

Pediatric Physical & Occupational Therapy Services, LLC

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FUNCTIONAL EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS:

The functional emotional development of a child has been studied by Stanley Greenspan, MD and Serena Wieder, PhD and their colleagues over the past 25 years. These levels of development encompass six core developmental levels that describe the emergence of the child's ability and delight in relating and communicating with others in the world. These six core capacities develop over the first four years of life. Typically, as each core capacity emerges it then continues to develop and become richer as the child matures, with each capacity supporting the next level. Some children, despite a warm and nurturing environment may have constrictions in their development. These constrictions may be due to a variety of challenges including sensory processing, regulatory capacities, motor planning, auditory processing, language skills, and visual processing.

DIR LEVEL I - ATTENTION AND REGULATION (HOMEOSTASIS): Emerging 0-3 MONTHS

In the first few months of life the parent is helping the infant calmly regulate themselves while they become interested and take pleasure in the sights, sounds, tastes, and touches that the parent offers. This ability will help the child organize their senses and motor responses and create a deep sense of security.

This level of emotional development provides the foundation for the older child to maintain a calm and regulated state in a variety of sensory experiences, environments, with a range of people and through a range of emotional states. This is essential for success in interactions with peers and to function in the school setting.

DIR LEVEL II: FORMING RELATIONSHIPS AND MUTUAL ENGAGEMENT: Emerging 2-7 MONTHS

During the second stage of development, when the child is between three and six months of age, the baby grows in their ability to engage in an intimate relationship with the parent. They will experience more and more warmth and pleasure and all the related other feelings that spring out of engagement with the parent. This is the time that the infant "woos" the parent and the parent falls in love with the infant. The infant also seeks interaction with the parent for comfort and soothing when needed, so that they can deal with satisfactions and frustrations.

As the child grows, the capacity for engagement will embrace the full range of emotions (joy, caring, anger, jealousy, fears, competition etc.), supported by affect cues (e.g., smiles or scowls) from others. Mutual engagement helps the child stay engaged and feel comfortable and curious about different experiences.

In the school setting forming relationships is essential for the child to relate to peers and adults in a variety of sensory experiences, environments, as well as throughout challenges and through a range of emotions.

DIR LEVEL III: INTENTIONAL TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION - PURPOSEFUL INTERACTIONS WITH GESTURES: *Emerging 3 - 10 MONTHS*

By the time the child is about nine months old they exchange gestures in a purposeful way. With parental support, reading and responding to the child's cues, they will eventually be able to string together more and more of these emotional expressions, sounds and actions. This is the beginning of the child conveying their intentions or desires to start the "conversations" needed to participate actively in the world.

The ability to use gesture effectively also reflects the child's increased body awareness, how their sensory systems provide them with a discrete and discriminative sense of who they are physically and how their body can be used to interact with the world, communicate needs, and to express intentions.

The simple gestures of a child less than a year old, such as pointing or playing "give and take", turn to complex gestures in the second year, and then to back and forth conversation as the child develops language. The parent's response such as making a funny face, or tempting actions, such as covering a favorite rattle with your hand, will inspire them to master the baby version of logic or two-way communication far better than any educational toy or picture book.

In the school setting, maintaining two-way communication with gestures enables the child to be intentional in their eye contact, gesture, body language and in their verbal communication. It enables them to be intentional (purposeful) in their play and work. It enables them to initiate original ideas, initiate activities independently and to be intentional in their interactions with their peers.

LEVEL IV: TWO WAY PURPOSEFUL INTERACTIONS WITH COMPLEX GESTURES AND PROBLEM SOLVING: *Emerging 9 -18 MONTHS*

By the time that the child is a year to a year and a half, the child will be learning to be a "complex social problem solver". This is the stage in which the child, with a clear sense of their body and how it operates, can formulate ideas, have a cognitive plan, then come up with an idea, sequence the plan, execute it, and then to adapt it, if necessary, to be successful (motor planning).

