaffolding is responsive rather than a set amount of help. Increase, reduce, or change assistance according to the child's participation and understanding, while retaining the access supports the child needs.

Language, Private Speech, and Thinking

Vygotsky viewed language as an important cultural tool for communicating and organizing thought. Through interaction, children encounter words and ways of explaining that help them describe relationships, plan actions, and solve problems. They increasingly use language to guide their own activity as well as communicate with others (Vygotsky, 1934/1986).

Language in Shared Activity

During a shared experience, language can draw attention to information and connect actions with meaning. An educator comparing two objects might say, “Let’s line up these ends so we can see which one is longer.” The words identify both a strategy and its purpose.

Children also contribute language that shapes the activity. They may ask why something happened, explain a prediction, or suggest another approach. These exchanges provide opportunities to connect their ideas with those of other people.

Learning involves understanding and using these meanings. Repeating an adult’s explanation does not necessarily demonstrate that the child can apply it.

Private Speech: Talking to Guide Oneself

Private speech is speech directed toward oneself rather than primarily toward another person. A child working on a puzzle may say, “Turn it. No, the other way,” or quietly repeat, “First the blue one, then the red one.” Vygotsky interpreted this speech as a way children guide their actions and organize thinking. Words first encountered in social interactions can become resources for planning, remembering, and managing a challenge (Vygotsky, 1934/1986).

Private speech may become more noticeable when a task is difficult. It should not automatically be treated as distracting behavior or a failure to communicate appropriately (Winsler, 2009).

Example 7.2.2.1

Talking Through a Plan

Five-year-old Mateo is building a garage for toy cars. As he selects blocks, he says, “Two sides first. Then the top.” When the roof falls, he pauses and says, “Too far apart. Move this one.”

Mateo’s words accompany planning and revision. The educator listens for the strategy he is using and allows him time to test it before offering assistance.

Inner speech refers to language used internally as part of thinking. Vygotsky proposed that, through development, speech used to guide action becomes increasingly internalized. Children may move from speaking aloud to whispering or using less audible speech as they organize an activity (Vygotsky, 1934/1986).

This change is not a rigid sequence completed at a particular age. Older children and adults may also speak aloud to themselves, especially during unfamiliar or demanding tasks. Private speech and inner speech can serve related functions without one completely replacing the other (Winsler, 2009).

Silence does not establish that a child has a plan, and audible self-talk does not establish that the child lacks mature thinking. Educators consider how communication relates to what the child is doing.

Supporting Language as a Thinking Tool

Educators can model useful language without requiring children to narrate every action. Saying, “I’ll check whether these ends line up,” makes a strategy available for children to consider and use.

Other helpful approaches include allowing time for explanations, inviting children to discuss plans, and connecting vocabulary with actions and materials. An educator might ask, “What will you try first?” or “How did you decide?” while accepting a response through speech, signs, gestures, pictures, or demonstration.

Children may use any of their languages to organize thinking. A multilingual child’s private speech in a home language is a resource for learning, even when the educator does not understand every word.

Language is one important resource for thinking, but it is not the only one. Images, movement, objects, and other representations also help children organize and express ideas.

Notice the Function of Self-Talk

Listen for whether a child's words support planning, remembering, checking, or revising. Respond to the purpose of the communication rather than assuming that all talking must be directed toward someone else.

Play and Collaborative Learning

Vygotsky's perspective draws attention to how children develop thinking through shared activity. Pretend play and collaborative problem-solving provide opportunities to negotiate meanings, use language, follow plans, and consider ideas contributed by others.

Being near other children does not automatically create collaborative learning. The learning opportunity depends on how children participate, exchange ideas, and coordinate their actions.

Pretend Play: Roles, Meanings, and Rules

In pretend play, children create an imagined situation and act within it. A block may become a telephone, and a classroom corner may become a veterinary clinic. Children use shared meanings to decide what objects represent and how the play will proceed.

Roles also involve expectations. A child pretending to be a veterinarian may examine an animal before giving treatment. A child playing a customer may wait while another child prepares an order. These expectations create reasons to plan, remember, and regulate actions within the imagined situation (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky proposed that pretend play can create opportunities for children to act beyond their usual everyday performance. A child may sustain attention or follow a role's expectations during meaningful play while finding similar demands difficult in another activity. This does not mean that every pretend-play experience places every participant within a ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978).

Negotiating a Shared Plan

Shared play requires children to communicate about their ideas. They may discuss who will take a role, what materials are needed, or how to respond when their plans differ.

For example, one child may want a pretend restaurant to serve soup while another wants to make sandwiches. Deciding to offer both creates a need to organize materials and coordinate responsibilities. Children use language, gestures, objects, and actions to establish a plan.

Educators can help make different ideas understandable without deciding every detail. Asking, "What does each person want to include?" invites children to consider contributions and work toward a shared solution.

Collaborative Problem-Solving

During collaborative problem-solving, children work toward a shared goal and contribute to the thinking involved. They may compare explanations, demonstrate strategies, or test a partner's suggestion.

Two children designing a ramp, for example, might predict how far a toy car will travel, compare results, and change the ramp together. One child may notice that the car leaves the track; the other may suggest adding a barrier. Their combined observations can support a solution neither initially proposed.

Productive collaboration allows children to understand and influence the activity. Simply assigning one child to watch while another completes the difficult steps provides fewer opportunities for shared reasoning.

The Educator's Role

Educators support play and collaboration by observing the shared goal, noticing participation, and deciding when assistance would be useful. They may:

- Offer materials that support a common investigation or imagined situation.
- Help children communicate their plans and understand a partner's idea.
- Model how to explain, compare, or respectfully question a suggestion.
- Invite a less involved child to contribute a decision, prediction, or action.
- Address exclusion or conflict that prevents meaningful participation.

Support should preserve children's ownership of the activity. An educator may briefly enter the play to clarify a problem or introduce a useful tool, then step back as the children continue (NAEYC, 2020).

Example 7.2.2.2

Planning a Veterinary Clinic

During pretend play, Avery says the toy animals need checkups. Jordan wants to make a waiting area but is unsure how to keep track of whose turn comes next.

The educator asks, "What could help you remember the order?" Avery suggests placing the animals in a line. Jordan proposes making a picture list. The children choose the list, draw the waiting animals, and use it to call each animal for a checkup.

The children combine ideas and use a representation to organize their shared activity. The educator's question supports planning while leaving the decision and the work with the children.

Look for Shared Thinking

Notice whether children explain ideas, respond to one another, and contribute to decisions. A shared product provides stronger evidence of collaborative learning when children also participate in the reasoning that produces it.

Applying Vygotsky's Theory to Early Childhood Practice

Applying Vygotsky's perspective involves planning meaningful activities in which interaction, language, and cultural tools help children extend their understanding. Educators observe both independent and supported participation, then adjust their role as children take greater responsibility (NAEYC, 2020; van de Pol et al., 2010).

The aim is to help children use ideas and strategies themselves. A finished product or a correct answer is only part of the evidence of learning.

Start With a Meaningful Goal

Support is easier to interpret when the educator understands what the child is trying to accomplish. Building a bridge for a toy vehicle, organizing a pretend store, or finding enough materials for a group creates a purpose for thinking.

Educators connect these goals with children's interests and experiences. Family knowledge can reveal familiar tools, languages, and practices that help make an activity understandable. A child who helps set a table at home, for example, may draw on that experience when deciding how many plates a pretend restaurant needs.

Identify a Useful Point of Support

Observe what the child manages independently and where participation becomes difficult. The difficulty might involve

understanding a relationship, choosing a strategy, communicating an idea, or using unfamiliar materials.

An educator then offers assistance directed toward that point. If a child can count accurately but loses track of objects already counted, moving each object into a separate group may be more useful than repeating the counting sequence.

The child's response helps determine whether the support fits. Assistance that produces copying without understanding needs reconsideration.

Make Strategies Available Through Interaction

Educators can make thinking visible through brief demonstrations, shared actions, and purposeful language. Rather than only showing the finished result, they explain the relationship guiding the action.

For example, an educator comparing lengths might say, "I'm lining up these ends so the starting point is the same." The child can then try the approach, examine the result, and explain what it shows.

Peers can also contribute strategies. The educator helps ensure that collaboration includes opportunities for the learner to act, decide, and question.

Adjust Support and Revisit Learning

As children begin using a strategy, educators reduce unnecessary prompts and invite greater responsibility. If a child needs renewed assistance, the educator considers what has changed in the task or setting.

Later observations help distinguish supported performance from independent understanding. A child may use a strategy successfully during a shared activity but still need help applying it with different materials.

Table 7.2.2.4: From Sociocultural Concepts to Teaching Decisions

Concept	Question for the educator	Possible teaching decision
Social and cultural learning	What familiar experiences and practices could connect with this activity?	Use family knowledge to choose meaningful materials and examples.
Zone of proximal development	What can the child accomplish independently and with appropriate assistance?	Offer a manageable challenge and observe the response to support.
Scaffolding	Which assistance helps the child understand and participate?	Adjust a question, demonstration, cue, or shared action to the point of difficulty.
Language and private speech	How is communication helping the child organize thinking?	Model useful planning language and allow self-directed communication.
Cultural tools	What resource could help represent or organize the problem?	Introduce a picture list, measuring tool, diagram, or other relevant resource.
Internalization	Is the child beginning to use the strategy with greater independence?	Reduce prompts and revisit the strategy in another meaningful situation.

Note

These author-created teaching applications draw on sociocultural theory, later scaffolding research, and developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2020; van de Pol et al., 2010; Vygotsky, 1978).

Preserve Participation and Access

The form of support should fit the child's communication, sensory, and physical access needs. An educator may use signs, pictures, a home language, or an adapted tool to make participation possible.

Temporary instructional prompts can be reduced as understanding grows. Access tools may remain part of independent participation. The educator judges progress by the child's increasing understanding and responsibility, rather than by whether every support has disappeared.

From Shared Support to Greater Responsibility

Observe participation → Offer purposeful support → Adjust together → Revisit independence

Notice what the child contributes at each point. Use that evidence to decide when to extend the activity, change assistance, or provide another opportunity to practice.

Contributions and Limitations of Vygotsky's Theory

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory offers a way to understand learning through relationships, language, and participation in cultural activities. It encourages educators to examine how an interaction changes what a child can understand and accomplish.

The theory provides useful questions for practice, but it does not prescribe one teaching method or explain every aspect of cognitive development.

Contributions to Early Childhood Practice

Vygotsky's perspective expands attention beyond independent performance. A child's response to guidance can reveal emerging abilities that are not yet demonstrated without assistance. This helps educators identify possibilities for learning rather than treating an initial difficulty as a fixed limit.

The theory also highlights language and cultural tools as resources for thinking. Conversations, signs, number systems, drawings, and familiar practices can help children organize information and participate in increasingly complex activities.

Its emphasis on social and cultural context encourages educators to recognize knowledge developed through family and community life. Classroom performance is interpreted alongside the child's experiences, languages, and opportunities to participate.

The ZPD Requires Careful Interpretation

The ZPD is not a directly visible trait or a single score. Educators infer possibilities for learning by observing a child's participation and response to assistance across particular activities.

Supported success can also be misleading if the adult or peer performs most of the thinking. A child may imitate a demonstrated action without understanding its purpose. Educators therefore consider what the child contributes and whether the strategy is used later with less assistance (van de Pol et al., 2010).

Difficulty despite support requires similar care. The activity may be unfamiliar, the communication inaccessible, or the assistance poorly matched. One unsuccessful interaction does not establish the child's learning potential.

Social Interaction Does Not Automatically Produce Learning

The quality of an interaction matters. Collaboration can involve unequal participation, inaccurate explanations, or one person taking over. More help is not always more useful help.

Educators observe whether children understand each other, engage with the shared problem, and have opportunities to make decisions. They adjust interactions that restrict participation rather than assuming that any group activity provides effective support.

Scaffolding is one later-developed approach associated with Vygotsky's ideas. It should not be treated as the whole of

sociocultural theory, which also addresses how cultural meanings and practices shape development.

Culture Must Be Understood Specifically

Recognizing culture's importance does not justify assumptions about an individual child. Families within the same community may differ in languages, routines, values, and approaches to learning.

Educators seek information from families and observe actual participation. They also examine whether classroom expectations privilege one way of communicating or demonstrating knowledge (NAEYC, 2020).

For example, a child who learns by observing before joining an activity should not automatically be interpreted as disengaged. The educator considers the child's actions and understanding across opportunities to participate.

Using Vygotsky Alongside Other Perspectives

Vygotsky's theory places particular emphasis on the social origins and cultural organization of thinking. Other perspectives add detail about children's conceptual reasoning, attention, memory, and biological development.

An educator might use Piaget's concepts to interpret a child's explanation, Vygotsky's perspective to plan a useful interaction, and information processing to reconsider the memory demands of the activity. These perspectives can inform the same teaching decision without being identical or interchangeable.

Note

Support Is Evidence to Examine

Neither success with help nor difficulty with help provides a complete picture of a child's understanding. Observe the child's contribution, the assistance offered, and how participation changes over time.

Putting Vygotsky's Theory Into Practice

The following illustrative classroom scenario shows how an educator observes independent performance, offers responsive assistance, and looks for increasing responsibility. It also demonstrates how language and a cultural tool can support thinking during a meaningful activity.

Example 7.2.2.3

Enough Plates for Everyone

During pretend restaurant play, four-year-old Sam wants to prepare a table for six toy animals. Sam counts six plates but places two beside one animal and leaves another animal without a plate.

The educator asks, "How could we make sure every animal gets one?" Sam counts the plates again but does not change their placement.

The educator points to one animal and models placing one plate beside it. "One animal, one plate," the educator says. Sam places the remaining plates beside the other animals, repeating quietly, "One animal, one plate."

Another child brings two more animals. The educator waits while Sam examines the table. Sam points to the newcomers and says, "We need two more." Sam retrieves two plates and places one beside each animal.

Later, Sam wants to collect cups without making several trips to the shelf. The educator offers paper and asks, "Could a picture help you remember how many?" Sam draws a mark for each animal and takes the paper to the shelf.

On another day, the educator observes Sam setting a table for a different group of toy animals. Sam places one plate beside each animal without a prompt. Sam still asks for help when making a picture list for several kinds of supplies.

Interpreting the Child's Participation

Sam independently counts six plates but does not initially coordinate one plate with each animal. With a demonstration and a brief verbal cue, Sam carries out the matching strategy. This supported performance suggests that one-to-one matching is a productive focus for further learning.

The educator's initial question does not help Sam change the arrangement. Rather than repeating it, the educator changes the assistance. Modeling one match makes the relationship visible while leaving the remaining decisions and actions to Sam. This illustrates **scaffolding** adjusted to the child's response.

Sam's quiet repetition of "One animal, one plate" is **private speech** that may help organize the task. The picture list is a **cultural tool** for representing and remembering the quantity needed.

Observing Increasing Responsibility

Sam's later independent matching provides evidence that the strategy is becoming available without prompting. From a sociocultural perspective, this is consistent with **internalization** of a strategy practiced through shared activity.

It does not establish mastery across every situation. Sam continues to need assistance with a more complex list. The educator treats matching and list-making as related but distinct learning demands and adjusts support accordingly.

Examining the Educator's Decisions

The educator:

- **Observes the starting point:** Sam can count the plates but does not yet consistently match them to the animals.
- **Changes ineffective assistance:** A question is followed by a brief demonstration when needed.
- **Preserves active participation:** Sam completes the remaining matches and responds to the additional animals.
- **Makes tools available:** Language and a picture list help organize the activity.
- **Revisits independent performance:** A later observation shows what Sam can do without a prompt.

The interaction supports Sam's goal while providing information about emerging understanding. The educator uses that evidence to decide which assistance to reduce and which learning opportunities to revisit.

Reflect on the Example

How could the educator explore whether Sam uses one-to-one matching in another meaningful activity? Describe what you would observe independently, what assistance you might offer, and how you would recognize increasing responsibility.

Vocabulary Alert:

Sociocultural theory: Vygotsky's perspective that cognitive development is shaped through social interaction and participation in cultural activities.

Cultural tools: Physical resources and symbolic systems developed and shared by communities that help people act, communicate, and think, such as measuring tools, language, writing, and maps.

Internalization: The process through which socially shared ways of acting and thinking are transformed into an individual's own mental activity.

Zone of proximal development (ZPD): The distance between what a child can accomplish independently and what the child can accomplish with adult guidance or collaboration with a More Knowledgeable Other.

More knowledgeable other (MKO): Someone with greater knowledge or skill relevant to a particular activity, such as an adult or peer, who can support the child's learning. The role may change with the task.

Scaffolding: Temporary, responsive assistance adjusted to help a learner participate in a task and take increasing responsibility.

Fading: Gradually reducing instructional assistance as the learner demonstrates greater understanding and responsibility.

Private speech: Speech directed toward oneself that can help organize actions, remember information, or solve problems.

Inner speech: Language used internally as part of thinking.

Collaborative learning: Learning through shared activity in which participants contribute ideas, respond to one another, and coordinate their thinking and actions.

Child agency: A child's capacity and opportunity to make choices, contribute ideas, and influence participation in an activity.

Exercise 7.2.2.1

Check Your Understanding

1. **Social interaction and culture:** Explain how a child could develop cognitive understanding while participating in a family or community activity. Identify a cultural tool or shared practice involved in your example.
2. **Zone of proximal development:** A child cannot independently compare the lengths of two objects accurately. After an educator demonstrates lining up one end of each object, the child uses the strategy with another pair. What does this suggest about the child's supported performance? What additional observation would help assess learning?
3. **Scaffolding and participation:** During a difficult puzzle, an educator places every piece while the child watches. Explain why completing the puzzle does not establish that effective scaffolding occurred. Describe a more useful approach.
4. **Private speech:** A child quietly says, "First the sides, then the roof," while building a garage. How would Vygotsky's perspective help interpret this speech? Describe an appropriate educator response.
5. **Adjusting support and preserving access:** A child uses a picture checklist to gather materials. Initially, an educator points to each picture and reminds the child what to collect. Later, the child follows the checklist without reminders. What support could be reduced? Should the checklist necessarily be removed? Explain.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Contributors and Attributions

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Answers

Exercise 7.2.2.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. **Social interaction and culture:** A child helping prepare food might compare quantities, follow a sequence, and discuss how ingredients change. Measuring containers are physical cultural tools, while language and a shared recipe help organize the activity. The child develops understanding through active participation with others. Other examples are appropriate if they connect a meaningful activity, a tool or practice, and an opportunity for thinking.
2. **Zone of proximal development:** The child's response suggests that comparing lengths through alignment is possible with appropriate guidance, even though it was not initially accomplished independently. Using the strategy with another pair provides evidence beyond copying the first demonstration. The educator should later observe whether the child aligns objects without a prompt and understands why the common starting point matters. One supported success does not establish consistent independent understanding.
3. **Scaffolding and participation:** The educator has produced a completed puzzle, but the child has had little opportunity to select, test, or place pieces. A more useful approach would begin by observing the point of difficulty, then offering a cue or modeling one strategy. For example, the educator might demonstrate looking for matching picture details and invite the child to choose and place the next piece. Assistance should change according to the child's response.
4. **Private speech:** The words appear to organize a sequence of actions and may help the child maintain a plan. Vygotsky's perspective interprets this as a possible thinking tool rather than assuming the child is speaking inappropriately. The educator can allow the self-talk, observe how it relates to the construction, and offer assistance only when useful. Modeling planning language during shared activities can also make strategies available.
5. **Adjusting support and preserving access:** The educator can reduce pointing and verbal reminders because the child now uses the checklist independently. The checklist does not necessarily need to be removed; it may remain a useful cultural tool and access support. Increasing independence is demonstrated by the child's greater responsibility for gathering materials, even when a tool continues to support participation.

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7.2.3: Information Processing

How does a child remember the steps in a familiar routine, follow directions during a game, or use a previous experience to solve a new problem? The **information-processing perspective** examines how children attend to information, hold and work with it in memory, store knowledge, and retrieve it when needed.

Rather than organizing development into broad stages, this perspective focuses on changes in specific mental processes. As children develop and gain experience, they become increasingly able to focus their attention, use memory strategies, and manage their thinking. These abilities develop gradually and vary with the child, the task, and the support available (Cowan, 2014; Diamond, 2013).

For early childhood educators, this perspective provides a useful way to consider the demands of a learning experience. A child who has difficulty following several directions may need fewer steps, a visual reminder, or an opportunity to practice. Understanding information processing helps educators adjust their support so children can participate successfully and build independence (Gathercole & Alloway, 2007).

Attention, Memory, and Learning

From an information-processing perspective, learning involves several connected processes. Children must notice relevant information, hold and work with it, connect it to what they already know, and retrieve it when needed. These processes work together during everyday play, conversations, and routines.

Table 7.2.3.1: Information-Processing Processes in Early Childhood

Process	What it involves	Everyday example
Attention	Focusing on relevant information. Selective attention helps children focus amid distractions; sustained attention helps them remain engaged over time.	A child listens to a story while other children play nearby and stays engaged to learn what happens next.
Working memory	Holding information in mind briefly while using it to complete a task.	A child remembers “Get a cup and bring it to the table” while carrying out the directions.
Long-term memory	Retaining knowledge, skills, and experiences beyond the immediate moment.	A child remembers a familiar song, the meaning of a word, or a previous visit to the park.
Retrieval	Accessing information stored in long-term memory when it is needed.	A child recalls how to connect two pieces of a construction toy and uses that knowledge in a new creation.
Memory strategies	Using deliberate actions to help remember information, such as repeating, grouping, or creating a mental picture.	With an educator’s support, a child repeats “boots, coat, backpack” to remember what to collect before leaving.

Note

Definitions synthesized from Cowan (2014), Diamond (2013), and Gathercole and Alloway (2007). Classroom examples are illustrative.

These processes place different demands on children. For example, a child may know a classroom routine but have difficulty keeping several steps in working memory while materials and conversations compete for attention. Familiarity, interest, language

demands, and the surrounding environment can affect how successfully a child completes a task (Cowan, 2014; Gathercole & Alloway, 2007).

Executive function includes working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility. Together, these abilities help children hold a goal in mind, resist distractions, and shift approaches when needed (Diamond, 2013). Young children can also demonstrate emerging metacognition, or awareness of their own thinking, through their words and actions (Whitebread et al., 2009). Educators can invite children to reflect with questions such as, “What helped you remember?” or “What could you try next time?”

Supporting Children’s Information Processing

Educators can support learning by considering how much information children must attend to, remember, and use during an experience. The goal is to make tasks manageable while helping children develop strategies and increasing independence.

