

What is Holistic Child Development? by **Susan Greener**

“So, Mission of Mercy ministers to children from a holistic perspective? What exactly does that mean?”

Many questions and concerns are raised about what constitutes holistic child development. Often, only the ‘spiritual’ or ‘physical’ categories are used in Christian outreach because feeding, health care, and evangelism are comfortable arenas for ministry intervention. ‘Emotional’ or ‘basic’ needs may also be mentioned as discrete categories. Some of these categories are interpreted only at a surface level and are not fully explored. For example, social development can be interpreted as providing opportunities to attend birthday parties or go on field trips to museums. The intellectual area has been particularly troublesome as one strives to determine the difference between support of cognitive growth and interventions, such as formal education, economic interventions or traditional community development programming.

Often organizations provide "lists" of child development activities, but neglect defining the chosen terms, adding to the confusion. For example, Mission of Mercy’s mission statement and its definition do not actually identify the components of holistic child development (the definition lists only the spiritual and physical areas, although other areas are mentioned in the text of the [Childcare Program Manual](#)). The question remaining to be asked is, "What areas of child development need to be addressed in order to alleviate poverty and support child development potential in order to affect global change?"¹

It is essential to outline a common understanding of child development to clarify expectations between Mission of Mercy and field ministries. It has also been suggested that the greatest training need is an improved understanding of child development. By providing a clear framework for holistic child development, better programs, evaluation, 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, enabling children to fully utilize their God-given capacities.

The matrix below is an effort to "flesh out" the categories of child development in a way that takes into consideration the desired outcome: to promote children’s developmental potential so that they may be capable of transforming their world in the name of Jesus Christ. Child development research and theory suggests that four developmental categories best capture holistic child development: spiritual, socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical (see matrix below). (Note: Usually human development is divided into these or similar categories, although these divisions are somewhat arbitrary and overlap between categories must be acknowledged). The items in each of these four categories seek to answer the following question: What does a child need to develop into a healthy transformational ‘change agent’?

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

1. Spiritual development

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? What happens after death? The growth process is one of "bringing the believer to maturity in Christ" (e-mail conversation with Professor Perry Downs, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School).

2. Physical development

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). Health and growth are commonly included in this developmental domain, but it is just as critical to include muscular and neural coordination, which are necessary for performing day-to-day tasks and job-related skills.

3. Socio-emotional development

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. A thorough description of the category of socio-emotional development may be less likely to suggest activities, such as celebrations 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. Cognitive development

Obviously, Mission of Mercy is extremely concerned for children who live in economic poverty, who lack the basic resources for survival and healthy development. However, poverty is multi-dimensional, not just economic. For many people, the words "economic development" conjure up images of monetary handouts, business ventures, or other micro-enterprise types of interventions. These all fulfill valid needs, but a question remains: How does one train a child to intelligently utilize these types of interventions 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, businessperson or entrepreneur. 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 older child or adolescent may be applying those problem-solving skills in a specific vocational area.

The items in these four categories are based on current research and theory in child development, as well as input from various child development workers. Obviously there is much work to be done to "fill in every box"; but before this can be accomplished, it is important 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 these age categories are not listed under each item, this thinking should be reflected throughout the matrix. On the right there are columns for: 1) indicators that this need is being met, 2) goals/objectives for meeting this need, and 3) developmentally appropriate activities. It is hoped 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 developmental 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.)

Importance of integration and synergy

Programs that combine interventions to address children's needs holistically are more effective than programs that address an isolated area of development. One of the key principles of child development is that there is a synergistic relationship between developmental areas: health status, nutritional status, growth, spiritual development and psycho-social well-being of children all work together to enhance the effectiveness of each category (Myers, 1995). In other words, $1 + 1 = 3$ or "whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

Although it is convenient to separate child development into specific areas or perhaps even separate programmatic interventions, this does not reflect the holistic nature of the person. Learning opportunities designed for children's development touch the whole person and curricular/activity design should reflect that integration. Thus, programs and activities are likely to impact multiple areas of development or can be adapted to enhance multiple developmental areas. Programs may also be designed to take advantage of other resources available in the community, such as public education as the primary vehicle for cognitive development. However, it is still important for some adult to be monitoring the quality of complementary programs and insuring that integration is taking place and that the holistic needs of the individual child are truly being met.

Questions for Reflection

1. Is holistic child development adequately represented by these categories?
2. Do the items provide flexibility for cultural contextualization?
3. Could you envision generating clear indicators, goals/objectives, and activities for each item?
4. Will the items provide a clearer understanding of child development?
5. Will the items provide a basis for improve curriculum development?
6. Will the items provide a basis for improved programs?
7. Will the categories provide a basis for assessing the developmental progress of individual children?

References

Berk, L. (1999). *Infants, Children and Adolescents, Third Edition*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Myers, R. (1995). *The Twelve Who Survive*. Ypsilanti, MI: High Scope Press.

Santrock (1996). *Child Development, Seventh Edition*. Madison, WI: Brown and Benchmark Publishers.

Webster's New World Collegiate Dictionary, Fourth Edition. (1999). John Wiley & Sons.

& 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 skill

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).