Not Just Cute

Whole Child Development

an observer's guide

by Amanda Morgan
"But what skills are developmentally appropriate?"

It's a common question for me to hear when giving my presentation on developmentally appropriate practice. After understanding why it's important not expect four year olds to act like eight year olds, someone in the audience usually wants to know what they *should* be encouraging preschoolers to do.

First look at the whole child.

The first thing I encourage is looking at whole child development rather than a few isolated skills. We adults tend to get hung up on explicit academic skills, such as whether or not a child is reading yet, but in reality there are not only many other equally important areas of development, but also many critical foundational skills that come into play long before a child reads independently from a page.

Healthy development relies on whole child development. Even excellence can be detrimental, if it comes only in one area and at the expense of other necessary areas. Think of it this way. My grandparents - dairy farmers by trade - had a classic three legged milking stool in their home. Each leg screwed into the base and provided a stable, low seat. As a child, I loved unscrewing the legs and screwing them back in. No matter how perfectly I would screw in one or two of the legs, I couldn't get the stool to be steady and balanced unless I included all three legs.

Human development is similar. To be healthy and well-balanced, we need supported development in all areas. There are many ways to divide up these areas by domains. Here are the eight domains I focus on, along with a very basic description of what is included in that domain.
**Language and Literacy:** Expressive and receptive linguistic skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

**Cognitive Reasoning, Math & Logic:** Mental skills such as reasoning, logic, and basic concepts of geometry, numeracy, and math.

**Curiosity & Approaches to Learning:** Traits that drive future learning such as wonder, curiosity, and an inborn drive to use the scientific method (questioning, hypothesizing, testing, etc.).

**Social-Emotional:** Internal traits such as self-regulation, emotional processing, and awareness of social cues as well as (and the interplay with) external skills for positively associating with others.

**Self-Help/Adaptive:** A growing capacity to engage in self-care such as feeding, dressing, and other daily tasks.

**Physical/Motor:** Growth and development associated with the body, including large/gross motor skills (large movements often associated with the arms and legs) and small/fine motor skills (smaller movements often associated with the hands and fingers). Includes balance, strength, coordination and dexterity.

**Creativity:** Capacity and drive toward creating, innovating, and thinking independently and "outside of the box".

**Spiritual:** One of the few things academics agree on in this category is that there is a need for more academic literature on the subject, so the definition is still in debate. My preferred definition: "Spiritual development is the process of growing the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence, in which the self is embedded in something greater than the self, including the sacred. It is the developmental “engine” that propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose and contribution. It is shaped both within and outside of religious traditions, beliefs and practices." (Benson, P. L., Roehlkepartain, E. C., & Rude, S. P. (2003). Spiritual development in childhood and adolescence: Toward a field of inquiry. Applied Developmental Science, 7, 204–212.)
While it's helpful to organize and compartmentalize developmental areas this way for the sake of observation and discussion, in reality there's clearly plenty of overlap. Social experiences are often linked with language experiences and spiritual experiences may be linked with both. One play experience in the block area may use spatial skills along with small motor skills (manipulating small objects), social skills (sharing materials), language skills (communicating ideas), and creativity (experimenting with design). While the image two pages back is how we often talk about developmental domains, the way they're experienced usually looks a bit more like the image on the next page.

For the purposes of observing whole child development, the accompanying guide is also divided by these eight domains, though you will observe plenty of overlap in practice.

This is part of why play-based learning experiences are so powerful. One intentional, high-quality play experience can yield growth in multiple developmental domains.
This is Not a Test

This curated developmental guide is not an exhaustive list, and is simply intended to start to answer the often asked question as to what is developmentally appropriate for children in the preschool years (3-6). These are skills preschoolers are typically approaching, struggling with, learning, and mastering as part of typical development.

I hesitate to call this a checklist, as these are not tasks to simply check off and tally throughout the preschool years. I prefer calling it a guide or guide-list, as this is meant to guide both your observations and the types of experiences and environments you share with the children you love and teach.

Please, do not use this list as a test of sorts, calling out tasks for a child to perform at random. Ideally, you will observe these tasks over time, in authentic, experiential, and play-based situations. You may decide to use one of the tasks mentioned as inspiration to create or introduce an activity that may provide the opportunity to work on, develop, and display that skill (such as playing catch to show throwing and catching skills). But be sure that the activity is authentic, enjoyable and continues beyond simply "proving" the ability.

A Season for Blooming

Keep in mind that development progresses in a predictable order (large motor skills in the arms before fine motor skills in the hand, or rhyming skills before reading from the page, as a few examples) and with generally predictable windows. At the same time, these windows can be rather wide. The typical developmental window for reading, for example is from 4 to 7. That's a three year span, yet within that wide window it is still considered developmentally normal.

Not all three year olds will be at the same developmental level at the same time. In spite of this, typical development tends to even out over the years.
Consider the growth of a plant. We know the order: roots, stem, leaves, buds, blossoms. But not every bud opens at the exact same moment on the exact same day. (Read more at http://notjustcute.com/2015/09/15/allowing-children-to-bloom-in-season/)

Additionally, it is normal for children to show more advanced development in one area than in another. A child with advanced verbal skills may still struggle with gross motor skills, for example. This too is normal. Support strengths and encourage growth by providing opportunities to practice and experiment without pressure.

If you're concerned about a task a child is struggling with, look for other skills in the same category that the child has mastered or has nearly mastered. Consider other similar skills that may not be listed as well as foundational skills that may precede the mastery of that particular task.

Support development by scaffolding. This term relies on the imagery of scaffolding used for construction. This temporary support meets up right where the work is needed so that the work can continue just above where it currently sits. Picture a course of bricks, each row set one on top of the other.

Similarly, meet children where they are and provide just enough support to allow them to take risks with skills slightly above where they are until they reach mastery. Just as you wouldn't work on a course of bricks three levels above the current one, don't push children into skills far above their current level. Real learning is built on a strong foundation.

**When You're Worried**

While there is a wide variation within typical development, do not hesitate to seek professional advice if you are concerned about a child's development. The following list may help help you recognize when professional consultation
is warranted, but it is not exhaustive. Don't ignore the "gut instinct" that something is not right. Professionals can evaluate and let you know if your concern needs to be pursued. It's better to ask and be put at ease about typical development than to ignore warning signs and miss out on early intervention opportunities. If you have concerns, contact your pediatrician and/or your local school district (most have services for ages 3 and up) for an evaluation or a referral for one.

Some developmental red flags for preschoolers (3-6) include:

* Does not attempt to communicate or is difficult to understand more than half of the time.
* Does not make eye contact or acknowledge others.
* Unable to play with others.
* Excessive aggression/violence toward people and/or animals.
* Excessive/Repetitive motion ("stimming"/flapping, spinning, head banging, etc.).
* Falls frequently (more than typical preschoolers of the same age) and/or is unable to move both sides of the body in a coordinated manner (alternating feet on stairs, jumping with both feet, etc.).
* Decreasing muscle tone or coordination.
* Other observation or "gut feeling" that something is "off".

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Disclaimer & Adding On

This developmental guide is not meant to be a diagnostic tool. The intention is that it will guide the observation and intentional implementation of developmentally appropriate experiences for preschool children ages 3-6.

If you have questions or suggestions for improving this guide, email me at amanda@notjustcute.com

Find more resources for intentional whole child development at www.notjustcute.com.