Fact sheet 1.9 Factors of emotional development

Learning aim E: Emotional development from birth up to eight years

What does emotional development mean?

Emotional development in children refers to the growth and maturation of their ability to understand, express and regulate emotions. A wide range of skills and processes have influence over the way a child might perceive, interpret and respond to not only their own emotions but those of others.

1. **Emotional awareness**: Emotional development begins with the recognition and identification of basic emotions such as being happy, sad, in distress or in pain. As they mature, children start to be aware of others and feelings such as joy, sadness, anger, fear and disgust. At five years and above they are more able to interpret facial expressions, and develop an understanding of their own and others' emotions.

2. **Emotional expression**: Children start to learn how to express their emotions through verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. They show anger through throwing tantrums and happiness by laughing and smiling. As their vocabulary develops, they are able to describe their feelings and use tone of voice to add emphasis to their emotions.

3. **Emotional regulation**: By the age of around five to six years, children become more able to control their own emotions responding to different situations, and develop strategies for coping such as positive self-talk, distraction, problem-solving and seeking adult support.

4. **Empathy and perspective-taking**: This means the child is able to appreciate someone else's viewpoint and the emotions they may be experiencing. Normally at around seven years a child will show empathy and take others' perspectives, recognising their emotional states and being able to respond to them.

5. **Social relationships**: Emotional development is very closely aligned with social development. Children around seven years are better able to navigate relationships and interactions with others, building positive relationships and forming firm friendships.

6. **Self-concept and self-esteem**: Through interactions and experiences with others, children develop self-concept, esteem, worth and a sense of identity. It is important to ensure that professionals provide positive feedback, encouragement and support to children to ensure they develop a secure and healthy self-esteem.

7. **Resilience and coping skills**: It is important that children develop strong resilience to be able to cope and navigate the challenges and causes of stress that they may encounter through their interactions with their environment and with other children and adults. A resilient child is more able to cope with daily stressors and 'bounce back' from problems and difficulties.

8. **Supportive relationships and environments**: Finally, it is important that children are able to form positive, supportive relationships with professionals and adults working with children as well as encouraging positive relationships with other children. The development of secure attachments is key to providing children with the right emotional support to be able to thrive.

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