

Categories of Holistic Child Development

Compassion's corporate mission states:

"In response to the Great Commission, Compassion International exists as an advocate for children, to release them from their **spiritual, economic, social and physical** poverty and enable them to become responsible and fulfilled Christian adults."

Many questions and concerns have been raised about what constitutes child development in each of the four categories: spiritual, economic, social, and physical. For example, in some projects, social development has been interpreted as providing opportunities to attend birthday parties or go on field trips to museums. The economic area has been particularly troublesome as partners strive to determine the difference between support of child development in this area and traditional community development programming. It has been noted that the IPM provides several "lists" of child development categories, but that the wording is not consistent, adding to the confusion. Perhaps this confusion has arisen because the mission statement does not actually describe holistic child development. **The four descriptors listed above are provided to delineate types of poverty, not areas of holistic development.** The question to be asked is, "What areas of child development need to be addressed in order to alleviate the four types of poverty?"¹

The Program Team has a felt need to explicitly outline a common understanding of child development to reduce confusion in COS, field offices and with church partners. Moreover, it has been noted in the Program Improvement Plans that the most often cited training need in individual countries is an improved understanding of child development. By providing a clear framework for holistic child development, better Program Improvement Plans, evaluation, audit, and training can be achieved. The individuals involved in program planning and implementation at all levels will have a better understanding of the indicators, goals, and activities that support holistic child development.

The matrix below is an effort to "flesh out" the categories of child development in a way that takes into consideration our overall outcome: to **become** responsible and fulfilled Christian adults. Child development research and theory suggests that four developmental categories best capture holistic child development: spiritual, socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical (see matrix below). The items in each of these four categories seeks to answer the question: What does a child need in each of these four areas to enable healthy development?

The following terms are not new to Compassion. Thus, they will be defined, but not discussed in depth.

1. Spiritual development includes changes in one's awareness of and relationship with God. Spiritual development typically is concerned with existential questions, such as: Who am I? Why am I here? What is the meaning of life? And What comes after death?

¹ See Scripture references for four areas: Luke 2:52, 1 Corinthians 10:23, Philippians 1:9,10

2. Physical development includes changes in body size and proportion, brain development, perceptual and motor capacities, and physical health (L. Berk, *Infants, Children, and Adolescents*, 3rd Edition, 1999).

You may notice two words that are different from the four descriptors of poverty listed in the mission statement.

3. Why use "socio-emotional" instead of social?

Socio-emotional processes involve changes in an individual's relationships with other people, changes in emotions, and changes in personality (J.W. Santrock, *Child Development*, 1996). In the study of human beings, it is difficult to separate the emotional domain from the social one. In fact, many theories address both aspects of development as one area of study. By placing them together, we are recognizing that children grow through relationships with others in order to fulfill emotional needs and that socialization is accomplished through the communication of messages, both verbal and nonverbal, that are loaded with emotion.

Also, by using the word "emotion" to describe this area of development, we provide a clearer understanding of the type of programming children need to develop in holistic way. For example, a thorough description of the category of socio-emotional development may be less likely to suggest activities, such as birthday parties or field trips, which are considered to be "social events." Historically, the term "social" has been understood by its common meaning, that is, "marked by or passed in pleasant companionship with one's friends or associates" (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*). Although social activities (as understood by common usage) can be designed to promote social and emotional growth, in most cases they are not implemented with these goals in mind. The matrix on the following pages should give the reader a better idea of the components of socio-emotional development. One important concept in socio-emotional development that deserves special attention is "emotional intelligence", which has been found to be a predictor of success in life across the categories of relationships, school, and job performance.

