

Enhancing children's development

Part 1

This is the first of three podcasts on enhancing children's developmental potential.

Early child development, which sets the foundation of life for a person, is a sensitive period in life. It is open to various influences, which may weaken it or make it prosper. Still, parents care for and bring up children with little information or support. Some parents do ask, is there something else they should be doing to promote their child's development. It is also a good question for the wider society because the loss of children's potential is detrimental to its future.

In this series of three podcasts, I will share a range of ideas based on the current scientific understanding about ways of protecting and promoting children's developmental potential.

Can we really change children's developmental potential? Many people think that some children are born clever and some not so, and not a lot can be done about it. No, that is not correct. Children's developmental potential is not static or fixed, and given the right circumstances, it **can** be changed for the better. Yes, we inherit a template of potential from our parents through our genes, but what eventually happens to this potential is not fixed. And the outcome of this potential depends not just on the child but almost everyone around them. We all contribute to making it better or worse through our actions or lack of actions and the environment we create for the child. So, parents, teachers and society are all partners in developing the child's potential. It is also abundantly clear that the community at large stands to gain hugely from preventing the loss of potential of children.

Now the question is, **how** do we enhance children's potential? To understand the answer to this question, let's first look at an example; when we grow a plant, we **protect** it from insects, strong wind or sun to reduce the risk of dying and promote its growth by giving it good soil and water. And the same two approaches we need to take with children's development.

First, we need to protect children from harmful influences, or risk factors, which stop or hinder them from achieving their potential. We can reduce these influences and help children become more able to cope with them. The second approach is about taking actions to promote and enhance their development.

In this first podcast, I will discuss risk factors and some practical steps to reduce them. Then, in the following two podcasts, I will talk about promoting children's development and the tools and tips that parents can use.

All children face some risk factors, which may affect them before birth – during the pregnancy, at the time of birth and after birth. These factors may have to do with their family, health or general social environment. And, in a well-supported family, one odd risk factor may not matter that much. But, if risk factors accumulate or the family is not supported, there is a real risk of long-term negative impact on the child's health and development.

So, let's begin at the beginning – the pregnancy. Without any doubt, the time of pregnancy is the most crucial time for the developing brain because that is when it is most sensitive to different types of risk factors. A pregnant mother's poor health, poor nourishment and mental stress have long term adverse effects on her child. Make sure that the mother has a healthy diet that has a balance of green leafy vegetables, lentils and pulses, milk, fruit, and nuts and for non-vegetarians, eggs, fish and meat and iodine is added to salt. In addition, the pregnant mother should take supplements of folic acid, vitamin D and iron. She must avoid unpasteurised milk, raw eggs, undercooked meat, more than small portions of oily fish and more than about two cups of coffee or tea. Alcohol and smoking damage the foetus and must be avoided.

A pregnant mother should have regular health checks for identifying and treating diabetes, which is common in pregnancy, and thyroid deficiency, which can have a devastating effect on the child, and both these conditions are treatable. In addition, the family must value her emotional well-being and make efforts for her to be happy and free of stress.

Poor care at the time of birth, unfortunately, still remains a major cause of disability. A competent clinician's care during pregnancy and delivery can prevent many of these risks. At the time of birth, we must make sure that a qualified practitioner manages the delivery and the chances for infection are minimised. In addition, the infant should receive vitamin K injection soon after birth and a check for any risk of becoming hypoglycaemic or lacking in sugar, particularly if the mother has had diabetes during the pregnancy.

From birth onwards, two health-related issues are primarily responsible for reducing children's developmental potential: poor nutrition and recurrent infections. Children must have access to clean water and sanitation and receive vaccines to prevent diseases. Worm infestations are common, cause nutritional deficiency and are easy to treat. In addition, any recurrent infection must be treated. A balanced vegetarian diet with lentils, pulses, fruit, yoghurt, cheese, and milk provides good nourishment. Egg, fish and meat add nourishment to the diet but are not absolutely essential. WHO recommends a daily intake of vitamins A, D, E and K for four years; these vitamin supplement drops are relatively cheap and readily available. In addition, an oral iron supplement should be given if there is a risk of iron deficiency.

Children who grow up in the middle of family discord often do not reach their potential and may suffer from mental health problems. A loving relationship with adults in the family is a major protective factor for children's development. Children need love and affection like plants need water and sunlight. And here, I don't mean love or affection as a noun; I mean it as a verb - it is not something that is just kept or felt in the heart; instead, it must be expressed and felt in day to day interactions with the child. Children who do well in life have at least had one adult who relates with them with unconditional love, warmth and affection.

Taking measures to reduce risk factors is crucial for protecting children's health and development; it has been proven right in different parts of the world. However, it needs effort, by parents and society, to value the potential in children and become co-creators of that potential.

The two main factors that **promote** children's development are sensitive-responsive parenting and a stimulating environment. We will discuss these two, including some

methods, tools and tips that parents can use to promote children's development in the next two podcasts. The full text of these broadcasts is on the website www.enablenet.info. Stay healthy and take care; my best wishes are with you and thank you for listening.

