

Child Development: A Service Learning Experience. PY102

During October 2007, I registered for volunteer work at a division of the Mental Health Association of Montgomery County known as the Families Foremost Center, or the FFC. I selected it as my volunteer site because, as a major in the biological sciences, the description of “promoting mental wellness” appealed to me. Initially, I had vague expectations of interacting with people with psychological disorders, but it was uncertain what kind of organization the Center was or what activities I would be participating in. It wasn’t until my interview that I learned I would primarily be caring for children. As a part-time babysitter for close friends, watching young children was something I both enjoyed and had experience in. So, naturally, I couldn’t wait to start volunteering. During my stay at the Center, which lasted about a month and half, I would learn how to better communicate with children, as well as study how they think, feel, and behave in a social environment.

As they state on their brochure, the Families Foremost Center, located in Silver Spring, Maryland, “is a community-based center that offers support to families and their children.” The FFC serves families who are either pregnant or have a child under 4 years, and some of its main goals include promoting healthy functioning and development within families, helping families to become self-sufficient, and stimulating the development of young children. Parents can attend classes focusing on furthering their education, supporting themselves through employment, or improving their parenting skills.

While parents are in class, which generally lasts for an hour or two, their children are cared for in Center Child Development. This is where I worked. I was immediately comfortable in the room, which is a suite in a business building, because its atmosphere was homey and not tense like a research lab might be. After a few training sessions, I assisted my supervisors in looking after children. There were 6 children that were there regularly, most of who ranged from 2 to 3 years of age. In addition to engaging them in constructive activities, I was instructed to fill out progress notes on the children. By writing these reports, we were able to keep track of their cognitive, socioemotional, linguistic, and motor development. This required that I observe each child carefully, noticing how they tend to behave and respond to others. However, I saw them as children, not as subjects, and hopefully managed to maintain a nurturing environment. I also observed my experienced supervisors, paying close attention to the way they dealt with the children. They let the children explore and be creative with the resources that were available to them, and promoted cooperative and productive play by making it clear which sorts of behavior were unacceptable. By adopting their methods, I learned how to communicate more effectively with the kids, all the while gaining a greater understanding of their psychological progression.

A major aspect of a child’s psychology is their cognitive development, which includes how they learn about people and objects in their environment. In truth, noting the intellectual abilities of the toddlers at the FFC was the most difficult for me. This is probably because the concept of “cognition” actually encompasses a vast array of thought processes, whereas I was required to focus my attention on only certain kinds of actions. For example, if one of the children could repeat and understand instructions, I had to judge whether it would be considered cognitive or language development. I do think that many of my observations, regardless of what I labeled them as, could be placed under multiple areas of progression. For the cognitive component, I

focused on the children's interpretations of nonliving objects and their understanding of core ideas, such as colors.

My experiences tell me that 2-year-old children are aware and are becoming aware of the role of certain objects in their everyday lives. When told to wash his hands at the sink, one of the children I looked after realized that the sink was too high up and gestured to a stepping stool. Though he couldn't actively retrieve the stool himself, he knew that it would allow him to reach the sink. Also, by experimentation, the toddler could understand how the toy instruments were operated. One thing all the 2-year-olds could comprehend was the representation of things that were not actually present. The children could pretend to drink out of empty cups and eat plastic food. One child, after having a pretend drink, would even smack his lips and exhale as if he was deeply satisfied. Along with the 3-year-olds, they could also simulate conversations with plastic telephones. Toy animals, which are nonliving depictions of living things, were often played with. While playing, they would imitate galloping and the sounds of the animals. Collectively, these behaviors are agreed upon as developmentally normal. As research shows (Fackler, 2007), this ability to imagine and connect events generally emerges in children at this age.

Even so, not all of the children functioned at exactly the same level. In one situation, two 2-year-olds were playing a game that involved putting small toys into a hole at the top of a larger, basketball hoop-shaped toy. Once inserted, the small toys went down a spiral tube and emerged again at the base of the toy. Every time he put in a toy, one child would peer down the tube and reacted with surprise when he saw the toy at the bottom. The other child, though he was slightly younger, quickly realized the process and would put his hand at the base before the smaller toy had even come all the way down.