- **Support attention.** Reduce competing noise and visual distractions when introducing something new. Use meaningful materials, follow children’s interests, and allow time for active participation (Diamond, 2013).
- **Make directions manageable.** Give a few clear steps at a time, demonstrate unfamiliar actions, and provide time to respond. Adjust the number of steps based on the child’s response (Gathercole & Alloway, 2007).
- **Provide reminders.** Use photographs, gestures, objects, or picture sequences so children can check what comes next without holding every step in working memory (Gathercole & Alloway, 2007).
- **Connect new learning to familiar experiences.** Invite children to relate new ideas to something they have already explored: “How is this seed like the ones we planted?” (Cowan, 2014; Gathercole & Alloway, 2007).
- **Model useful strategies.** Think aloud to show how to repeat important information, organize materials, or check a plan: “I need two things—paper and crayons. I’ll say them again to help me remember” (Gathercole & Alloway, 2007).
- **Revisit learning through play and conversation.** Offer opportunities to recall and use ideas in different situations (Cowan, 2014). Invite children to describe what helped them remember or solve a problem, encouraging reflection on their thinking.

Support should respond to the individual child and the situation. A child learning the language used for directions may benefit from a demonstration or familiar-language support. A child who is tired, overwhelmed, or unfamiliar with an activity may need additional time and reminders (Diamond, 2013). Difficulty completing a task does not, by itself, show that the child lacks the underlying knowledge.

As children become more confident, educators can gradually reduce prompts and invite them to choose their own strategies. Asking, “What would help you remember your plan?” encourages children to take an active role in managing their learning.

Putting It Into Practice

Example 7.2.3.1

Remembering a Planting Plan

During a small-group planting experience, an educator says, “Get a cup, add soil, make a hole, put in a seed, and cover it.” Four-year-old Mateo gets a cup but then watches another child pour water. He asks, “What do I do?”

The educator considers the information-processing demands of the activity. Mateo must attend to the directions, hold several steps in working memory, and carry them out amid nearby activity. Rather than repeating the entire sequence, she points to a picture strip showing the planting steps and says, “You have your cup. Next, add soil.” She leaves the pictures where Mateo can check them independently.

Later, the educator asks, “What helped you know what to do next?” Mateo points to the pictures. She responds, “You checked the pictures to remember your plan.”

Applying the perspective: The educator makes the immediate task manageable and introduces a strategy Mateo can use again. Her response supports attention and working memory, while the follow-up conversation encourages awareness of his own thinking.

Reflect: How could the educator adjust her support as Mateo becomes more familiar with planting?

Vocabulary Alert

Information processing: A perspective that examines how people attend to information, work with it, store it, and retrieve it to support thinking and learning.

Attention: Focusing mental effort on particular information or an activity.

Working memory: Holding information in mind briefly while using it to complete a task.

Long-term memory: Retaining knowledge, skills, and experiences beyond the immediate moment.

Retrieval: Accessing information stored in long-term memory when it is needed.

Metacognition: Awareness of one's own thinking and the use of that awareness to guide learning and problem solving.

Exercise 7.2.3.1

Check Your Understanding

1. How does the information-processing perspective explain changes in children's thinking and learning?
2. What is the difference between working memory and long-term memory? Give a classroom example of each.
3. During cleanup, an educator asks a child to put away blocks, return a book, wash their hands, and get their backpack. The child puts away the blocks but then stops. Identify two adjustments the educator could make and explain why they might help.
4. A child remembers how to connect construction pieces and uses that knowledge to build a new structure. Which memory process is demonstrated? Explain your answer.
5. After completing a puzzle, a child says, "Looking for the corner pieces helped me. I'll do that first next time." How does this statement demonstrate metacognition?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Contributors and Attributions

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Answers

Exercise 7.2.3.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. The information-processing perspective examines changes in specific mental processes, including attention, memory, and retrieval. With development and experience, children become increasingly able to manage information and use strategies to support learning. Their performance also depends on the task and available support.
2. **Working memory** holds information briefly while a child uses it, such as remembering where to carry a cup while following a direction. **Long-term memory** retains knowledge, skills, and experiences beyond the immediate moment, such as remembering a familiar song.
3. The educator could:
    1. Give one or two directions at a time to reduce the amount of information the child must hold in working memory.
    2. Provide a picture sequence so the child can check what comes next.

    Other appropriate responses include demonstrating an unfamiliar step or reducing competing distractions. Stopping after one step does not, by itself, mean the child does not understand the routine.
4. The child demonstrates **retrieval** by accessing knowledge stored in long-term memory about connecting the pieces. The child then applies that knowledge to a new construction.
5. The child identifies a strategy that helped, reflects on its usefulness, and plans to use it again. This demonstrates awareness of their own thinking and the use of that awareness to guide future problem solving.

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7.3: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Cognition and General Knowledge

Children demonstrate their thinking in everyday experiences. An infant searches for a partially hidden toy, a toddler tries different ways to fit a shape into a sorter, and a preschooler groups objects by a shared characteristic. These actions provide clues about how children remember, explore, solve problems, and build knowledge about their world.

Educators learn about children's cognitive development through ongoing observations, conversations with families, and documentation of children's learning. Developmental screening serves a different, more focused purpose: it helps identify children who may benefit from closer monitoring or further evaluation. Screening provides a brief picture of development rather than a complete account of a child's abilities (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2026).

Cognitive development is closely connected with language, movement, attention, and opportunities to participate in meaningful experiences. A child's response during screening must therefore be considered alongside family perspectives, everyday observations, and the conditions in which screening occurs. Educators use this information to collaborate with families, support learning, and follow appropriate procedures when concerns arise (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 7.3: Explore the types and purposes of developmental screening tools related to cognitive development and general knowledge.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Distinguish developmental screening from ongoing assessment and diagnostic evaluation.
- Describe the purposes of screening tools that include cognitive development and related skills.
- Explain what screening information can—and cannot—tell educators about children's thinking and learning.
- Identify considerations for choosing and using developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate screening tools.
- Describe how educators partner with families, respond to screening results, and support children's continued development.

Developmental Screening, Ongoing Assessment, and Diagnostic Evaluation

Developmental screening, ongoing assessment, and diagnostic evaluation provide different kinds of information about children's development. Understanding these differences helps educators use each process appropriately and explain its purpose to families.

Table 7.3.1: Comparing Developmental Screening, Ongoing Assessment, and Diagnostic Evaluation

Process	Primary purpose	How information is gathered	How information is used
Developmental screening	Identify whether a child may need closer monitoring or further evaluation.	Brief, standardized tools that may include family questionnaires, structured activities, or both.	Guide follow-up decisions, including additional monitoring or referral according to the tool's guidance and program procedures.

Process	Primary purpose	How information is gathered	How information is used
Ongoing assessment	Understand a child's strengths, interests, learning, and progress over time.	Repeated observations, conversations, work samples, and documentation during everyday experiences; may also include structured assessment tools.	Individualize teaching, plan learning experiences, document progress, and communicate with families.
Diagnostic evaluation	Examine developmental concerns in greater depth, clarify developmental needs, and determine whether a developmental condition or disability is present when appropriate.	Comprehensive procedures conducted by qualified professionals, often drawing on multiple tools, observations, developmental history, and family input.	Clarify a child's needs and inform recommendations for services and supports. Eligibility decisions follow the requirements of the relevant service system.

Note

Author-created summary based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2026), Lipkin et al. (2020), and National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020).

These processes complement one another. For example, an educator may observe that a child frequently has difficulty solving familiar classroom problems. The educator documents what happens, asks the family about the child's experiences at home, and follows program procedures for discussing screening. If screening results indicate a need for further evaluation, qualified professionals examine the concerns more closely. Throughout this process, the educator continues to provide appropriate learning opportunities and document the child's progress.

Screening Is Not a Diagnosis

A screening result indicates whether further attention may be needed; it does not establish a diagnosis or describe everything a child knows and can do. A result that does not identify a concern also does not replace ongoing observation or dismiss concerns raised by families or educators (Lipkin et al., 2020; NAEYC, 2020).

For cognition and general knowledge, educators need both the focused information provided by screening and the richer picture that develops through everyday assessment. A child may demonstrate problem-solving during block play, remember steps in a familiar routine, or explain ideas more fully in their home language. These observations help educators understand screening results in context and plan meaningful support.

Types of Screening Tools Related to Cognition and General Knowledge

Screening related to cognitive development often occurs within a **broad developmental screening tool** that examines several areas of development. These tools may include questions or activities involving problem-solving, understanding concepts, and using information. They do not provide a complete measure of a child's intelligence or everything the child knows.

Tools also differ in how they gather information. **Family-completed questionnaires** draw on caregivers' knowledge of children's everyday abilities. **Direct screening activities** involve a trained individual engaging the child in structured tasks. Some tools combine direct activities with information from families and educators.

Table 7.3.2: Examples of Developmental Screening Tools Related to Cognition and General Knowledge

Screening tool	How information is gathered	Connection to cognition and general knowledge
Ages & Stages Questionnaires, Third Edition (ASQ-3)	Families complete an age-specific questionnaire, with professional support as needed.	The problem-solving area addresses skills related to thinking and learning. Other areas include communication, gross motor, fine motor, and personal-social development.
Survey of Well-being of Young Children (SWYC)	Families complete age-specific forms that include developmental questions.	The Milestones component examines cognitive, language, and motor development. These skills are considered together rather than reported as a separate cognitive score.
Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning, Fourth Edition (DIAL-4)	Trained individuals conduct structured activities; parent and teacher questionnaires provide additional information.	The Concepts area examines developing conceptual knowledge. The tool also includes Motor and Language areas and gathers information about self-help and social development.

Note: Author-created summary based on Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. (n.d.) for ASQ-3, Perrin et al. (2016) for SWYC, and Pearson (n.d.) for DIAL-4. Consult each tool's current instructions for age ranges, administration, scoring, and follow-up.

Age-range reminder: ASQ-3 covers ages 1–66 months; SWYC Milestones forms cover approximately 1–65 months; and DIAL-4 covers ages 2 years, 6 months through 5 years, 11 months. These examples do not cover the textbook's full three-to-eight age range. Programs must select an appropriate alternative for children beyond a tool's intended age range.

The SWYC's 60-month Milestones form has less robust validation evidence and no established screening cutoff in the developer's scoring guide. It may support developmental surveillance, but its total score requires cautious interpretation (TEAM UP Center, n.d.).

These examples illustrate different ways to gather screening information; they are not interchangeable. Each tool has its own intended age range, administration procedures, scoring rules, and guidance for follow-up. Educators must use the appropriate form and follow the tool's instructions.

A familiar tool may also serve a different purpose. For example, a tool focused on social-emotional development may provide useful information about participation and self-regulation, but it does not replace screening that addresses cognitive development.

> **Screening Is Not a Test of Everything a Child Knows**
>
> General knowledge develops through children's experiences with families, languages, cultures, communities, and learning environments. A brief screening samples selected skills. Educators need family perspectives and ongoing observations to understand the broader picture of a child's thinking and learning.

What Can Screening Tell Us About Cognitive Development?

Developmental screening can help identify whether a child's responses suggest a need for closer monitoring or further evaluation. Depending on the tool and the child's age, screening may sample skills related to exploring objects, solving simple problems, remembering information, or understanding concepts. These skills offer a limited view of how a child thinks and learns.

For example, screening questions or activities might examine whether a child searches for a hidden object, figures out how to obtain a desired toy, or recognizes relationships among objects. The specific skills examined depend on the screening tool. Educators should avoid assuming that every tool measures all aspects of cognition (Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., n.d.; Pearson,

n.d.; Perrin et al., 2016).

Screening information can help educators and families:

- **Recognize demonstrated skills.** Responses show which sampled skills a child is currently demonstrating.
- **Identify areas needing follow-up.** Results may indicate that further attention to development is appropriate.
- **Guide conversations.** Screening provides a starting point for discussing what families and educators observe across settings.
- **Determine next steps.** Results, family concerns, and other developmental information help guide monitoring and referral decisions.

Screening does not explain why a child had difficulty with an activity. A response may be influenced by the child's understanding of the directions, familiarity with the materials, opportunities to practice, or ability to see, hear, move, and communicate. Further information is needed to understand the concern.

Looking Beyond a Single Response

Consider a preschooler who does not sort objects as expected during a screening activity. This response alone does not establish that the child cannot recognize similarities or differences. The educator might also observe how the child organizes toy animals, matches containers with lids, or groups materials during cleanup. Families may describe similar abilities demonstrated at home.

These observations add context without changing the screening tool's scoring rules. Educators record and score responses according to the instructions, then consider the results alongside other information when planning follow-up.

> **A Starting Point for Understanding**
>
> Screening can identify a possible concern, but it cannot establish a child's overall cognitive ability, determine a child's future achievement, or provide a complete picture of general knowledge. Its value lies in helping families and professionals recognize when additional attention may be needed.

Choosing and Using Screening Tools

Choosing a screening tool requires more than selecting a familiar name or a convenient questionnaire. Educators and program leaders need to consider the tool's purpose, the children it was designed for, and the requirements for using it appropriately. A tool that fits one age group or setting may not fit another.

Table 7.3.3: Considerations for Choosing and Using Developmental Screening Tools

Consideration	Questions to ask
Purpose and developmental areas	Is the tool intended for screening? Does it include skills related to cognition, problem-solving, or conceptual knowledge?
Age range	Is the child within the tool's intended age range? Which questionnaire or form is appropriate according to the instructions?
Reliability and validity	Does evidence support consistent results and the tool's intended use with children similar to those being screened?
Language and cultural responsiveness	Is an appropriate language version available? What guidance does the tool provide for multilingual children and for working with interpreters?
Accessibility	Can the child participate meaningfully? What accommodations does the tool permit, and how might changes affect interpretation?

Consideration	Questions to ask
Training and administration	Who is qualified to administer and score the tool? What training, materials, time, and setting are required?
Family participation	How will families understand the purpose, contribute information, and receive results? What consent procedures apply?
Follow-up procedures	What do the instructions recommend for monitoring, rescreening, or referral? Who will coordinate and document follow-up?

Note. Author-created summary based on Lipkin et al. (2020), National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020), and Perrin et al. (2016).

Reliability refers to the consistency of results under specified conditions. **Validity** concerns the evidence supporting how results are interpreted and used. A standardized format alone does not establish either quality; programs need to examine the evidence and guidance for the particular tool (NAEYC, 2020; Perrin et al., 2016).

Using the Tool as Intended

Before screening, explain the process to the family and follow applicable consent and confidentiality procedures. Review the instructions, select the correct form, and prepare the required materials. For direct activities, arrange a setting that supports the child's participation while meeting the tool's requirements. For family questionnaires, help caregivers understand how to complete the form without suggesting answers.

During screening, follow the administration and scoring procedures. Providing extra hints, changing directions, or substituting materials may change what an activity measures. Use only the supports permitted by the tool, and document relevant conditions or departures from the standard procedures.

Language access also requires planning. An available translation should not automatically be assumed to have the same supporting evidence as another version. Follow the tool's guidance for language selection, interpreter involvement, and interpretation of results (NAEYC, 2020; Perrin et al., 2016).

Planning for Follow-Up

Screening is useful only when results lead to appropriate action. Programs need a clear process for sharing results privately, responding to family questions, and coordinating recommended next steps. Record the results, relevant observations, agreed-upon actions, and who is responsible for follow-up.

> **Keep Scoring and Context Together**
>
> Score the screening according to its instructions. Then consider family perspectives, everyday observations, and the conditions of administration when interpreting what the results mean. If the procedures could not be followed, document the limitation and seek guidance rather than treating the score as directly comparable to a standard administration.

Understanding Results in Context

Screening results are one source of information about a child's development. Understanding them requires attention to the tool's guidance, family perspectives, everyday observations, and the circumstances in which screening occurred. A score can identify a need for follow-up, but it cannot explain a child's development by itself.

Considering the Whole Child

Cognitive skills are closely connected with other areas of development. A child may understand a problem but have difficulty communicating an answer or manipulating the materials. Hearing, vision, movement, language, attention, and emotional comfort can all affect how a child participates.

Educators should also consider opportunities to learn. Children develop knowledge through experiences with their families and communities. Unfamiliarity with a particular object, word, or activity does not automatically indicate difficulty thinking or learning. Ask families how children demonstrate related skills during familiar routines and in the languages they use at home (NAEYC, 2020).

Relevant questions include:

- What does the child demonstrate during familiar play and routines?
- What strengths, changes, or concerns do family members describe?
- Did the child understand the language and directions used?
- Were the materials and response methods accessible to the child?
- Did illness, fatigue, distress, or interruptions affect participation?
- Were the screening procedures followed as intended?

These questions help clarify the meaning and limitations of the results. They do not replace the tool's scoring rules or justify dismissing a concern.

Connecting Results With Appropriate Action

Tools may use different terms for results, such as scores within an expected range, a monitoring range, or a range indicating further evaluation. Educators should use the categories and follow-up guidance provided by the specific tool rather than applying one tool's labels to another.

When results indicate a need for closer monitoring, follow the recommended procedures and timeline while continuing to gather information and support learning. When results indicate a need for further evaluation, collaborate with the family and appropriate professionals according to program procedures. Classroom support should continue throughout the process.

A result within an expected range does not guarantee that no developmental concern exists. Concerns raised by families or educators still deserve attention, even when the screening does not identify a need for referral (Lipkin et al., 2020).

> **Context Informs Follow-Up**
>
> Considering language, culture, experience, and participation helps educators respond thoughtfully. These factors should neither be mistaken for evidence of a developmental delay nor used to explain away concerns that warrant further evaluation.

Example: Different Settings, Additional Information

During screening, a child has difficulty completing a problem-solving activity. In classroom play, the educator has observed the child experimenting with ramps and adjusting blocks to keep a structure from falling. The family describes similar persistence when the child builds at home.

The educator records these strengths alongside the screening result and reviews whether language, materials, or administration conditions affected participation. The team follows the tool's recommended next steps while using the child's interests to provide meaningful learning opportunities. The additional observations enrich the picture without canceling the screening concern.

The Educator's Role

Educators contribute to developmental screening through their knowledge of children's everyday learning. They observe how

children explore, remember, solve problems, and use ideas across activities. They also communicate with families and help connect screening information with appropriate classroom support and follow-up.

An educator's responsibilities depend on training, qualifications, and program procedures. Some educators administer approved screening tools; others contribute observations or help families complete questionnaires. Educators work within their role and refer questions requiring specialized interpretation to qualified professionals.

Documenting Thinking and Learning

Useful documentation describes what a child does, the circumstances, and any support provided. Record observable actions rather than conclusions about intelligence, motivation, or ability.

For example, write:

> "During cleanup, Amara placed the round blocks together after the educator demonstrated with two blocks. She continued sorting four more blocks without help."

This description is more useful than "Amara understands sorting" because it identifies the task, the support, and the child's response. Observations across different experiences help show whether a skill is emerging, used independently, or demonstrated under particular conditions.

Providing Support During Everyday Experiences

Educators do not need to wait for a diagnosis to provide responsive teaching. They can use observations and family knowledge to make learning experiences more accessible while recommended screening follow-up proceeds (Lipkin et al., 2020; NAEYC, 2020).

Strategies that support thinking and learning include:

- **Build on interests.** Offer problems to explore through materials and activities the child enjoys.
- **Make routines predictable.** Use familiar sequences, visual cues, and clear directions to support participation.
- **Adjust the challenge.** Offer an achievable starting point, then increase complexity as the child demonstrates readiness.
- **Allow time.** Give children opportunities to think, try, repeat, and revise their actions.
- **Model without taking over.** Demonstrate a possible strategy, describe your thinking, and let the child continue.
- **Offer different ways to respond.** During classroom learning, allow children to show understanding through actions, gestures, objects, pictures, or language.

These are classroom teaching strategies. During standardized screening, educators follow the tool's rules about prompts, materials, and permitted supports.

Coordinating and Following Through

When concerns arise, educators share specific observations, listen to families, and follow the program's process for consultation or referral. They protect confidentiality and share information only through authorized procedures.

Follow-through includes documenting agreed-upon actions, identifying who will complete each step, and checking whether the family needs help accessing the recommended next step. With appropriate permission, educators collaborate with specialists to connect recommendations with classroom routines (Perrin et al., 2016).

> **Support and Follow-Up Work Together**
>
> Responsive teaching continues while monitoring, referral, or evaluation is underway. Classroom progress provides useful information, but it does not replace recommended follow-up.

The educator's continuing responsibility is to observe, communicate, support participation, and review how the child responds over time.

Partnering With Families

Families bring essential knowledge about how children think and learn during everyday life. They may notice a child remembering where belongings are stored, finding a different way to reach a toy, or recognizing patterns in a familiar song. These experiences help educators understand abilities that may not be visible during classroom activities or screening.

Partnership begins before results are available. Explain why screening is offered, what participation involves, and how information will be used. Clarify that screening identifies possible needs for follow-up rather than determining a child's intelligence or everything the child knows.

Inviting Family Knowledge

Ask questions that encourage families to describe their child's actions rather than compare the child with others. For example:

- "What does your child do when a toy or activity is difficult?"
- "What routines does your child remember and help complete?"
- "How does your child show you what they know?"
- "What have you noticed about your child's learning recently?"
- "Are there questions or concerns you would like us to consider?"

Invite examples from the languages, activities, and settings familiar to the child. Ask which language and communication method the family prefers, and arrange appropriate language support when needed. A family's comfort with written forms should not be mistaken for the quality of its knowledge about the child (NAEYC, 2020).

Discussing Results Respectfully

Share results privately and use clear, descriptive language. Begin with specific strengths, explain what the screening found, and make room for the family's interpretation and questions. Avoid labels or predictions that extend beyond the information available.

For example, an educator might say:

> "You described how Mateo remembers where his toys belong, and we see him solving problems during block play. His screening result suggests that a closer look at some areas of development would be helpful. This result does not give us a diagnosis. Let's review the recommended next step and talk about your questions."

If family observations differ from the screening results, explore the difference together. Children may demonstrate skills differently across settings, languages, or activities. Document the additional information while following the tool's guidance for follow-up (NAEYC, 2020; Perrin et al., 2016).

Making Next Steps Manageable

Work with the family to clarify what will happen next, who will make contact, and when follow-up will occur. Ask whether the family needs help understanding a referral, arranging communication, or sharing information through authorized procedures.

Families may also welcome ideas for supporting learning at home. Build on routines they already value, such as matching socks, finding ingredients while cooking, remembering steps in a bedtime routine, or exploring how containers fit together. Offer choices and invite families' own ideas rather than assigning a lengthy list of activities.

> **Shared Understanding, Shared Planning**

Effective partnership combines family expertise with educators' observations and screening information. Together, families and educators identify useful next steps while recognizing the child's strengths and continuing to support learning.

Putting It Into Practice

Developmental screening becomes useful when educators connect results with family knowledge, everyday observations, and appropriate action. The following example shows how these sources of information can work together.

Example 7.3.1

Understanding Noah's Problem-Solving

Noah is 3 years old and enjoys playing with toy vehicles. His educator, Ms. Rivera, notices that he often watches an adult when a familiar activity becomes difficult. During puzzles, he sometimes pushes pieces against an opening and then moves away. Ms. Rivera documents the materials, Noah's actions, and the assistance offered rather than concluding that he cannot solve problems.

