



Promoting the Global Development of Children 0 to 6 Years of Age: *Some Principles to Guide the Action*

This knowledge translation tool, developed by the Institut national de santé publique du Québec (INSPQ), aims **to support early childhood stakeholders in the implementation of concerted actions at the national, regional, and local levels**. More specifically, the tool targets professionals who accompany early childhood consultation and mobilization, as well as partners and actors on the ground who feel affected.

The tool is based on two knowledge syntheses¹. These syntheses have identified principles for effective early childhood interventions across Canada. The tool introduces these principles and illustrates them with examples of interventions that have been evaluated. There are, of course, many effective and inspiring actions in Quebec; however, it was impossible to list them all in this tool. **We encourage early childhood stakeholders to share their success stories for further reflection and mobilization.**

The approach behind the tool

The tool was developed as part of the *Initiative concertée d'intervention pour le développement des jeunes enfants* (ICIDJE) working group, "Intervention Support" component. The ICIDJE also includes a "Survey" component, corresponding to the *Enquête québécoise sur le développement des enfants à la maternelle* (EQDEM) and the *Enquête québécoise sur le parcours préscolaire des enfants de maternelle* (EQPPEM)². These surveys measure and monitor the developmental status of Quebec children at the age of 5. For the development of this tool, early childhood professionals familiar with the EQDEM and EQPPEM were consulted to identify issues related to early childhood surveillance, promotion, and prevention. A consensus emerged on the main need of the various actors, namely support for reflection leading to the implementation of promising actions. The tool was discussed with respondents from various regions at different stages of the process to be as relevant as possible to the field.

¹ These syntheses can be consulted at www.inspq.qc.ca/developpement-des-jeunes-enfants

² Québec Survey of Child Development in Kindergarten (QSCDK) and Survey on the Preschool Path of Kindergarten Students (QSPPKS), respectively.

1

Acting on several ecological levels

What does this mean

According to Bronfenbrenner's model, which is widely used in early childhood, a variety of actions targeting several ecological levels should be implemented. These actions may be aimed directly at improving children's skills, but they may also target their families more indirectly. They may also involve the child's proximal living contexts, such as his or her daycare or school. Finally, they can be linked to more global interventions aimed at the child's community or society in general. In the latter case, the actions often fall under the heading of public policies.

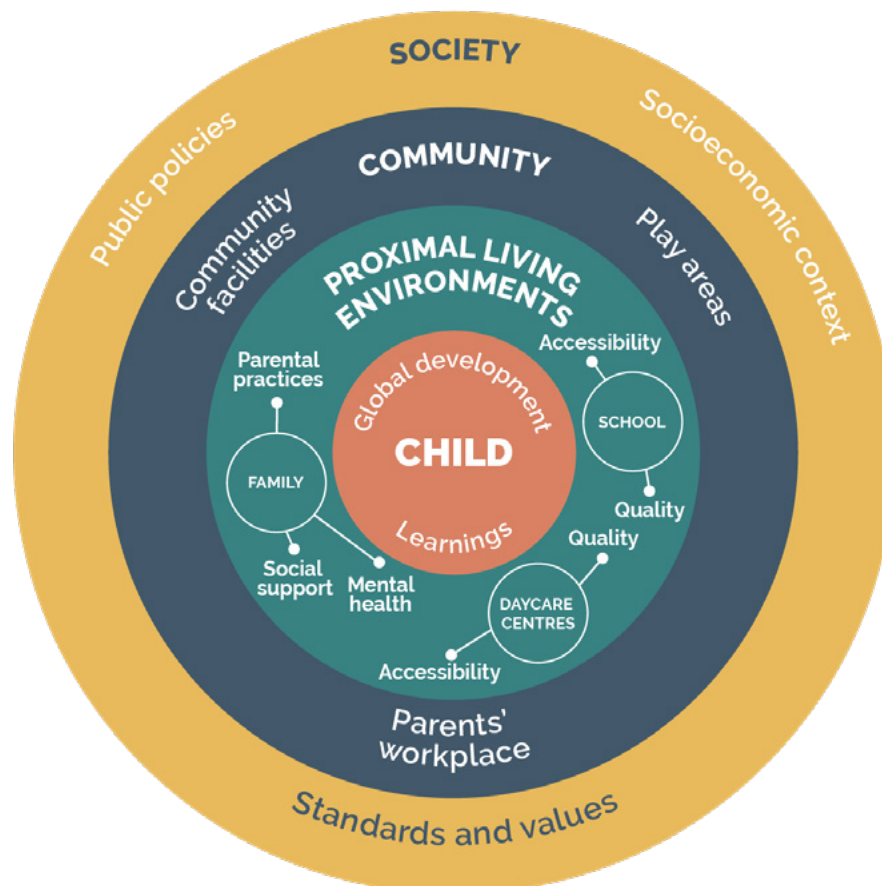
Why is this important?