Enhancing children's development: Part 2

In this second of the three podcasts about enhancing children's development, I will share some general approaches for promoting children's development. In the following podcast, we will discuss some activities scientifically proven to enhance development.

Parents do many things for their children: they care for them, protect them from harm, and give them love and affection. Of course, all these are necessary for children to survive and thrive. However, there are two things that some, but not all, parents do: they notice and respond to their children in a sensitive - responsive way and create a stimulating environment for learning, which has a direct and lasting positive impact on children's development. So, in the sense that we are talking about here, parenting is not as natural as it seems. It does not mean that some parents are to be blamed for not doing things in the right way; all it means is that some ways of working with the child are more effective in promoting development, and these ways can be learnt and used by all parents for that purpose.

Sensitive-responsive parenting is simply a way of working with the child, which increases the effectiveness of whatever else is done. Of course, like everything else, this way of working changes as the child grows and, of course, different parents do it differently. But, still, there is a common thread to it, and it makes a remarkable and long-lasting positive impact on children.

Let's begin from the beginning. A few weeks after birth, infants attempt to engage and interact with people around them. They look at others and show interest in them, and if others seem friendly, exciting or loving, they make more attempts to connect with them. They send signals of joy, fun or distress, and they try to manage the flow and the intensity of interaction. When a sensitive parent or carer notices their signals, even when no words are being spoken, they give meaning to these signals and respond to them immediately with warm and loving expressions suitable for the child's age. Their response is also appropriate - they smile, touch or pick up the child depending on what the child is trying to convey. Their way of noticing and responding is called sensitive responsiveness. If you look at it closely, you will see four things happening:

1. the parent is noticing the child's signals,
2. they are responding in a timely manner - soon after receiving the signal,
3. their response is appropriate to the child's need and age, and
4. they are responding with emotional warmth.

The child is thus encouraged to make further efforts to interact. It is almost like a to-and-fro game in which both players constantly respond to what the other one does. But there is a difference between sensitive responsiveness and a game. Unlike in a game, a parent does not just respond to what the other one has done but appreciates what the other one does and responds in a way that encourages the other person to do it even better. Making this

kind of response, which is timely, appropriate, inspiring and stimulating for the child, is the key here. When parents consistently respond in this way, when it becomes a part of their way of working with the child, children's potential blooms and cognition grows.

If, however, parents do not respond in time, respond in a wrong way, or stop responding, the game stops; children lose interest or become upset or anxious, and their ability to make sense of their environment and learn from it goes down. If such interactions repeatedly occur, children become uninterested, and their potential fades.

Let me give you an example of the wrong kind of response that happens quite often. Parents are too keen to point out an error that the child has made and tell them how to do something right, or they are too eager to tell the child what to do next - they become interfering and directive. And, yes, there are times when parents need to be directive. But, when a parent becomes directive in most of their interactions, they cease to be sensitive responsive, the child becomes disinterested. Though they may do as told, their learning diminishes. To maintain the right balance, parents need to watch themselves; if they become directive once, then at least the next four times, they need to join in the child's interests, not be interfering and directive and become sensitive-responsive. Can parents learn to make this kind of response and in this ratio? Yes, the evidence is that if parents are encouraged to notice their child and their own way of responding, the change happens, and sensitive responsiveness increasingly becomes their way of responding.

Some parents react negatively to the child not following something or not understanding something - they become angry, critical or laugh at the child. Such behaviour even if happening for a short time is damaging to children's development. It ruins the child's relationship with the parent and it takes away their enthusiasm for learning.

Creating a stimulating environment means creating various exciting experiences for the child - by doing things with them or simply creating opportunities. Creating a stimulating environment does not require purchasing a lot of material. Parents can create a lot of fun material at a low cost, hire or borrow or buy second-hand books, and do many fun activities at a low cost.

The activities that make an environment stimulating depend on the situation of the family and the child. Sometimes, it is a physical game, such as running or chasing; at other times, doing an outdoor fun activity. Sometimes, singing or dancing with the child, watching an exciting TV programme; at other times, reading an interesting magazine or a book. For many children exploring nature - animals, trees and stars - is interesting. It is not just what is done but how it is done that matters. The activity has to be made attractive for the child; the parent has to be interested in paying attention to it, exploring it with the child and talking about it, not like a teacher but as fun sharing partner.

One of the main requirements for creating a stimulating environment is giving time - putting the mobile phone away and spending time with the child, noticing, responding, encouraging, talking and interacting, praising and rewarding. And all that has to be done not as a burden but as something to enjoy. Children are pretty clever - they notice if you are pretending or doing it because you think it has to be done, and if you are behaving like a teacher rather than a fun sharing partner for them, that switches them off. So, put the mobile phone away, bring out your warmth, bring out your interest and share it with your child; notice their

interest, become a partner in their interest, encourage them and let them lead. Yes, as I said earlier, there are moments to direct them and guide them, but don't do it more than 10 to 20% of the time – let them lead and enjoy the rest of the time. In the next podcast, I will talk about some activities scientifically proven to enhance development. The whole series and the full text of these podcasts is on the website www.enable.net/info. Stay healthy and take care. My best wishes are with you, and thank you for listening.

