



Introduction

Today, the educator is attending a professional development opportunity and an occasional teacher warmly greets the children as they enter. Children's instant reaction to this change differs. She reminds them to put their things away and come to the carpet. Upon seeing her, Thomas backs to the door, clinging to his mother's leg, not sure whether to enter. His mother reassures him that it is alright to go in. Jack says "Hey, who are you? Where's Mrs. M?" Kaya ignores the adult and takes her father over to the picture wall to show him the new picture of her and her friend Kayla. Aza, with his snowsuit half on and half off, goes over and holds out his hand to show his rock, "Look, I've got a very shiny rock. It's soapstone. It's good for carving. Can I share it today?" Karleen immediately informs the new adult that Mrs. M. said that she is the helper of the day and that she gets to do the name cards. Jack also informs the occasional teacher that he is supposed to be the helper of the day and should do the name cards. An argument ensues between the two children. Mahtaiyo takes his things off quickly, twirls with his arms outstretched to the group area where he gallops around the rug.

Infancy and early childhood is the first and most critical phase of human growth. A child's earliest experiences shape brain development. Genes interact with experiences, creating a dynamic that affects lifelong health, learning, and behaviour.¹

Each child is unique, developing at his or her own rate. Children's development is a complex interplay between biological determinants and early experiences. Research has shown that their development can be influenced by early experiences, whether that is in the care of the family or in early learning and care situations.

The quality of exchanges between caregiver and infant serves as the foundation for the infant's signaling system and influences the child's subsequent mental and physical health. The relationship between caregiver and infant plays a pivotal role in the child's capacity to interact with others and influences neural pathways for language and higher cognitive functions.²

A child's development does not necessarily proceed along a linear pathway and may be uneven in some areas. Children may show strength in one area of development, yet not in others. For example, a child's strength may be language. The child talked at an early age, has an extensive vocabulary, interacts with adults on almost an adult level, yet physically may be awkward and disinterested in fine motor activities or those involving physical activity.

The kindergarten classroom is full of variation and diversity. Children differ in size and shape, in their use of language, in experiences, in their approaches to learning, and in how they interact with peers and adults. Although there are differences, children of this age have what might be called 'universal' needs - for physical activity, recognition, and concrete 'hands-on' experiences. However, the needs of individual children will always vary.

Children demonstrate their development and learning in many different ways, some of which depend on their interests, background experiences, and the conditions of the particular classroom. Programs for young children must offer rich opportunities for children to develop and use their growing skills and knowledge. Children need opportunities to demonstrate their development and to show what they know and what they can do.

Educators learn about the children's development as they watch, listen to, and interact with them while the children are engaged in learning activities.

As children build structures such as towers with blocks, they show their fine motor control; ability to problem solve; understanding of structure and stability; and the extent to which they will take risks and persevere.

As children move, they show their body strength; sense of balance and control; ability to move in relation to space; control of body movements; and ability to listen and respond to direction or a stimulus.

As children paint, they show their development of fine motor skills; visual perception of space; stage of development in picture making; thinking and representation of ideas; and level of independence in following routines.

As children dramatize familiar and new situations they demonstrate their use of imagination; knowledge and use of the various language structures (syntactic, semantic, pragmatic); comprehension of stories and events; and social skills as they leave and enter the play situation, take on roles and solve problems.

As children explore and investigate, they demonstrate their fine motor control using the various materials when representing their ideas; and curiosity and ability to observe, compare, predict, explain, hypothesize, and draw conclusions.

In an early learning environment, children's developmental needs influence the educator's choice of materials. When thinking about four and five year-old children and the variance in development of their fine motor skills and visual perceptions, a range of materials are needed such as simple puzzles with knobs to make it

easier to lift the pieces out and fit in easier, as well as more complex puzzles. Puzzles provide opportunities for children to develop spatial concepts, to learn about sizes and shapes, flips and rotations. Emotionally, puzzles give children opportunities to 'do it again', especially when they have been successful. Doing the same puzzle again gives children a sense of control and builds confidence. Putting a puzzle together can be a solitary activity, can be done with a partner, or can be done co-operatively with a group. By observing the children engaged in this activity, educators learn about the children's approach to the task, their ability to persevere, their fine motor control, their personal observations, and their spatial understandings.



Children can choose puzzles as one of the free choice learning centre activities. The following example illustrates children's different approaches to the puzzles and offers insights into what the educator might learn by watching the children at work.

Kayla and Miranda talk together and each select a Three Pigs puzzle of 18-24 connected pieces with Three Pigs pictures. They sit side-by-side. Kayla takes all of the pieces of the Three Pigs puzzle out and lines them up on the floor. She pulls all the feet out, then the bodies, then, the heads. Once these are lined up, she puts all the heads in first, then the bodies, and so on. She asks Miranda which pieces she should fit in next. Miranda responds, indicating which ones should be next. Miranda dumps out all of the pieces of her puzzle, picks a piece and tries to fit it in various places until she finds the right spot. When she can't find a place, she selects another one. Kayla completes her puzzle then says, "Let me help you." She takes some pieces and fits them into place while Miranda continues to try pieces in various locations.

Julian and Quinn select the transportation puzzle of 15 pictures of vehicles with knobs. They dump it out on the floor and individually take pieces and fit them into place. They choose a piece and pop it into the correct spot without hesitation. They smile when finished and Quinn says "Hey we did it!" Julian says "Let's do it again and do it faster." They do the same puzzle again very quickly and repeat four more times.

Aza has chosen an alphabet puzzle of 26 letter pieces with knobs. First, he chooses the 'e' piece and tries it in four different places

before finding the right spot. He continues to try the pieces in more than one location before putting them in. Liam comes to watch. Aza stops and puts his hands around the pieces. He takes his hands away when Liam just sits and watches. He talks to Liam. "Have a 'q' and a 'u' left. Hey, that's a 'w' for washroom." Liam points to the 'l' and says, "Here's the 'l', that's just like listening." Aza takes the 'l' piece and puts it in.

Children entering school face certain expectations. They are expected to be able to make their needs known verbally; focus and sustain attention, particularly in group situations, when someone is speaking and with particular

tasks; follow directions, the classroom/school routines and rules; and regulate their behaviour. School expectations anticipate that children are motivated to learn. For some children, these are formidable expectations, well beyond their experiences and development. To some adults, children may appear unready to fit school's expectations. Does the child need to be ready for school or does school need to be ready for the child? Does the school accept children as they are when they enter? Is the physical environment in line with the needs of the children? The reality is that children enter school with the skills, knowledge, and concepts they have developed over their short lifetimes. The onus should be on school to be prepared for, to accommodate, and to welcome all children who come through the doors.