Child-specific interventions can be effective, but sometimes fail to address some of the risk factors for developmental vulnerability, such as the family's socioeconomic conditions. Therefore, in order to ensure optimal child development, it is important to combine various types of actions targeting several ecological levels, all of which are complementary. Their interaction and combined effect are what makes them most effective.

Please note

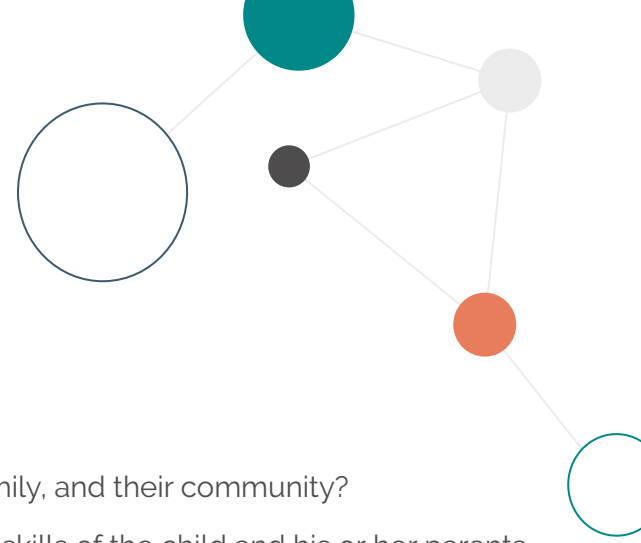
Aiming for actions at multiple ecological levels is the gateway to action from a public health perspective. The cooperation of different stakeholders at all levels is essential in such an approach.

An illustration of the different ecological levels



1

For more information



Some questions to ask yourself



- Are the actions aimed at the child, the family, and their community?
- Are actions taken not only to improve the skills of the child and his or her parents, but also to provide a developmentally appropriate environment for the toddler (e.g., quality daycare, spaces for playing)?
- Are there integrated programs, that is, with actions at different levels?
- Are there any public policies from which the child could benefit (e.g., reserved spaces in educational childcare services, financial support)?

An example of action

In Alberta, there is a “two generations” program that is an example of an integrated program. It was developed to address the problems of early intervention aimed only at children. The program involves the family in a significant way. The intervention includes access to an appropriate preschool environment for the child, as well as coaching for parents to improve their parenting skills and support network. The intervention also includes school bus transportation for the child, which facilitates access to the living environment, as well as the availability of healthy snacks. Finally, home visits to parents also promote access to support.

In relation to the surveys

The EQPPEM shows that children living in less secure neighbourhoods are more likely to be vulnerable in at least one area of development. Conversely, children who attended a library in the year prior to kindergarten were less likely to be vulnerable in a developmental area, even if the attendance was only a few times a month. These data support that children are influenced not only by their proximal living context, such as their family or daycare setting, but also by their community. Actions at the community level can therefore also be beneficial.

2

Acting according to proportionate universalism

What does this mean?

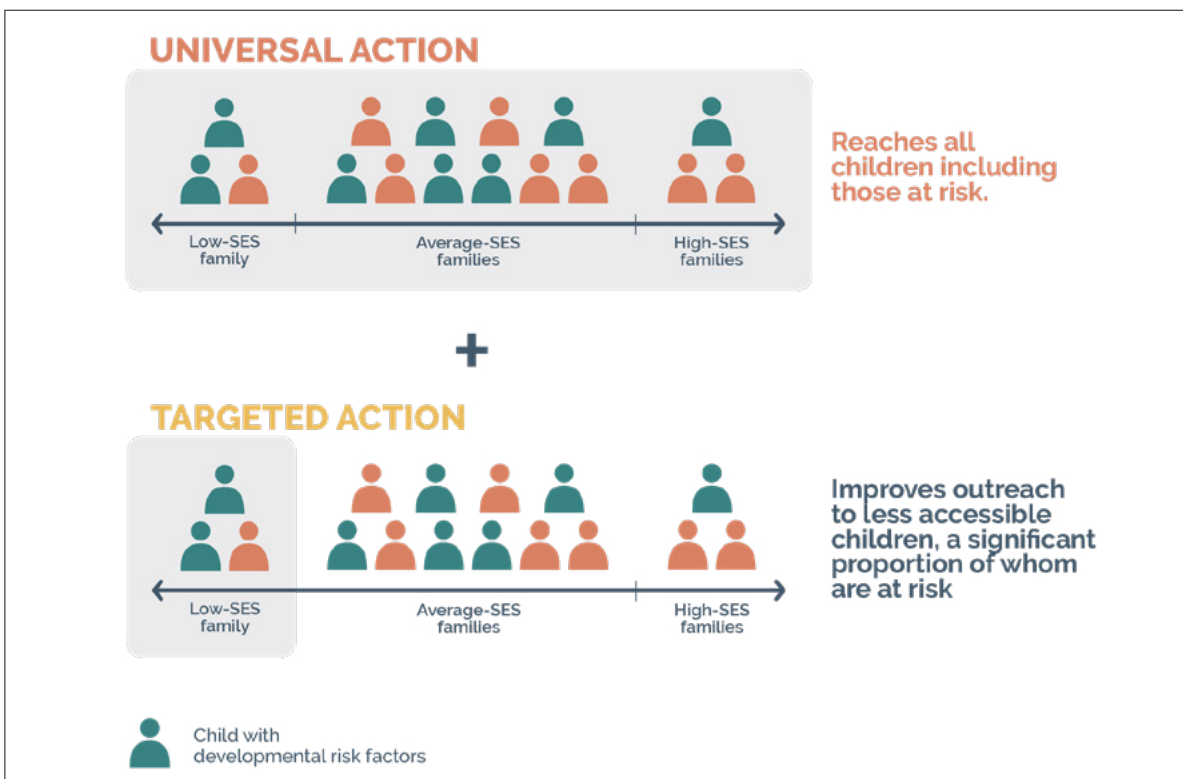
Certain factors increase the child's developmental vulnerability. For example, generally speaking, the more difficult a family's socioeconomic situation is, the more likely the child is to have developmental difficulties. With this in mind, it seems logical to target children from low socioeconomic status (SES) families. However, this will not reach all children, whether or not they are at risk of developmental vulnerability. From the perspective of preventing developmental problems, it is important to allow all children to be born and grow up in environments that are conducive to their development, regardless of whether they are at risk or not. Acting in accordance with the principle of proportional universalism involves offering both universal actions (meaning, for all) and targeted actions. In other words, it involves working with everyone, in ways and at levels that vary according to the disadvantage of the populations involved.

