

Child Development and Wellbeing.

A child is an ever-changing person with rapidly developing physical, emotional and social abilities and needs. To protect and enhance a child's wellbeing and particularly their mental health we need to understand how they might be developing within the context of the fact that each child will develop at his/her own pace and in her own particular way.

Child development has been a central aspect of psychological research for a number of years and has produced significant amounts of research findings. It is generally accepted that the best way to understand how children develop is to conceptualise it in the context of developmental stages. Indeed this staged approach to development can also be applied to adulthood. For most children, there are four such periods of growth, infancy (birth to age 2), early childhood (ages 3 to 7 years), later childhood (ages 8 to 12 years) and adolescence (ages 13 to 18).

In terms of thinking and language development Piaget defines the stages as the

- Sensorimotor Stage (having awareness of what's immediately in front of them, developing the concept of object permanence and early language development)
- Preoperational Stage (being capable of thinking about things symbolically, language use becoming more mature, developing memory and imagination, engaging in make believe)
- Concrete Operational Stage (increasingly aware of external events, realise own thoughts and feelings are unique and not shared by others),
- Formal Operational Stage (development of abstract thought and concepts)

It is important for us to have some knowledge about children's likely cognitive capacities at these various stages because if we have too high an expectation about what children can do at certain ages, we may be inclined to advocate for too much independence and not enough support. Likewise if our expectations are too low, we could argue for policies and legislation that smother or disempower children.

Too much independence leads to insecurity and negatively impacts on mental health. Too much control leads to disempowerment and impacts negatively on mental health. Empowering children requires giving them developmentally appropriate freedom and choice while protecting them. Such empowerment is dependent on understanding their likely developmental capabilities.

Most Societies tend to take a confused perspective on this. For example in Ireland the age of digital consent is 16 while the age of criminal responsibility is 12. Children's evolving thinking and language capabilities is often used as an excuse not to consult or communicate with them, taking the "they won't understand" or "what is the point" view when in fact the obligation is on adults to find age appropriate ways to consult and communicate.

Even parents can have confused perspectives on this. Most parents understand that communication with a baby occurs mainly through the baby's senses. For example, a baby needs to see, hear, touch, smell or taste something to realise it exists. Language for babies is often just sound and has no meaning. In these terms, a baby has not got the ability to be bold or does not have the thinking ability to be deliberately troublesome. The baby is completely dependent on his/her parents to meet his/her needs. Yet time and time again we hear debates and see various new parenting approaches suggesting babies crying should be ignored, babies need to learn early who is boss etc. We know that up to the age of 7, rules of a game are most likely not developed for a child so children's games will usually have to be supervised by adults to ensure they can progress. Yet many schools apply numerous rules to children before the age of 7 and expect them to adhere to these rules without appropriate supervision.

Sometimes language and behaviour advance faster than thinking leading to misinterpretation or an assumption of understanding and capacity to consent when such doesn't exist.

Equally important as thinking and language is a child's emotional, social and personality development. There are a number of different theories about how these develop however what is important to remember is that a child's ability to understand and deal with emotions and social situations evolves over time as does his/her unique personality. This evolving capacity plays a significant role in their decision making and behaviour. Emotional and social development may not be in line with language or thinking development. e.g. A child punching another child on a football pitch means something different from an adult punching an adult. The intent, understanding and consideration of this act is likely to be very different.

Erikson talks about eight different stages of psychosocial development 0-2 Hope (trust v mistrust), 2-4 Will (Autonomy v Shame), 4-5 Purpose (Initiative v Guilt), 5-12 Competence (industry v Inferiority) and 13-19 Fidelity (identity v Role Confusion) through which a healthy developing individual should pass. In each stage the person confronts and masters new challenges. Each stage builds upon the successful completion of earlier stages and the challenges of stages not completed may be expected to return as problems in the future. Mastery of a stage is not required to advance to the next and the outcome of one stage is not permanent and can be modified by later experience. Of course this is one theory and there are others but it helps us to focus on how a child's emotional capabilities evolve.

For a child to be emotionally healthy and to be an emotionally healthy adult, he/she needs to develop a strong sense of trust and self-value as a young child. He/she also needs to have developed a sense of self-confidence to allow him/her to take chances, a sense of an ability to achieve and a sense of positive self-image. What is important to remember is that throughout childhood a child is developing these emotional capabilities.