She also records his strengths. During vehicle play, Noah tries different positions to fit trucks inside a toy garage. When one truck blocks the entrance, he moves it so another can pass.

Gather family perspectives. Ms. Rivera asks Noah's family how he approaches challenges at home. They describe how he experiments with stacking food containers and remembers where different lids are stored. They also share a concern: he frequently becomes frustrated when learning an unfamiliar activity.

Review screening information. Following program procedures and obtaining required consent, a trained staff member coordinates an age-appropriate developmental screening. The result indicates a need for further evaluation according to the tool's guidance. Staff review the completed screening and document the administration conditions. They consider the family's examples and classroom observations alongside the result.

Plan follow-up together. Ms. Rivera and the program's designated staff member explain the result to Noah's family. They clarify that screening has identified a concern requiring a closer look, rather than a diagnosis. Together, they review the referral process and agree on who will complete each next step.

Continue classroom support. While follow-up is underway, Ms. Rivera builds on Noah's interest in vehicles. She offers garages with different-sized openings, models one possible strategy when needed, and gives him time to try. She also introduces simple puzzles with clear visual cues and gradually adjusts the challenge as he demonstrates readiness.

Document and communicate. Ms. Rivera records which tasks Noah completes independently, what support helps, and how he responds when an approach does not work. She shares observations with his family and checks on the agreed-upon follow-up. With appropriate permission, this information can also contribute to the evaluation process.

Reflect on the Example

- How did Ms. Rivera's documentation provide more useful information than a general statement such as "Noah struggles with problem-solving"?
- How did the family's observations add to the understanding of Noah's development?
- Why was further evaluation still appropriate even though Noah demonstrated problem-solving strengths?
- How did classroom support continue while the referral process moved forward?

Vocabulary Alert:

Developmental screening: A brief process using a standardized tool to identify whether a child may need closer monitoring or further evaluation.

Ongoing assessment: The repeated gathering and interpretation of information about a child's strengths, interests, learning, and development to guide teaching and document progress.

Diagnostic evaluation: A comprehensive process conducted by qualified professionals to examine developmental concerns, clarify developmental needs, and determine whether a developmental condition or disability is present when appropriate.

Cognitive development: The development of abilities involved in thinking, remembering, understanding, reasoning, and solving problems.

General knowledge: Information and understandings children build through experiences with people, objects, events, and ideas in their families, communities, and learning environments.

Reliability: The consistency of a tool's results under specified conditions.

Validity: The evidence supporting the interpretation and use of a tool's results for a particular purpose and population.

Standardized administration: Using a tool according to established procedures for directions, materials, permitted supports, and scoring.

Developmental monitoring: An ongoing process of noticing and discussing how a child develops over time, drawing on family knowledge, observations, and developmental information.

Referral: The process of connecting a child and family with an appropriate professional or service for further evaluation or support.

Exercise 7.3.1

Check Your Understanding

1. How do developmental screening, ongoing assessment, and diagnostic evaluation differ in purpose? Explain how the three processes can work together.
2. Identify two screening tools introduced in this chapter. Describe how each gathers information and how it relates to cognitive development or general knowledge.
3. A program selects a screening tool because it is inexpensive and easy to administer. What additional considerations should staff examine before using it? Identify at least four and explain why they matter.
4. A multilingual preschooler has difficulty following directions during screening. The family reports that the child solves similar problems during familiar activities in their home language. How should the educator respond to these different sources of information?
5. A child's screening result indicates a need for further evaluation. The educator suggests waiting several months because the child has recently improved during classroom activities. What would be a more appropriate response, and how can the educator continue supporting the child?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 7.3.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. **Developmental screening** briefly identifies whether closer monitoring or further evaluation may be needed. **Ongoing assessment** gathers information over time to guide teaching and document learning. **Diagnostic evaluation** examines concerns in depth through qualified professionals. These processes complement one another: everyday observations can inform screening conversations, screening may lead to evaluation, and ongoing assessment continues to guide classroom support.
2. Responses may include any two of the following:
   - **ASQ-3:** Uses family-completed, age-specific questionnaires. Its problem-solving area addresses skills related to thinking and learning.
   - **SWYC:** Uses family-completed forms. Its Milestones component examines cognitive, language, and motor development together rather than providing a separate cognitive score.
   - **DIAL-4:** Combines structured activities administered by trained individuals with family and teacher questionnaires. Its Concepts area examines developing conceptual knowledge.
3. Staff should examine the tool's intended purpose, developmental areas, age range, evidence of reliability and validity, language and cultural appropriateness, accessibility, training requirements, family participation, and follow-up guidance. For example, a tool must match the child's age, address the intended developmental concerns, and have evidence supporting its use with the children being screened. Staff must also be able to administer it appropriately and respond to the results.
4. The educator should document the screening conditions, review whether appropriate language procedures were followed, and gather specific examples from the family and classroom. Family observations add important context but do not automatically cancel the screening concern. Staff should follow the tool's guidance, seek qualified consultation when needed, and document any limitations affecting interpretation rather than changing scores informally.
5. The educator should share the results with the family and coordinate the recommended evaluation according to the tool's guidance and program procedures. Classroom improvement is valuable information but does not replace recommended follow-up. Meanwhile, the educator can build on the child's interests, provide appropriate challenges and supports, document progress, and communicate with the family and authorized professionals.

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7.4: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Cognition and General Knowledge

Children build cognitive skills and general knowledge as they explore materials, investigate questions, solve problems, and interact with others. A child comparing the lengths of two ramps, predicting whether an object will float, or explaining how a block structure fell is actively developing understanding. The environment influences which learning opportunities are available and how children participate in them.

Supporting cognitive development requires more than providing educational materials. Educators also consider how spaces are organized, whether children have time to investigate their ideas, and how interactions encourage thinking. Accessible materials, meaningful choices, and responsive conversations can help children connect new experiences with what they already know (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

Environmental rating scales and other observational measures help educators examine these conditions. Rather than measuring an individual child's cognitive abilities, these tools examine features of the learning environment and the interactions that shape children's experiences. Educators can use the findings to identify strengths, select priorities, and make intentional improvements.

This section explores environmental measures related to cognition and general knowledge, including the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). It also considers how educators use findings alongside classroom observations and family perspectives to strengthen learning opportunities.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 7.4: Explore the types and purposes of environmental rating scales related to cognitive development and general knowledge.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how environmental measures differ from developmental screening and assessment of individual children.
- Describe the purposes and focus of the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).
- Identify environmental features and educator interactions that support thinking, reasoning, problem-solving, and general knowledge.
- Explain considerations for selecting, using, and interpreting environmental measures.
- Use environmental findings, classroom observations, and family perspectives to recommend improvements that support children's learning.

What Are Environmental Measures?

Environmental measures are tools used to examine the quality of learning settings and the experiences available to children. They help educators consider how spaces, materials, routines, and interactions support children's participation and development. Depending on the tool, observations may focus on the overall environment, particular features of classroom quality, or educator–child interactions.

For cognition and general knowledge, environmental measures help educators examine opportunities for children to explore, compare, investigate, represent ideas, and solve problems. Having puzzles, books, and science materials available is one consideration. Equally important is how children can access and use these materials and how educators extend their thinking during everyday experiences.

Examining Learning Conditions and Individual Development

Environmental measures and assessments of individual children answer different questions. Developmental screening identifies

whether a child may need further evaluation. Ongoing assessment helps educators understand a child's learning, strengths, and progress. Environmental measures examine the conditions in which that learning occurs (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020; Teachstone, n.d.-b).

For example, an educator might document how a child sorts objects during play as part of ongoing assessment. An environmental observation would examine whether children have access to varied sorting materials, enough time to explore them, and interactions that encourage comparing and explaining.

An environmental rating does not identify an individual child's cognitive abilities or diagnose a developmental concern. Educators use environmental findings alongside information about individual children to make informed teaching decisions.

Process Quality and Structural Quality

Two concepts help explain what environmental measures may examine:

- **Process quality** refers to children's everyday experiences and interactions with educators, peers, and materials. Examples include an educator inviting children to explain their predictions, helping them compare possible solutions, and responding thoughtfully to their questions.
- **Structural quality** refers to conditions that help organize and support the program, such as group size, staff-to-child ratios, and staff qualifications (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018).

These aspects of quality are related, but individual tools emphasize them differently. Educators need to understand a tool's purpose and scope rather than assume that one rating captures every aspect of program quality.

Connecting Findings to Improvement

Environmental findings are most useful when they guide specific changes. If an observation shows that children have few opportunities to investigate their own questions, educators might provide longer periods of uninterrupted play, make exploration materials easier to reach, or practice asking questions that invite explanation.

The goal is to strengthen children's daily learning experiences. Educators consider both what the environment provides and how effectively those opportunities support the children who use it.

Types of Environmental Measures

Environmental measures differ in the settings they address and the aspects of quality they examine. The **Environment Rating Scales (ERS)** examine a broad range of environmental features and daily experiences. The **Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)** focuses on the quality of educator–child interactions. Both can provide useful information about conditions that support cognition and general knowledge.

Environment Rating Scales (ERS)

The Environment Rating Scales are a family of observational tools designed for different age groups and program settings. They examine features such as space, materials, routines, interactions, and opportunities for learning. Educators select the scale that fits their setting and follow the guidance for the edition being used (Environment Rating Scales Institute, n.d.-b).

Table 7.4.1: Environment Rating Scales and Connections to Cognition and General Knowledge

Tool	Age group or setting	Connections to cognition and general knowledge
Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ITERS-3)	Center-based programs serving children from birth to age 3.	Examines experiences that support early exploration, understanding of cause and effect, communication, and learning through play and routines.

Tool	Age group or setting	Connections to cognition and general knowledge
Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (ECERS-3)	Programs serving children ages 3–5	Examines opportunities involving language, books, mathematics, nature and science, pretend play, and other experiences that support thinking and knowledge building.
Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition (FCCERS-3)	Family child care homes serving children from infancy through school age	Examines how the home-based setting supports learning through accessible materials, interactions, routines, and experiences appropriate for children of different ages.
School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale, Updated Edition (SACERS-U)	Programs serving school-age children, generally ages 5–12	Examines opportunities for exploration, problem-solving, creative activities, and social learning during out-of-school care.

Note

Author-created summary based on the Environment Rating Scales Institute (n.d.-b). Connections to cognition and general knowledge are illustrative applications, not official item descriptions or scoring criteria.

These scales address overall environmental quality rather than measuring cognition as an isolated developmental domain. Their findings can help educators examine whether children have meaningful opportunities to use and extend their thinking throughout the day.

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)

CLASS is an observational tool that examines educator–child interactions. CLASS 2nd Edition includes Infant–Toddler and Pre-K–3rd versions. The domains and dimensions vary by age level and edition, so educators must use the guidance appropriate to the version selected (Teachstone, n.d.-b).

In relation to cognition and general knowledge, CLASS helps draw attention to how educators support children's thinking during interactions. Relevant practices include:

- Encouraging children to compare, predict, reason, and explain.
- Connecting ideas to children's experiences and prior knowledge.
- Providing feedback that helps children reconsider or extend their ideas.
- Sustaining conversations through meaningful back-and-forth exchanges.
- Responding to children's interests and supporting their active participation.

For example, when children build a bridge with blocks, an educator might ask, "What could we change to help the bridge hold more weight?" The educator then listens, invites children to test their ideas, and helps them discuss what happened. The learning opportunity involves both the materials and the interaction surrounding their use.

Understanding the Difference

ERS and CLASS offer related perspectives on classroom quality. ERS examines a broad range of conditions and experiences, including materials and interactions. CLASS provides a focused examination of interactions. A classroom may contain many learning materials while offering limited support for children to investigate, explain, or connect ideas.

Neither tool measures an individual child's cognitive development. Educators use findings to improve learning conditions and interactions, alongside ongoing assessment of children's learning.

What Do Environmental Measures Examine?

Environmental measures help educators examine how daily learning conditions support children's thinking and knowledge building. Depending on the tool, observations may address the physical setting, available materials, schedules, or educator–child interactions. No single measure examines every feature, so educators must interpret findings within the purpose and scope of the tool used.

The following areas offer a practical way to connect environmental observations to cognition and general knowledge. They are examples for educator reflection rather than a scoring guide for a particular tool.

Table 7.4.2: Environmental Features That Support Cognition and General Knowledge

Area to examine	What educators consider	Connection to cognitive learning
Learning materials	Are materials varied, developmentally appropriate, accessible, and available for children to use in different ways?	Blocks, puzzles, pretend-play props, books, and investigation materials provide opportunities to compare, classify, represent ideas, and solve problems.
Space and organization	Can children locate materials, move comfortably, and work independently or with others? Are there places for quiet concentration and active investigation?	Clear organization supports purposeful choices, sustained attention, planning, and collaboration.
Daily schedules and routines	Do children have enough time to explore, revisit ideas, and complete meaningful work? Are unnecessary waiting and interruptions reduced?	Extended engagement allows children to test predictions, adjust strategies, and connect experiences over time.
Educator–child interactions	Do educators listen, follow children's ideas, introduce useful information, and invite explanation? Do they allow time for children to respond?	Responsive exchanges help children develop concepts, consider alternatives, and explain their reasoning.
Access and participation	Can children participate through different languages, movements, communication methods, and levels of support? Do materials connect with children's families and communities?	Accessible and meaningful experiences give children varied ways to use their knowledge and build new understanding.

Note

Author-created synthesis informed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2018). Examples support educator reflection and do not constitute a standardized observation or scoring guide.

Looking Beyond the Presence of Materials

The presence of materials provides only part of the picture. A classroom may have a well-stocked science area, but children may rarely use it because materials are out of reach, exploration time is brief, or adults discourage experimentation. Educators examine how children actually experience the environment.

For example, magnifying glasses and natural objects create possibilities for investigation. Those possibilities become richer when children can handle the objects, compare details, ask questions, and discuss their observations with an interested educator.

Recognizing Learning Throughout the Day

Opportunities to build cognition and general knowledge occur across classroom areas and routines. Children explore quantity while setting places for snack, consider spatial relationships while putting away equipment, and use symbolic thinking while creating a pretend restaurant. Educators can notice these opportunities and extend them without turning every experience into an adult-directed lesson.

Considering Whose Learning Is Supported

An environment may work well for some children while creating barriers for others. Educators consider whether children can reach and manipulate materials, understand available choices, communicate ideas, and connect experiences to familiar knowledge.

For example, a child who communicates using pictures should have ways to make predictions and share discoveries during an investigation. A multilingual child may demonstrate understanding through actions, drawings, or discussion in a home language. Considering these possibilities helps educators identify strengths and barriers that an overall rating alone may not fully explain.

Why Use Environmental Measures?

Environmental measures provide a structured way to examine learning conditions and identify opportunities for improvement. They help educators move from general impressions, such as “our classroom encourages exploration,” to specific observations about materials, schedules, participation, and interactions.

For cognition and general knowledge, the purpose is to strengthen children’s opportunities to investigate, reason, solve problems, and build understanding throughout the day.

Identify Strengths and Priorities

Environmental findings can highlight practices worth maintaining as well as areas that need attention. A classroom might offer accessible materials and ample time for exploration while providing few opportunities for children to explain their thinking. Recognizing both strengths and needs helps educators choose focused, manageable priorities.

Educators also consider how findings relate to the children currently enrolled. A recommendation becomes more useful when it addresses an observed barrier or expands an opportunity that matters to those children.

Guide Intentional Improvement

Findings can help educators connect a concern with a specific action. If children’s investigations are frequently interrupted, the team might adjust the schedule. If materials offer only one level of difficulty, educators might introduce options that allow children to explore different challenges.

Improvement does not always require purchasing more materials. Reorganizing existing resources, protecting time for play, or changing how educators respond to children’s ideas may create meaningful opportunities for learning.

Support Reflection and Professional Learning

Environmental observations give teaching teams a shared starting point for discussing practice. Rather than relying only on personal preferences, educators can examine concrete examples of what occurred and consider possible responses.

For example, a team might notice that educators frequently ask children to name objects but seldom invite them to compare, predict, or explain. Professional learning could focus on extending conversations, followed by coaching, practice, and reflection on children’s responses.

Formal observations should support constructive professional discussion. Feedback is most useful when educators understand the findings, can ask questions, and receive practical support for improvement (Teachstone, n.d.-b).

Monitor Changes Over Time

After making a change, educators observe whether children's experiences improve. Are more children participating? Are investigations lasting longer? Are children trying different solutions or sharing more detailed explanations?

Follow-up observations help educators decide whether to continue, adjust, or replace a strategy. When comparing formal ratings over time, they must also consider whether the same tool, edition, and observation procedures were used.

Contribute to Broader Program Improvement

Environmental measures may also inform program evaluation, accreditation efforts, or quality improvement initiatives. Their role depends on the requirements of the particular system.

A rating provides information about the features observed within a tool's scope. It does not offer a complete picture of a program or guarantee particular outcomes for children. Educators interpret findings alongside ongoing child assessment, family perspectives, and other program information to guide thoughtful decisions.

Choosing and Using Environmental Measures

Environmental measures are most useful when they fit the setting, address a clear purpose, and are used according to established procedures. Educators need to understand what a tool examines, what preparation it requires, and how findings can inform improvements in children's learning experiences.

Select a Tool That Fits the Purpose and Setting

Begin by identifying the question the observation should address. Is the program examining overall environmental quality, or does it need a closer look at educator–child interactions? Select a tool appropriate for the children's ages, the program setting, and the intended use.

For cognition and general knowledge, educators also consider how the tool addresses opportunities for exploration, reasoning, concept development, and meaningful conversation. If a tool is required by a quality improvement initiative or other program system, confirm the required edition and procedures. For ERS observations, consult the applicable additional and updated notes from the Environment Rating Scales Institute alongside the scale manual (Environment Rating Scales Institute, n.d.-a).

Table 7.4.3: Considerations When Choosing and Using Environmental Measures

Consideration	Questions to ask
Purpose and scope	What does the tool examine? How will the information help improve children's learning experiences?
Age group and setting	Is the tool appropriate for the children's ages and the type of program?
Edition and requirements	Which edition is being used? Are there specific requirements for this observation?
Observer preparation	What training, certification, or reliability checks are required for the intended use?
Observation procedures	What observation length, activities, documentation, and scoring procedures does the tool require?
Cultural, linguistic, and disability considerations	What guidance supports appropriate use in this setting? What additional information is needed to understand children's access and participation?
Resources and follow-up	Are time, materials, and professional support available to use the findings?

Note

Author-created planning questions informed by the Environment Rating Scales Institute (n.d.-a, n.d.-b), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2020), and Teachstone (n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Follow the selected tool's manual and applicable assessment requirements for formal observations.

Prepare Observers and Follow Established Procedures

Formal observations require preparation appropriate to the tool and its intended use. Observers need to understand the criteria, document relevant evidence, and apply scoring rules consistently. For CLASS, observer certification requires completion of observation training, passing a reliability examination, and annual recertification. Requirements for ERS observations depend on the assessment system and intended use; observers should follow the applicable training and reliability requirements (Environment Rating Scales Institute, n.d.-a; Teachstone, n.d.-a).

Agreement among observers is called **inter-rater reliability**. Training and reliability checks help observers apply a tool's criteria consistently.

Educators may also use a tool's concepts for informal reflection. However, an informal classroom review should not be presented as an official rating or treated as equivalent to an observation completed under standardized procedures.

During a formal observation, follow the manual's directions for timing, evidence collection, and scoring. Avoid changing criteria or substituting personal preferences for the tool's requirements.

Observe Typical Daily Experiences

The goal is to understand children's usual experiences. Educators should maintain regular routines rather than stage special activities or temporarily display materials for the observation (Environment Rating Scales Institute, n.d.-a).

For cognitive learning, typical experiences can reveal whether children have sustained opportunities to investigate ideas, use materials, and engage in conversations. Formal scoring must follow the tool's observation requirements. Additional observations across days or routines can provide context for improvement planning.

Interpret Findings Within Context

Review the evidence behind ratings rather than relying only on an overall score. Findings may identify a concern without fully explaining why it occurred. Educators can consider classroom observations, family perspectives, children's participation, and program conditions when deciding how to respond.

For example, limited conversation during one activity may warrant further observation of group size, noise, communication supports, or the educator's approach. The finding provides a starting point for inquiry rather than a complete explanation.

Cultural and linguistic knowledge is also important. Educators should avoid assuming that unfamiliar materials, interaction patterns, or ways of communicating indicate limited learning. Follow formal scoring procedures while using additional contextual information to interpret findings and plan appropriate changes.

Turn Findings Into a Manageable Plan

Select a small number of priorities and identify specific actions, needed support, and a time to review progress. A useful plan describes what educators will change and what they will observe afterward.



Figure 7.4.1: Educators use environmental findings to choose priorities, make changes, observe children's experiences, and adjust practices (OpenAI, 2026).

For example, a team might make investigation materials independently accessible and protect a longer period for exploration. Follow-up observations could examine which children use the materials, how they sustain investigations, and how educators extend their thinking.

The value of an environmental measure lies in how thoughtfully its findings are used to improve everyday learning opportunities.

The Educator's Role in Supporting Cognition and General Knowledge

Educators turn environmental findings into daily practices that support children's thinking. This involves noticing how children use the environment, responding to their ideas, and adjusting learning conditions to expand participation and understanding.

An environmental observation may identify a broad priority, such as strengthening conversations or improving access to materials. Educators connect that priority to the interests, strengths, and learning needs of the children in their care.

Observe Children's Thinking

Watch how children approach challenges, use materials, and communicate ideas. Notice what they compare, what they predict, and how they respond when something does not work. Thinking may be expressed through actions, gestures, drawings, construction, home languages, or spoken explanations.

These observations help educators make specific decisions. A child repeatedly testing which objects roll may benefit from additional objects with different shapes. Children struggling to share a small construction space may need a larger work area before they can develop their ideas together.

Extend Thinking Through Responsive Interactions

Join children's experiences with interest and a clear purpose. Describe what children are doing, introduce useful vocabulary, and offer questions or comments that invite further thought. Allow time for children to respond and try their ideas.

For example, an educator might say, "You put the wider block on the bottom. What did you notice when you changed it?" The child's response can guide the next interaction.

Questions are one way to support thinking. Modeling, explaining, demonstrating, and sharing accurate information also have a place. Educators balance support with opportunities for children to investigate and make decisions (National Association for the

Education of Young Children, 2020).

Connect Experiences and Build Knowledge

Help children connect new discoveries to familiar experiences. During pretend grocery-store play, educators might connect children's knowledge of shopping with sorting foods, making lists, comparing quantities, and discussing where foods come from.

Revisiting experiences also gives children opportunities to develop their ideas. Photographs, drawings, and children's comments can help them recall earlier investigations, consider changes, and plan what to try next (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

Adjust Supports to Expand Participation

Use environmental findings to identify barriers and make purposeful adjustments. A child may need a stable work surface, easier-to-grasp tools, visual choices, a quieter space, or a communication system to participate fully.