Why is this important?

Although children from low-SES families are proportionately more at risk for developmental vulnerability, children from average-SES families are also at some risk, and their numbers are greater. The same is true for other risk factors for developmental difficulties such as mental health problems among parents. Universal actions therefore benefit a large number of children who need them.

However, children with vulnerability factors are also often those who have the least access to services due to various barriers (e.g., high costs, lack of transportation, family mistrust), which is why it is important to tailor measures for them that take into account the broader context that plays a role in creating vulnerability.

An illustration of proportionate universalism





Some questions to ask yourself



- Is it possible to work with a large number of children, especially by ensuring that they have a supportive environment for their development?
- Do the actions in place target multiple children regardless of specific factors, including parents' socioeconomic or immigration status?
- Do some families face more barriers when accessing the actions in place? What can we do about these barriers?
- Are there additional resources (financial, material, human) to support children who are most at risk in terms of their development?

Two examples of actions

In Quebec, educational childcare services are universally available. They provide a living context that fosters child development. In publicly funded services, families pay a fixed basic fee for attendance. In non-subsidized daycare centres, families pay an additional fee that is reimbursed by the government. This increases access to daycare for a large number of families. Given that the most disadvantaged families have difficulty accessing services, particularly financial ones, one of the measures taken is to exempt recipients of Quebec's social assistance program from paying the basic contribution.

In Quebec and elsewhere, the Triple P – Positive Parenting Program, where implemented, allows all parents to attend training on positive parenting practices in order to reduce behavioural problems in children 0 to 12 years old. Various services are available following the general training, ranging from broad-based to highly targeted interventions

In relation to the surveys

In 2017, 33.7% of children in the most materially disadvantaged quintile were vulnerable in at least one area of development, compared with 23.2% of children in the most advantaged quintile, a significant difference. As such, it is true that children living in disadvantaged circumstances are at greater risk for developmental vulnerability overall. However, one must not forget that a majority of children in Quebec do not live in material disadvantage, as we must not overlook the fact that 23.2% is also a significant proportion.

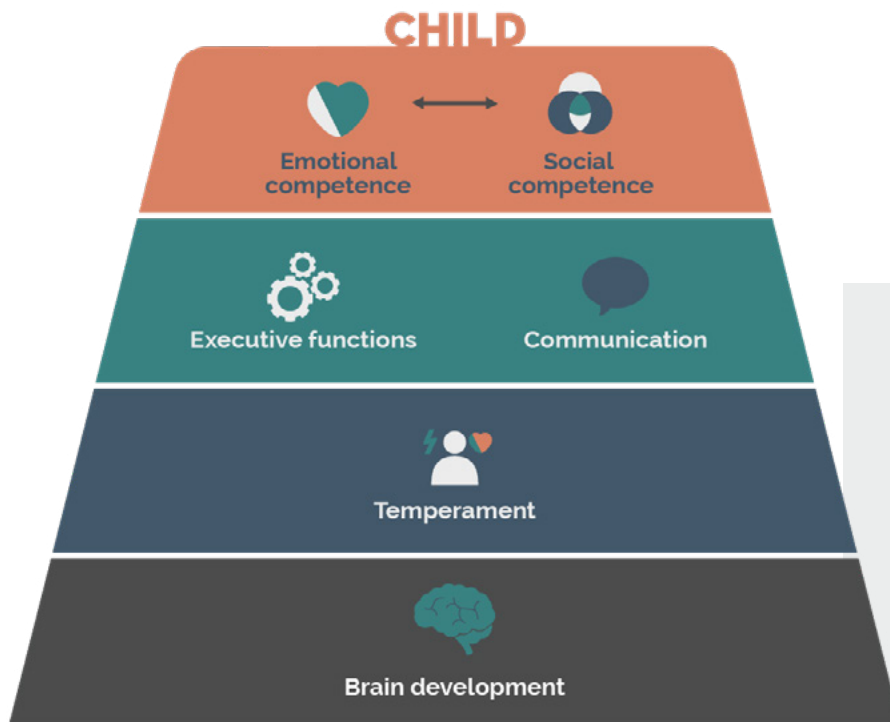
What does this mean?

During early childhood, the brain has a great plasticity, i.e., connections are formed, while others can be undone¹. The brain's plasticity influences the entire development of the toddler. In this sense, acting early (or precociously), while the child is as young as possible, opens a window onto a multitude of potential skills that are ready to emerge.

Why is this important?

Science indicates that early experiences significantly influence a child's brain development. A healthy and stimulating environment promotes optimal neurological development. Conversely, a lack of opportunities for play or difficult experiences at an early age hinders the consolidation of neural connections relevant to a toddler's overall development.

An illustration of how development is built very early, based on brain development²



Reading keys:

- Brain development between the ages of 0 and 6 is the foundation upon which a child's temperament is built, influencing the development of basic skills such as executive function and communication. These skills are involved in social and emotional competencies.

¹ Plasticity is present throughout life, but is most pronounced during early childhood.

² This figure is based on a tool developed by the INSPQ, which can be found at www.inspq.qc.ca/developpement-des-jeunes-enfants

Some questions to ask yourself



- Can actions be taken with very young children? Can they at least be part of a significant portion of the population targeted by these actions?
- Is it possible to raise awareness about brain development from 0 to 5 years old and the importance of acting early through interventions?
- Is it possible for some children to access early learning and childcare services before 18 months?
- Is there more support for parents when their children are very young?

An example of action

In Ontario, the Suzuki Early Childhood Education program is an intervention designed to foster social, emotional, and communication development in children as young as 6 months of age. It is based on parent-child dyads—as are many interventions for babies—and focuses on shared music (rhymes, lullabies). Parents are called to be attentive to their child's signs of pleasure and distress.

In relation to the surveys

The association between vulnerability and early stimulation is reflected in the EQPPEM data. For instance, the risk of vulnerability in one or more developmental areas was found to decrease significantly with the amount and frequency of stimulating activities in the year before kindergarten, such as parents reading aloud or telling stories to their child, or the child trying to read or flipping through books. This reminds us that early action is possible throughout early childhood.

4

Taking action with children, based on their developmental trajectory

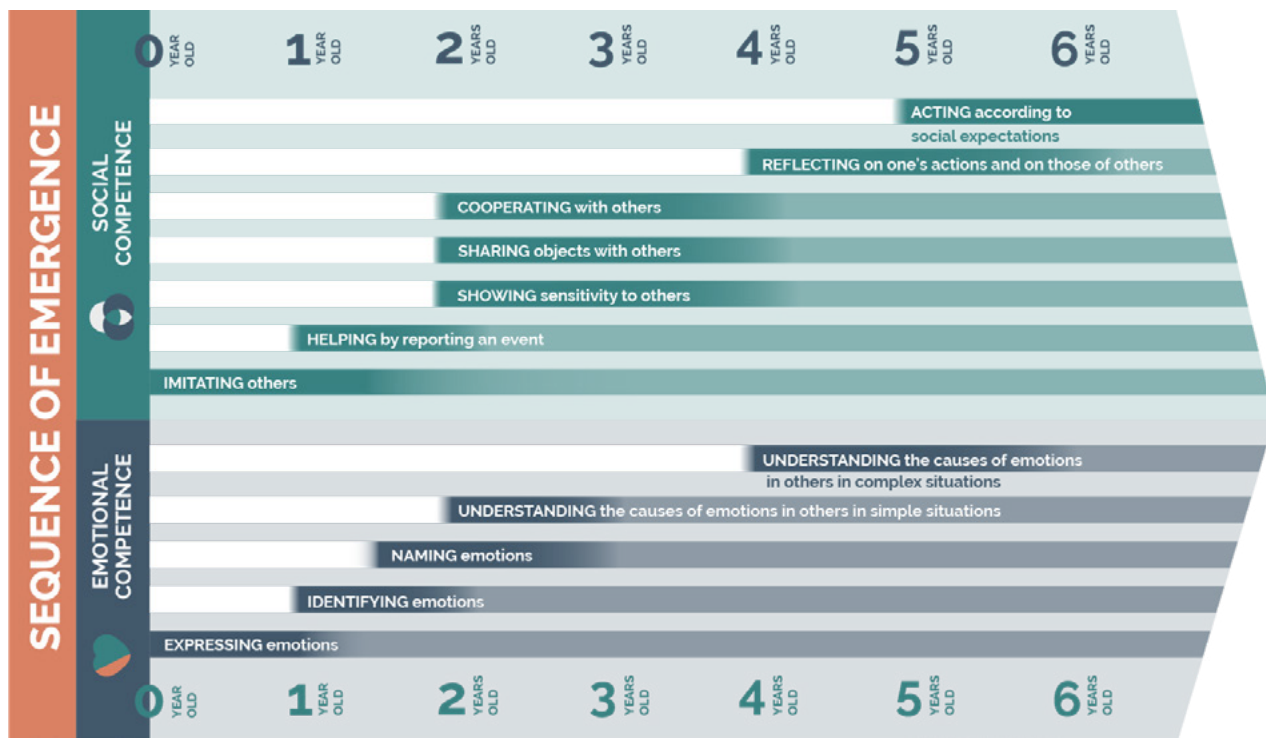
What does this mean?

