

Intellectual Disability and Childhood Development

Development

Development can be thought of as the process by which we grow and change through our experiences and interaction with the world around us.



Developmental milestones

Often referred to as 'ages and stages', milestones provide a guide to what we can expect during the different stages of development. For example, walking is a 'milestone' that many toddlers begin to do when they are about a year old.

However, everyone is unique and no two people will reach their developmental milestones at the same time. For example, while one child may learn to walk before they start to talk, the opposite may be true for another child. Despite individual differences, development generally follows a similar pattern. Certain skills need to be developed before we move onto more complex ones. For example, usually infants crawl before they can walk.

Intellectual disability

Generally, children with intellectual disability go through similar stages of development in the same order as children without intellectual disability. However, milestones may be achieved later and they may not develop as many skills (Patton et al, 1990). Therefore, you may notice that a child with intellectual disability has skills in some areas that are similar to those of a younger child without intellectual disability.

Impact on development

As children get older and need to complete more complex tasks, the difference between individuals with and without intellectual disability becomes more noticeable. The impact of the intellectual disability on development will depend on the level of disability. For example:

- People with a mild intellectual disability may learn self-care skills at a slower rate. However, with the right support they have the potential to live quite independent lives.
- People with more severe intellectual disability will typically require more support with activities, such as eating, showering, and dressing.

There are six main areas of development listed below: these are cognitive, communication, physical, sensory, social and emotional and activities of daily living. Each person's development is unique resulting in different patterns of skills.

Areas of development

Cognitive

Cognitive development refers to increasing skills in areas such as 'thinking', problem-solving, memory and concentration. As a person develops they are able to pay attention for longer periods, remember more information and understand more complicated concepts. A person with intellectual disability may be more able to recall and understand things that they can see or are familiar with such as a favourite toy or a parent. They may have difficulty understanding more abstract concepts and talking about things they cannot see, for example time.

Communication

Communication development refers to talking and listening skills and can include the ability to write. Communication therefore relates to how people understand and use language, how they let others know what they want, how they follow instructions and whether they read or write. A person with intellectual disability may have a short attention span for their age and may only be able to follow directions with one or two steps. Many people with intellectual disability can benefit from the use of visual prompts such as pictures to assist with communication.

Physical

Physical development includes fine motor skills, that is how a person handles objects and uses their hands. Gross motor skills refers to the bigger movements of the body, such as walking, jumping, going up and down stairs, throwing and catching, coordination between arms and legs. These skills are necessary for many daily living and personal care tasks. A person with intellectual disability may have some physical difficulties that impact on doing activities independently. For example, they may require assistance with fine motor tasks such as managing buttons and zips; or with gross motor skills such as sweeping and vacuuming.

Sensory

Sensory development refers to the integration of sensation such as touch and body awareness, and how we use this information to respond to the world around us. Sensory development is linked to all other areas of development. Sensory processing relates to an individual's ability to watch, listen, notice and respond to cues within a task or their surroundings. For example, the ability to notice (look and hear) when the contents of the pot are starting to simmer; smell that the toast is cooking; and hear and pay attention when another person is speaking. A person with intellectual disability may have difficulty understanding information from their senses.

Social and emotional

Social and emotional development refers to how a person relates and interacts with others, for example making friends, playing and socialising. It involves the understanding of feelings and emotions both within themselves and recognising these in other people.

For example, a person with intellectual disability may have difficulty understanding that other people have different thoughts to them; or how to start and maintain a conversation with another person, which may mean they need extra support to develop friendships. However, people with intellectual disability have the same need for positive relationships, love and affection as all other people.

Activities of daily living

Activities of daily living refer to self-care activities such as the ability to dress, shower, and brush hair. It can also include chores such as making the bed, tidying up a bedroom or washing the dishes. For adults, community activities such as catching a bus and shopping for groceries are also part of activities of daily living. A person with intellectual disability may have difficulty organising, sequencing and problem-solving within these types of activities.

The impact of intellectual disability

Generally, compared with other people, those with intellectual disability may:

- need more time to learn new skills and extra opportunities to practice them
- have greater difficulty in learning complex skills. They may need to have a task broken-down into 'small steps'
- need to have people use simplified language, especially if they have difficulty remembering verbal instructions. Sometimes using pictures and gestures can help people understand
- benefit from a variety of learning methods. For example, role play, watching others (in person or on video), gentle physical prompts, verbal prompts and lots of opportunity to practice.

It is important to have a good understanding of the nature of the person's intellectual disability and the impact this has on their development. What a person is able to do will depend on their developmental stage and level of intellectual disability.

Understanding where an individual is up to in their development helps to identify what skills the person may already have and what skills they may be ready to learn.

One of the difficult aspects of having a son or daughter with intellectual disability is having realistic expectations about what they can and cannot do. While many children and young people with intellectual disability develop many skills without too much difficulty, people with intellectual disability usually need some specific support to learn skills and tasks. Others' expectations need to match the person's unique needs and abilities. To avoid failure it is important that the expectations placed on a person with intellectual disability match their abilities. Tasks should not be too difficult for the person, but challenging enough to keep them interested and motivated to succeed.

A large part of development occurs as a consequence of a person's interactions with their environment. Environment means objects (toy, chair, fork) and people (siblings, relatives, friends) with which the person interacts. Opportunities for positive interactions are improved with the use of appropriate objects, and support from others.

Teaching tips

People with intellectual disability remain capable of learning new skills and improving on existing skills throughout their life. The goal, therefore, is to reduce the impact of the intellectual disability by building on their strengths and helping them learn new skills so that they can reach their full potential.

When teaching a person with intellectual disability a new skill, it is important to know if the person has developed the prerequisite skills needed. For example, has the child learned to sit before they can crawl; and learned to crawl before they walk; and learned to walk before they run.

Children and adults with intellectual disability are usually very responsive to praise and encouragement. It is important to acknowledge the person's effort on a task and ensure they receive encouragement, praise or rewards for their exploration or achievements.

Building on strengths and helping learn new skills will increase success. Being successful in what we do increases our confidence and motivation to undertake new learning opportunities.

More information

Recommended resources on this topic include:

B L Baker & AJ Brightman, 1997, *Steps to Independence*, Paul H Brookes Publishing Co Inc, Maryland

E E Castles, 1996, *We're People First: The Social and Emotional Lives of individuals with Mental Retardation*, Praeger Publishers, Westport, CT

J R Patton, J S Payne & M Beirne-Smith, 1990, *Mental Retardation 3rd Edition*, Columbus, OH: Merrill