Provide different levels of challenge within shared experiences. During a building investigation, one child may explore stacking, another may compare the stability of different bases, and another may draw a plan. Educators support each child's next steps while maintaining opportunities to learn together.

Reflect With the Teaching Team

Discuss what changes in the environment and teaching practices mean for children's experiences. Focus on observable examples: Who participated? What ideas did children explore? How did educator responses extend or interrupt their thinking?

If a change does not have the intended effect, reconsider the materials, timing, interactions, or supports. This ongoing reflection keeps improvement connected to children's learning rather than ending when an observation or rating is complete.

Partnering With Families to Support Cognition and General Knowledge

Families offer knowledge about children's interests, experiences, languages, and ways of learning that may not be visible during a classroom observation. Their perspectives help educators interpret children's participation and plan environments that connect new learning with familiar experiences.

Learn From Family Knowledge

Invite families to describe what children investigate, build, notice, or ask about at home. Conversations about cooking, repairing objects, caring for animals, shopping, or spending time outdoors can reveal meaningful starting points for classroom learning.

For example, a family might explain that their child enjoys helping a grandparent repair bicycles. Educators could build on this interest with photographs of bicycle parts, books about wheels, or opportunities to investigate how wheels move. Family knowledge helps educators recognize and extend understanding that children already bring to the classroom.

Exchange Observations in Accessible Ways

Share specific examples of children's thinking and invite families to contribute their observations. Instead of reporting only that a child "did well in science," an educator might say, "Today, Amara tested three objects to find out which would float. She changed her prediction after noticing that the wooden block stayed on top of the water."

Ask whether families have noticed related interests or discoveries. Use communication methods and languages that work for each family, such as brief conversations, translated messages, photographs, or an interpreter when needed. Children may demonstrate knowledge differently across settings, and these exchanges help educators develop a fuller understanding (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

Include Families in Environmental Improvement

Explain environmental findings in clear, practical language. Emphasize that the observation examines learning conditions and interactions rather than rating individual children or families.

Invite input on proposed changes. If the team wants to strengthen pretend play, families might suggest familiar community settings, household routines, languages, or materials to represent. Educators remain responsible for providing resources; family participation should be voluntary and should not depend on donations or classroom visits.

Make Meaningful Connections Between Home and the Program

Offer optional ideas that fit naturally into family routines. Comparing the sizes of containers while cooking, discussing changes noticed on a walk, or planning how to build something together can extend children's thinking without requiring special purchases or formal lessons.

These exchanges should remain reciprocal. Families can share approaches and experiences that educators incorporate into the program, while educators share classroom discoveries that families may choose to explore further. Together, they can create connections that make learning more accessible and meaningful for each child.

Putting It Into Practice

From Available Materials to Meaningful Investigation

During a classroom environmental review, Ms. Rivera notices that the preschool science area contains ramps, balls, toy vehicles, and measuring tools. However, most materials are stored in closed containers on a high shelf. Children must ask an adult to retrieve them, and the daily schedule allows only a brief period for exploration.

When children use the ramps, Ms. Rivera often asks questions such as, "What color is the car?" or "How many wheels does it have?" These questions invite children to identify features but provide few opportunities to explain how things move or test their own ideas.

The review identifies strengths, including varied materials and children's interest in movement. The teaching team selects one improvement priority: **expand children's opportunities to investigate and explain how objects move.**

Ms. Rivera and her co-teacher make several changes:

- Move selected materials to labeled, accessible shelves and provide a stable work surface with room for children to investigate together.
- Adjust the schedule to allow a longer period of uninterrupted exploration.
- Practice comments and questions such as, "Your car stopped before the end. What could you try?" and allow time for children to respond.
- Provide picture choices, drawing materials, and opportunities to demonstrate ideas through actions as well as words.

The team also invites families to share children's interests in movement. One family describes watching vehicles at a relative's repair shop. Another shares that their child enjoys rolling objects down a hill. With permission, educators incorporate these experiences into classroom conversations and add photographs that connect the investigation to familiar settings.

Over the following weeks, the educators document children's participation and strategies. They notice children comparing ramp heights, testing different vehicles, and returning to earlier ideas. One child uses gestures and picture choices to predict which vehicle will travel farther. Another draws a starting line so repeated trials can begin in the same place.

The team also notices that the investigation space becomes crowded. They adjust its arrangement and continue observing whether children can reach materials and work comfortably.

These follow-up observations suggest that the changes are creating richer learning opportunities. They do not establish an official environmental rating or measure individual children's cognitive progress. The educators continue using ongoing child assessment alongside environmental observations to plan next steps.

Reflect on the Scenario

- Which barriers limited children's opportunities to investigate, even though materials were available?
- How did the changes address both the physical environment and educator–child interactions?
- How did family input make the investigation more meaningful?
- What evidence should the educators continue collecting to decide whether further changes are needed?

Vocabulary Alert:

Environmental measures: Tools used to examine the quality of learning settings, including features such as spaces, materials, routines, and interactions.

Process quality: The quality of children's everyday experiences and interactions with educators, peers, and materials.

Structural quality: Conditions that organize and support a program, such as group size, staff-to-child ratios, and staff qualifications.

Environment Rating Scales (ERS): A family of observational tools that examine a broad range of environmental features and daily experiences in different age groups and program settings.

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS): An observational tool that examines the quality of educator–child interactions, with versions designed for different age levels.

Standardized procedures: Established directions for administering a tool, collecting evidence, and scoring results consistently.

Inter-rater reliability: The degree of agreement among observers who independently evaluate the same experiences using the same tool.

Continuous quality improvement: An ongoing process of examining practices, identifying priorities, making changes, and reviewing evidence to guide further improvement.

Exercise 7.4.1

Check Your Understanding

1. How do environmental measures differ from developmental screening and ongoing assessment of individual children?
2. What is the main difference between the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)? How can each provide information relevant to cognition and general knowledge?
3. A preschool classroom has many puzzles, building materials, and science tools. However, children must ask adults to retrieve most materials, and exploration time is frequently interrupted. Identify two changes educators could make and explain how each could support children's thinking.
4. An educator informally reviews classroom interactions using ideas from CLASS and reports the results as an official CLASS rating. Why is this inappropriate, and how could the informal review still support professional learning?
5. Following an environmental observation, a teaching team decides to strengthen children's opportunities to compare, predict, and explain. Describe how the team could include family perspectives, implement one specific change, and observe whether that change improves children's experiences.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 7.4.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. **Environmental measures examine learning conditions rather than an individual child's development.** They provide information about spaces, materials, routines, and interactions. Developmental screening identifies whether a child may need further evaluation, while ongoing assessment documents a child's strengths, learning, and progress. An environmental rating cannot diagnose a developmental concern or determine a child's cognitive abilities.
2. **ERS and CLASS examine related aspects of quality with different emphases.** The Environment Rating Scales examine a broad range of environmental features and daily experiences, including materials, routines, and interactions. CLASS focuses on educator–child interactions. Both can help educators identify ways to strengthen opportunities for thinking, problem-solving, and knowledge building.
3. **Available materials support learning when children can access and meaningfully use them.** Educators should examine whether children can reach materials, have sufficient time and space to investigate, and receive support that extends their thinking. Possible improvements include reorganizing shelves, providing longer exploration periods, adapting tools, and inviting children to test and explain their ideas.
4. **Appropriate tool selection and consistent procedures support useful findings. A**n informal review cannot be reported as an official CLASS rating because it does not establish that the required observer qualifications and standardized observation and scoring procedures were followed**.** The educator can still use the review to identify interaction patterns, select a professional learning goal, and reflect with a colleague or coach. For example, the educator might practice extending conversations and then observe whether children have more opportunities to explain their thinking.
5. **Improvement requires action, collaboration, and follow-up.** Educators can identify a manageable priority, invite family perspectives, and make specific changes to materials, schedules, spaces, or interactions. They then observe who participates, how children investigate and communicate ideas, and which barriers remain. This evidence helps the team decide whether to maintain, adjust, or replace the changes.

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8: ANALYZING THE EFFECT OF TRAUMA ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

8.1: Brain Growth and Functions
8.2: Impact of the Environment and Toxic Stress on Brain Development
8.3: Critical Periods of Brain Development
8.4: The Impact of Family Mental Health on Child Development
8.5: The Impact of Trauma-Informed Care on Development

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8.1: Brain Growth and Functions

Introduction

An infant turns toward a familiar voice. A toddler practices fitting pieces into a puzzle. A preschooler begins to wait for a turn during a game. Each experience involves the developing brain working with the body, relationships, and surrounding environment.

Brain development begins before birth and continues through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. During early childhood, brain cells form and reorganize connections that support movement, communication, memory, emotions, and learning. Genes help guide these processes, while experiences and environmental conditions influence how developing brain networks take shape (Stiles & Jernigan, 2010).

For early childhood educators, understanding brain development provides a foundation for interpreting children's emerging abilities and planning appropriate support. Responsive relationships, predictable routines, play, and opportunities to explore help create conditions in which children can learn and develop. Educators apply this knowledge when they comfort an infant, respond to a toddler's gestures, or help a preschooler manage frustration (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020).

This section introduces the progression of brain growth, major brain structures and their functions, and the cellular processes that support neural communication. Later sections examine environmental influences, developmental periods, family mental health, and trauma-informed care.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 8.1: Describe brain growth and functions.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe the general progression of brain growth and development from the prenatal period through early childhood.
- Identify major brain structures and explain their contributions to movement, sensation, emotions, memory, and thinking.
- Explain how the brain's hemispheres communicate and work together.
- Identify the major parts of a neuron and describe how neurons communicate.
- Explain how synaptogenesis and synaptic pruning contribute to developing neural networks.
- Describe myelination and its role in efficient neural communication.
- Define brain plasticity as a capacity for changes in brain structure and functioning.

How the Brain Grows and Develops

Brain development begins before birth and continues throughout life. Early childhood is a period of especially rapid growth, but different parts of the brain develop at different rates. Changes in brain size, connections, and organization work together to support children's emerging abilities (Stiles & Jernigan, 2010).

Before Birth: Establishing the Foundation

During prenatal development, the nervous system begins forming early in pregnancy. Cells that will become neurons—the nerve cells that receive and transmit information—are produced and move into developing brain regions. As these cells develop, they begin forming connections that allow communication within the nervous system.

These early processes establish foundations for functions such as movement and sensory processing. Genetic influences, maternal health, nutrition, and prenatal environmental conditions contribute to this development (Stiles & Jernigan, 2010).

Infancy: Rapid Growth and Early Connections

During infancy, the brain grows rapidly as connections develop among neurons and communication pathways become more organized. Infants use their senses and movements to learn about people, objects, and familiar routines.

Everyday interactions provide meaningful opportunities for learning. When a caregiver responds to a baby's sounds, comforts the baby, or follows the baby's gaze, the infant experiences patterns of communication and care. Repeated experiences help developing brain networks become organized through ongoing activity (NAEYC, 2020; Stiles & Jernigan, 2010).

For example, an infant reaching for a rattle coordinates vision, movement, and touch. As the infant grasps and shakes the rattle, the sound and movement provide additional information. Brain and body development support one another throughout this process.

Toddlerhood: Expanding Abilities

During toddlerhood, continued brain development supports increasing mobility, communication, memory, and independence. Children begin using words or signs more intentionally, remembering familiar routines, and exploring how their actions affect objects and people.

These emerging abilities develop unevenly. A toddler may remember where a favorite toy belongs but still need substantial help waiting for a turn. Knowing a rule does not mean the child can consistently control an impulse. The brain networks supporting attention, emotional regulation, and flexible thinking are still developing (Diamond, 2013).

Responsive adults support this growth through predictable routines, opportunities to practice, and help managing emotions and behavior.

The Preschool Years: Increasing Coordination and Complexity

During the preschool years, brain networks continue to develop and become more coordinated. Children often show growing abilities to use language, engage in pretend play, solve problems, remember directions, and participate in shared activities.

Skills involving planning, attention, and self-regulation continue to require practice and adult support. A preschooler may successfully follow a familiar routine but struggle when excited, tired, or faced with an unexpected change. Performance depends on the demands of the situation as well as the child's developing abilities (Diamond, 2013).

The Early School Years: Building on Earlier Development

During the early school years, continued development of brain networks supports increasingly coordinated movement, attention, memory, and flexible thinking. Children may manage longer sequences of actions and use strategies more deliberately, but these abilities still vary with experience, task demands, and available support. Children ages five through eight continue to benefit from clear directions, meaningful practice, and help managing challenging situations (Diamond, 2013; Lebel & Deoni, 2018).

Beyond Early Childhood: Development Continues

Although the brain reaches much of its adult size during childhood, size does not indicate that development is complete. Connections continue to be refined, and communication among brain regions becomes more efficient through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood (Lebel & Deoni, 2018; Stiles & Jernigan, 2010).

Early experiences provide an important foundation for later development, while new experiences and supportive relationships continue to create opportunities for learning and change.

> **Key Idea: Brain Growth Is More Than Brain Size**

Brain development includes changes in connections, organization, and communication—not simply an increase in size. Educators support development by providing responsive relationships and meaningful opportunities to explore, practice, and learn.

Major Brain Structures and Their Functions

The brain contains interconnected structures that work together to support movement, sensation, emotions, memory, and learning. Although particular regions contribute to particular functions, most everyday activities involve networks across several brain areas. Listening to a story, for example, involves processing sounds, understanding language, paying attention, and connecting information with previous experiences.

Understanding these structures helps educators connect brain development with children's emerging abilities. However, observing a child's behavior does not allow an educator to determine how a particular brain structure is developing.

The Cerebrum and Cerebral Cortex

The **cerebrum** is the largest part of the brain. Its outer layer, the **cerebral cortex**, contributes to perception, language, thinking, and voluntary movement. The cortex has folds that increase its surface area (Spielman et al., 2020).

Each half of the cerebrum contains four major lobes. These lobes have specialized contributions, but they communicate and work together.

Table 8.1.1: Major Lobes of the Cerebral Cortex and Examples of Their Functions

Brain lobe	Contributions to brain function	Connection to early childhood
Frontal lobe	Supports voluntary movement and processes involved in planning, attention, decision-making, and self-regulation.	A child reaches for a toy, works toward a goal, or practices waiting with adult support.
Parietal lobe	Processes body sensations, such as touch, and contributes to spatial processing and awareness of body position.	A child feels an object's texture or adjusts their movements while climbing.
Temporal lobe	Contributes to processing sounds, understanding language, and memory.	A child recognizes a familiar voice or makes meaning from spoken words.
Occipital lobe	Processes visual information.	A child notices colors, shapes, and movement while exploring materials.

Note

Brain-function descriptions synthesized from Spielman et al. (2020) and Diamond (2013). Classroom examples illustrate possible applications and do not identify activity in an individual child's brain.

The **prefrontal cortex**, located in the front portion of the frontal lobe, contributes to executive functions such as working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility. These abilities develop over a prolonged period. Young children need adults to provide reminders, manageable expectations, and help regulating their emotions and actions (Diamond, 2013).

Two Hemispheres Working Together

The cerebrum is divided into the **left and right hemispheres**. Some functions rely more heavily on one hemisphere than the other, a pattern called **lateralization**. For example, some aspects of language processing are more strongly associated with the left hemisphere in many people (Spielman et al., 2020).

However, language, creativity, reasoning, and emotional understanding involve interconnected networks. Children should not be labeled “left-brained” or “right-brained,” and these labels should not guide instructional decisions (Nielsen et al., 2013).

The **corpus callosum**, a large bundle of nerve fibers, connects the hemispheres and allows information to pass between them. Communication between the hemispheres supports the integration of information and coordinated activity (Spielman et al., 2020).

Other Important Brain Structures

Structures beneath the cerebral cortex and toward the back and base of the brain also make essential contributions to development.

Table 8.1.2: Additional Brain Structures and Their Contributions to Development

Brain structure	Contributions to brain function	Connection to early childhood
Cerebellum	Helps coordinate movement, balance, and motor learning.	A child gradually adjusts movements while walking, stacking blocks, or using a spoon.
Brainstem	Supports vital functions such as breathing and heart rate and contributes to sleep, arousal, and communication between the brain and spinal cord.	A child’s ability to become alert or settle into sleep involves systems that include the brainstem.
Hippocampus	Helps form and organize new memories, including memories of events and places.	A child remembers a recent experience or where materials are kept.
Amygdala	Helps identify emotionally significant information and participates in learning about possible threats and rewards.	A child responds to an unfamiliar situation or learns that a familiar adult provides comfort.
Hypothalamus	Helps regulate internal conditions, including hunger, thirst, body temperature, and sleep–wake rhythms; participates in stress responses.	Hunger, fatigue, and other physical needs influence a child’s readiness to participate.

Note

Brain-function descriptions synthesized from Spielman et al. (2020). Classroom examples illustrate how these functions may contribute to everyday activities.

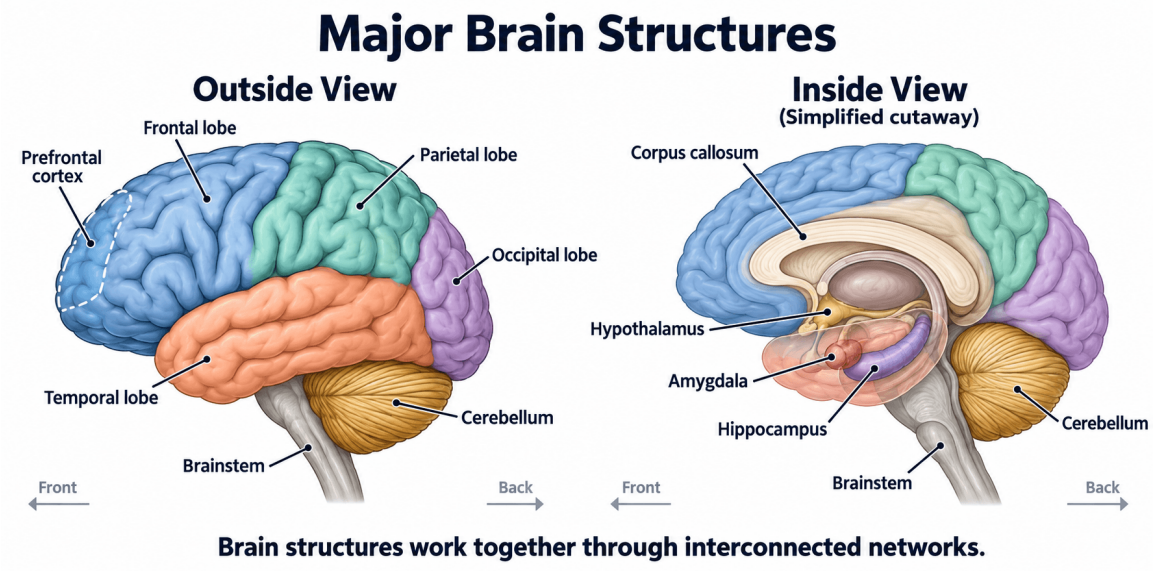


Figure 8.1.1: Major brain structures shown in an outside view and a simplified cutaway. Deeper structures are shown schematically to illustrate their locations. (OpenAI, 2026b).

Brain Structures Work as Networks

A toddler completing a simple puzzle uses several brain systems at once. Visual systems process the pieces, spatial and sensory systems help the child position them, and motor systems guide movement. Memory supports recognition of familiar shapes, while emotional and regulatory systems contribute to the child's response when a piece does not fit.

An educator supports this coordinated activity by offering an appropriate challenge, allowing time to explore, and responding calmly when help is needed.

> **Key Idea: Connected Systems Support Development**
>
> Brain structures have specialized contributions, but children learn and act through coordinated networks. Meaningful experiences engage movement, thinking, communication, and emotions together.

Neurons and Neural Connections

The brain's functions depend on communication among specialized cells called **neurons**. Neurons receive and transmit information, forming networks that support sensation, movement, memory, emotions, and thinking. Other cells, called **glial cells**, support and protect neurons, help maintain their environment, and, in some cases, produce myelin (Spielman et al., 2020).

Understanding how neurons communicate provides a foundation for understanding how brain connections form, change, and become more efficient during development.

Parts of a Neuron

Although neurons vary in shape and function, most have three main parts:

- **Cell body:** Contains the nucleus and structures that maintain the cell.
- **Dendrites:** Branching extensions that receive incoming signals from other neurons.
- **Axon:** An extension that carries electrical signals toward other neurons, muscles, or glands. Its branches end in terminals that communicate with other cells.

Dendrites and axons are parts of neurons. The points where neurons communicate are called **synapses** (Spielman et al., 2020).

How Neurons Communicate

Communication within a neuron involves electrical changes across its cell membrane. When incoming signals provide sufficient activation, an electrical impulse called an **action potential** travels along the axon toward its terminals.

At most synapses, the signal passes to the next cell through chemical messengers called **neurotransmitters**. These chemicals are released from an axon terminal, cross a tiny gap called the **synaptic cleft**, and bind to receptors on the receiving cell. Their effects can increase or decrease the likelihood that the receiving neuron will produce an action potential (Spielman et al., 2020).

This communication occurs across interconnected networks. A single neuron can receive signals from many other neurons and send information to multiple cells.

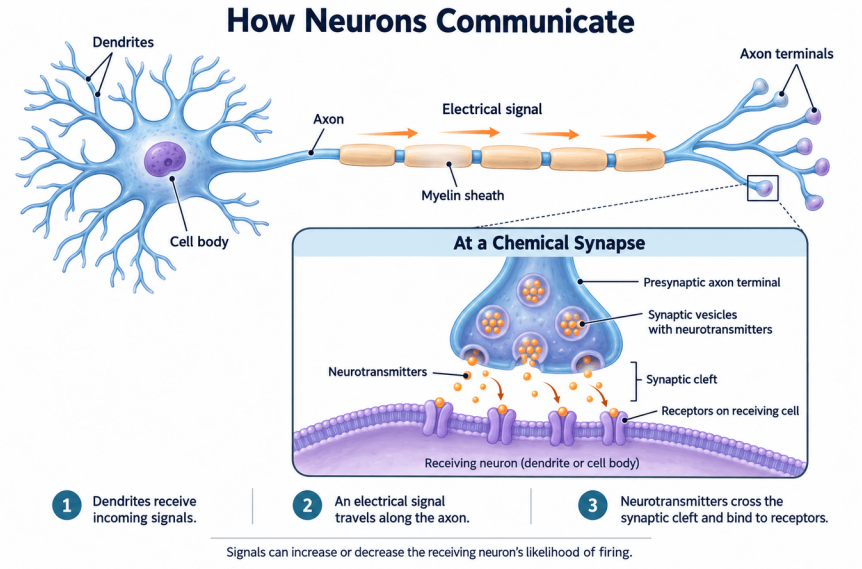


Figure 8.1.2: Electrical signals travel along a neuron's axon. At chemical synapses, neurotransmitters cross the synaptic cleft and bind to receptors on the receiving cell. (OpenAI, 2026a).