Children need to be supported to develop mentally healthily through empowerment and protection. Getting the right balance is the trick. For children to be mentally healthy they need to:

- Feel loved and feel safe
- Learn how to be happy: building emotional awareness and psychological resilience
- Have self-belief
- Be able to meet emotional health challenges

Emotional difficulties are caused by a combination of three factors: personality, experiences and supports. How these factors combine is very much determined by the individual nature of each child.

Four things have a key impact on a child's emotional development.
A)Citizenship B)Participation and Involvement C) Communication D) Discipline.

Children, no matter what age, are people with rights, views, beliefs and feelings which need to be integrated into the development process. Ignoring a child's individualism and personality results in a passive development relationship focused on either disengagement or over-control. Accepting and treating children as young citizens with their own unique personality not only adds to the success of their development but also enhances the vitality and richness of the process.

To involve children fully in a developmentally appropriate way in decision making we need to remember that there is an inevitable imbalance in power and status between adults and children. This power imbalance is necessary for some components of development such as protection but can make involving children as equals difficult. We counter this imbalance by ensuring children are able to freely express their views and opinions, that they are listened to seriously and that their views and opinions are taken into account.

Children need to be clear about the purpose of their participation and involvement – what it involves and what impact it may have. They need to be given the relevant information in an age-appropriate manner. They need to be allowed to consider their involvement and be able to give their personal informed consent to it.

It is also important that children are enabled to participate on their own terms and for lengths of time chosen by them. Children should be involved in ways, at levels and at a pace appropriate to their capabilities and interests. Creating a child-friendly environment and keeping participation safe is key. We need to try to ensure that the participation of children is democratic and non-discriminatory and that there is follow-up and feedback.

One of the most effective ways of promoting a child's mentally healthy development is to communicate with him or her. It is crucial that children, from the earliest age, understand how he or she can expect to be

communicated with by adults and how adults expect him/her to communicate.

Creating an environment in which there is honest and constructive communication with children and with all those who have a stake in children's lives is essential.

The practical principles of good communication are:

- Listening with genuine ears, with understanding, with respect.
- Asking questions and reflecting back what we understand we are hearing.
- Seeing beyond negative statements to try to understand what another person is actually saying.
- Taking responsibility for our own feelings and wishes e.g. using the "I" word.
- Where possible, telling the truth.

Good communication involves acknowledging successes, achievements. It also involves being prepared to deal with the difficult issues and being prepared to confront problems.

The obstacles to good communication are disrespect, failing to listen, being too dogmatic, saying one thing but showing another through our actions, jumping to conclusions and making assumptions and secrecy.

Another key to mental health development is learning positive discipline, learning about right and wrong. Children need to learn how to control their own behaviour, to respect others, to give and take and to make the right decisions when confronted with moral and ethical decisions. Teaching a child self-discipline is a core function of enhancing his/her wellbeing because a well-disciplined child will be a more secure and more confident child.

Teaching discipline involves modelling good behaviour, talking about the decisions a child is confronted with on an everyday basis and listening to how a child is resolving these issues, influencing a child to think about the rights and wrongs of situations and to make the right decisions, helping a child through support and guidance to control their behaviour.

Punishment-based discipline does not work and can create difficulties. Children do need to understand and learn that behaviour has consequences and that difficult, disruptive or violent behaviour will have negative consequences. This is different from imposing a consequence on a child simply to hurt, upset or punish the child. For example, a young child who cycles his/her bike on to the road should have the bike taken from them until he/she understands how to use the bike safely. This may cause upset but is being done because the child has not got the maturity to understand the safe use of the bike. The reason why the bike is being taken from the child needs to be explained to the child carefully so that he/she does not feel he/she is bad or bold but understands that we are taking this decision in order to give him/her a chance to learn about safety.

A core part of enhancing a child's welfare is teaching appropriate discipline. Teaching him/her about right and wrong, enables them to contribute to Society in a constructive way and helps them be more secure, happy people.

To enhance a child's wellbeing and mental health we must have some understanding of how they are developing and likely to develop and we must empower this development.

Every child develops in their own unique way and none develops to a formula but having some model around the parameters of development not only better equips us to consult, communicate and engage with children but helps us to advocate for policies, legislation and services that are truly child centered and grounded in children's rights.

END

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