The young toddler will take you by the hand to get you to help them. They are starting to figure out how the world works and may even vocalize their own version of words, along with a few real ones, to help you understand their intentions. Complex gestures involve sequences - all the steps needed to communicate and solve problems - first through actions and then with words as well. When the child grabs their parent's hand and points to the cupboard to get a toy they want, they are making a first attempt at social problem solving. As the parent nods back, the child motions until the parent hoists them up in their arms and the child can grab the toy. The child is not only delighted and proud, but they will also be on their way to becoming a budding scientist. The toddler learns that problems get solved through many interrelated steps, and that the world, including their physical surroundings, personality, and the parent's personality, is made up of patterns. No colorful pop-up toy or computerized light and sound gadget can come close to matching the companionable lessons in problem solving that a parent can offer their child as they play and engage in gestural dialogues together.

In the school setting this enables the child to use their ability to motor plan to engage in rich gestural communication such as waving to catch a peer's attention, pointing, or shrugging their shoulders when confused. Children are now able to use their increasingly sophisticated motor planning ability as they make decisions in interactions, play, self-help skills, and work. The child becomes an independent problem solver and thinker, can verbally sequence ideas in a problem-solving manner, is flexible, is independent in activities, and is able to problem solve in an interaction with peers. This is the stage during which the child develops a

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strong sense of “me” and self-esteem as they feel powerful and experience success in interactions in the school environment.

LEVEL V - ELABORATING IDEAS, PRETEND PLAY, CREATING SYMBOLS: *Emerging 18 - 30 MONTHS*

By the time the child is 24 to 30 months the child is displaying a new ability that is nothing short of miraculous. They will be capable of creating richly detailed, multisensory pictures that we commonly refer to as symbols, or ideas. The child and parent share the development of the child’s use of ideas and creativity. Now instead of just acting on the environment to get their needs met, they can form mental images of wants and desires, and label it with specific spoken words. Instead of plucking your sleeve, dragging you over to the cupboard, pointing to the bag of cookies and jumping up and down in anticipation, they will look you in the eye and demand, “Cookie now!”. The parent and child share the development of the child’s use of ideas and creativity. This occurs as the child and the parent begin to expand play as they pretend to be a “cat and a dog”, a “king and a queen”, or “have a tea party”. The child begins to express thoughts, ideas and feelings through symbols, using pretend play and words. The child now begins to communicate emotions more clearly, and they can communicate what they imagine through role play, dress up, dolls, and action figures, which now represent experiences from real life as well as those learned from other sources. These become the child’s own as they project their feelings into the character and actions. Play emerges as the child’s choosing rather than from set games or impersonal manipulative or computerized toys.

As the child matures, elaboration of ideas enables the child as they function in the school setting to express themselves in their work and play, to recognize their emotions in their interactions with their peers, to express mental images through their work and play, and to represent real life in their play.

LEVEL VI - BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN IDEAS (EMOTIONAL THINKING) - CONNECTING SYMBOLS LOGICALLY AND ABSTRACT THINKING: *Emerging 30 - 48 MONTHS*

Between 36 and 48 months the child begins to develop logical bridges between ideas, or analytical thinking. It emerges from more elaborate pretend play, as well as from debates over bedtime or cookies, and from those around them asking their opinions. Questions such as “Why do you want to go outside?”, “to the park?”, or “to grandma’s?”, rather than rote teaching of letters or numbers teaches the child to connect their ideas and be a logical thinker. As the child begins to build bridges between ideas, their play has a logical beginning, middle and end, taking time and space into account. Realistic conversations and pretend play stories are now made up of logically interconnected ideas, with clear motives and anticipated consequences. The child can now also abstract and reflect on various feelings and lessons to be learned.

In the school setting emotional thinking enables the child to think abstractly, reflect and reason, to give reasons behind ideas and to connect ideas in play and work. It enables the child to understand reasons behind ideas and to understand how their actions affect others and to use this understanding to guide interactions and manipulate their world. It also enables the child to use reasoning to understand peer interaction and motives.

Suggested Web Sites:

- www.floorimefoundation.org
- www.icdl.com
- www.stanleygreenspan.com
- www.serenawieder.com
- www.coping.org/earlyin/floortm.htm
- www.playproject.org

Rosemary White OTR/L January 2005