Neural Networks and Early Learning

A **neural network** is a group of interconnected neurons that work together to process information. Networks interact to support complex activities, such as recognizing a caregiver, reaching for an object, or understanding a familiar phrase.

As children develop and engage with their surroundings, activity within these networks can change the strength and organization of connections. Learning involves changes across networks rather than a separate connection for every skill or experience (Kolb & Gibb, 2011).

For example, when an educator names an object that a toddler is looking at, the child experiences the word together with visual information and shared attention. Across meaningful encounters, the child gradually builds connections among the object, its name, and its uses.

Repeated Experiences Support Learning

Children benefit from opportunities to revisit meaningful experiences. Hearing a familiar song, exploring the same materials in different ways, and participating in predictable routines provide repeated opportunities for developing networks to become active.

Repetition is most useful when it is responsive to the child's interests, abilities, and engagement. Educators can offer familiar experiences while gradually introducing variation or an appropriate challenge.

Example 8.1.1

Example: Learning Through a Familiar Song

An educator sings a familiar action song with a small group of toddlers. At first, one child watches. Over several days, the child begins anticipating a movement, raising their hands at the expected moment, and joining in with a sound.

The experience brings together hearing, movement, attention, memory, and social interaction. The educator supports learning by repeating the song, noticing the child's participation, and allowing different ways to join.

Synaptogenesis and Synaptic Pruning

Brain development involves both forming connections and refining them. **Synaptogenesis** is the formation of synapses between neurons. **Synaptic pruning** is the selective elimination of some synapses as brain networks develop and reorganize. Together, these processes contribute to the organization of networks that support learning and behavior (Stiles & Jernigan, 2010).

Synaptogenesis: Forming Connections

Synaptogenesis begins before birth and occurs rapidly during early development. As neurons develop, their axons and dendrites form connections with other cells. Genetic processes help guide this development, while neural activity and experiences influence how connections develop and are maintained.

The timing of synapse formation differs across brain regions. Areas involved in basic sensory processing generally undergo rapid development earlier than areas involved in complex planning and self-regulation. There is no single age at which all brain regions reach their greatest number of synapses (Huttenlocher & Dabholkar, 1997).

During some periods, developing brain regions produce more synapses than they retain later. This temporary abundance provides opportunities for networks to become organized through development and experience.

Synaptic Pruning: Refining Connections

As brain networks develop, some synapses are maintained or strengthened, while others are weakened and eliminated. This refinement is called synaptic pruning. It begins early in development and continues on different schedules across brain regions through childhood and adolescence (Huttenlocher & Dabholkar, 1997; Stiles & Jernigan, 2010).

Pruning is a normal part of development. Eliminating some connections helps organize networks; it does not mean that a child is losing intelligence or the ability to learn. More synapses do not automatically mean better functioning.

Pruning is sometimes summarized as "use it or lose it," but this phrase oversimplifies a complex process. Which connections remain depends on biological processes and patterns of neural activity, including activity influenced by experience. Missing an activity or taking a break from practicing a skill does not mean that the child permanently loses the ability to learn it (Kolb & Gibb, 2011; Stiles & Jernigan, 2010).

Formation and Refinement Overlap

Synaptogenesis and synaptic pruning are not two separate stages in which connection formation ends before pruning begins. Both can occur during the same period, with different patterns across brain regions. Existing connections also change in strength as children learn (Stiles & Jernigan, 2010).

These processes help explain why brain development involves more than growth in size. Development also includes changes in how connections are organized and how networks communicate.

What This Means for Educators

Educators support learning by providing responsive relationships and varied, meaningful opportunities to participate. Conversations, movement, exploration, shared reading, and play allow children to revisit experiences and build on emerging abilities.

Children do not need constant stimulation or pressure to master skills early. Familiar routines, rest, and time to explore at an appropriate pace are also important parts of a supportive environment (NAEYC, 2020).

Example 8.1.2

Example: Exploring Containers

A toddler repeatedly places objects into a container and tips them out. The educator notices the child's interest and offers containers with different openings. The child explores, adjusts hand movements, and tries different approaches.

The educator supports learning through repetition and manageable variation. Although the educator can observe changes in the child's actions, they cannot observe or identify the formation or pruning of particular synapses from that behavior.

Key Idea: Development Includes Formation and Refinement

Healthy brain development involves forming, modifying, and selectively eliminating connections. The goal is organized, adaptable networks—not the greatest possible number of synapses.

Myelination

As brain connections develop and are refined, changes also occur in how signals travel along axons. **Myelination** is the process of forming **myelin**, a fatty, insulating material, around many axons. Myelin helps electrical signals travel more rapidly and reliably, supporting communication within the nervous system.

How Myelin Supports Communication

Specialized glial cells produce myelin. In the brain and spinal cord, these cells are called **oligodendrocytes**. They wrap layers of membrane around sections of axons, forming a myelin sheath.

Small gaps between these sections, called **nodes of Ranvier**, allow electrical signals to be regenerated at intervals along the axon. This arrangement allows signals to travel faster than they would along a comparable unmyelinated axon (Spielman et al., 2020; Stiles & Jernigan, 2010).

Myelin surrounds axons rather than entire neurons. Not all axons are myelinated, and unmyelinated axons also perform important functions.

When Myelination Occurs

Myelination begins before birth, progresses rapidly during infancy and early childhood, and continues through adolescence and into adulthood. Its timing varies across pathways.

Many pathways involved in basic sensory processing and movement myelinate relatively early. Pathways connecting regions involved in more complex thinking and self-regulation generally follow a more prolonged developmental course (Lebel & Deoni, 2018).

These differences are part of why children's abilities develop gradually and unevenly. However, myelination is one of several interacting processes that support development; it does not independently determine when a child acquires a skill.

Connections to Movement and Thinking

As myelination and other developmental processes advance, communication across neural pathways becomes more efficient. This supports children's growing ability to coordinate movements, process information, and participate in increasingly complex activities.

For example, learning to use a spoon involves coordinating vision, body position, and hand movements. Improving communication within and among the networks involved contributes to this coordination, alongside physical growth, experience, and practice.

Similarly, attention and remembering directions depend on communication across multiple brain regions. These abilities develop over time and remain sensitive to the demands of the activity, the child's familiarity with it, and physical and emotional conditions.

Supporting Development in Everyday Practice

Educators support overall brain development through responsive care, opportunities for movement and play, adequate rest, and collaboration with families around children's needs. Meaningful practice allows children to build skills as their nervous systems develop (NAEYC, 2020).

Myelination cannot be assessed by watching a child complete a classroom activity. Educators should use observations to understand participation and plan support rather than attribute a child's success or difficulty to a particular level of myelination.

Example 8.1.3

Example: Practicing a Movement Sequence

An educator invites children to step over a low obstacle, walk along a wide floor line, and toss a beanbag into a basket. One child completes the sequence independently, while another benefits from a demonstration and a steady hand.

The educator adjusts the challenge and offers repeated opportunities to participate. Children's progress reflects the interaction of developing neural systems, physical abilities, experience, and support.

Key Idea: Myelin Supports Efficient Communication

Myelination helps many axons transmit signals rapidly and reliably. It works alongside connection formation, synaptic refinement, and experience to support development.

Brain Plasticity

The brain continues to change as it develops and learns. **Brain plasticity**, also called **neuroplasticity**, is the nervous system's capacity to change its structure and functioning in response to experience, learning, or injury.

Plasticity includes changes in the strength of existing synapses, the formation and elimination of connections, and the organization of neural networks. These changes contribute to learning and adaptation (Kolb & Gibb, 2011).

Plasticity Across Development

Plasticity is especially pronounced in some brain systems during early development, when connections are rapidly forming and being refined. However, the brain remains capable of change throughout life. Different systems vary in how and when they respond to experience.

Plasticity does not mean that every part of the brain can change equally or that one region can always take over another region's functions. The possibilities for change depend on the brain systems involved and the nature and timing of the changes (Kolb & Gibb, 2011).

Plasticity and Learning

When children learn, activity within neural networks can modify how connections function. For example, as a child practices fitting puzzle pieces together, networks involved in vision, movement, spatial processing, and memory participate in learning. With experience, the child may rotate pieces more effectively and recognize where they belong.

These improvements reflect several interacting developmental and learning processes. An educator can observe changes in the child's skills but cannot identify specific neural changes from classroom behavior alone.

> **Key Idea: The Brain Can Change**
>
> Brain plasticity supports learning and adaptation throughout life. It includes changes in connections and network organization, some of which involve synaptogenesis and synaptic pruning. Myelination also contributes to developing and adaptable neural communication.

The brain's responsiveness to experience varies across development. Section 8.2 examines how environmental conditions influence brain development, and Section 8.3 explores sensitive and critical periods.

Putting It Into Practice

Understanding brain growth and functions helps educators interpret children's developing abilities. Consider how several brain structures and developmental processes contribute to one everyday activity.

Building a Bridge

Three-year-old Amara places a long block across two shorter blocks to create a bridge. When the bridge falls, she pauses, looks at the blocks, and tries again. Her educator asks, "What could help hold up this end?" Amara moves one support block and successfully replaces the long block.

Later, Amara invites another child to roll a toy car across the bridge. When the child reaches for the car before she is ready, Amara grabs it back. Her educator helps the children arrange turns.

Connecting Brain Functions With the Activity

Amara's actions involve coordinated activity across multiple brain systems:

- **Visual and spatial processing:** Occipital and parietal regions contribute to processing the blocks' appearance and positions.
- **Movement and coordination:** Motor areas of the frontal lobe and the cerebellum contribute to reaching, placing blocks, and adjusting movements.
- **Memory and language:** Networks involving the hippocampus and regions of the cerebral cortex contribute to remembering previous attempts and understanding the educator's question.
- **Planning and self-regulation:** Networks involving the prefrontal cortex contribute to working toward a goal, changing an approach, and managing actions.

Amara's success in building does not mean she can consistently manage the demands of sharing. Abilities develop unevenly, and a child's performance varies with the situation.

Connecting Developmental Processes

Synaptogenesis, synaptic pruning, myelination, and plasticity contribute to the development and functioning of the networks Amara uses. These processes overlap and follow different timelines across brain systems.

The educator cannot determine which synapses are forming or being eliminated, or how much myelination has occurred, by watching Amara. Instead, observations reveal what she can do, where she encounters difficulty, and what support helps her participate.

Reflect

How does this example show that brain regions work together? Why would it be inaccurate to explain Amara's difficulty sharing as a problem with one brain structure?

Vocabulary Alert:

- **Neuron:** A specialized nerve cell that receives and transmits information.
- **Dendrites:** Branching extensions of a neuron that receive incoming signals.
- **Axon:** An extension of a neuron that carries electrical signals toward other cells.
- **Synapse:** A junction where a neuron communicates with another cell.
- **Neurotransmitters:** Chemical messengers that transmit signals across the gap at chemical synapses.
- **Neural network:** A group of interconnected neurons that work together to process information.
- **Cerebral cortex:** The outer layer of the cerebrum, involved in perception, language, thinking, and voluntary movement.
- **Prefrontal cortex:** The front portion of the frontal lobe that contributes to planning, attention, decision-making, and self-regulation.
- **Lateralization:** A pattern in which some functions rely more heavily on one brain hemisphere than the other.
- **Corpus callosum:** A large bundle of nerve fibers that connects the brain's two cerebral hemispheres.
- **Synaptogenesis:** The formation of synapses between neurons.
- **Synaptic pruning:** The selective elimination of some synapses as neural networks develop and reorganize.
- **Myelination:** The formation of a fatty, insulating sheath around many axons, supporting faster and more reliable signal transmission.
- **Brain plasticity (neuroplasticity):** The nervous system's capacity to change its structure and functioning in response to experience, learning, or injury.

Exercise 8.1.1

Check Your Understanding

1. A colleague says, "Once a child's brain is close to adult size, brain development is nearly finished." How would you explain why this statement is inaccurate?
2. Describe how information typically travels through a neuron and across a chemical synapse. Include the roles of dendrites, the axon, and neurotransmitters.
3. How do synaptogenesis, synaptic pruning, and myelination contribute differently to brain development? Explain why pruning is a normal developmental process.
4. A preschooler looks at a puzzle piece, rotates it, and fits it into place. Identify three brain regions that contribute to this activity and explain their contributions. Why would it be inaccurate to describe the child as a "right-brained learner"?
5. A toddler becomes more skilled at using a spoon over several weeks. Explain how brain plasticity relates to this learning. What can the educator conclude from observing the child's progress, and what cannot be determined from observation alone?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 8.1.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. **Brain size does not indicate developmental completion.** Connections continue to form, change in strength, and undergo refinement. Myelination and coordination among brain networks also continue through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood. Different systems follow different developmental timelines.
2. **Dendrites typically receive incoming signals from other neurons.** When incoming signals provide sufficient activation, an action potential travels along the axon toward its terminals. At a chemical synapse, neurotransmitters are released, cross the synaptic cleft, and bind to receptors on the receiving cell. Their effects can increase or decrease the likelihood that the receiving neuron will produce an action potential.
3. **Synaptogenesis forms synapses; synaptic pruning selectively eliminates some synapses; and myelination forms insulation around many axons.** These processes contribute to the organization and efficient communication of neural networks. Pruning is normal because development involves refining connections, not simply increasing their number. The processes overlap and occur on different schedules across brain regions.
4. **Several regions contribute to completing the puzzle.** For example, the occipital lobe processes visual information, the parietal lobe contributes to spatial processing, and the cerebellum helps coordinate movements. Other regions also participate, including frontal areas involved in movement and planning. Although some functions show lateralization, the hemispheres communicate and work together. A child's puzzle performance does not establish a "right-brained" learning type.
5. **Plasticity supports changes in neural connections and networks involved in learning to use the spoon.** Progress also reflects interacting factors such as physical development, practice, and support. The educator can document observable changes, such as improved accuracy or greater independence, and use them to plan appropriate opportunities. Observation alone cannot reveal which synapses changed, how much myelination occurred, or which neural process caused the improvement.

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8.2: Impact of the Environment and Toxic Stress on Brain Development

Content Note:

This section discusses childhood adversity, abuse, neglect, and toxic stress.

These topics may bring up difficult feelings or connect with personal experiences.

Take breaks as needed and approach discussions with care and respect.

You are not expected to share personal experiences to demonstrate your understanding.

Introduction

Young children's brains develop through ongoing interactions with people, places, and everyday experiences. Responsive relationships, predictable routines, opportunities for play, and environments that meet children's physical and emotional needs help support this development.

Children also experience stress. Brief, manageable challenges, such as separating from a caregiver or trying an unfamiliar activity, provide opportunities to develop coping skills with adult support. More intense or persistent challenges may place greater demands on children's developing stress response systems. The effects depend on several factors, including the intensity and duration of the experience and the support available to the child.

This section examines how environmental conditions and stress responses influence brain development. It also explores adverse childhood experiences, protective factors, and the ways early childhood educators can provide responsive relationships and supportive learning environments. Understanding these connections helps educators respond to children's needs without labeling children or assuming that early adversity determines their future.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 8.2: Explain the impact of the environment, including the effects of toxic stress, on brain development.

After completing this section, you will be able to:

1. Explain how relationships, daily experiences, and environmental conditions influence early brain development.
2. Distinguish among positive, tolerable, and toxic stress responses.
3. Describe how prolonged activation of the stress response system can affect children's development and learning.
4. Explain the relationship among adverse childhood experiences, toxic stress, and protective factors.
5. Identify ways educators can support children through responsive relationships, predictable routines, family partnerships, and connections to additional resources.

How the Environment Influences Brain Development

Brain development occurs through the ongoing interaction of biology and experience. Genes help guide development, while children's experiences influence how connections among brain cells form, strengthen, and become organized. As discussed in Section 8.1, brain development involves forming, strengthening, modifying, and selectively eliminating connections. Biological processes and patterns of neural activity, including activity influenced by experience, help shape these changes (Stiles & Jernigan, 2010).

A young child's environment includes more than the physical space. It includes relationships, caregiving practices, daily routines, language, cultural experiences, and access to basic necessities. These influences work together to shape children's opportunities to explore, connect with others, and learn.

Responsive Relationships and Everyday Interactions

Responsive relationships are central to early brain development. When an infant looks toward an adult and the adult smiles or speaks, or a toddler points to an animal and an adult names it, they participate in a back-and-forth exchange often called **serve and return**. The child communicates through a look, movement, sound, or word, and the adult responds with attention and interest.

These exchanges support developing language, social connection, and emotional regulation. They occur throughout ordinary caregiving experiences, including feeding, diapering, dressing, playing, and sharing books. Adults do not need to respond perfectly to every signal. What matters is an ongoing pattern of attentive, caring interaction (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, n.d.).

Young children also rely on adults for **co-regulation**, the support adults provide to help children manage emotions, attention, and behavior. A calm voice, comforting presence, or familiar routine can help a child settle after becoming upset. Through repeated experiences of receiving support, children gradually develop their own regulation skills (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

Physical Conditions and Opportunities for Learning

Children's physical surroundings and access to resources also influence development. Adequate nutrition, sleep, health care, safe housing, and protection from harmful substances help support the developing brain and body. Comfortable spaces, manageable noise levels, and opportunities for movement can make it easier for children to participate in daily activities (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015).

Play and exploration provide meaningful opportunities to use developing brain connections. Reaching for a toy, filling and emptying containers, listening to a familiar song, or solving a problem with a peer engages different abilities. These experiences are most supportive when they match children's developmental abilities, interests, cultures, and individual needs.

A supportive environment does not require expensive toys, constant entertainment, or formal academic instruction. Everyday experiences with caring adults and accessible materials provide valuable opportunities for learning.

Predictability, Safety, and Manageable Challenges

Predictable routines help children learn what to expect. Familiar caregivers, consistent responses, and clear transitions can support a sense of security. Within this foundation, children can encounter manageable challenges, such as waiting briefly for a turn, attempting a new task, or coping with a disappointment.

Children's responses to these experiences vary. Temperament, developmental abilities, previous experiences, and available support all influence how a child responds. Educators can observe children's cues and adjust the challenge or provide additional assistance.

Persistent danger, severe deprivation, or prolonged instability can place greater demands on developing stress response systems. Families' access to housing, food, health care, and community support can affect these conditions. Understanding environmental influences therefore requires attention to both children's immediate experiences and the broader resources available to their families (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014, 2015).

> **Emphasis: Everyday Experiences Matter**
>
> Brain development is supported through repeated experiences of responsive care, exploration, and adult assistance with challenges. Early difficulties do not determine a child's future. Supportive relationships and improved conditions can promote continued learning, adaptation, and recovery.

Understanding Positive, Tolerable, and Toxic Stress Responses

Stress is the body's response to a challenge or perceived threat. When children encounter something unfamiliar, frustrating, or frightening, their stress response systems help them respond. A temporary increase in alertness, heart rate, and stress hormones can be useful. With time and appropriate support, the body can return to its usual state.

The terms **positive**, **tolerable**, and **toxic** describe patterns of stress response. They do not simply label events. The same experience may affect children differently depending on its intensity and duration, the child's developmental needs and previous experiences, and the support available (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014).

Table 8.2.1: Comparing Positive, Tolerable, and Toxic Stress Responses

Stress response	Intensity and duration	Role of adult support	Early childhood example
Positive	Brief, mild to moderate activation of the stress response system during an ordinary challenge.	A responsive adult offers reassurance and assistance, helping the child manage the challenge and recover.	A toddler becomes upset when a caregiver leaves, then settles with a familiar educator and joins an activity.
Tolerable	More intense activation in response to a serious difficulty. The response can subside when safety and effective support are available.	Supportive relationships help buffer the effects and support recovery during and after the experience.	After a frightening storm damages the family's home, caregivers provide comfort, explain what will happen next, and establish familiar routines in a safe location.
Toxic	Excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems associated with strong, frequent, or prolonged adversity without sufficient buffering support.	Available support is insufficient to help the child manage the demands and recover. Improving safety, strengthening relationships, and addressing underlying conditions are essential.	A child repeatedly experiences violence and has limited access to a consistently protective adult, leaving the child frequently on alert.

Note

Summary based on National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2014). Early childhood examples are illustrative and do not establish a diagnosis.

Positive Stress: Managing Everyday Challenges

Positive stress responses are part of healthy development. Trying something new, experiencing a brief frustration, or receiving a vaccination may temporarily activate a child's stress response system. With responsive support, children can recover and gain experience managing challenges.

Educators support this process by acknowledging feelings, offering help, and adjusting expectations to the child's abilities. A manageable challenge for one child may be overwhelming for another. Adults should use children's cues to guide their responses.

Tolerable Stress: Coping With Serious Difficulties

Tolerable stress responses occur in connection with more serious experiences, such as the death of a loved one, a serious injury, or a natural disaster. These situations can produce substantial distress. Supportive adults help children regain a sense of safety, meet their needs, and recover over time.

The term *tolerable* does not mean that the experience is easy or harmless. It describes a stress response whose potential effects can be buffered through adequate support. Children may need ongoing assistance even after the immediate event has ended.

Toxic Stress: When Demands Exceed Available Support

A toxic stress response can develop when adversity repeatedly or persistently activates the body's stress response systems without sufficient support. Examples of conditions that may contribute include ongoing abuse, severe neglect, or repeated exposure to violence.

Toxic stress is not another name for ordinary frustration, occasional crying, or all stressful experiences. It also cannot be determined from a single behavior or a family circumstance. Poverty, a caregiver's mental health condition, or a family separation alone does not establish that a child is experiencing toxic stress. The child's actual experiences, access to protection, and available supports matter.

Educators can help by providing consistent, responsive care and partnering with families to identify needs and resources. Some situations also require additional professional services or protective action.

Note

Adult Support Buffers Stress

Buffering means reducing the effects of stress through responsive relationships and practical support. Comfort, predictable routines, and help meeting basic needs can support recovery. When danger or severe adversity continues, supportive interactions must be accompanied by efforts to address those conditions.

How the Stress Response System Works

The stress response system helps the body respond to challenges and perceived threats. It involves communication among the brain, nerves, and hormone-producing glands. This system is protective: it prepares a person to act when something may be dangerous.

For young children, a perceived threat might involve a sudden loud noise, a frightening interaction, or separation from a familiar caregiver. Children's responses depend on their developmental abilities, previous experiences, and how they interpret the situation.

Activating the Body's Alarm System

When the brain detects a possible threat, the **hypothalamus**, a small region involved in regulating body functions, helps activate two connected pathways:

- **A rapid response through the sympathetic nervous system.** Nerve signals stimulate the inner portion of the adrenal glands, located above the kidneys, to release hormones including adrenaline. Heart rate and breathing increase, and energy becomes available for immediate action (Chu et al., 2024).
- **A slower hormonal response through the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis.** The hypothalamus signals the pituitary gland, which then signals the outer portion of the adrenal glands to release cortisol. Cortisol helps make energy available and regulates several aspects of the stress response (Chu et al., 2024).

Together, these responses prepare the body to respond to a challenge. A child may become more alert, tense their muscles, cry, move away, or seek an adult. Some children become unusually quiet or still.