Global development is based on the child's neurological development and personal characteristics, but it also follows the same stages in all children (with the exception of certain clinical populations). Thus, the developmental trajectory is the same for all children; only the age of skill acquisition varies.

Why is this important?

Knowing the developmental trajectory helps not only to have realistic expectations about the child's abilities, but also to anticipate upcoming milestones. This makes it possible to observe the child's development, by being vigilant to the periods of acquisition of the various skills, but also to the periods of their emergence. Ideally, a promising action should take into account the emergence of skills in the child, in order to promote their consolidation.

An illustration of the developmental trajectory for social and emotional competence¹



Reading keys:

- Each line represents an emotional or social competence.
- The dark colour represents the period of competence emergence, and the light colour represents the period of complexification.
- The periods of emergence are wide given the great degree of variability between children.
- The development of one competence enables the appearance of the next.
- Emotional and social competencies emerge in parallel and are reinforced.

¹ This figure is based on a tool developed by the INSPQ, which can be found at www.inspq.qc.ca/developpement-des-jeunes-enfants



Some questions to ask yourself



- Does the objective of the action take into account the developmental trajectory of the children?
- Are the expectations for children realistic, given their developmental trajectory?
- Can awareness of the importance of respecting developmental milestones be raised among adults involved with children? Are these developmental milestones well known to stakeholders?
- Are there tools for early childhood professionals to help them observe and support children with respect to the developmental trajectory?

An example of action

From the age of two, several social skills are emerging (e.g., demonstrating sensitivity to others, sharing objects, cooperating). In Quebec, Brindami, an intervention designed to promote the development of social skills in children starting at age two, is based specifically on this period of emergence. The intervention takes place in a daycare centre or a community organization for families, and relies on the use of a puppet who introduces himself as the children's friend and talks about behaviours that lead to positive social interactions.

In relation to the surveys

An age-related gradient is illustrated in the EQDEM. The youngest children at the time of the survey (less than 5 years and 9 months old) are more likely than older children (at least 6 years and 3 months old) to be vulnerable in at least one developmental area, as well as in the domains of physical health and well-being and cognitive and language development. These data suggest that children entering preschool are not all at the same point in the developmental trajectory, depending on their age.