Enhancing children's development: Part 3

This is the third of a three-podcast series about enhancing children's development. In this podcast, I will talk about some activities which help promote development. As I mentioned in the previous podcast, it is not just what is done but how it is done that matters, and if you haven't done so, please, listen to the previous podcast before moving on with this one. The activities, as you know, depend on the child, the parents and their situation. Still, here are five activities that are worth sharing because they are proven to enhance development:

1. Play

Playing is about having fun - children learn best through play because they are interested and engaged. When they play with other children, they learn to plan, take turns, share and deal with problems. It does not matter much what the play is, but it must be suitable for the child's age, have some variety in it, and, most importantly, be exciting and fun. So, create play opportunities - with other children and also with you. Remember, playing is about sharing fun, don't try to act like a teacher when you play with your child; try to act more like an older friend. You don't need expensive toys to play with your child. Instead, assemble simple day-to-day things, act out different roles, sing nursery rhymes or songs together, and play; all you need is imagination, interest and enthusiasm to stimulate the child's imagination. And whatever you do, be completely present in the play, put everything aside, including your mobile phone, and be there with the child, taking turns, showing enthusiasm, being imaginative and encouraging and praising the child.

2. Having conversations with your child

A conversation is not about questions and answers, and it is not about what you want to talk about or what you want to ask. A good conversation is more about the child's interests. Even infants of a few months of age can have little conversations - you watch them smile, you smile back at them, you show your expressions, and when making little sounds, you put meaning in those sounds, and you say some words, and they smile back and make little sounds – try to keep this kind of conversation going for as long as it goes. Conversations change as children grow - you listen to the child, you share your ideas and feelings, you say something similar to what they are talking about, and when the child adds something to it - you build on what the child has said and encourage them to build on what you have just said. Just remember one thing: hold your temptation to correct them, don't tell them what to say or how to say. Perhaps, the best thing is that even if they say something wrong or in a wrong way, you say the right thing in the right way, you model the right way, and, in time, the child will pick it up. If you insist on correcting the child, they will soon lose interest in talking with you, which will be the end of the story.

3. Reading:

Reading a book is perhaps one of the most potent activities to do with the child. Parents often ask how early they can start reading books with children. Again, like play and talking, what you read and how you read changes as the child grows, but you can start it when the infant is just a few months old. Choose a book with big, bold pictures, point with your finger at the pictures as you show them, use sounds with expressions, create interest and use simple words. And, quite quickly, the child will see a whole world of magic hidden in these pages. As the child grows, choose books with some pictures and a few words on each page and, with time, read stories. Let the child turn the page, let them show expressions, use sounds or words, and you respond to them – the idea is to have fun; try not to be like a teacher when you are reading with your child. With older children, explore the feelings and motives of characters in stories.

4. Activities to do with hands

As the child starts holding things in hands, give small things of different colours and textures, such as a rattle or shiny, soft toys, to hold in hands, look at and feel. At this stage, the experience of different sensations is what the brain needs. As the child starts reaching and picking objects, gather small, exciting things like a bell, keys or a colourful or sound-making toy. Avoid tiny objects which infants may swallow, creating a risk of choking. Encourage the child to do whatever they want to do with toys: pat, bang, shake, throw or stack. First, join in and copy the child and then expand it to do something different. In time, introduce more refined play activities like stacking blocks or threading large beads. Play with soft materials like playdough, clay or flour, making little shapes; play with colours and let your child be messy. Let the child scribble and do colouring with crayons and pencils. Let them fold and cut with safety scissors, use paper and cardboard to make imaginary models. Let them weave some colourful strings together and make puppets and dolls with old bits of cloth. Encourage others to notice, join in and appreciate. The child should feel that they've done something that others like and that's the best reward for them.

5. Model

The fifth activity is not for the child but you. It is about your (parents' and carers') behaviour throughout all activities. Your behaviour works as a model for the child and helps them learn to manage their attention and emotions, which affects the growth and function of their brain. This is your chance to model your voice, behaviour and emotions; to show the child how you deal with situations when things don't work out as planned. You model paying attention, listening, turn-taking, waiting patiently, a calm voice and showing consideration. And when things go wrong, you model finding a solution or an alternative or gracefully accepting the situation. You don't make fun of the child, highlight their failure to make them feel bad, and don't get angry with them, because that will put an end to their interest and enthusiasm.

These five activities, which you can do with your child, will help your child's cognitive and emotional growth. They will improve their vocabulary, language, attention and emotional regulation. And, finally, if you want children to do the right things, then become a model for them rather than telling them what to do. So, for example, if you want them to read, keep some time for reading and let the child see you reading; talk about the book you are enjoying and read out the fun bits to them. If you want to nurture their thinking, start having

conversations about their feelings and ideas; be curious and encourage them to think. Finally, always do whatever you do, with affection and appreciation.

I hope the ideas I have shared in these three podcasts will help in protecting and enhancing children's development. The whole series and the full text of these podcasts is on the website www.enable.net/info. Stay healthy and take care. My best wishes are with you, and thank you for listening.