Why should I teach my students about early child growth and development?

There is undeniable evidence that the first three years of a child’s life are the most important for healthy growth and development. Dramatic growth and development of a child begins at the time of conception, continues throughout the pregnancy and after birth. Parents can not only provide the foundation for a healthy pregnancy and birth, but they can also directly affect the long-term health and potential of their children through everyday interactions. Caregivers play a very important role in the lives of young children as they can also provide the experiences necessary for healthy growth, development and intellectual achievement.

Teaching secondary school students the importance of good parenting practices, long before they become mothers and fathers themselves, provides them with an understanding of the crucial role parents play in the overall growth and development of their children. Parenting information is also valuable to students who baby-sit or care for young children. Teens acquire realistic expectations about age-appropriate behaviour which can help them better understand children so they can foster the healthy growth and development of the infants and toddlers with whom they interact.

What information could help me teach about early child growth and development?

Dramatic growth and development takes place in the first three years of a child’s life in the following four areas: physical development, emotional development, social development and intellectual development. While children generally follow a similar developmental sequence, their growth and development will be unique and influenced by both inherited qualities and the environment in which they are raised. Early growth and development is measured by developmental milestones. These milestones provide parents and caregivers general guidelines regarding what to expect at different stages. Being aware of the milestones can help them interact positively with children, but can also assist them to identify any possible concerns. This is important because early intervention can improve the outcomes for children who experience many kinds of developmental delays.
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Physical Development:

The first three years of a child’s life involve dramatic physical growth and development. For example, a baby will double in weight from birth to six months of age. For this reason, proper nutrition is essential for the healthy growth and development of babies and infants. We know that establishing healthy eating habits, right from birth, encourages children to eat nutritious food for life. This is particularly important since childhood obesity is on the rise.

In addition to physical growth, children acquire skills and build on them to develop new abilities. For example, a child will learn to sit up, crawl and then walk. As children are naturally curious, it is important to provide a safe environment for them to practice their new abilities without getting hurt.

Emotional Development:

During the first three years of life, children are learning about self-esteem – or how they feel about themselves. They are also learning how to regulate their emotions. According to Erik Erikson’s Theory of Development, the initial stage that children must master in the first year is trust versus mistrust. Parents and caregivers have the significant task of providing young children with a loving environment that allows their children to trust their world. Having a strong sense of trust allows children to feel safe to explore the world around them.

The next level of development is autonomy versus doubt. During this stage, toddlers who are between the ages of one to three, struggle with the realisation that they are separate from their parents yet still dependent in many ways. This developmental stage explains the typical behaviours seen in toddlers such as temper tantrums. When children exhibit challenging behaviour such as this, adults can play an important role in modeling respect, setting clear limits and responding in a calm and consistent manner.

Social Development:

Social development occurs in stages and is the basis for language development. Young children learn about themselves and how to get along with others through the early interactions that they have with their parents and caregivers. These interactions form the basis for how they will get along with others later in life. The very first social interactions take place in the loving care provided to babies and infants.
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Although very young toddlers (ages one to two) will happily play alongside one another (what is called parallel play), they will not play together and really cannot be expected to share and take turns, at this stage. As toddlers get a bit older, it is increasingly important that they spend time with other children so they can learn to share, cooperate and get along. By the time a child is three years old, s/he should be able to engage in more cooperative play.

Intellectual Development:

Although babies are born with all of their brain cells in place, the brain is not fully developed at birth. In order to ensure optimal brain development, babies need good nutrition (breast milk and healthy foods are best) as well as intellectual stimulation. Parents and caregivers provide the experiences for children that allow the brain to form connections between brain cells.

The brain develops after birth through the experiences taken in through the five senses: sight, smell, sound, taste and touch. The more often these connections are used, the more permanent they will be. For example, if a baby watches his/her mother smile, s/he will soon start to imitate the action and repeat the behaviour based on the reaction received. Babies learn that if they smile, their mothers will smile back. One of the most important ways that children develop intellectually is through play. Play enables children to learn about their world, other people and acquire new skills.

What are the most important messages students should take away from this lesson?

• The first six years of a child’s life, particularly the first three, are the most important for healthy growth and development.

• Parents play the central role in a child’s growth and development. This starts with healthy parents and a healthy pregnancy, and continues in the everyday interactions parents have with their children.

• Growth and development occurs for all children in a general developmental sequence, but within this sequence, every child will grow and develop in his/her unique way. Developmental milestones provide a basis for monitoring early growth and development.
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- Growth and development occurs in four primary areas: physical development, emotional development, social development and intellectual development.

- Play is one of the most important ways that young children develop in all four areas.

- Having an understanding of early growth and development allows parents and caregivers to understand the behaviour of children and interact with them in productive and meaningful ways.

References:


