

# Supporting children's development

## Life skills

*In this final article in our series on supporting the domains of children's development, Angela Owens outlines the importance of life skills development and ways that child care professionals can promote these.*

### What are 'life skills'?

Life skills encompass a range of knowledge, attitudes and personal traits that enable us to cooperate and communicate effectively with others, make decisions, deal with new (and sometimes difficult) situations and care for ourselves independently. As such, life skills incorporate competencies that include self-help, problem solving and social skills, as well as a personal sense of self-worth and confidence.

Our life skills continue to develop throughout our lives, although the important foundations for their development are laid during our early years.

### Why are life skills important?

Possessing functional life skills allows us to cope with the experiences and challenges that we face throughout our lives. These skills enable us to take responsibility for ourselves and our actions, and they help us to form positive, cooperative relationships with others. They also help us to continue to grow and learn throughout our lives by giving us the ability to apply what we already know and understand in new and unfamiliar contexts.

A person's ability to view themselves and the wider world positively is at the heart of effective life skills.

### What are children's life skills at each stage of their development?

**Babies:** Babies begin learning from the moment they are born, and their brains develop more extensively during the first two years of life than at any other time. Babies' life skill development is about the growth of their senses and their emerging motor skills which enable them to experience, interact with and learn about their world. They are also learning to communicate their needs, wants and feelings to others – even the youngest of infants is able to quite clearly express when they are feeling tired, hungry or distressed. Babies develop feelings of security

#### This article relates to:

**FDCQA Principles:** 1.1, 2.2, 3.1 – 3.6 and 4.4

**OSHCQA Principles:** 1.1 – 1.3, 2.2, 2.3, 4.2, 4.3 and 5.1 – 5.3

**QIAS Principles:** 1.1 – 1.5, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1 – 4.4, 4.6, 6.1, 6.3 and 6.4

and of being loved when they are cared for by responsive, sensitive adults.

**Toddlers:** As children enter the toddler age group, they increasingly show an interest in playing and interacting with others. At this time they begin to develop early social skills, and initially they often need adult support to be able to share, take turns and negotiate with others. This is also the time when children begin to develop the ability to control their emotions and to express these appropriately. Children become progressively more independent at this stage of their development, and can often be heard to say quite firmly to an adult who tries to help them, 'I do it myself'. As toddlers' curiosity and problem solving skills develop, they also spend a great deal of their time experimenting and exploring the world around them. Many toddlers refine these skills by repeating the same activities over and over.

**Preschool age children:** Children aged from three to five years are beginning to develop more complex and sophisticated relationships with others, and their play often centres on organised games involving rules and structure. Children in this age range are developing the skills to work and play cooperatively, and share and take turns. They are also gaining the ability to empathise with others and are beginning to understand concepts such as respect, fairness and equality. Preschool aged children are also beginning to apply the skills and knowledge they have already developed to approach new experiences, to predict outcomes and to solve fresh problems.

Preschoolers are refining their self-help skills and are able to undertake a range of self-care tasks,

## Supporting children's development



as well as to help peers and adults with many everyday routines and activities. As they move closer to school age, they may begin to take greater responsibility for themselves and their possessions, which are important school readiness skills.

**School age children:** School age children are consolidating and extending upon the many life skills they have attained in their earlier years. They are able to take greater responsibility for themselves and their actions, and they can use reasoning and predictive thinking to make choices and decisions and to accept the consequences of these. School age children begin to increase their understanding of self and to identify and respect the similarities and differences between themselves and others.

Children in this age group are able to cooperate and negotiate with others and to resolve quite complex issues in their play and interactions with others. At this stage of their development children typically possess well-developed self-help skills and are usually eager to take on new challenges in caring for themselves and others. They are also often keen to take on leadership roles.

Older children, such as those aged between 10 and 12 years, benefit from opportunities to

have their own space and be responsible for themselves without intense adult supervision.

### What can we do to promote the development of children's life skills?

There are a number of specific areas in which child care professionals can support aspects of children's life skill development. It is important to note that, as with all areas of children's development, strategies and experiences should be tailored to the skills, abilities and interests of the individual child.

The areas which are fundamental in facilitating the development of sound life skills are outlined below.

**Self-esteem:** Having positive self-esteem leads children to feeling good about themselves and the world, and to confidently face new experiences and challenges. We can foster children's self-esteem by:

- Interacting with them in a friendly and warm way
- Having regular conversations with them that demonstrate understanding, respect and liking for the child
- Listening and responding to them with genuine interest
- Acknowledging their achievements and positive behaviour
- Helping them to interact respectfully with each other
- Guiding their behaviour positively
- Ensuring they are equally included in everyday conversations and experiences.

**Social skills:** Effective social skills are an essential part of getting along in daily life. Child care professionals can support children to develop and extend upon these skills by:

- Providing many opportunities to interact and play with other children and adults
- Modelling positive, constructive and respectful interactions with others
- Talking about feelings and helping them to express these in acceptable ways
- Encouraging them to consider how others might feel

# Supporting children's development

- Supporting them to learn the skills to share, take turns and play cooperatively
- Giving them time and support to resolve conflicts with others positively.

**Self-help skills:** Being able to care for yourself is not only an important life skill in itself, it also gives a person a sense of self-confidence and self-reliance which contributes to positive self-esteem. Child care professionals can support children's self-help skills by:

- Giving them many opportunities and encouragement to do things for themselves and others
- Praising them for their efforts to care for themselves, even when their attempts are not entirely successful
- Accepting their interest in trying new tasks and skills, and giving support only when needed. Avoid stopping children from trying new tasks by saying things like 'You can't do that - you're too little'
- Allowing enough time for them to do things for themselves, without having the pressure of having to hurry. For example, allow plenty of time for routine activities such as meal times, hygiene and sleep/rest times, as these offer many opportunities for children to engage in self-help experiences
- Encouraging them to ask for assistance if they need it, and avoiding taking over from children if they are slow or experiencing difficulty with a task
- Breaking new and more complex tasks down into smaller steps that can either be explained or demonstrated to children.

**Thinking and problem solving skills:** The capacity to approach and manage new problems and unfamiliar situations, and the ability to make independent choices and decisions are central to competent life skills. Strategies that child care professionals can use to assist children to extend their thinking and problem solving skills include:

- Giving them support and encouragement to explore their environment and the things they find in it
- Providing them with open-ended materials and resources – ie items that may be used in different ways or for multiple purposes
- Asking open-ended questions that encourage children to predict, hypothesise, express their ideas and opinions and draw conclusions
- Allowing them to try new things and to take on new challenges
- Supporting them to take 'safe' risks in their play and daily experiences
- Allowing them to repeat actions and activities over and over, as this helps them to develop their understanding of concepts and to test their predictions.

## Conclusion

Life skills are essential for equipping individuals with the capacity to deal with the inevitable ups and downs of their everyday lives. These skills continue to develop and expand throughout a person's life. However, it is in the early and middle childhood years that many important foundations are being laid for the optimum development of life skills. Child care professionals play an integral role in facilitating the development of these skills through nurturing environments and interactions ■

## References and further reading

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