Returning to a Settled State

As the threat passes, the body's recovery processes help reduce activation. The **parasympathetic nervous system** helps slow the heart rate and supports functions such as digestion. Feedback within the HPA axis helps regulate further cortisol release (Chu et al., 2024).

Young children are still developing the ability to manage these changes. Responsive adults provide co-regulation by offering comfort, reducing overwhelming stimulation, and helping children understand what is happening. Recovery may take time, and

children differ in the support they need (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

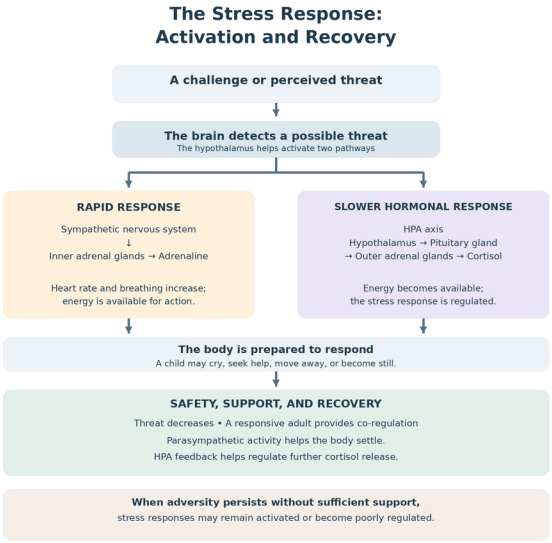


Figure 8.2.1: The stress response involves rapid nervous system and slower hormonal pathways. Safety, responsive adult support, and the body's regulatory processes support recovery (OpenAI, 2026).

Note. Simplified explanation of stress response physiology based on Chu et al. (2024). The role of adult co-regulation is informed by Rosanbalm and Murray (2017).

When Activation Continues

When threatening or overwhelming conditions occur repeatedly or persist, the stress response system may have fewer opportunities to recover. Over time, prolonged activation can alter how the system responds to later challenges. Some children may become highly reactive to reminders of danger; others may show less visible distress or appear withdrawn.

Stress hormones are not inherently harmful. Cortisol, for example, has important everyday functions. The concern is prolonged or poorly regulated stress activity during development, rather than the presence of a particular hormone.

Repeated activation can place demands on systems involved in attention, memory, emotional regulation, sleep, and physical health. A child who is focused on detecting danger may have difficulty attending to a story, exploring unfamiliar materials, or participating with peers. These responses may reflect adaptation to stressful conditions, although similar behaviors can have many other explanations (Forkey et al., 2021; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014).

Connecting Physiology to Educator Responses

Consider a toddler who startles when a tray falls, begins crying, and reaches for an educator. The educator moves close, speaks calmly, and offers comfort. As the toddler settles, the educator follows the child's cues before supporting a return to play. This interaction illustrates activation followed by adult-supported recovery.

If a child remains distressed or repeatedly reacts strongly to everyday situations, educators can observe patterns, adjust the environment, and communicate with the family. Behavior alone does not reveal a child's stress hormone levels or establish that the child has experienced trauma.

> **Emphasis: Support Recovery Before Expecting Participation**
>
> When a child is overwhelmed, begin with safety, connection, and co-regulation. Adjust demands and allow time to settle before expecting the child to listen, solve a problem, or rejoin an activity.

Effects of Prolonged Stress on Development and Learning

When stress response systems remain activated repeatedly or for extended periods without sufficient support, they can influence developing brain networks involved in learning, emotional regulation, and responses to danger. The effects vary with the timing, intensity, and duration of adversity, as well as the child's individual characteristics and access to protective relationships and resources (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014).

Children's responses are not always immediately visible. A child may become highly active and reactive, while another becomes quiet or withdrawn. Some children show different responses across settings or at different times.

Attention and Memory

Children need to direct attention, hold information in mind, and connect new experiences with previous learning. Prolonged stress can interfere with these processes. A child who is closely monitoring adults' voices or movements for signs of danger may have less attention available for a conversation, story, or play activity.

Working memory may also be affected. A child might have difficulty remembering a direction while completing a task or keeping track of the steps in a familiar routine. Stress can make it harder to demonstrate an existing skill, so inconsistent performance does not necessarily mean that the child has lost the skill or cannot learn it (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014).

Emotional Regulation and Flexible Thinking

Prolonged stress can affect children's ability to manage strong emotions, pause before acting, and adjust to change. Small frustrations may bring intense reactions, especially when the child is tired, overwhelmed, or reminded of a frightening experience.

For example, an unexpected schedule change may be difficult for a child who relies on predictability to feel secure. The child may cry, resist the transition, or become unusually still. Calm adult support and advance preparation can help the child manage the immediate demand while continuing to develop regulation skills.

Relationships and Social Participation

Previous experiences influence what children expect from other people. When care has been frightening, inconsistent, or unavailable, some children may have difficulty trusting adults, accepting comfort, or seeking help. Others may stay close to a familiar adult and become distressed when that person moves away.

Peer interactions can also be challenging. A child may interpret an accidental bump as a threat, react strongly when another child approaches, or avoid group play. Educators can support participation through consistent responses, sensitive guidance, and opportunities to build relationships at the child's pace (Forkey et al., 2021).

Physical Well-Being and Engagement

Prolonged stress can influence sleep and other body systems that support daily functioning. A child who has difficulty sleeping may arrive tired, become frustrated more easily, or have less energy for exploration. Changes in appetite or physical discomfort may also affect participation (Forkey et al., 2021).

These connections illustrate why learning cannot be separated from physical and emotional well-being. A child may need rest, food, comfort, movement, or a quieter space before being ready to participate fully.

Interpreting Behavior Carefully

Difficulty concentrating, strong emotional reactions, withdrawal, and disrupted sleep can have many explanations. They may relate to developmental differences, illness, sensory needs, changes in routines, stress, or several factors together. Educators should describe what they observe, consider the context, and collaborate with families rather than assume a cause.

For example, “Maya covered her ears and moved under the table when the room became noisy” provides useful information. “Maya has toxic stress” makes a conclusion that classroom observation alone cannot establish.

Emphasis: Development Remains Open to Change

Early adversity can increase developmental risks, but it does not determine a child’s future. The brain continues to adapt through experience. Greater safety, responsive relationships, practical resources, and appropriate professional support can promote recovery and continued development.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and Toxic Stress

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic experiences that occur before age 18. They include abuse, neglect, and circumstances that can undermine a child’s sense of safety, stability, and connection. ACEs describe experiences or conditions in a child’s life; toxic stress describes a pattern of excessive or prolonged stress response activation without sufficient buffering support (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2026; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014).

Experiencing an ACE does not automatically mean that a child develops a toxic stress response. Children’s responses depend on the nature of the experience, their developmental needs, and the protection and support available during and afterward.

Understanding the Original ACE Study

The original CDC–Kaiser Permanente ACE Study examined associations between adults’ reports of childhood adversity and their later health and well-being. Across its two survey waves, more than 17,000 adult health plan members participated (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

The study examined experiences within three broad groups: abuse, neglect, and household challenges. These categories helped researchers investigate patterns across a large group of people.

Table 8.2.2: Categories Examined in the Original ACE Study

Category	Experiences examined
Abuse	Emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.
Neglect	Emotional and physical neglect.
Household challenges	Violence against the mother or stepmother; household substance misuse or mental illness; parental separation or divorce; and an incarcerated household member.

Note. Categories summarized from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.). Neglect was assessed during the second survey wave. The original categories do not encompass every form of childhood adversity.

Family circumstances must be understood in context. For example, a caregiver’s mental health diagnosis does not by itself establish that a child receives unsafe or unresponsive care. Separation or divorce may reduce a child’s exposure to conflict or violence. Educators should consider children’s actual experiences and available supports rather than make assumptions about a family.

What ACE Research Can Tell Us

ACE research identifies patterns of increased risk across groups. Higher numbers of reported ACE categories have been associated with greater risk for a range of later difficulties, including some mental and physical health conditions, substance misuse, and challenges in education or employment (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2026).

These associations help explain why preventing adversity and strengthening family and community supports are important. They also show that childhood experiences can have implications extending beyond the immediate situation.

However, an association does not establish that a particular experience caused an individual person's later difficulties. Health and development are influenced by many interacting factors, including access to resources, ongoing conditions, and supportive relationships.

What an ACE Score Cannot Tell Us

An **ACE score** typically counts how many categories of adversity a person reports experiencing. It does not fully capture the frequency, severity, timing, or duration of those experiences. It also does not adequately represent the protective relationships and positive experiences in a person's life (Baldwin et al., 2021).

An ACE score cannot:

- Diagnose trauma or a toxic stress response.
- Measure an individual child's brain development or stress hormone activity.
- Accurately predict an individual child's future health or determine the child's learning potential.
- Provide a complete picture of a child's strengths, needs, or family circumstances.

Support decisions should draw on the child's current functioning, strengths, relationships, circumstances, and identified needs rather than an ACE score alone (Baldwin et al., 2021).

Using ACE Knowledge in Early Childhood Education

For educators, the value of ACE research lies in understanding the importance of prevention, supportive relationships, and access to resources. Educators can use this knowledge to create responsive environments for all children, recognize when additional support may be needed, and partner respectfully with families.

Educators should not use ACE checklists to question children about potentially traumatic experiences, assign risk labels, or collect unnecessary personal histories. Any formal screening process requires a clear purpose, appropriate preparation, privacy protections, and a plan for responding to identified needs.

Note

ACEs, Toxic Stress, and Trauma Are Related but Distinct

ACEs describe potentially traumatic experiences during childhood. **Toxic stress** describes excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems without sufficient support. **Trauma** refers to the lasting adverse effects that an experience or set of circumstances can have on a person's functioning and well-being. These concepts overlap, but they are not interchangeable.

Protective Factors, Positive Experiences, and Resilience

Children's development is influenced by both the challenges they encounter and the supports available to them. **Protective factors** are conditions, relationships, and resources that reduce risk or help children and families manage adversity. These supports can exist within the child, family, early childhood program, and broader community.

Protective factors do not erase difficult experiences or guarantee that a child will avoid lasting effects. They can reduce exposure to adversity, buffer stress responses, and create opportunities for recovery and continued development.

Responsive Relationships and Positive Experiences

A stable, responsive relationship with a caring adult is an important source of protection. Adults help children feel connected, respond to their needs, and provide assistance when situations become overwhelming. Children benefit when supportive relationships extend across home, early childhood settings, and the community (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015).

Positive childhood experiences include experiences of being cared for, feeling a sense of belonging, participating in enjoyable routines, and receiving support during difficulties. For young children, these experiences may include:

- Being comforted by a familiar adult when distressed.
- Sharing songs, stories, play, and family traditions.
- Having their home language and cultural identity respected.
- Exploring and making choices with appropriate adult support.
- Experiencing predictable routines and warm interactions.

Positive experiences are valuable in their own right. They should not be treated as points that cancel out adverse experiences. Children need both supportive experiences and protection from ongoing harm.

Family Strengths and Practical Resources

Families bring knowledge, relationships, cultural practices, and problem-solving strategies that can support children during difficult times. Educators can build on these strengths by asking what helps the child feel comfortable, which routines are meaningful, and whom the family identifies as trusted sources of support.

Practical resources also matter. Reliable access to food, housing, health care, transportation, and child care can reduce pressures on families and make responsive caregiving easier to sustain. A caregiver may understand a child's needs but face barriers to meeting them. Effective support therefore includes attention to material conditions as well as caregiving practices.

Community resources may include early intervention services, mental health care, family resource centers, culturally responsive organizations, and opportunities for social connection. Access depends partly on whether services are affordable, welcoming, available in the family's language, and reachable when needed (Forkey et al., 2021; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015).

Understanding Resilience

Resilience is the process of adapting positively in the context of significant adversity. It develops through interactions among individuals and their environments and can change over time (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015).

Resilience is not a fixed personality trait or an expectation that children should manage hardship independently. A child may function well in one area while needing substantial support in another. Appearing calm, compliant, or successful does not necessarily mean that a child is unaffected by adversity.

For young children, resilience is supported through repeated experiences of receiving help, participating in manageable challenges, and returning to a sense of safety. Adults carry much of the responsibility for creating those conditions.

Supporting Adaptation in Everyday Practice

Consider a family temporarily living with relatives after losing housing. The child's educator maintains a familiar arrival routine, offers a preferred book, and provides additional support during transitions. In conversation with the family, the educator learns that a familiar song helps the child settle and incorporates it into the day.

With the family's agreement, the program also helps connect them with housing and transportation resources. The familiar routines and responsive interactions support the child's immediate participation, while practical assistance addresses conditions contributing to family stress.

> **Emphasis: Resilience Requires Support**
>
> Strengthening resilience means increasing access to safety, responsive relationships, meaningful participation, and practical resources. Children should not be expected to adapt to ongoing harm without changes to the conditions around them.

The Educator's Role in Creating Supportive, Trauma-Informed Environments

A **trauma-informed approach** recognizes that traumatic experiences can affect development and participation and uses that understanding to guide relationships, environments, and responses. It emphasizes safety, trust, collaboration, and meaningful choice while seeking to avoid practices that may intensify distress (Forkey et al., 2021).

Educators do not need to know a child's trauma history to provide responsive care. Supportive practices can benefit all children while allowing educators to individualize assistance based on observed needs.

Build Safety Through Consistent Relationships

Children develop trust through repeated experiences of adults responding predictably and respectfully. Educators can greet children warmly, follow through on what they say, and explain what will happen next. When staffing changes occur, familiar adults can help children become comfortable with another caregiver.

Physical and emotional safety work together. Educators maintain appropriate supervision, respond promptly to distress, and protect children from ridicule, threats, and humiliation. They also respect individual preferences for comfort. Some children welcome a hug; others prefer an adult sitting nearby. Comfort should follow the child's cues rather than require physical contact.

Make Routines Predictable and Flexible

Consistent routines help children anticipate daily experiences. Simple picture schedules, familiar transition songs, and advance notice of changes can make expectations easier to understand.

Predictability should allow room for individual needs. An overwhelmed child may need additional time, a quieter route between activities, or support from a familiar adult. When plans change, educators can explain the change in concrete language and identify what will remain familiar.

Provide Co-Regulation During Distress

When a child becomes overwhelmed, the educator's first response is to support safety and regulation. Helpful actions may include lowering their voice, reducing language, moving nearby without crowding, and offering a familiar calming activity (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

Educators can acknowledge feelings while maintaining clear limits: "You are upset. I will help keep everyone safe. I won't let you hit." Teaching problem-solving or discussing what happened is more effective when the child is ready to engage.

Breathing exercises, movement, and quiet spaces may help some children, but no strategy works for everyone. A quiet area should be accessible as a supportive option, with adult assistance as needed, rather than used as punishment or forced isolation.

Offer Meaningful Choices and Accessible Participation

Small, appropriate choices can give children some control over their experiences. An educator might ask, "Would you like to sit beside me or on the cushion?" or "Will you carry the picture card or hold my hand as we walk?"

Choices should be genuine and manageable. Safety requirements remain the adult's responsibility. Educators can also offer different ways to participate, such as watching an activity before joining, using gestures instead of speaking, or engaging with a smaller group.

Materials, communication, and routines should reflect children's languages, cultures, abilities, and family experiences. A sense of belonging grows when children can recognize themselves and their families in the learning environment.

Observe Patterns and Adjust Support

Objective observations help educators identify situations that may be difficult for a child and evaluate whether support is helping. Useful details include what happened before the behavior, how the child responded, what the adult did, and what followed.

For example, repeated observations may show that a child becomes distressed during crowded transitions but participates comfortably when moving with a small group. The educator can adjust the transition and observe the child's response.

Observation guides support; it does not establish a trauma diagnosis. Educators should consider multiple explanations and collaborate with families and appropriate professionals when concerns persist.

Maintain Professional Boundaries and Team Support

Educators provide responsive care and facilitate access to additional assistance when needed. Diagnosing trauma and providing trauma treatment require appropriately qualified professionals. Programs can support educators through consultation, reflective supervision, shared planning, and manageable working conditions.

Consistent adult support is easier to sustain when educators also have opportunities to regulate their own emotions, seek assistance, and reflect on difficult interactions (Forkey et al., 2021; Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

Partnering With Families and Connecting With Additional Support

Families are essential partners in understanding children's experiences and planning effective support. Respectful collaboration begins with recognizing family strengths, listening to concerns, and sharing observations without blame. Educators can offer assistance without requiring families to disclose private or painful experiences.

Communicate With Respect and Curiosity

Conversations about concerns should occur privately, using the family's preferred language and an accessible communication method. Begin with the child's strengths, describe specific observations, and invite the family's perspective.

For example, an educator might say, "Lena enjoys playing beside you at arrival. This week, she has cried for about fifteen minutes after goodbye and has wanted me nearby. What helps her feel comfortable when you leave her with someone familiar?"

This approach opens a conversation without assuming that the child has experienced trauma. Families may identify helpful routines, recent changes, health concerns, or other information they choose to share. Educators can then agree on a manageable plan and a time to review how it is working.

Protect Privacy and Explain Its Limits

Information about children and families should be documented securely and shared only with people who are authorized to receive it for a legitimate professional purpose. Sensitive conversations should not occur in hallways, at classroom doors, or within hearing of other families.

Before sharing information with an outside provider, educators should obtain appropriate consent unless disclosure is required or otherwise authorized by law. Families should understand what information will be shared, with whom, and for what purpose.

Educators should also explain that confidentiality has limits when child safety or reporting obligations are involved. They should not promise a child or caregiver that information about possible harm will remain secret.

Connect Families With Appropriate Services

When concerns persist or extend beyond the educator's role, additional support may be useful. Depending on the need, options may include a child's health care provider, early intervention or preschool special education services, infant and early childhood

mental health consultation, or community assistance with food, housing, and transportation (Forkey et al., 2021).

Discuss referrals collaboratively. Explain the reason for suggesting a service, ask about the family's priorities, and explore barriers such as cost, transportation, language access, or scheduling. With permission, a **warm handoff**—helping the family connect directly with a service—may be more useful than providing a list of telephone numbers.

Continue classroom support while the family considers or accesses services. Follow up respectfully without pressuring the family to disclose treatment details or unnecessary personal information.

Respond When Safety Concerns Arise

Family partnership also includes fulfilling responsibilities to protect children. Educators must know the reporting requirements that apply to their role and location, including when, how, and to whom a report must be made.

FFor example, Wisconsin identifies child care workers and providers as mandated reporters. They must report to county child protective services or law enforcement when they have reasonable cause to suspect that a child seen during professional duties has been abused or neglected, or reason to believe that the child has been threatened with abuse or neglect and that it will occur (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, n.d.).

If a child describes possible harm, listen calmly, avoid leading or repeated questions, and record the child's words accurately. The educator's role is to respond and report as required; investigating the allegation belongs to the appropriate authorities. Do not delay a required report while seeking proof or family permission. Internal program procedures should support the applicable reporting obligation.

When immediate danger or an urgent medical need is present, seek emergency assistance. Decisions about communicating with caregivers concerning suspected abuse should follow applicable requirements and guidance from the receiving agency, particularly when notification could increase risk.

Note

Support and Reporting Serve Different Purposes

A request for food, housing, or parenting assistance calls for a respectful response and connections to resources. Family hardship alone should not be treated as proof of maltreatment. When information meets the applicable threshold for a required report, offering voluntary services does not replace that responsibility.

Putting It Into Practice

Understanding environmental influences and stress responses helps educators make intentional decisions. The following scenario illustrates how an educator can respond to a child's needs while remaining open to different explanations for the child's behavior.

Classroom Scenario: Supporting Mateo During Transitions

Mateo, age 30 months, recently began crying and covering his ears when cleanup music starts. He sometimes pushes materials away and stays near the book corner while other children move to wash their hands. Earlier in the morning, he often explores materials and plays comfortably beside a familiar peer.

His educator, Janelle, records what happens before, during, and after several transitions. She notices that Mateo becomes distressed when loud music begins suddenly and several children move through the same space. He settles more readily when she sits nearby and speaks softly.

Janelle does not assume that Mateo has experienced trauma or is showing a toxic stress response. She uses her observations to identify immediate supports.

Respond With Co-Regulation

When Mateo becomes distressed, Janelle moves nearby, lowers her voice, and says, “That was loud. I’m here.” She gives him space and offers to sit with him in the book corner. She allows time for him to settle before helping him move to the next activity.

If Mateo pushes materials toward another child, Janelle calmly blocks the materials and says, “I won’t let the blocks hit anyone. I can help you.” She maintains safety while continuing to offer support.

Adjust the Environment

Janelle replaces the sudden cleanup music with a quieter verbal cue and a picture showing what happens next. She gives Mateo advance notice, helps him put away a few materials, and arranges for children to wash their hands in smaller groups.

She offers a manageable choice: “Would you like to carry the picture or walk beside me?” These changes make the transition more predictable and reduce crowding.

Partner With the Family

In a private conversation, Janelle shares her observations and asks what helps Mateo during changes at home. His caregiver explains that the family’s work schedule recently changed and Mateo has been sleeping less consistently. A familiar song and a short explanation usually help him prepare for a transition.

Together, they agree to use similar words before changes and incorporate the familiar song quietly. Janelle does not request a detailed family history. She asks whether the caregiver would like help locating any additional resources and respects the family’s priorities.

Observe and Follow Up

Over the next two weeks, Janelle documents how Mateo responds. He begins moving toward handwashing after the picture cue and accepts help putting materials away. He still needs additional support on some mornings.

Janelle shares this progress with the family and continues the helpful strategies. If distress persists, increases, or affects other parts of Mateo’s day, she will revisit the plan with the family and discuss appropriate consultation or referral.

Reflect on the Educator’s Decisions

Consider the following questions:

1. Which observations helped Janelle identify changes to the environment?
2. How did she provide co-regulation while maintaining safety?
3. How did family knowledge influence the support plan?
4. What evidence suggested that the changes were helping?
5. Why would it be inappropriate to conclude that Mateo’s behavior demonstrated toxic stress?

> **Emphasis: Respond to Needs and Review the Results**
>
> Observe the context, provide responsive support, collaborate with the family, and evaluate the child’s response. Educators can make meaningful changes without determining a diagnosis or knowing every detail of a child’s experiences.

Vocabulary Alert

- **Stress response system:** The coordinated activity of the brain, nervous system, and hormones that prepares the body to respond to a challenge or perceived threat.
- **Positive stress response:** Brief, mild to moderate activation of the stress response system during a manageable challenge, with responsive support available.
- **Tolerable stress response:** More intense activation associated with a serious difficulty, whose potential effects can be buffered by supportive relationships and opportunities for recovery.
- **Toxic stress response:** Excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems associated with strong, frequent, or prolonged adversity without sufficient buffering support.
- **Co-regulation:** Support provided through responsive relationships, supportive environments, and guidance that helps children manage emotions, attention, and behavior.
- **Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs):** Potentially traumatic experiences before age 18, including abuse, neglect, and circumstances that can undermine safety, stability, and connection.
- **Trauma:** Lasting adverse effects of an experience or set of circumstances on a person's functioning and well-being.
- **Protective factors:** Conditions, relationships, and resources that reduce risk or help children and families manage adversity.
- **Resilience:** The process of adapting positively in the context of significant adversity, supported by interactions between individuals and their environments.
- **Trauma-informed approach:** An approach that recognizes the possible effects of trauma and emphasizes safety, trust, collaboration, and meaningful choice while seeking to avoid increasing distress.