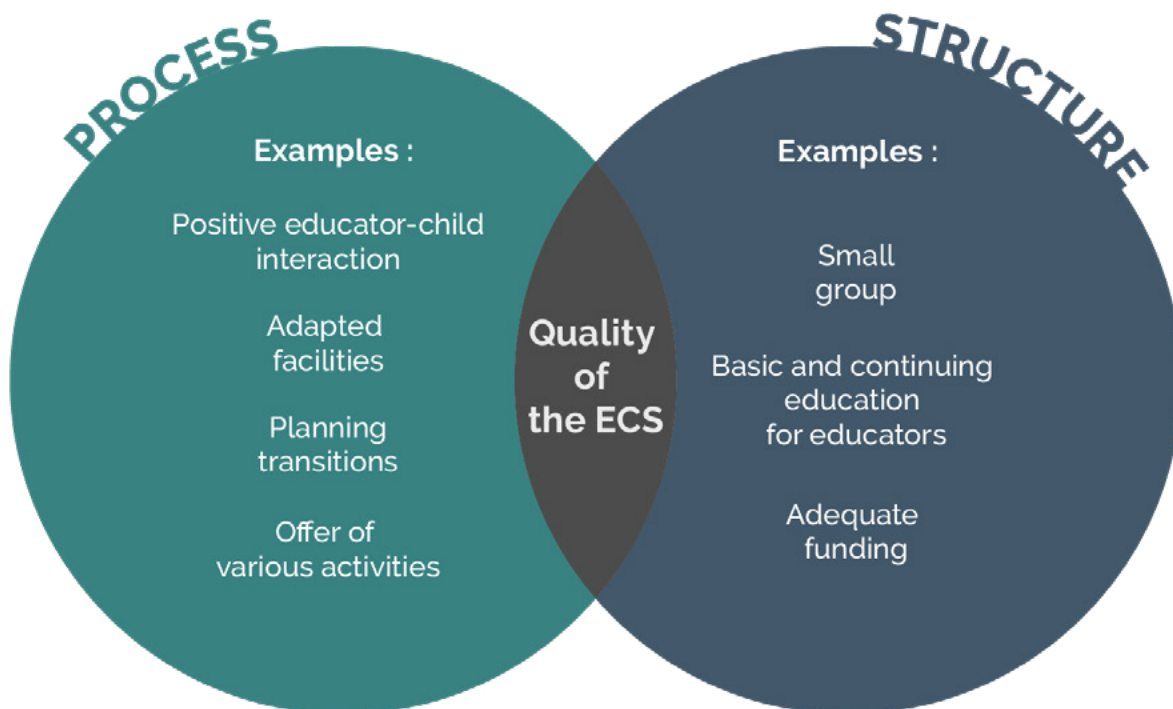
What does this mean?

The quality of the actions taken depends on several factors, which vary according to the type of action. For example, the quality of educational childcare services is not viewed in the same way as that of an intervention with families. In general, it is possible to reflect on the quality of actions by questioning their relevance in light of knowledge and evidence. For example, the pursuit of developmentally realistic expectations can contribute to the quality of an action. In addition, the quality of actions depends in large part on the staff responsible for them. Thus, knowledgeable and competent staff who maintain stable and sensitive relationships with families contribute to the quality of actions.

Why is this important?

While high-quality action can be effective in promoting child development, low-quality action can not only be ineffective, but can also be harmful. This fact reminds us of the need to reflect on the actions taken in terms of quality, and also to ensure an informal or formal evaluation of their effects on the child's development.

An illustration of the defining aspects of quality in educational childcare services





Some questions to ask yourself



- Are actions based on relevant knowledge of child development and principles?
- Is there an emphasis on training for those who work with children and families?
- Is special attention given to the quality of relationships between practitioners and families and/or children?
- Is problem-solving considered from the perspective of maintaining the quality of the actions?

An example of action

Making educational childcare services accessible to all is a potentially powerful action. However, studies suggest that these services are effective in fostering social-emotional development if they have high-quality characteristics. For example, attending a high-quality daycare in terms of processes (e.g., educator's style of intervention) is associated with the development of socially appropriate behaviours among children with difficult temperaments and among those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Conversely, attending a daycare of lower quality is associated with more behavioural difficulties among children with the same characteristics¹.

In relation to the surveys

There is some consensus about the benefits of children attending daycare, especially when it is of good quality. In addition, the effects appear to be greater for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The picture painted by the EQPPEM on children's preschool paths highlights differences in the risk of developmental vulnerability depending on the type of childcare used. Although the survey was not able to assess the quality of the services provided, it does highlight the importance of taking this into account and of considering certain aspects related to quality, such as the size of the daycare centre or the type of group.

¹ Burchinal et al., 2010 ; de Schipper et al., 2004, dans Bigras, N. et Lemay, L. et collaborateurs (2012). *Petite enfance, services de garde éducatifs et développement des enfants : État des connaissances*. Presses de l'Université du Québec, Québec.

