

LifeLines

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safer, healthier relationships
for children and families



What Can I Expect From My Child?

Jamie Scaccia, PsyD

Director of Assessment, Clinical Psychologist

Child development is tricky. When we zoom out, we notice the trends and various stages most of us passed to become functioning adults. We learned to understand how to use our bodies by moving our hands, smiling, and running. We fumbled through social relationships, making mistakes and missteps but eventually understanding what it means to be a good friend. We learned ourselves – what we need when we are upset, excited, angry, sad, confused, overwhelmed to meet our goals. Zoomed out, this all seems pretty straightforward!

But yes, I did say that development is tricky. Amidst the examples above, there are so many smaller steps we took to develop appropriately. To learn how to run, we learned that we could control our feet, that we could coordinate our muscles to propel us in a direction, and that we could balance well enough to move fast. This is complex!

While we don't have all the answers, we know a few things are true: **Development is not always linear.** Though it seems like everything happens in order when we zoom out, each individual skill and milestone requires practice and persistence. When a child learns to talk, they do not say their first word one day and tell full stories the next.

Generally, they accumulate words over time and might revert to “baby talk” when feeling emotional. They may understand words well, but word choices or pronunciation may be difficult. Even if the general map is linear, children may take two steps forward and one step back. It is all a part of the process.

What a child needs differs from skill to skill and day to day. Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. Mastery may come easy in reading but be such a challenge in math. A child might be verbal and articulate but have trouble with impulsivity or reasoning. Even more, bad days are real. A bad day, which comes with negative emotions, impacts our ability to do our best and to believe in ourselves. Some days come with gusto and some come with rain.

Development is impacted by what is happening around us like the access to resources, support, nurturance, safety, and the freedom to focus on working things out. Privilege comes in many forms, such as access to finances to feed and house our families, supportive communities that show up when times are tough, and being able to be our true selves without fear. When a child is faced with stressors that take up great space in their minds and hearts, there is less room to focus on new skills. Thus, these skills may take longer, require

more help, or may fall behind. Sometimes, we need to shift our focus to improving the child's situation before we can expect growth.

Development needs support and coaching/guidance.

Development does not happen solely within the child. Children are dependent on adults to give them the building blocks to development and teach the child how to use them. We do not expect a child to learn the alphabet when they have not had a parent or teacher in their lives to sit and sing with them. Adults provide the support and pieces a child needs to complete the puzzle. Just as important, caregivers offer children the space to struggle when development is hard and support the process. No teen gets out of middle or high school without having some trouble socially or in understanding who they are; teachers, mentors, and coaches are essential in providing the space for them to figure it out.

Developmental age does not always equal chronological age. Especially when a child has experienced early trauma, development can be behind their peers. While they may be 16 on the calendar, some skills may be at a 10-year-old level. In fact, other skills still may be at an 8-year-old level, and another yet at a 17-year-old level. As caregivers, responding to the child's developmental age is so important because it reflects where they are in the moment. If a child is 10 but is acting 5, respond as though that child is 5 because that is the support they require right then. As we all know, the next moment may be different, but that is where our attunement, the ability to recognize and meet our child's needs at any given moment, is paramount.

How to help: be respectful of your child's path. No two children are alike and, while developmental guidelines are important, we cannot force a child to meet a milestone. We are on the journey with them and can only support them in skill building and tolerance of the experience.

Yes, you can work on pushing your child to grow but no farther than a step or two beyond what they can do now. If you push too hard or expect too much, your efforts might backfire, impacting the child's self-esteem or the relationship between the two of you.

Attunement to what a child is capable of requires a lot from a caregiver, teacher, or therapist. A child benefits from this entire web of people to help communicate observations, successes, and frustrations. Again, while a child might be able to succeed one day, the next day might be harder. While they can perform well in one subject, another subject is harder.

And let's be real – while we are talking about child development, learning a skill or reaching a milestone does not change when we become adults. We too require patience, support, and consistency. We too make mistakes and learn through failure. We too struggle when someone expects too much from us or when we expect too much from ourselves.

We too deserve grace!

