

DIR®: Stages in Functional Emotional and Intellectual Development

Stage 1: Self-Regulation and Shared Attention (Interest in the World)

The child's ability to enter and sustain a state of shared attention with another person and stay focused, organized and calm (first learned at 0-3 months).

- Harness all available senses, as well as motor capacities, to help child stay calm and regulated in order to draw child into shared attention.
- Involve child in enjoyable interactions that involve looking (look and examine faces), hearing (focus on voices), touch (pleasurable tickles, stroking or sharing an object or toy) and movement.
- Increase the interactive circles of communication and sustain shared attention as child develops.
- Use constructive and playfully obstructive strategies with affect cues to stretch the child's capacity for shared attention.

When shared attention is not developed child's attention may be fleeting, easily distracted, preoccupied and/or lethargic and passive.

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Stage 2: Engagement and Relating

The ability to form relationships and attachment and to engage another person with warmth and pleasure (first learned at 2 to 7 months).

- Woo the baby into engaging with you with pleasure and delight – Seen when baby brightens with a smile, focuses on faces, moves arms or legs to the rhythm of caregiver’s voice, vocalizes in response to caregiver’s cadences, turns or reaches toward caregiver.
- Encourage growth of intimacy and caring - notice the gleam in the child’s eye when child interacts with you and sense falling in love.
- As child develops, deepen the relationship to include the full range of feelings such as assertiveness, anger or sadness that can be incorporated into the quality and stability of the child's engagement (e.g., does she withdraw or become aimless when under stress, does she stay connected when angry or scared?).
- Emphasize relationships all the time to help the child develop a sense of security, intimacy, caring and empathy for others. Relationships also provide the foundation to encourage progress in related areas where child must work so hard to develop motor planning, language acquisition, and a positive attitude towards all new learning.

When relationships and engagement are weak (e.g., the absence of trusting, positive expectations), avoidance, distrust, or apathy may take their place.

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Stage 3: Two-Way Intentional Communication

Back and forth affective signaling and communication to convey intentions, interests and needs (first learned at 3-10 months).

- Follow baby's lead and challenge him to communicate with you through the exchange of gestures and emotional signals about his affects (interests, needs or intentions) and also respond to your affective signals in a back and forth reciprocal pattern.
- Elicit communication. Use affect cues (signals) to woo and wait for child's purposeful social gestures (facial expressions, making sounds, reaching, pointing, throwing, movement, etc.) to express his desires, objections or other feelings.
- Encourage the flow of continuous communication by opening and closing circles. A circle is **opened** when the child evidences some interest or **initiates** a behavior; e.g., the child looks at a toy, and the parent or caregiver **follows the child's lead** by picking up the toy and showing it to the child. The child **closes** the circle by reaching for the toy, while **acknowledging** (looking at) the parent, nodding with a smile, etc.
- Encourage communication by building on child's interests, initiative, and purposeful behavior. Challenge him to do things to you, help him achieve his goal, and later build obstacles to add steps and increase the number of circles.

Two-way communication is the basis for all relationships, as well as language and learning where conversations and exchanging information are necessary.

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Stage 4: Purposeful Problem-Solving Communication

The ability to use complex circles of communication by stringing together a series of gestures, actions and words into an elaborate problem solving sequence of interactions which helps child develop a sense of self (first learned at 9 to 18 months).

- Become an interactive partner with a toddler as she learns to use a continuous flow of gestures with you to pursue her interests and wishes and to meet her needs.
- Combine affect cues with action (be animated and show affect through tone of voice and facial expressions) while creating interactions. Your goal is to help your child learn to open and close multiple circles of communication. Begins with a dialogue without words through subtle facial expressions, a gleam in the eye, and other emotional signals or gestures, to a dialogue with problem solving words.
- Work up to a continuous flow of 20 to 30+ back and forth circles of communication, e.g., child can take a parent by the hand, walk her to the door, point that she wants to go out, and perhaps vocalize a sound or word to further the caregiver's understanding of his intentions.
- Expand the conversation by asking where child wants to go, what they need, who else will come, what they will get, what else and where else, etc. These conversations are necessary for negotiating the most important emotional needs of life, e.g., being close to others, exploring and being assertive, limiting aggression, negotiating safety, etc.
- Increase interactive range of affects and emotions when solving problems (e.g. feed hungry baby, bandage hurt knee, fix broken truck, chase away hungry wolf, etc.).
- Encourage different emotional patterns, e.g., dependency, assertiveness, pleasure, etc., organized into integrated, problem solving affective interactions. Look out for child polarizing and being dominated by one or another feeling state (organized aggression and impulsivity, organized clinging, needy or dependent behavior, organized fearful patterns).

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Stage 5: Creating and Elaborating Ideas (Symbols)

The child's ability to create ideas (symbols) observed in pretend play and words (phrases and sentences) to convey some emotional intention (begins between 24 to 30 months).

- Encourage child to relate sensations, gestures and behaviors to the world of ideas that have meanings which can be shared with others in pretend play and drama. Whether the animals are fighting, the dolls are hugging, or there is a tea party, ideas (symbols) are guiding this play.
- Enter the child's ideas through his make believe world as a character in his drama using words and actions together. Let child initiate the play idea and through interaction (dramatization in roles), elaborate with expanding themes and range of emotions (closeness, assertiveness, fear, anger, jealousy, aggression, etc.) which child can explore and express safely.
- Encourage action words instead of acting out to convey intent and feelings. When feelings and impulses are elevated to the level of ideas they can be expressed through words and play instead of acting out (e.g., child doesn't have to hit his friend, but can say, "I'm mad.").
- Engage in long conversations to communicate interests, feelings, desires and objections throughout the day.
- Promote symbolic play in order to provide the distance from real life and immediacy of needs to differentiating self from others through different roles, feelings, and actions (child pretends to be a mommy comforting the frustrated baby who broke his toy).

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Stage 6: Building Bridges Between Ideas (Logical Thinking)

The ability to build logical bridges or make connections between different emotional ideas (emotional thinking) (begins between 36-48 months).

- Challenge child to connect her ideas together by seeking her opinion, enjoying her debates, and negotiating for things she wants using logical reasons. Begins with logical conversation involving at least two give and takes: “Time for school.” “I don’t want to.” “ Why?” “I feel sick now.”
- Encourage child to engage in pretend play with both peers and adults where the story or drama “makes sense”, with a beginning, middle and end where elements in the drama logically fit together.
- Promote the use of pretend play, words, and/or visual symbols to elaborate a partially planned pretend drama (theme or idea is identified in advance), or engage in logical conversation dealing with causal, spatial, and/or temporal relationships between themes.
- Challenge child to create connections between differentiated feeling states, e.g., “I feel happy when you are proud of me!” Identify relationship (contingency) between feelings, thoughts and actions.
- Expand identification and differentiation of more and more subtle feelings states, e.g., lonely, sad, disappointed, annoyed, frustrated, etc.

This capacity is a foundation for higher level thinking, problem solving and such capacities as separating reality from fantasy, modulating impulses and mood, and learning how to concentrate and plan.

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