

Why 'What to expect, when?' Should be changed to 'What to expect next' - Rethinking the way in which we pigeon hole child development

Alison Stewart

Humans can be found on every continent in the world, we are the same species: *Homo sapiens*, we were all children once. Surely you would therefore expect that regardless of where we are in the world, the rate of progression of child development would be the same? However, the expected norms vary from country to country, culture to culture, place to place, family to family, child to child. This variation is observed not only between countries "but among cultural, ethnic or religious groups within the same country" (UNICEF, 2019, p. 9). This is because child development is not just a product of nature, it is inextricably linked with nurture (Lake and Chan, 2015) in part due to differing parenting strategies and expectations. However, in general, "development takes place in a series of predictable and common stages" (UNICEF, 2019, p. 9).

In England, the 'go to document' that we give to parents is 'What to expect, when?' (4Children, 2015). As professionals, we turn to 'Development Matters' (Department for Education, 2012), which breaks down examples of average expected development, according to age. Although it states on almost every page of this document that "The development statements and their order should not be taken as necessary steps for individual children. They should not be used as checklists" (Department for Education, 2012). However, almost every nursery and school that I have come across in England uses it to track child development and it is used as an assessment checklist. But what I don't understand is why are we so obsessed with tracking our non average children against these general expectations? On the first page of 'Development Matters' it states different factors which could affect development, including: Home language, family background, disabilities. But states nothing about how these factors might affect development and how to calibrate this with the general expectations given in the document. It even states that children develop at their own rates, if so why include age related expectations when it is not an expectation that children will comply to them? In addition, by focusing in the developmental stages given in 'Development Matters', we are also restricting our assessment of child development to these criteria, and these are actually quite narrow, not taking into account its multidimensional nature, or individual circumstances for a particular child. For example the ability to understand two spoken languages is something which is not referred to in 'Development Matters', because I assume it is not something that affects the 'average child'. Having English as an additional language is a factor affecting children across England, but instead of celebrating a child's ability to even be attempting to master two languages at the age of three, we don't even acknowledge it, because it does not feature in the document most

commonly used to assess child development by. Apparently forgetting altogether that not only are children learning a second language, but a new culture as well. Something referred to as a 'double bind' by Tabors (1997), the interdependence of language acquisition and social interaction. This is not a criticism of 'Development Matters', this is a criticism of us as professionals who have decided to use it as a checklist, and are only point of reference to assess child development, even though it quite clearly states that it is not one.

We recently had a child with Down Syndrome in our nursery, his stage of development was assessed against 'Development Matters', he varied in development from 18m – 26m. But why were we assessing him against criteria like this? His development may have been entirely appropriate for a child with Down Syndrome but we don't seem to take that into account.

But it isn't just genetic conditions that affect child development, there are a wide range of possible factors which affect child development, skewing it from the 'average' in either direction. These include premature birth, sickness, birth order, multiple birth, death of a carer, living in a home with a drug user, parents have separated, sibling has died, rainbow baby, autism, IVF child etc. etc.

For example, an Early Years child who is suffering from malnutrition cannot get the nutrients it needs and this is known to have significant effects on brain and cognitive development (De and Chattopadhyay, article in press). Malnutrition is not just a 'third world' problem, it is known to affect all member states of the European Union and it has been reported that there as many as 20 million citizens at risk of malnutrition (Guest *et.al.*, 2011). So if we know that the average child with malnutrition will not achieve average child expectations of child development, why do we assess them as if they are not coming from the starting point of being malnourished? A malnourished child being able to 'securely' play cooperatively with a familiar adult at the age of 30 months maybe below expectation for an 'average child' (16-26 months) but may actually be exceeding expectation for a malnourished one.

A second example is a child on the autistic spectrum. They may never 'form a special friendship with another child (22-36 months)' whilst at nursery school. This would according to Development Matter's would be below expectation. However, it could be considered unusual for a child on the autistic spectrum to form such as friendship and as such, this criteria should not be used to assess this particular child's development. It is setting them up to fail. Imagine the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) failing a child with a foot amputation in a ballet exam, because they were unable to point their foot (oh wait, this actually happened) (Hope, 2015).

But factors affecting child development are not taken into account when we assess a child's development, we assess against an average child, when we should, if we are going to assess by age, assess against data compiled from children in a similar situation. But this is impossible because each child is unique, and may have been affected by more than one of the factors listed above. Therefore how they progress through their development is unique to them and how we track and assess them should be just as unique.

What is generally the same, is the order in which a child develops. For example when looking at pencil grip: Whole hand grasp > Digital Grip > Modified tripod grip > Dynamic tripod grip. In 'Development Matters' this would be assessed against the expected average age that each stage occurs. But we should surely be assessing against what the child can do at a particular point in time and what the next development stage would be and how to work towards it. Not whether they have failed/achieved/exceeded to develop compared to an average child of the same age i.e. a child growing up under different circumstances.