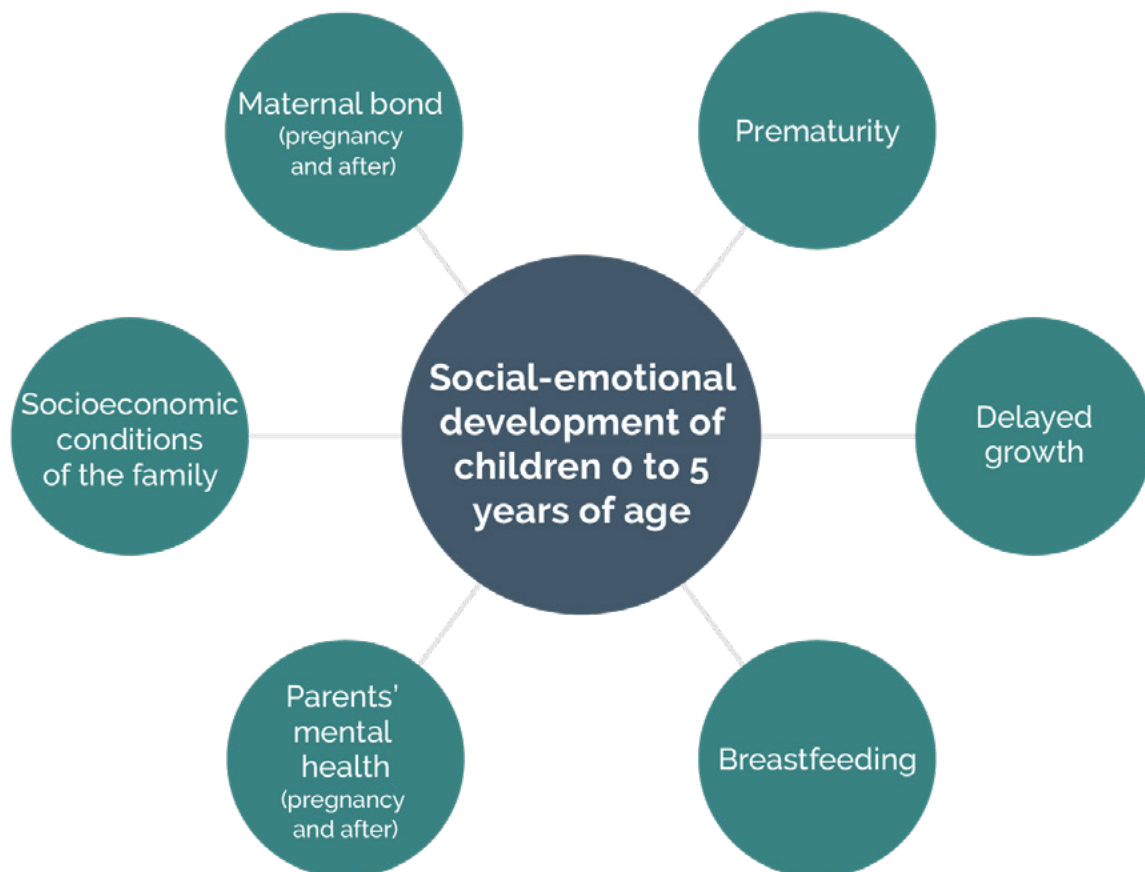
What does this mean?

Early childhood actions are often associated with interventions carried out during the period from 1 to 5 years of age. However, the perinatal period, including the time of pregnancy, constitutes a window of opportunity for the implementation of actions likely to promote the development of the child.

Why is this important?

Among other things, perinatal actions reduce the consequences of complications during pregnancy and childbirth, which can be associated with later developmental difficulties. Examples include low birth weight and prematurity. In addition, actions during pregnancy can help prepare parents for their role, and actions following delivery can, for example, promote the parents' attachment to their child. In short, perinatal actions are beneficial for the child, the parents, and the community.

An illustration of the factors associated with the social-emotional development of children from birth to 5 years of age that are related to the perinatal period



Some questions to ask yourself



- What do pregnant women need in terms of accompaniment and support, and how do existing services meet their needs?
- Is it possible to add actions for pregnant women and fathers-to-be to the existing service offer?
- Is it possible to help parents learn about parenting and co-parenting?
- Can certain actions, especially those aimed at supporting people experiencing significant difficulties (mental health problems, substance abuse, poverty, etc.), reach families during pregnancy and after delivery?
- Can awareness of the importance of the perinatal period be raised?

An example of action

In Manitoba, the Healthy Baby program is for pregnant women with an income of less than \$32,000 per year. It helps women connect with other parents and families and also with the various health professionals who can help them. It provides information on issues related to pregnancy and the role of being a parent. It also provides a monthly financial supplement.

In relation to the studies

Although not a direct causal link, EQPPEM data highlight an association between low birth weight and developmental vulnerability. Indeed, children with a birth weight of less than 2.5 kg are more likely to demonstrate vulnerability in a developmental area in preschool than children with a birth weight of more than 2.5 kg. This association underscores the importance of addressing risk factors in pregnancy, such as low birth weight, which can be related to the mother's diet, for example.

