

# Children's Services Council of St. Lucie County

## Three Years That Shape the World

Patricia A. Frey, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center

The explosion of curiosity, imagination and expression in a child's first three years is amazing in itself. But that time is even more important considering that it shapes a child's future. "The roots of a child's future development are in the first three years of age," said Nancy Lanphear, M.D., a pediatrician with the Division of Developmental Disabilities at Children's Hospital Medical Center in Cincinnati, formerly Cincinnati Center for Developmental Disorders. Development progresses in stair-step style, so reaching higher skills depends on mastering basic ones.

Perhaps no area of development is more important than cognitive-thinking and problem-solving skills. Cognitive development affects all other areas, even gross motor (running, jumping and climbing) and fine motor (feeding and drawing) skills. "By cognitive, we're not just talking about academic skills," Dr. Lanphear said. "Early in development, most of what children do is rudimentary problem solving."

Cognitive and language skills, in particular, are closely linked. But hearing loss, learning disabilities or problems in the mechanics of producing speech could affect a child's language even without an associated cognitive delay. Child development experts monitor cognitive and language development much the way parents do – by watching for milestones. Some key markers of a child's development include:

- Looking at faces, following movement and turning to voices or singing by age 3 months.
- Transferring toys from hand to hand and showing excitement at the return of a favorite person by 6 months.
- Making consonant sounds, responding to their name, playing with toys and wanting to be included in family activities by 9 months.
- Playing such games as peek-a-boo, using one to four words and searching for hidden or fallen objects by 12 months.
- Pointing to objects of interest by 15 months.
- Recognizing and pointing to some body parts, actively exploring and using four to ten words by 18 months. "By 18 months, children are doing a lot of imitation. I've seen that especially in mothering skills, where a child imitates feeding a baby a bottle or setting the table," Dr. Lanphear said.
- Speaking in two-word phrases, using 'I' or 'me,' using a cup and spoon and developing memory for where things are and what has happened by 24 months.
- Understanding simple concepts of time, counting beyond three, pedaling a tricycle and singing simple songs by 30 months.
- Asking why, what and where questions, naming or selecting primary colors and understanding he is a boy or she is a girl by 36 months.
- "By age 3, a toddler has begun developing even higher-level skills such as extensive imaginary play," she added.

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"If a child is behind in achieving a particular skill, don't become upset or try to push the child's development," Dr. Lanphear advised. But do understand that delays can be signs – not necessarily conclusive indications – of learning disabilities or developmental disorders. Parents should consult their pediatrician with concerns, because early intervention may help overcome some delays before school starts. "Though developmental delays usually stem from factors beyond a parent's control, parents can encourage a child's development," Dr. Lanphear said. The key is providing a stimulating environment. That doesn't necessarily mean a room full of fancy toys, but rather plenty of human interaction. Don't try to force learning, she counseled, but be there to observe and provide feedback when a child does, sees or says something new.

"If you make their world interesting, and you interact with them in that, then they're going to be even more interested in trying the next thing," she said. "If a parent is standing by when a child bounces a ball for the first time and says, 'Oh, you bounced the ball!' the child has some immediate feedback that accomplishment is important. Likewise, when a child points and says "dog," a parent can try to expand the child's thinking and language by saying, "That's a big dog." For infants, simply singing or talking to a child provides a world of enrichment.

Dr. Lanphear recommends parents reward the skill of listening, for example, by giving a 12-month-old simple, one-step directions like "Pick up the ball" and offering praise when the child does it. She also encourages parents to remember that children learn in many ways besides through what they hear. "Try to involve all of the child's senses in play," she said.

A common developmental mistake is allowing too much time for isolated TV watching, Dr. Lanphear said. "TV viewing in itself isn't bad. But parents often use that time to do other things. You have to make sure that you don't do that to excess. If the parent is watching Barney with the child and saying 'Oh look, he's got the balloon now!' that makes it interactive." Even with the best educational toys or TV, children who spend hours on end playing alone aren't getting the stimulation they need.

"If they're great at playing on their own and you're letting them all the time," Dr. Lanphear concluded, "you're missing an opportunity."