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY CORNER

Ashley Wagner, OTD, OTR/L

Director of Occupational Therapy

Should I Expect My 6-Year-Old To Do Their Own Laundry?

As a parent of three school-aged children, I spend a lot of time thinking about whether I am teaching my kids the skills they will need to take care of themselves when they're adults and asking myself questions like: Will my 4-year-old be a failure if I brush their teeth for them? Does making my 13-year-old's school lunch every morning mean they won't be able to feed themselves as adults? Should I expect my 6-year-old to do their own laundry?

As an occupational therapist (OT) whose job is helping children engage in the important activities of childhood, I have spent a lot of time teaching children to tie their shoes, get themselves dressed, and make simple meals. So, you might assume I have all the answers about when children should be expected to perform certain activities.

But the most important lesson that I've learned as an OT is this: **There is no single answer for when a child should be performing specific tasks.**

Instead, as an OT (and a parent), I ask myself these four things to determine if expecting a child to do something is reasonable.



1. Does the child have the skills they need for success?

Before a child can tie their shoes, they need to be able to tie a simple knot.

Sometimes, as caregivers, we ask our children to do activities they're not ready for and put ourselves and our children in stressful situations where they feel like they're letting us down, and we question what we're doing wrong. It's important to remove judgment from ourselves and our children in those moments and figure out how to teach needed skills or break up the task so our children can use the skills they do have to be successful.

2. Is the environment and situation supportive of the child's success?

You probably wouldn't ask a friend to draw you a map while they're riding a bicycle or to solve long division in the middle of an emergency.

Often, supporting our children's success means finding the right environment and situation in which they can succeed. So, instead of asking the teen who's a zombie in the morning to pack their lunch before school, we may have them do it when they're more alert at night. Or we may brush our toddler's teeth for them on tough days where they could use some extra TLC and have a little less chance of failure.

3. Why is this activity important?

Sometimes, we get stuck in the habit of expecting our children to perform tasks at certain times or in specific ways because that's what we've 'always seen done.'

Different families have different routines, rituals, and meanings surrounding the activities in which they participate. There is no one right way to do things. So, it's valuable to evaluate where the importance of an activity comes from. Is it important for safety reasons? Is it important because it brings joy and a sense of connection to you and the child? You may find that you're spending a lot of energy on an activity that's not important to you or your child just because you assumed your child needed to do it in a certain way or by a certain age.

4. Do I have the capacity to coach the child on this task right now?

For children who have experienced early adversity or trauma, this is an essential question to ask as their caregiver. Just like we can't expect our children to perform at their best when they're not in a situation that supports their success, we can't expect to be the best coach for our children when we're not in the right situation. This may not be the right time for you to teach the child this skill. And that's okay, too. Remember: 'not right now' isn't the same as 'never'.

Coming Soon!

SEASON TWO OF OUR NEW PODCAST



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11358 Van Cleve Ave
Saint Louis, MO 63114-1131
314.968.2350

familyforwardmo.org



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U.S. Postage
PAID
St. Louis, MO
Permit No. 4525

Staff Information

Education and Training

Program Manager

Vickie Johnson

vickie.lawson-johnson@familyforwardmo.org

Chief Program Officer

Sharon Skidmore Stern, MSW, LCSW



Our Vision

FamilyForward leads the community in providing innovative solutions for advancing safer, healthier relationships for children and families.

Our Mission

FamilyForward moves vulnerable children in the direction of hope by delivering comprehensive therapeutic and educational services to support biological, foster, and adoptive families.

Visit familyforwardmo.org/publications to read LifeLines online.

Educational Opportunities for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Parents

All in-person classes will be held at FamilyForward's Developmental Trauma Center located at 11358 Van Cleve Ave in St. Louis County. *Light refreshments will be provided.*

Ready, Set, Fly

Thursday, July 11, 18, 2024 | 6:00-8:30 pm

Training for any foster parent interested in providing care for teens and based on the curriculum of the Casey Family Programs. This training is recommended for foster families accepting placements of foster youth aged 14 or older. This is a 2-week course. Attendance for both classes is recommended.