7

Acting on the child's global development

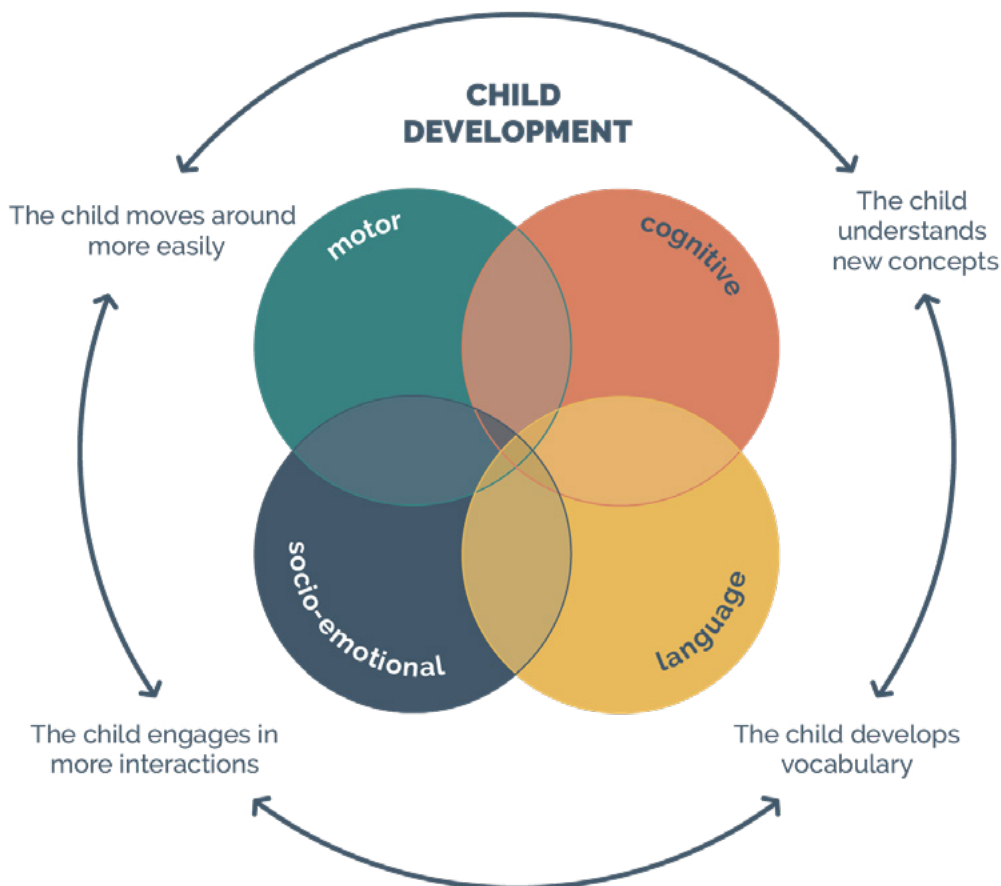
What does this mean?

The development of the child can be seen in different dimensions, namely motor, cognitive, language, and social-emotional aspects. Nevertheless, these aspects are evolving in an integrated and simultaneous way. An improvement in one sphere of development can help to an improvement in another sphere. For example, a child who has developed language can more easily name his or her emotions, which helps to regulate them. Thus, child development must be understood in a holistic way.

Why is this important?

To promote child development and prevent difficulties, the actions are designed to meet several needs of young children, which are associated with all dimensions of their development. Some interventions may have more targeted objectives (e.g., encouraging the improvement of social skills), but they should complement each other. Overinvesting in actions related to one sphere of development, to the detriment of another sphere, can be counterproductive because each sphere feeds off the others.

An example of global development



Some questions to ask yourself



- Are actions aimed at the child's global development often abandoned in favour of actions aimed at vulnerability in a specific area? How can interventions targeting the full range of development be prioritized in the service offering?
- Do the actions put in place offer the child a stimulating and varied environment in which all aspects of his or her development are stimulated (physical, motor, language, cognitive, socio-emotional)?
- Are the actions proposed by different professionals complementary and coherent? Does one area of development seem to be overinvested at the expense of another?
- Do early childhood professionals' tools (action plans, coaching tools, etc.) address all areas of development?
- Is it possible to raise awareness of the importance of promoting harmonious overall development, beyond the identification of specific difficulties?

An example of action

In British Columbia, a research initiative was undertaken to improve the outdoor design of two educational childcare service centres. For example, natural materials (e.g., plants, large rocks) or recycled materials (e.g., large tires) were used in the redesign of the playgrounds to encourage "risky" and "make-believe" play. These types of games can get children not only moving, but also thinking about their actions, verbalizing their ideas with each other, and building their self-esteem. By making the environment more conducive to quality play, the initiative was able to support the children's overall development in the daycare centres involved.

In relation to the surveys

The purpose of the EQDEM and EQPPEM is to provide useful data for monitoring the development of children in Quebec. Although these data are compiled from indicators in five developmental areas, they should not supplant the overall development view, whose composite vulnerability index is represented by the indicator, "vulnerable in at least one area of development." This indicator is monitored in the Quebec government's health prevention policy. The areas of discussion suggested by the surveys emphasize the importance of focusing on the child's overall development through coordinated action at different levels, as well as the establishment of national targets for reducing vulnerability in a comprehensive manner.

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The authors would like to thank the members of the “Intervention Support” working group from the *Initiative concertée d'intervention pour le développement des jeunes enfants* (ICIDJE), and practitioners for their feedback on the draft version of this tool.

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Legal Deposit – 2nd quarter 2023

Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec

ISBN: 978- 2- 550 -91802 -8 (French PDF)

ISBN: 978-2-550-94795-0 (PDF)

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