4. Why use "cognitive" instead of "economic?"

Compassion is extremely concerned about children who live in economic poverty, who lack the basic resources for survival and healthy development. However, Compassion is also dedicated to child development, rather than community development efforts. For many people, the words "economic development" conjure up images of monetary handouts, business ventures, or other micro-enterprise types of interventions. How does one train a child to escape economic poverty? The child needs to be able to think, to communicate effectively, to have opportunities for learning problem-solving skills, training in job-related skills, and the acquisition and application of basic knowledge. In other words, the child needs the skills necessary to be an effective worker or entrepreneur. Thus, our purpose becomes teaching young people how to learn, giving them the confidence to try new things, imparting the skills to make good choices and encouraging them to use their giftedness to meet their economic needs.

Cognitive development, an important piece of holistic child development, includes changes in an individual's thinking, intelligence, and language. Intelligence is defined in a very broad sense and includes "verbal ability, problem-solving skills, and the ability to

learn from and adapt to the experiences of everyday life" (J.W. Santrock, *Child Development*, 1996, p. 289). The breadth of this category of child development allows us to develop program interventions that are appropriate to the age of the child. For the younger children, basic problem solving skills may be encouraged, where the adolescent may be applying those problem-solving skills in a specific vocational area, such as hydroponics.

The items in these four categories are based on current research and theory in child development, as well as input from various program staff. Obviously there is much work to be done to "fill in every box"; but before this can be accomplished, the program staff wanted to obtain input from others who have a vested interest in program design and thinking.

A sample structure for holistic child development categories with the areas for future expansion has been provided below. As can be seen in the sample, each area (e.g., Relationship with God) is divided into the developmental stages of 0-3 years of age, 3-6, 6-12, and 12-18, as well as the categories of caregivers and families (who are also beneficiaries and targets of intervention). Although I did not add these age categories under each item, this thinking should be reflected throughout the matrix as you review and reflect upon it. On the right you will see columns for: 1) indicators that this need is being met, 2) goals/objectives for meeting this need, and 3) developmentally appropriate activities. We are hoping that the left side of this matrix will provide a framework to understand the whole child while still being sensitive to the individual child's development stage and age. The right side of the matrix should provide concrete and practical information for the creation of appropriate curriculum and program interventions, as well as assessing program effectiveness. Remember that specific items can be added on the right side of the matrix to address the issues of special needs children (traumatized, learning disabled, etc.)

Overall Need for each of the Four Areas of Holistic Child Development: adults who model appropriate behavior

Categories	Indicators	Goals/Objectives	Activities
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Spiritual Development

Relationship with God

0-3

3-6

6-12

12-18

Caregivers

Families

Partners

Tutors

Involvement in a community of faith/local church

Christian value system

Application of Christian faith and values

Interaction with role models

Conscience (internalized sense of right and wrong)

Sense of Justice/Moral Reasoning

Socio-emotional Development

Nurturing environment

Security and trust

Sense of responsibility

Identity

Self-confidence/appropriate locus of control

Awareness of gifts, talents, interests, and aptitudes

Appropriate guidance and discipline

Understanding the feelings of self and others

Ability to communicate emotion appropriately

Social skills (initiating and maintaining relationships)

& prosocial² behaviors)
Healthy family interaction

Cognitive Development

Stimulating environment
Access to learning opportunities
Access to developmentally appropriate materials
& activities
Thinking and problem solving skills
Basic knowledge and concepts
Application of knowledge
Exposure to a range of work and learning possibilities

Physical Development

Safe, clean environment
Applied health knowledge and habit formation
Screening and referral
Nutrition
Physical activity (fine motor, gross motor,
coordination)
Self-help skills

² Prosocial behavior is defined as voluntary, intentional behavior that results in benefits for another person (S.H. Greener, *The Relationship Between Emotional Predispositions, Emotional Decoding and Regulation Skills and Children's Prosocial Behavior*, 1998, p. 2).

Discussion Questions

1. **Is holistic child development adequately represented? Do the items address the whole person across age categories?**
2. **Do the items adequately address concerns about cultural context?**
3. **Does each item have clear indicators, goals/objectives, and activities**
4. **Will the items provide a clearer understanding of child development?**
5. **Will the items provide a basis for improved curriculum development?**
6. Will the items provide a basis for improved program and individual child assessment?