Exercise 8.2.1

Check Your Understanding

1. Explain how responsive relationships and physical conditions work together to support brain development. Include one example of each.
2. How do positive, tolerable, and toxic stress responses differ? Explain why knowing what happened to a child is not enough to determine the type of stress response.
3. A child frequently watches the classroom doorway, has difficulty following familiar directions, and rarely joins sustained play. How might prolonged stress help explain these observations? Why should the educator consider other explanations?
4. Explain the difference between adverse childhood experiences and a toxic stress response. Why is an ACE score insufficient for accurately predicting an individual child's future or identifying all the support the child needs?

Apply What You Know

5. After a family moves into temporary housing, their toddler begins crying during arrival and resisting transitions. Describe how the educator could use co-regulation, environmental changes, family partnership, and follow-up observations to support the child.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 8.2.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Responsive relationships provide back-and-forth interaction, comfort, and assistance with challenges. Physical conditions support children's health and opportunities to participate. For example, an adult who responds to an infant's gestures supports communication and connection, while adequate sleep and a comfortable play space help the infant remain available for interaction and exploration. These influences work together throughout daily experiences.
2. Positive stress responses involve brief activation during manageable challenges. Tolerable stress responses involve more intense activation during serious difficulties, with sufficient support to buffer potential effects and promote recovery. Toxic stress responses involve excessive or prolonged activation associated with adversity without sufficient buffering support. An event alone does not establish the response because intensity, duration, developmental needs, previous experiences, and available support vary among children.
3. A child focused on detecting possible danger may have less attention available for directions or play. Prolonged stress may also affect working memory and regulation, making participation more difficult. However, these observations do not establish toxic stress or trauma. Hearing differences, language comprehension, fatigue, sensory needs, developmental differences, and other circumstances could contribute. The educator should document patterns, provide support, and collaborate with the family.
4. ACEs describe potentially traumatic childhood experiences; a toxic stress response describes excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems without sufficient support. Experiencing an ACE does not automatically produce toxic stress. An ACE score counts categories but does not fully represent severity, timing, duration, protective relationships, or adversity outside the questionnaire. It cannot diagnose a child or determine future outcomes. Support should reflect the child's current strengths, needs, relationships, and circumstances.

Answers to Apply What You Know

5. The educator could offer a calm greeting, remain nearby, and follow the toddler's cues for comfort. A consistent goodbye routine, picture cues, and advance notice could make transitions more predictable. In private conversation, the educator could ask the family which routines help and whether practical resources would be useful, without requiring a detailed personal history. Follow-up observations could track how long distress lasts, which supports help, and how participation changes. The educator and family could review the plan and consider additional assistance if concerns persist.

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8.3: Critical Periods of Brain Development

Introduction

Children's brains develop through ongoing interactions among biology, relationships, and experiences. The timing of these experiences matters because different brain systems develop at different rates. During certain periods, particular experiences have an especially strong influence on how those systems develop (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, n.d.).

These periods are described as **sensitive periods** and **critical periods**. Understanding the distinction helps early childhood educators recognize why timely support matters without assuming that children's abilities or futures are fixed. Early experiences provide an important foundation, while meaningful learning and development continue beyond early childhood.

This section examines sensitive and critical periods, considers examples from sensory and language development, and explains how educators can use this knowledge to provide responsive experiences, partner with families, and support timely follow-up when concerns arise.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 8.3: Identify optimal and critical periods of brain development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Distinguish sensitive periods from critical periods.
- Explain how the timing of experiences influences developing brain systems.
- Describe why early support matters while recognizing the possibility of later learning.
- Apply these ideas to everyday teaching and family partnerships.

Understanding Sensitive and Critical Periods

These periods reflect changes in neuroplasticity—the brain's capacity to change its organization or functioning through development and experience.

A **sensitive period** is a time when a developing brain system is especially responsive to particular experiences. Learning remains possible afterward, although the process or outcomes may differ.

A **critical period** is a more restricted developmental window during which particular input is necessary for a specific function to develop typically. Missing that input can produce enduring difficulties that are harder to change later. Researchers sometimes use these terms differently; the distinction concerns the particular system being studied, rather than a universal deadline for development (Knudsen, 2004).

Table 8.3.1: Comparing Sensitive and Critical Periods

Feature	Sensitive period	Critical period
Main idea	Experience has an especially strong influence.	Particular input is necessary for typical development of a specific function.
Later development	Learning and change remain possible.	Later experience may not fully compensate for missing input.
Interpretation	A period of heightened opportunity and sensitivity.	A more restricted window for a particular developing system.
Educational implication	Provide meaningful experiences and continue supporting learning.	Support timely identification and access to appropriate services.

Source: Based on Knudsen (2004).

Important Point

Critical periods apply to specific developmental processes. They do not mean that a child's overall abilities or future are fixed at a particular age.

Early Sensory Development

Research on vision provides important evidence about developmental timing. When early visual input is disrupted, the developing visual system may not establish typical patterns of functioning. Classic animal studies helped researchers understand how experience shapes these neural circuits (Knudsen, 2004).

A related human example is **amblyopia**, a condition in which vision does not develop properly because the brain increasingly favors input from one eye. Early identification and treatment are important. However, research also shows that some older children benefit from treatment. This illustrates why educators should encourage timely follow-up without assuming that later help is useless (National Eye Institute, 2005, 2024).

Educators support this process by sharing specific observations with families and following program procedures for screening and referrals. Diagnosis and treatment belong to qualified health professionals.

Language Development and Access to Communication

Early childhood is an important period for language development. Children need frequent access to language they can perceive and understand, along with meaningful opportunities to communicate. Spoken and signed languages both provide pathways for language development. American Sign Language is a complete, natural language with its own grammar (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders [NIDCD], 2021, 2022).

For children who are deaf or hard of hearing, early access to language is especially important. Hearing status alone does not determine whether a child has language access. Families and professionals work together to establish accessible communication and appropriate services (NIDCD, 2024).

Educators can:

- Respond to children's communication attempts.
- Use shared books, play, songs, and everyday conversations.
- Support home languages and communication approaches used by families.
- Collaborate with specialists to make classroom interactions accessible.

First-language access and additional-language learning are different questions. A child learning English after developing another language already brings valuable language knowledge. Educators should avoid interpreting limited English experience as evidence of a missed developmental opportunity or a language disorder.

What Does "Optimal" Mean?

In this section, **optimal** refers to conditions or timing that are especially favorable for development. It should not be interpreted as one exact age when every child must learn a skill.

For teaching purposes, the useful question is:

> What experiences and supports will help this child participate and learn now?

A toddler interested in filling and emptying containers may benefit from materials that invite exploration. A preschooler interested in storytelling may benefit from puppets, shared reading, and an attentive listener. These examples illustrate responsive teaching; they do not establish biological critical periods for those activities.

Early Experiences Matter, and Later Support Still Matters

Early opportunities deserve attention because developing systems can be especially sensitive to experience. Nevertheless, early difficulty should never become a reason to lower expectations or stop providing support.

Educators should avoid statements such as “The window has closed” or “It is too late.” Instead, describe what the child currently does, identify barriers to participation, and collaborate on appropriate next steps.

The goal is timely action paired with continued opportunities for learning.

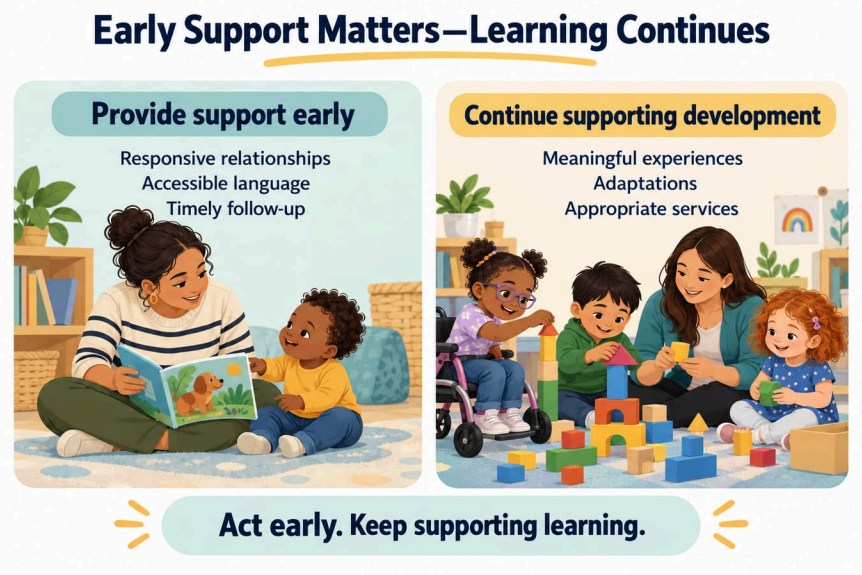


Figure 8.3.1: Early support and continued learning opportunities work together to support children’s development (OpenAI, 2026).

The Educator’s Role

Understanding developmental timing should strengthen everyday practice.

1. **Observe carefully.** Record what a child does across activities and situations.
2. **Provide accessible experiences.** Adapt materials, interactions, and routines to support participation.
3. **Partner with families.** Ask about the child’s interests, languages, communication, and experiences at home.
4. **Follow up on concerns.** Use established screening and referral procedures rather than waiting for difficulties to disappear.
5. **Continue supporting the child.** Maintain meaningful learning opportunities while evaluations or services are being arranged.

Educators contribute observations and instructional support. They do not determine that a child has “missed” a critical period.

Putting It Into Practice

Scenario:

During group stories, three-year-old Maya often watches other children before responding. She participates more readily when the educator sits nearby and shows her the pictures. The educator wonders whether Maya can consistently hear the conversation.

Rather than concluding that Maya has a language delay or has missed an important learning period, the educator documents observations and speaks privately with her family. Together, they discuss what happens at home and appropriate follow-up through the program's procedures.

Meanwhile, the educator reduces background noise, faces Maya when speaking, uses visual supports, and creates more opportunities for small-group interaction.

Reflection:

The educator recognizes the importance of timely support while avoiding a diagnosis. Classroom adaptations support Maya's participation as the family and appropriate professionals investigate the concern.

Vocabulary Alert:

- **Sensitive period:** A developmental time when particular experiences have an especially strong influence.
- **Critical period:** A more restricted developmental window when particular input is necessary for a specific function to develop typically.
- **Neuroplasticity:** The brain's capacity to change its organization or functioning through development and experience.
- **Accessible language:** Language a child can perceive and understand through an appropriate sensory pathway.
- **Optimal conditions:** Circumstances that are especially favorable for development and learning.

Exercise 8.3.1

Check Your Understanding

1. How does a sensitive period differ from a critical period?
2. Why is it inaccurate to describe early childhood as one deadline for brain development?
3. Why is accessible language important for children who are deaf or hard of hearing?
4. What should an educator do when observations raise concerns about a child's hearing or vision?
5. In Maya's scenario, identify two appropriate educator actions and explain their purpose.

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 8.3.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. During a sensitive period, experience has an especially strong influence, but learning remains possible afterward. A critical period involves a more restricted window when particular input is necessary for typical development of a specific function.
2. Different brain systems develop on different timelines, and learning continues beyond early childhood.
3. Children need language they can perceive and understand. Accessible spoken or signed language provides opportunities to develop communication.
4. Document specific observations, communicate respectfully with the family, follow screening and referral procedures, and support classroom participation.
5. Examples include documenting observations to inform follow-up, consulting the family to understand other settings, and reducing background noise or using visual supports to improve access.

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8.4: The Impact of Family Mental Health on Child Development

Children develop within relationships. The mental health and well-being of parents and other family caregivers can influence the emotional climate of daily life, the consistency of routines, and the support available to young children. At the same time, caregiving demands, financial pressures, isolation, and difficulty accessing services can affect adults' well-being. Supporting children therefore includes supporting the adults who care for them (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2026).

Family mental health concerns do not determine a child's developmental future. Families have different strengths, resources, and support needs. Early childhood educators can contribute by building trusting relationships, providing predictable and responsive care, and helping families connect with additional support when needed.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 8.4: Identify family mental health issues impacting child development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Describe family mental health concerns that may influence young children's experiences.
- Explain how caregiver well-being, relationships, and daily routines connect with development.
- Identify protective factors that support children and families.
- Describe appropriate educator responses, including observation, family partnership, and referral.

Understanding Family Mental Health

Mental health involves emotional, psychological, and social well-being. In early childhood settings, family mental health includes the well-being of parents, grandparents, guardians, and other significant caregivers.

Stress and mental health conditions are related, but they are not interchangeable. A caregiver may experience temporary stress without having a mental health disorder. A caregiver living with a diagnosed condition may also provide warm, consistent care and have effective treatment and support (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2026; National Institute of Mental Health, 2023).

Educators should learn about mental health to understand families' experiences, rather than use that information to label or diagnose them.

Family Mental Health Concerns

Concerns that may be relevant to families include depression, anxiety, trauma-related difficulties, and other conditions that affect mood, thinking, energy, or daily functioning. These concerns may influence how caregivers manage responsibilities, respond to stress, and participate in everyday family interactions. Experiences differ across individuals and over time, and caregivers with the same diagnosis may have different strengths and support needs. Understanding these differences helps educators approach families with empathy, recognize existing supports, and avoid assumptions about parenting or children's development. The following table introduces several mental health concerns and possible support considerations.

Table 8.4.1: Family Mental Health Concerns and Possible Support Needs

Concern	Possible effects on a caregiver's daily functioning
Depression	Persistent sadness, reduced interest, low energy, or difficulty concentrating may n daily activities harder.

Concern	Possible effects on a caregiver's daily functioning
Anxiety disorders	Persistent worry or fear may interfere with sleep, concentration, decisions, or ever activities.
Trauma-related conditions	Trauma reminders may bring distress, heightened alertness, avoidance, or difficul feeling safe.
Bipolar disorder and psychotic disorders, such as schizophrenia	Bipolar disorder can involve episodes of changes in mood, energy, and activity. Psychotic disorders may affect thinking and perception. Symptoms, functioning, a support needs vary across individuals and over time.

Note

Symptom descriptions are summarized from the National Institute of Mental Health (2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d, 2024e). Support considerations are instructional applications informed by the Office of Head Start (n.d.-b). These descriptions provide general background, not diagnostic criteria. A condition's name does not establish a caregiver's parenting capacity or a child's support needs.

Perinatal depression occurs during pregnancy or after childbirth. It can involve persistent sadness, anxiety, fatigue, and difficulty managing daily responsibilities. It differs from the mild, short-lasting mood changes sometimes called the "baby blues." Perinatal depression is treatable, and a qualified health care provider determines appropriate care (National Institute of Mental Health, 2023).

Family stress may also arise from grief, housing instability, discrimination, relationship difficulties, or limited access to child care. Educators should consider these circumstances without assuming that hardship indicates a mental health diagnosis (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2026).

Note

A Diagnosis Does Not Describe an Entire Family

A mental health diagnosis alone does not tell an educator how a caregiver parents, whether a child is safe, or what support a family needs. Begin with the family's strengths, the child's experiences, and specific observations.

How Family Mental Health Can Influence Development

Family mental health can influence development through several connected pathways. These pathways help explain possible support needs; they do not predict an individual child's future.

Responsive Relationships

Infants and young children communicate through facial expressions, movements, sounds, words, and behavior. Responsive adults notice these signals and respond with comfort, attention, and interaction. These back-and-forth exchanges support early brain development. When adults face substantial difficulties, additional support may help them sustain responsive caregiving (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, n.d.).

For example, a caregiver experiencing severe fatigue may find it harder to join a toddler's play. A supportive relative, accessible treatment, or practical assistance may help the family maintain opportunities for connection.

Routines and Everyday Experiences

Symptoms that interfere with daily functioning may make meals, sleep routines, transitions, or appointments harder to manage. Families may benefit from practical help as well as mental health services (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry,

2026; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2026).

The educator's question should be: **What would help this child and family experience greater connection, consistency, and support?**

Emotional Security and Co-Regulation

Young children depend on adults to help them manage strong feelings. Through **co-regulation**, an adult provides a calm presence, responds to distress, and helps the child return to a manageable emotional state (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

Educators can support this process through patient responses, predictable routines, and developmentally appropriate expectations. A consistent classroom relationship can be one part of a child's wider network of support.

Language, Exploration, and Learning

Everyday interactions give young children opportunities to communicate, explore, and solve problems. When significant mental health difficulties interfere with a caregiver's participation, children may have fewer opportunities for shared conversation, play, or exploration. Supportive relationships and predictable environments help children engage in learning experiences (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, n.d., 2009; Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

A caregiver's diagnosis alone does not establish the cause of a child's developmental delay or predict whether a delay will occur. Educators can support learning through responsive conversations, shared books, hands-on exploration, and consistent routines while working with families to understand each child's experiences.

Individual Differences

Children respond differently to family circumstances. Their experiences depend on interacting factors, including developmental stage, temperament, the duration of difficulties, available relationships, and access to support.

Research identifies increased risks across groups; it does not establish that every child whose caregiver has a mental health condition will experience developmental difficulties (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2026; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2009).

Noticing Children's Support Needs

Educators may notice changes in a child's participation, relationships, or routines. These observations can guide support, but they do not identify the cause of a difficulty.

Table 8.4.2: Moving From Observation to Support

What an educator notices	A supportive response
An infant needs more help settling than usual.	Offer familiar, responsive care and ask the family about comforting strategies.
A toddler has begun crying for longer periods at arrival.	Establish a predictable goodbye routine and provide a consistent adult welcome.
A preschooler participates less often in familiar activities.	Offer a low-pressure invitation and observe when engagement increases.
A child becomes frustrated more quickly during transitions.	Provide advance notice, simple choices, and additional adult support.
A child repeatedly expresses worry about a caregiver.	Acknowledge the feeling, provide reassurance within your knowledge, and speak privately with the family.

Note

Original instructional examples informed by co-regulation principles described by Rosanbalm and Murray (2017). These observations do not identify a diagnosis or establish their cause. Similar behaviors can have many explanations, including illness, developmental changes, disrupted sleep, or changes in the learning environment.

Document what happened, when it happened, and what helped. For example, “Maya cried for eight minutes after arrival and settled while reading with her teacher” is more useful than “Maya is anxious because of problems at home.”

Protective Factors and Family Strengths

Protective factors are relationships, resources, and conditions that support well-being and help families manage challenges. A stable, committed relationship with a supportive adult is an important foundation for children’s resilience (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2021).

A **strengths-based approach** begins with the family’s knowledge, abilities, relationships, and resources and uses these strengths when planning support (Office of Head Start, n.d.-b).

Educators can learn about strengths by asking:

- Who helps the child feel comfortable and connected?
- What routines work well for the family?
- Which activities bring the family enjoyment?
- What cultural, community, or spiritual connections matter to them?
- What assistance would the family find useful?

Support may include dependable child care, trusted relatives, culturally responsive services, transportation, food assistance, or opportunities for social connection. Mental health treatment can be valuable, while practical assistance can reduce pressures that make daily life harder.

Community Conditions That Support Families

Family well-being is influenced by the conditions in which families live and work. Affordable mental health care, dependable child care, transportation, stable housing, and workplace flexibility can make it easier for caregivers to obtain support and manage daily responsibilities. Services are more accessible when they respect families’ languages, cultures, and circumstances. Supporting family mental health therefore involves both individual services and community efforts to reduce barriers (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2021; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2026).

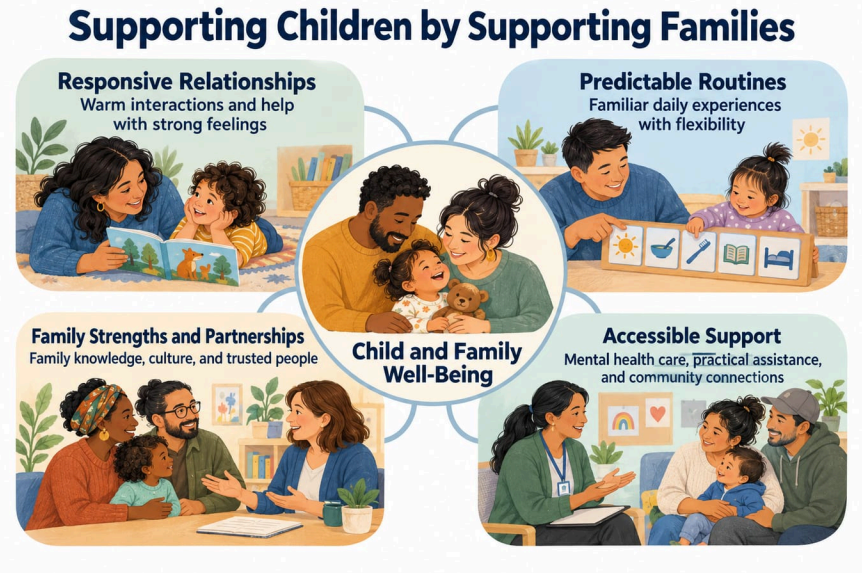


Figure 8.4.1: Responsive relationships, predictable routines, family partnerships, and accessible support contribute to child and family well-being (OpenAI, 2026).

Note. Conceptual summary informed by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2021) and Office of Head Start (n.d.-b).

The Educator's Role

Early childhood educators support development through everyday relationships and intentional teaching. They can:

- Provide a warm, predictable welcome.
- Respond to distress with calm, respectful support.
- Use consistent routines with flexibility for individual needs.
- Help children name feelings through play, books, and conversation.
- Recognize effort, interests, and strengths.
- Review whether classroom expectations or transitions contribute to difficulties (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

Educators do not diagnose caregivers, recommend medications, or provide psychotherapy. Mental health consultation can help staff understand concerns, strengthen classroom practices, and work effectively with families. Head Start's Family Connections model, for example, supports staff working with families experiencing parental depression and related adversities (Office of Head Start, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

Partnering With Families and Connecting With Support

Discuss concerns privately and begin with specific observations. Invite the family's perspective without requiring disclosure of a diagnosis.

For example:

> "I've noticed that arrival has been harder for Amir this week. He settles when we look at his family photo together. What have you noticed, and what might help us make mornings easier?"

If a caregiver shares a mental health concern, acknowledge the disclosure respectfully. Ask what would help the child's experience in the program and whether the family would like information about resources (Office of Head Start, n.d.-b).

Talking With Children About Family Mental Health

When children ask questions about a caregiver's well-being, use brief, truthful, developmentally appropriate language. Coordinate explanations with the family and avoid sharing private information or making promises about recovery.