When we have children in nursery and parents are worried that their 39 month old child is not toilet trained yet, we don't force the issue, we use phrases like 'Don't worry, they will do it in their own time' or 'Every child is different'. But we will still record their level of development as that of a 22-36 month old, but we have just told the parent that it is ok for that child. Our supportive advice and apparently negative judgement, is confusing and feels judgemental to the parent and on the child. Adding stress to what already maybe a stressful situation. As any parent who has gone through this particular stage of their child's development will know. From my own personal experience, and mother of three children, I know that each child's readiness to use the toilet independently is unique to that child. First child, did not like the sensation of wet underwear (or worse) and was toilet trained at the age of two within a week. "A-ha", I thought, "this is a breeze, why do people complain about this?". Second child, didn't care one iota. He was fascinated by his own poo and preferred the opportunity to get 'hands on' (if we weren't looking) with his own deposits. He was 39 months when he was toilet trained, not because he wasn't developmentally ready, he just 'chose' not to be. My third child has had ongoing issues with toileting and now age 8, has something which is referred to by the medical profession as a 'baggy bowel', due to continual idiopathic constipation, something for which she receives daily medication and consequently, even now can be taken by surprise by an unexpected bowl movement. However, I wouldn't assess her development as that of a 36 month old; but in nursery school and assessing against 'Development Matters', she would be, because her personal situation has not been taken into account. It is worth noting at this point, that there are a wide variety of books and papers documenting child development, so why are we so focussed on using just one?

When children are assessed later on in school e.g. End of Key Stage Tests and Assessments, GCSE's, and A-Levels, some of these factors are taken into account, and special exam access arrangements are made. Exam Access Arrangements are defined as being "reasonable adjustments that can be made for an exam candidate". For example a dyslexic student having extra time in the exam, or a child who suffers from anxiety having the opportunity to take rest breaks or do the exam away from the exam hall. So why don't we make the same reasonable adjustments when assessing a child of nursery age?

In recognition that children develop at their own pace, but in approximately the same order, the way we assess progress should be 'What to expect next'. This takes away the pigeonholing by age against an 'average child' and instead focuses on the stage of that child's development, how they are making progress, and treating them as an individual. It also gives the opportunity to personalise assessment to the child e.g. Wearing glasses, is not mentioned at all in 'Development Matters', but could be vital for a child's holistic development. In other words an inclusive assessment.

In the 2019 edition of the 'Early years inspection handbook for Ofsted registered provision' (Ofsted, 2019, p.29), it states that inspectors should consider "the progress children make in their learning and development relative to their starting points, and their readiness for the next stage of their education" i.e. not relative to age expectation but relative to their own development. It also states that Inspectors will evaluate how "Practitioners ensure that the content, sequencing and progression in the areas of learning are secured" (Ofsted, 2019, p.). So what could this inclusive style of assessment look like? A suggested example of stage based assessment is given on the following page.

This is a working document, added to as children develop and access new experiences, and is led by the child. The criteria assessed comes from the knowledge of that child's Key Person (in conjunction with discussion with parents/carers). The key person is mentally dynamically planning, observing and assessing their child, on a day to day basis and this recorded assessment focuses on experiences/outcomes, framed within the EYFS areas, making it easy to understand by both professionals and caregivers. The Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly highlights the importance of early child development, stating that a child has a right to develop to "the maximum extent possible" (article 6) and this method of assessment supports this process without any requirement for pigeon holing.

Personal Educational Plan

Name: *A. Child*

Age: 36 months

Date: June 15th 2019

	Baseline	Focused Outcome/Experience 1	Focused Outcome/Experience 2
Area of Learning	I can...	I am learning...	I would like to..
Physical Development	Put my glasses on	To wear my glasses during the nursery day	Wear my glasses at home
	<i>Refusing to wear at home.</i>	<i>Achieved Jun-19</i>	
Personal, Social and Emotional Development	Play with my friend but can be led into play that I do not enjoy or know is not right.	To tell my friend when I don't want to engage in a particular play	Be able to lead play activities with my friend
	<i>Encouraged to break resources by friend who did not themselves break resources.</i>	<i>Attended over the summer without friend, has built up self confidence. Achieved Aug-19</i>	<i>Roles reversed during play at several points during the day. Achieved Oct-19</i>
Communication and Language	Listen to stories read by an adult	To tell an adult what story I would like to hear	'Read' a story out loud myself
	<i>During group times</i>	<i>Participates when given the opportunity Sep-2019</i>	
Literacy	Respond to favourite rhymes	To fill in the missing word or phrase in a known rhyme	Join in with stories in small group situations
	<i>Smiles and sings along</i>	<i>With favourite nursery rhymes can do this regularly Sep-19</i>	<i>Active contributor in group time Sep-19</i>
Mathematics	Organise objects and make patterns	To use some number names accurately in play	Recognise numerals of personal significance
	<i>Enjoys playing in the maths area</i>	<i>Good number recognition during Forest School 1 Oct-19</i>	
Understanding the World	Recognise that my mum is pregnant and that I am going to have a sibling soon	Recognise that I will no longer be the youngest person in my family	Accept sharing my mum's attention with my new sibling.
	<i>Kiss mum and bump goodbye at drop off</i>		
Expressive Arts and Design	Choose to take part in nursery dancing sessions	To move rhythmically	Build up a repertoire of songs and dances
	<i>Enjoys dancing sessions with Alison</i>	<i>Can clap in time during 'clapping songs' Jul-2019</i>	

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