Since the 3-year-old children at the FFC operated, expectedly enough, at a higher level of cognition, I concentrated on different aspects when analyzing their intellectual capabilities. One of the goals of my supervisors and I was getting them to learn their colors. We made sure to point out the colors of toys they were playing with, or of pictures in books. While the children knew the names of the colors, they could not always identify a color with the correct name. What they could do was recognize when two objects were the same color. For example, one of the children would sometimes point out that a toy was the same color as a shape on the rug. However, when asked which color it was, he would not usually respond with the right answer. In another case, I was reading a book to a child while simultaneously identifying colors. He repeated after me when I said that the Winnie the Pooh character in the book was the color yellow. I also went through the colors of the pictures of the honey pots. When I pointed to the yellow honey pot and asked him what color it was, instead of stating the name of the color he replied "Winnie Pooh."

This development of knowledge about colors corresponds with studies and reports by several researchers. These studies indicate that though children will recognize names of colors, when asked what the color of an object is, they will often provide randomly chosen answers that are unrelated to the property at hand (Backscheider & Shatz, 1993; Barlett, 1978; Cruse, 1977; Istomina, 1963; Landau & Gleitman, 1985; Sandhofer & Smith, 1999, as cited in Sandhofer & Smith, 2001). In conclusion about this learning process, children tend to learn the words

themselves before being able to correctly associate the words with the definitive properties, which in this case is the certain appearance of an object (Sandhofer & Smith, 2001).

During early childhood, children show rapid growth in their gross and fine motor abilities. Gross motor requires the use of large muscles for actions like running and hopping, whereas fine motor skills involve using the fingers to grasp small objects or eat with a utensil. On average, 2-year-old children are able to jump and run, kick a ball, and are beginning to draw with crayons. By 3 years of age, a child can build a high block tower and try to solve simple jigsaw puzzles. At this stage, even if they recognize the correct spot for a puzzle piece, they do not always rotate it to fit and often try to force the piece in (Santrock, 2007). Though there were individual variations, of course, these generalizations accurately apply to the children that I observed.

The 2-year-old children that I looked after were all very active. Most of them ran much more often than they walked, and did not always listen when told to slow down. They could all throw and kick balls, and roll them across the floor. We, my supervisors and I, aimed to further motor development by playing music often. The kids enjoyed the toy instruments, and played them whenever the music was turned on. Though they all jumped around to music, there was really only one child that could perform actions akin to choreographed dancing. The gross motor abilities of the 3-year-olds appeared to be very similar. The difference between the two ages was largely present in their fine motor skills. The younger children knew how to grasp and draw with crayons, but were not as coordinated in their movements. Because they couldn't pick up the crayons as easily, they had a tendency to hold onto only one crayon while they drew. In contrast, the older toddlers had little trouble picking up crayons and used a wide variety of colors. Unlike the younger children, they were able to draw coherent shapes on the paper. On the finished drawings of the 3-year-olds, circles and shapes could be clearly identified by both me and them. Also, by this age, the children had developed a more acute sense of touch. A book I read to a child had places on the page that could be lifted to uncover hidden pictures. The child was able to run his fingers along the surface of the page and find the flap areas of the book. I thought that this was impressive because the flaps were difficult to see, meaning that the child was relying almost completely on sensation to find them.

Another significant element of child development is the way children gain understanding of spoken language, listen to it, and use it to communicate with others. Because most of the children spoke mainly in Spanish, and I cannot, it was necessary to consult with my supervisors when trying to understand what was being said. Even when I couldn't fully understand the children, I was still able to interpret meanings of words due to the context of the situation. Language development, I learned, is a crucial aspect of child growth. Not only does it play a big role in how children communicate, but it also determines how well others can communicate with them.

Although there was somewhat of a language barrier between the children and me, they could understand English. Most of the children would respond to and seemed to understand most of the things I would say, like orders to stop running or to play nicely. The younger children generally spoke in simple, one- or two-word sentences, and were able to communicate effectively. One of the children often said the Spanish word for "water" when he received juice at snack time. He would also say "thirsty" as a way of asking for his bottle. The other 2-year-olds also used short

sentences, but more so to name objects, like a “horse” or “baby.” Sometimes, they would also mimic phrases that were said by me and the other adults, such as “How are you?” or “Come on.”