MO Healthy Kids Presentation, Led by Mary Mogg, MSW

Monday, July 22, 2024 | 6:00-8:00 pm

Show Me Healthy Kids offers several benefits that you may not know about, such as earning money for well care doctor visits, transportation services for birth parents to visit their children, and free sensory kits for some children. Get help as you navigate the healthcare system so members can get the treatments and benefits they need.

Developing Social Skills

Wednesday, July 24, 31, 2024 | 6:00-8:30 pm

Lagging social skills put children at risk for bullying and exclusion. In this 5-hour, two-week class, parents will learn how to assist their children in acquiring skills related to social competency. The parent's role as social coach is explored, along with social boundaries, levels of friendship, and concrete skills related to making and keeping friends. This class also looks at how to address challenging social situations like bullying, rumors, and bad reputations. The importance of active, intentional involvement on the part of the parent as coach is stressed.

MO C.A.R.E.

Monday, July 29, August 5, 12, 19, 26, September 9, 16, 23, 30, and October 7, 2024 | 6:00-9:00 pm

Preservice training is required of any individual wishing to be licensed as a foster parent through the state of Missouri. Please contact Tonya.Williams@dss.mo.gov for information and registration.

Sibling Practice - Module 1

Wednesday, August 7, 2024 | 6:00-9:00 pm

Module 1 From the National Resource Center for Foster Care and Permanency Planning Hunter College School of Social Work: Sibling Practice Curriculum Module 1 focuses on enhancing understanding of sibling-related issues in out-of-home care. The importance of siblings in your life and the lives of others will be discussed. Myths and truths about sibling separation and the negative impact of sibling separation will be discussed as well.

Self Compassion (Virtual Lunch and Learn)

Friday, August 9, 2024 | 12:00-1:30 pm

Self-compassion has become a popular term these days. What does that mean? Self-compassion is an essential trait that caregivers must learn to practice to sustain themselves through the long, challenging job of parenting. Understand that being kind to yourself is not selfish but rather a gift you need to give yourself to prevent compassion fatigue. A link to this virtual program will be shared upon registration.

Understanding the Effects of Sexual Abuse

Tuesday, August 20, 27, 2024 | 6:00-8:30 pm

Parenting a child with a history of sexual abuse can be frightening—from responding to the child’s acting out behavior to dealing with emotions. Discussions focus on the best ways to minimize the trauma and help your child heal. Sex trafficking will be explored in the training. This is a two-week class, attendance at both weeks is strongly encouraged.

Family Dynamics: Right Time Trainings (Virtual Lunch and Learn)

Friday, September 13, 2024 | 12:00-1:00 pm

An overview of the impact fostering or adopting can have on family dynamics including the impact on marital relationships, biological children, foster or adoptive children already living in the home, and extended family members. It helps parents who are fostering or adopting gain insight and increased understanding of how their family may need to adjust, as well as strategies that they can use to support healthy family dynamics. A link to this virtual program will be shared upon registration.

Stop Bullying Now!

Tuesday, September 17, 2024 | 6:00-8:30 pm

Parents gain an understanding of why a child bullies, signs of a child being a victim of a bully, and intervention approaches within the community and school setting. Content is based on the national program, Stop Bullying Now!

School Issues

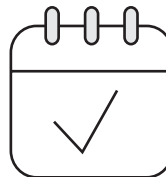
Thursday, September 19, 26, 2024 | 6:00-8:30 pm

Many children with a history of abuse, neglect or other trauma struggle in school. Whether it is a learning disability, a developmental delay, or an emotional issue, children will often find the academic and social demands of the school environment to be a challenge. Parents discuss a variety of challenges, ways to ease the transition for children as they begin a new school year, and ways to communicate effectively with school personnel in this two-week class. Attendance for both weeks is strongly encouraged.



Online resources

Sign up for our LifeLines email newsletter and view training information online by scanning the QR code or by visiting familyforwardmo.org/calendar



Register for training

Call: 314.534.9350 ext. 7234

Email: intake.dept@familyforwardmo.org