

Child Development: your input as the Non-Resident Parent

By Linda James, FNF Member

All forms of child development rely on interaction with and participation of adults. As the Non-Resident Parent (NRP) you may feel that your input is limited, yet it may be crucial, making the difference between a child growing up with security and confidence, and one that grows up without this, with the problems that this can lead to in the future. Children need 'unconditional interest' from an older person to encourage their development and fulfil their potential. 'Unconditional interest' means being interested in the child as a developing human being rather than a reflection of what its parents want a child to be or a reflection of their status in society. Most parents give this to their children to some degree and in the past if it was not available from parents then it may have been available from an older sibling or other relative or teacher.

Today with the decrease in family size, the stratification of society along age lines and the pressure on teachers, many children do not have an alternative source of 'unconditional interest'. As a NRP you can still provide this even if you only see your child infrequently; it is important that they receive it from you. Surveys and autobiographical evidence have shown that the role of the father is important, particularly in developing confidence in both males and females, and one of the key factors appears to be the amount of active involvement they have. Even when active involvement is limited (maybe due to work factors) unconditional interest shown to the child helps them to develop self confidence.

A child needs to develop on a physical, emotional, intellectual and social level.

The factors that affect a child's development are:

- Genetic characteristics (physical and mental)
- The environment they live in
- The relationships they have
- The attitudes, values and norms of the society they grow up in.

Despite the changes in society children's developmental needs remain relatively constant.

Physical

Children need nourishing food, protection against illness and accidents, medical treatment when required, a safe environment and space and encouragement to exercise. As a NRP you can encourage them to eat healthily by preparing or taking them for a healthy meal. Regarding babies and toddlers, you are in control

of what they eat when they are with you. Primary age children can help prepare food and it helps to discuss the value of different foods with them and the part they play in growing. The basis of a healthy diet is laid in this period. You should not feel the need to give them a treat because you are a NRP; if they are happy spending time with you they will adjust to what you eat with them.

Walking with them (rather than taking the car despite their protests) will give them physical exercise as well as giving you the opportunity to talk to them and listen to what they have to say. From the moment they can move you can do physical things with your child, be it for an hour or a weekend - walking, playing in outdoor spaces, swimming, riding a bike. The important thing is to enjoy it and transmit that enjoyment to them. If they enjoy your company whilst doing physical exercise they are more likely to continue to maintain some form of physical activity, as they get older. Children today are unlikely to suffer from starvation but they may suffer from obesity or eating disorders that your help and guidance can help to protect them from. Their self-confidence can be formed in significant measure by your 'unconditional interest' in them.

Emotional

The brain develops in basically three stages; that of instincts, then emotions, then intellect. These do not operate independently but influence each other. If there are emotional problems this can affect intellectual development. Schools concentrate on intellectual development but parents are normally responsible for emotional development. The younger the child the more important the emotional development is because emotional patterns laid down in childhood can influence later responses and relationships. The key appears to be to 'read' the emotional state of the baby or young child, or in other words to empathise with it. Children have the same basic range of emotions as adults and empathising with them has the same effect as empathising with an adult; it is the basis for a close relationship and can continue into adulthood.

Empathy is not sympathy. Empathy is 'being in tune'; it comes from picking up the feelings of the person (child). Stern¹ refers to it as 'attunement' and it is the degree to which this 'attunement' takes place that can influence the child's relationship with its parents. 'Attunement' relies on picking up and responding to body language and verbal tone, then giving the correct response. Although most studies have focused on mothers (not all display empathy for their babies and children) there is no reason to suppose that fathers cannot and do not develop 'attunement' to their children. This is a skill taught to counsellors and psychotherapists, male and female. It relies on concentrating completely on the other person and showing that you understand how they feel. Children who have 'attuned' parents are emotionally more stable as adults and research has shown that intellectual development is also enhanced. As a NRP if you can be 'attuned to your child' you will be making an enormous contribution to their emotional development. You cannot achieve this 'attunement' if your attention, thought and feelings are not focused on the child when you are with them.

Intellectual

Intellect normally refers to the part of the brain that deals with cognition. Cognitive development is the ability to think and reason in a logical manner. This develops

¹ *The Interpersonal World of the Child*, Daniel Stern, 1987

as the child gets older (severe emotional trauma in early life, 'abuse', can interfere with it). It is addressed by schools but its basis is in experiences prior to and outside of school. Cognitive development like emotional development relies on interaction and NRPs can take part in this.

Of primary importance is the development of speech – most communication is some version of this – reading and writing usually being later developments. Therefore when your child is with you speak and listen to them as much as possible. Television does not take the place of this as it is not interactive and computer games are not fully interactive. You can play games with young children that help them to improve their vocabulary (a simple game of 'I spy'), a walk when you point things out, sitting turning the pages of a book naming the picture objects all help your child to develop words, sound and sense of meaning. Reading stories to them encourages them to read. They will not want to spend their time with you if it feels similar to school, so learning should be fun and entertaining. Older children may like to do things by themselves, with you providing encouragement and company. This allows a sense of independence to develop in a secure way whilst contributing to the 'unconditional interest' mentioned above.

The basis of cognition is the development of the perception of sound, movement, space, pattern and object recognition. Simple games when children are pre-primary can all help this develop. Peek a boo, nursery rhymes, hide and seek, exploring, matching shapes, counting fingers and toes and stairs all contribute to a child's early cognitive development. They don't cost money but they do take time. It is by spending the time you have with your child engaging in what may seem like simple activities that you can make a significant contribution to your child's development. Time spent with older children is equally important with the activities suited to their age and interests. Television and the Internet have a place to play in finding out information but it helps if you discuss with your child things they have seen and found out.

Social

Social development relies on interaction and communication. Unlike instinctual behaviour, social behaviour is learnt behaviour and children and young people are learning all the time. They learn by example and by watching and listening to parents and later friends and other people. As the NRP you provide a role model to your child so you should model the type of social behaviour you expect from your child. It is no good doing one thing and telling them to do something else. Although as a NRP you may not be able to influence your child all of the time (few parents can) you should be consistent in your expectations of their social behaviour when they are with you.

The best thing for the child is a set of social behaviour expectations that have been agreed with the resident parent and that are applied by both parents. If it is not possible to do this remain consistent in your example and expectations. Do not allow the child to exploit any differences that may exist between you and the resident parent as children can quickly learn to do this which can make a difficult situation even more difficult. A consistency of approach from you is important as it helps the child feel secure and develop confidence. Give your child as much experience as you can in different social situations to encourage the development of interactive and communicative skills.