It was in the language area of child development where I noticed the most significant difference between children 2 years of age and those that were 3 years of age. In contrast to the simple speech of the younger children, the 3-year-olds were using elaborate sentences often containing more than five words. Unlike the 2-year-olds, one child would repeat not only the sounds of instructions from the adults, but he would genuinely understand the instructions and enforce them. If we told them to stop running and walk, he might say “No, guys, let’s slow down.” Because he correctly paraphrased the command instead of mimicking it directly, it was clear that he could comprehend it. Another child was more talkative and frequently used even more elaborate sentences. On the other hand, he did not possess as superb listening skills. He had also said things like “We’re gonna kick butt!” or “I’m gonna kill you guys,” without any display of violent attempt. This led me to believe that he did not truly comprehend the meaning of these phrases and that he was most likely repeating them from another source.

It has been observed (Bloom, 1998, as cited Santrock, 2007) that the transition from the use of simple sentences to more complex sentences and ideas occurs rather abruptly and begins in children at 2 to 3 years of age. This trend was present in my own observations, as evidenced by the obvious differences in speech ability among the children. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (2007) also describes developmental milestones of children at this age, many of which the children I looked after had successfully reached. The 2-year-old children were able to respond to requests and name most objects. As noted earlier, they could form two-word sentences as well, though one-word sentences were still primarily used. The older children met the expectations of being able to speak clearly and be understood by most people.

The last developmental component I’d like to discuss is socioemotional progression. Ultimately, I found this aspect of the children’s behavior to be the most observable. Children actively interact with all parts of their surroundings, including peers, adults, and nonliving items. Therefore, it wasn’t difficult to see what environmental factors had an influence on their actions. During social development, children learn to play with each other in gradual stages, from playing alone to playing without sharing to playing organized games. Emotionally, it is important for them to be proud of their individual accomplishments (Jindrich, 1998). In truth, I did not find any real trends in social interactions among the different ages. It seemed to me that the children naturally preferred playing others closet to their age, but other than that the way each child communicated with others varied considerably

At the Center, I immediately discovered that the kids enjoyed playing with creative toys like blocks. However, the way that each child interacted with the others while playing was very different. One 2-year-old, instead of trying to construct something, kept picking up blocks only to give them to the other kids. He gave blocks to me as well, saying “more” in Spanish for each block he gave. Sometimes, a 3-year-old child would build energetically and say what he was making with enthusiasm. Other times he would play quietly to himself, pausing only occasionally to announce what he was making. Another child this age alternated between generous and selfish behavior. Though he was focused on what he was making, he would frequently hand blocks someone else saying “Do you want this one?” If he needed another block,

he might ask “Can I have this one?” Contrastingly, he would often refuse to share and snatched blocks away from the children, even if he had already accumulated a pile of blocks in front of him.

I was taught to promote socioemotional development through group play and positive reinforcement. During play, the caretakers, including me, aimed to establish a sense of belonging for everyone. At the beginning of a task, all the kids were always called over to participate. The children were notified of ill-favored behavior and encouraged to interact nicely with each other, and were congratulated when they did so. A sense of accomplishment was also positively reinforced by praise. I paid attention to each child’s individual projects, be they block structures or drawings, and displayed excitement when they proudly showed off their creation. Using this interaction, it seems that desirable results were produced during my time with the kids. Nearing the end of my volunteer work, one of the older children was, or at least appeared to be, snatching blocks less and sharing more frequently.

One of the most fascinating features about my whole experience was the discoveries I made about the personalities of children. Within the first two weeks, I had already begun to make assumptions about each child’s individual behavior. The children were so young, but they had already developed little quirks in their character that made them distinguishable. One of the kids, for example, made habit of making sure everything got put away. Though he was only 2 years of age, he noticed when a toy was out of place and cleaned up after himself more often than some of the older children. Another child, also 2, had a very playful disposition. He was energetic and would run from toy to toy, but he never occupied himself with one item for every long. After spending time with the children for about 6 weeks, I now realize that unique characteristics like these belong to every child. This realization has given me brand new insight about the diversity of children and influences on early development.

Although I have been babysitting for several years, I had never put much thought into the physical and psychological development of children. That changed drastically once I began volunteer work at the Families Foremost Center. Just by observation, I started to become more aware of how children reasoned with a given task, and of their daily interactions with both adults and their peers. I gained a better idea of their physical progression by looking at the difference in motor skills between children that were only about a year apart in age. The people that allowed me to do this were my supervisors at the Center, whom I have to thank for teaching me how to effectively communicate with children. For the future, I have my sights set on internships that will advance my knowledge in the biological sciences. However, I do plan to pay the Families Foremost Center another visit and thank them for a life-changing experience.

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