Children benefit from understanding that they are not responsible for a caregiver's illness (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2026). For example, when accurate and agreed upon with the family, an adult might say, "Dad is having a hard time feeling well. Adults are helping him. You did not cause it, and it is not your job to fix it."

Acknowledge the child's feelings and explain what will happen next in the child's day. Young children may need the same reassurance more than once.

Connecting With Services and Protecting Confidentiality

When making referrals, help families understand available options and possible barriers, such as cost, transportation, language access, or appointment availability. With appropriate consent, a supported connection to a provider may be more useful than handing the family a list of telephone numbers (Office of Head Start, n.d.-b).

Respect confidentiality and follow applicable program procedures and requirements for consent and information sharing. Explain relevant limits to confidentiality. Respond to specific safety concerns through established procedures and applicable reporting requirements; a caregiver's diagnosis alone should not be treated as evidence of harm.

Putting It Into Practice

Example 8.4.1

Three-year-old Elena has recently begun crying at arrival and asking when her father will return. Her teacher records that Elena usually settles after sitting with a familiar adult and looking at books.

During a private conversation, Elena's father shares that he is receiving treatment for depression and that mornings have been difficult. The teacher thanks him for sharing and asks which routines help Elena at home.

Together, they plan a brief, consistent goodbye, a family photograph Elena can carry to the reading area, and a familiar staff member to greet her. The teacher offers information about the program's family support services. Over the following two weeks, staff observe Elena's arrival, play, and participation and review the plan with her father.

The teacher supports Elena, respects her father's privacy, and builds on an existing family strength: his knowledge of his child.

Vocabulary Alert:

- **Family mental health:** The mental health and well-being of parents and other significant family caregivers.
- **Perinatal depression:** Depression occurring during pregnancy or after childbirth.
- **Responsive caregiving:** Noticing, interpreting, and responding appropriately to a child's signals and needs.
- **Co-regulation:** Support from another person that helps a child manage feelings and behavior.
- **Protective factors:** Relationships, resources, and conditions that support well-being and reduce risk.
- **Strengths-based approach:** Working with families by recognizing their abilities, knowledge, relationships, and resources.
- **Mental health consultation:** Collaboration with a mental health professional to strengthen adults' capacity to support children and families.
- **Referral:** Connecting a child or family with services that address identified needs.

Exercise 8.4.1

Check Your Understanding

1. Why should an educator distinguish family stress from a diagnosed mental health condition?
2. Describe two ways caregiver mental health may influence a young child's everyday experiences.
3. Why can classroom observations identify support needs without identifying their cause?
4. Identify three protective factors that may support a family experiencing mental health challenges.
5. A caregiver shares that they are receiving treatment for depression. Their child has recently begun struggling at arrival. How should the educator respond?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 8.4.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. Stress does not necessarily indicate a disorder, and a diagnosis does not establish how a caregiver parents. Educators should avoid assumptions and focus on observations and family-identified needs.
2. Mental health difficulties may affect opportunities for responsive interaction or make daily routines harder to maintain. Effects vary according to the family's circumstances and support.
3. Behaviors such as crying, withdrawal, or frustration can have many explanations. Observation describes what is happening; determining the cause may require family input and professional assessment.
4. Examples include a trusted adult relationship, dependable child care, supportive relatives, accessible treatment, practical assistance, and meaningful community connections.
5. Thank the caregiver for sharing, discuss specific observations privately, invite their perspective, and develop a predictable arrival plan together. Offer resources if wanted and follow up on the child's response.

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8.5: The Impact of Trauma-Informed Care on Development

Introduction

Children bring their experiences, relationships, strengths, and needs into early learning environments. Some have experienced frightening or overwhelming events that affect how they respond to people, routines, and everyday situations. An unexpected sound, a crowded space, or separation from a caregiver may feel threatening even when adults do not recognize an immediate danger (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.).

Trauma-informed care helps educators consider these possibilities and respond thoughtfully. Rather than viewing behavior only as compliance or noncompliance, educators consider what a child may be communicating and what support could help the child feel secure and participate.

Section 8.2 introduced supportive responses to stress and adversity. This section builds on that foundation by examining how a trauma-informed approach shapes everyday teaching, guidance, family partnerships, and program practices. Educators do not need to know a child's trauma history to provide predictable routines, respectful guidance, meaningful choices, and responsive care.

Learning Objectives

Course Competency 8.5: Analyze the impact of trauma-informed care on development.

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the purpose of trauma-informed care in early childhood settings.
- Describe how responsive relationships and supportive environments help children participate in learning.
- Apply trauma-informed practices to daily routines, guidance, and family partnerships.
- Distinguish educators' responsibilities from trauma assessment and treatment.

What Is Trauma-Informed Care?

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) describes a trauma-informed approach as recognizing trauma's impact, identifying possible signs, responding through informed practices, and working to prevent retraumatization.

Retraumatization occurs when an experience reactivates trauma-related distress or recreates aspects of an earlier traumatic experience.

In early childhood settings, this approach includes:

- Building dependable relationships with children and families.
- Making routines and expectations understandable.
- Responding calmly to distress.
- Respecting children's communication, preferences, and physical boundaries.
- Adjusting practices that unnecessarily increase fear or helplessness.
- Connecting children and families with additional support when needed.

Trauma-informed care is broader than a strategy used during challenging behavior. It influences how children are welcomed, how transitions occur, how adults communicate with families, and how programs support their staff (SAMHSA, 2014).

Important Distinction

Trauma-informed care is not trauma treatment. Educators provide responsive care, observe children's participation, adapt learning environments, and collaborate with families and qualified professionals. Clinical assessment and trauma treatment require appropriately trained providers.

How to Support Children Who Have Experienced Trauma: Advice from Head Start

Video: Head-Start Trauma Smart

The video "*Head Start--Trauma Smart*" gives an overview of a Head Start program in Missouri specifically designed to support children who have experienced childhood trauma. As you watch, notice how educators respond to children's feelings, teach coping strategies, and work with families and other professionals.

As you watch, retain the distinctions introduced in Section 8.2: adverse experiences, toxic stress responses, and trauma are related but are not interchangeable.

Watch Head Start-Trauma Smart from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation on YouTube to view the transcript.

Video Reflection

Identify two practices educators use in the video to support children who have experienced trauma. Explain how each practice could support children's emotional security, relationships, or participation in learning. (Click "Details" below to see possible answers.)

Possible Answers

- **Recognizing and validating feelings:** Naming feelings and responding calmly can help children communicate distress and feel understood.
- **Teaching coping strategies:** Practicing ways to manage stress gives children tools they can use with adult support.
- **Helping children ask for assistance:** Encouraging children to communicate their needs supports language development and relationships.
- **Collaborating with families and other professionals:** Sharing observations and coordinating support helps adults respond consistently to children's needs.
- **Supporting educator well-being:** Educators who receive appropriate support are better positioned to respond patiently and consistently.

Understanding Behavior Without Making Assumptions

Young children often communicate distress through behavior because they are still developing the language and regulation skills needed to explain their experiences.

Traumatic stress may be associated with fearfulness, difficulty being comforted, aggression, or difficulty regulating emotions and behavior. Responses vary across children and situations (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.).

These behaviors do not establish that a child has experienced trauma. Similar behaviors can reflect fatigue, illness, sensory needs, developmental differences, communication difficulties, or other circumstances.

An educator's task is to observe carefully and respond to the child's needs. Useful questions include:

- What happened immediately before the behavior?
- When and where does the child participate comfortably?

- What seems to increase or reduce distress?
- How does the child communicate a need for help, space, or connection?
- What strengths and interests can support participation?

Documentation should describe observable actions rather than assign motives or diagnoses. For example, “Maya covered her ears and moved under the table when the chairs scraped the floor” is more useful than “Maya had a trauma response.”

How Trauma-Informed Care Supports Development

Trauma-informed practices aim to make everyday experiences more predictable, supportive, and accessible. These conditions can help children engage with adults, peers, materials, and learning opportunities. Educators support children through responsive interactions, classroom adjustments, and collaboration with additional services when needed.

The following examples illustrate connections between educator practices and developmental opportunities.

Table 8.5.1: Trauma-Informed Practices and Developmental Opportunities

Developmental area	Trauma-informed practice	Opportunity supported
Social-emotional development	Respond consistently and offer calm support during distress.	Building trust, communicating feelings, and accepting help.
Language and communication	Use clear language, allow response time, and support gestures, visuals, or other communication methods.	Expressing needs and participating in interactions.
Cognition and approaches to learning	Provide manageable tasks, predictable sequences, and flexible ways to participate.	Exploring, solving problems, and sustaining engagement.
Physical development and well-being	Offer movement, rest, accessible spaces, and appropriate sensory adjustments.	Participating more comfortably in daily activities.
Peer relationships	Coach turn-taking, requesting space, and repairing interactions.	Practicing cooperation and building connections.

Note. Author-created instructional examples informed by Rosanbalm and Murray (2017) and Statman-Weil (2015).

These are instructional examples, not a diagnostic checklist or a guarantee of particular outcomes.

When children can participate more comfortably, they have more opportunities to practice communication, problem-solving, movement, and relationship skills throughout the day.

Creating Predictable and Responsive Environments

Predictability helps children understand what is happening and what comes next. A predictable classroom also allows flexibility when a child needs additional support.

Educators can:

- Maintain a familiar sequence of daily activities.
- Use photographs, objects, gestures, or visual schedules to explain routines.
- Give advance notice of transitions and changes.
- Plan additional adult support during difficult parts of the day.
- Provide a quiet, supervised space children can use with support.
- Explain what adults are doing before approaching or assisting a child.

Consistent routines, advance notice, meaningful choices, and sensitive relationships can make classroom experiences more

manageable. These practices help children anticipate events while giving adults opportunities to respond to individual needs (Statman-Weil, 2015).

Comfort should reflect the individual child's preferences. One child may welcome a hug; another may prefer an adult sitting nearby. Offer connection without requiring physical affection (Statman-Weil, 2015).

Example 8.5.1

Responsive Care During a Clothing Change

Before helping a toddler change a wet shirt, the educator shows the clean shirt and says, "Your shirt is wet. I'm going to help you change. Would you like to stand here or sit on the bench?"

The educator explains the next step, pauses for the child's response, and provides assistance respectfully.

Supporting Regulation and Maintaining Boundaries

Co-regulation occurs when a responsive adult helps a child manage feelings, attention, and behavior through supportive interaction (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017).

During distress, educators can reduce their language, use a steady voice, provide appropriate space, and offer familiar support. Teaching and problem-solving can occur when the child is more able to participate.

Trauma-informed guidance includes clear safety limits. Understanding a child's distress does not mean allowing behavior that harms others.

For example:

> "I won't let you hit. I'm helping you and Sam move apart so everyone has space. I'm here to help."

After the child settles, the educator can help the child practice a safer response, such as requesting space, asking for assistance, or using a gesture to communicate "stop."

Regulation strategies should be taught and practiced during comfortable moments. Children may benefit from different supports, including movement, a familiar song, a quiet activity, or proximity to a trusted adult. Participation should be responsive rather than forced (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017; Statman-Weil, 2015).



Figure 8.5.1: Supporting regulation and maintaining boundaries through safety, calm support, teaching, and observation (OpenAI, 2026).

Offering Choice and Supporting Agency

Agency is the ability to influence one's actions and experiences. Small, meaningful choices give children opportunities to communicate preferences and participate in decisions.

Examples include:

- "Would you like to walk beside me or hold my hand?"
- "You can listen from the rug or sit in the chair."
- "Would you like help, or would you like to try first?"

Choices should be genuine and developmentally appropriate. Adults remain responsible for safety and necessary care (Statman-Weil, 2015).

Educators can also support agency by acknowledging a child's refusal of optional touch, allowing different ways to join activities, and noticing communication expressed through gestures or assistive supports.

Using a Strengths-Based Approach

A **strengths-based approach** recognizes children and families as capable people with knowledge, relationships, interests, and resources.

Instead of defining a child by distress or challenging behavior, educators notice what the child enjoys, how the child connects with others, and what already supports success.

For example, a child who finds large-group activities difficult may show sustained attention while building. An educator can use that interest to support communication, collaboration, and confidence.

Strengths-based practice also recognizes family expertise. Families may identify familiar words, songs, routines, community connections, or cultural practices that help a child feel connected and supported.

Supporting strengths does not mean overlooking distress or expecting families to manage without assistance. Strengths and additional needs can exist together (SAMHSA, 2014).

Partnering With Families and Other Professionals

Family partnerships should begin with respectful observations and shared problem-solving.

An educator might say:

> "I've noticed that Eli becomes upset when we move indoors after outdoor play. Giving him a picture reminder has helped a little. What helps him with changes at home?"

Families should not be pressured to disclose traumatic experiences. Educators can ask what helps the child without asking for a detailed history.

When concerns persist, educators can collaborate with supervisors and families to consider developmental services, infant and early childhood mental health consultation, or other appropriate supports. Information should be shared according to confidentiality requirements and program procedures (SAMHSA, 2014; Statman-Weil, 2015).

Programs also need to address practices that may undermine belonging or trust, including biased interpretations of behavior and communication that excludes families' languages or perspectives. Respectful partnerships recognize the influence of culture, identity, and lived experiences on how families understand and seek support (SAMHSA, 2014).

Supporting Educators and Program Consistency

Trauma-informed care requires program support. Educators need preparation, consultation, adequate coverage, and opportunities to reflect on difficult situations.

Programs can support staff through:

- Clear procedures for responding to distress.
- Access to supervisors and mental health consultation.
- Protected breaks and manageable responsibilities.
- Confidential opportunities for reflection.
- Consistent approaches across classrooms and staff members.

Individual self-care can be helpful, but it cannot replace appropriate working conditions and organizational support (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014).

Putting It Into Practice

Four-year-old Nora frequently cries and hides near a shelf when cleanup begins. Her educator initially assumes she is avoiding responsibility. After observing several transitions, the educator notices that distress often begins when an adult abruptly ends Nora's play and starts putting away materials she is still using.

The educator documents these observations without assuming a trauma history. She speaks privately with Nora's family and learns that Nora often needs extra time and a quieter space during busy transitions.

The classroom team gives advance notice before cleanup, adds a visual reminder, and helps Nora save unfinished work when possible. Nora chooses between returning books or collecting crayons, and a familiar adult stays nearby. The team continues teaching cleanup expectations while adjusting how Nora participates.

Over the following weeks, educators record whether Nora joins cleanup more comfortably and how much support she needs. If difficulties continue, they revisit the plan with the family and appropriate program supports.

The response is trauma-informed because adults consider possible distress, adjust the environment, maintain expectations, and work collaboratively without labeling the child.

Reflection Point

Consider Nora's classroom experience.

- Which observations helped the educator reconsider the situation?
- How did the changes support both emotional security and participation?
- What additional information would help the team evaluate the plan?

Use classroom examples or hypothetical situations. Personal trauma disclosure is not required.

Vocabulary Alert:

Trauma-informed care: An approach that uses knowledge about trauma to guide supportive interactions, environments, policies, and services.

Retraumatization: An experience that reactivates trauma-related distress or recreates aspects of an earlier traumatic experience.

Co-regulation: Support provided through responsive interaction that helps a child manage feelings, attention, and behavior.

Agency: The ability to influence one's actions and experiences.

Strengths-based approach: A perspective that recognizes and builds on individuals' capabilities, relationships, knowledge, and resources.

Exercise 8.5.1

Check Your Understanding

1. What makes trauma-informed care broader than a response to challenging behavior?
2. Why should educators avoid identifying trauma from behavior alone?
3. How can predictable routines support children's participation in learning?
4. A distressed child pushes a peer. How can an educator respond with both support and a clear boundary?
5. How does an educator's role differ from the role of a trauma-treatment provider?

Answers available at the end of this section.

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Answers

Exercise 8.5.1

Answers to Check Your Understanding

1. **Trauma-informed care guides everyday practice.** It influences relationships, routines, environments, family partnerships, and program policies, including how adults respond before distress occurs.
2. **Similar behaviors can have many explanations.** Fatigue, illness, sensory needs, developmental differences, communication difficulties, and other circumstances may contribute. Educators should document observations and respond to needs without diagnosing.
3. **Predictable routines help children anticipate events and understand expectations.** Knowing what comes next can reduce uncertainty and make participation more manageable. Individual children may still need additional preparation or flexibility.
4. **The educator protects both children and calmly stops the pushing.** The educator offers support to the distressed child while maintaining a clear limit. When the child is ready, the educator teaches and practices a safer way to communicate.
5. **Educators provide responsive care, adaptations, observations, and collaboration.** Qualified clinical professionals assess and treat trauma-related conditions. Educators can support access to services while continuing to meet the child's needs in the learning environment.

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INDEX

A

Abraham Harold Maslow
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

Abraham Maslow
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

accommodation
5.4: Applying Language Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

adverse childhood experiences
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

aesthetic needs
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

affective development
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

Albert Bandura
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development

animism
7.2.1: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

Arnold Gesell
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

assimilation
5.4: Applying Language Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

attachment theory
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

B

B. F. Skinner
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

bias
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

brain development
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

C

child development
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice
8.1: Brain Growth and Functions

child identity
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

child psychology
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

child safety
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

child wellness
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

childhood diet
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

cid:cdev100
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development
3.3: Strengthening Gross and Fine Motor Development
4.1: The Progression of Social and Emotional Development
4.2: Identity Formation in Early Childhood
5.4: Applying Language Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
6.4: Applying Approaches to Learning Theories to Early Childhood Practice
7.1: The Progression of Cognitive Development and General Knowledge
7.2.1: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development
7.2.2: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development
7.2.3: Information Processing

cid:ece120
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

classical conditioning
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development

classroom management
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

classroom strategies
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

cognitive development
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

cognitive needs
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

constructivist theory
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

continuous development
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

coordination
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

criticisms
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

cultural contexts in learning
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

D

developmental milestones
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

developmental psychologists
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

developmental theories
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

developmentally appropriate practices
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

discontinuous development
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

divided attention
7.2.3: Information Processing

E

early childhood development
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

early childhood education
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

early childhood professionals
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

early interventions
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

early learning environments
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice

Ecological Systems Theory
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

education
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

educational implications
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

ego
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development

egocentric speech
7.2.2: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development
egocentrism
7.2.1: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development
Environment Rating Scales (ERS)
3.7: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Health and Physical Development
4.5: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Social and Emotional Development
5.6: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Language Development and Communication
6.6: Environmental Rating Scales Related to Approaches to Learning
7.4: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Cognition and General Knowledge
environmental influences
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
Erik Erikson
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development
esteem needs
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
ethology theory
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

F

family engagement in education
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice
food deserts
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

G

genetic factors
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

H

health care
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
health risks
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
healthy eating
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
healthy sleep
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
height trends
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
hierarchical needs
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
Howard Gardner
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
humanistic theory
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

I

id
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development
identity formation
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice
infant brain development
8.1: Brain Growth and Functions
information processing
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
Ivan Pavlov
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development

J

Jean Piaget
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
John Bowlby
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

L

language acquisition device
5.4: Applying Language Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
learning environment
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
learning environments
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
Lev Vygotsky
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

M

Mary Ainsworth
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
Maslow
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
maturation theory
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
methodology
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
motivation
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
motor skills
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
multiple intelligences
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
multitasking
7.2.3: Information Processing

N

nature vs nurture
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
neurodevelopment
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
neuroscience
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice
nutrition
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
nutrition needs
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

O

operant conditioning
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
5.4: Applying Language Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

P

personal development
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
physical development
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
physical growth
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
physiological needs
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
play in childhood
2.3: Connecting Child Development Research to Teaching Practice
preoperational stage
7.2.1: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development
preschool health
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
pretend play
7.2.1: Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development
private speech
7.2.2: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development
proximal development (ZPD)
7.2.2: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Cognitive Development
psychoanalytic theory
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

psychological theory
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
psychosocial theory
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

S

safety needs
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
scaffolding
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development
selective attention
7.2.3: Information Processing
sensory development
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
sensory memory
7.2.3: Information Processing
Sigmund Freud
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development
sleep habits
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
sleep practices
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
sleep problems
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
social learning theory
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
social needs
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
sociocultural theory
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
socioeconomic disparities
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
socioeconomic status
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
student needs
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
stunting
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
superego
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development

T

teaching
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice
teaching practices
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
theories of learning
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings
theory
2.2: Diverse Theoretical Perspectives on Child Development
toddler brain development
8.1: Brain Growth and Functions
transcendence needs
4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

U

unintentional injuries
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
Urie Bronfenbrenner
2.1: Using Child Development Theories in Early Childhood Settings

V

vaccination
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development
vaccine skepticism
3.4: How Health Concerns Impact Children's Development

W

working memory
7.2.3: Information Processing

Z

zone of proximal development (ZPD)
5.4: Applying Language Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice

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GLOSSARY

S

Sample Word 1 | Sample Definition 1

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    - 3.1: The Progression of Health and Physical Development - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 3.2: Relating Abilities to Physical Developmental Skills - *CC BY 3.0*
    - 3.3: Strengthening Gross and Fine Motor Development - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
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    - 3.6: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Health and Physical Development - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 3.7: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Health and Physical Development - *CC BY 4.0*
  - 4: Analyzing the Social and Emotional Development of Children - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.1: The Progression of Social and Emotional Development - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.2: Identity Formation in Early Childhood - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.3: Applying Social and Emotional Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 4.4: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Social and Emotional Development - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 4.5: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Social and Emotional Development - *CC BY 4.0*
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    - 5.1: The Progression of Language Development and Communication - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 5.2: Methods to Promote Language Development - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 5.3: Multilingual Learners - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 5.4: Applying Language Development Theories to Early Childhood Practice - *CC BY 4.0*
    - 5.5: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Language Development and Communication - *CC BY 4.0*

- 5.6: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Language Development and Communication - *CC BY 4.0*
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  - 6.1: How Approaches to Learning Impact Individualization in Development - *CC BY-SA 4.0*
  - 6.2: Influences of Family, Society, and Culture on Childhood - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 6.3: Strategies that Support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
  - 6.4: Applying Approaches to Learning Theories to Early Childhood Practice - *CC BY 4.0*
  - 6.5: Developmental Screening Tools Related to Approaches to Learning - *CC BY 4.0*
  - 6.6: Environmental Rating Scales Related to Approaches to Learning - *CC BY 4.0*
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  - 7.1: The Progression of Cognitive Development and General Knowledge - *CC BY 4.0*
  - 7.2: Theories of Cognitive Development - *CC BY 4.0*
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  - 7.4: Environmental Rating Scales Relating to Cognition and General Knowledge - *CC BY 4.0*
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  - 8.2: Impact of the Environment and Toxic Stress on Brain Development - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
  - 8.3: Critical Periods of Brain Development - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 8.4: The Impact of Family Mental Health on Child Development - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 8.5: The Impact of Trauma-Informed Care on Development - *CC BY-NC 4.0*
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