

Section 1 The On Track Guide

About this Guide

Background

The development of the On Track guide was guided by the principles that all children:

- ◆ Develop at their own pace
- ◆ Develop within the context of their families and communities

The On Track guide uses a strength-based, holistic approach and provides a tool to support:

- ◆ The healthy development of all children within their own pace and context
- ◆ Early identification of indicators that may put a child at risk
- ◆ Strategies to support children and those who work with and care for them as they access additional services, further assessment and interventions

Why use the On Track guide?

The purpose of this guide is to provide professionals who work with young children and families with some indicators of healthy child development from birth to six years of age. These indicators come from the five domains: social, emotional, physical, language, and cognitive and from other areas of development. If a child does not meet the expected milestones for his age range, further investigation is required, and a referral can be made to the appropriate specialist or program. In the past, a “wait and see” approach was often adopted due to the wide range of individuality in development. This approach resulted in children with developmental concerns being identified later and the loss of valuable time when brain development can be positively and fundamentally influenced.



The On Track guide is not to be used as an assessment tool, or to label or diagnose children. Early referrals can lead to early identification and early intervention by the appropriate professionals. In turn, this early intervention leads to more positive outcomes for children, such as less need for special education services, improved academic achievement, lower rates of grade retention and higher rates of school completion. A “wait and see” approach is not an acceptable alternative, as a delay in support can translate into increasingly profound delays in a child’s development.

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What to expect in the On Track Guide

The On Track guide aims to create a culture, focused on enhancing and supporting the healthy development of children. It provides information and tools to assist each professional in his observation of the child. It encourages professionals to connect children and their families to community resources and, if needed, to appropriate services. The guide assists professionals in making sure that children stay on track in their development even when risk factors are present.

The On Track guide offers:

- ◆ Information about factors that influence a child's development
- ◆ The continuum of healthy child development grouped into domains within an ages and stages approach
- ◆ A list of signs of atypical development
- ◆ Information on play as the central activity through which a child learns and reinforces his developing skills
- ◆ Information about children's safety and well-being, including how to recognize signs of maltreatment
- ◆ Questions, answers and resources that help support caregivers
- ◆ Links to local services and contact information

Acknowledgements

The On Track guide assists professionals in supporting healthy development in all children through a strength-based approach. The development of this comprehensive reference guide required the dedication and support of many experts who work with young children and families. We want to acknowledge the advisory committee and the authors of the Red Flags reference guides for their impressive work and contributions to the On Track guide.

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The On Track guide was also reviewed in part and as a whole by topic and practice experts. They provided valuable information on content related to accuracy and usability of the final version. We thank the reviewers for their thoughtful and timely input.

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We would also like to thank the professionals working with young children, who provided feedback through surveys and field testing, during the planning and implementation stages of this guide.

Disclaimer

On Track - Supporting Healthy Child Development and Early Identification in the Early Years: A Reference Guide for Professionals in Ontario is designed to support professionals who work with young children.

For the purpose of this resource the use of the terms ‘he, him and his’ and ‘she, her and hers’ were used interchangeably to be inclusive.

The goal of the resource is to:

Support professionals by providing specific strategies and information to:

- ◆ Support and promote healthy development in all children
- ◆ Make sound decisions regarding when a child could benefit from additional support or services
- ◆ Facilitate child and parent referrals to the appropriate local children’s service for advice, screening, assessment and/or treatment

The On Track guide is not a formal screening or diagnostic tool for children, families and professionals. It is not to be used to diagnose or label a child. It is intended to support professionals working with children from zero to six years of age.

This guide cannot substitute for the advice and/or treatment of professionals trained to properly assess the development and progress of young children. Although this document may help one decide when to seek professional help, the information contained in this document should not be used to diagnose or treat perceived developmental limitations and/or other health care needs.

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September 2015

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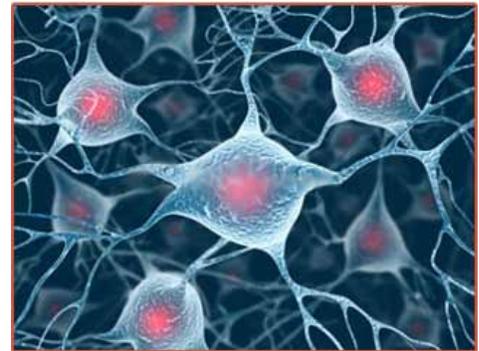
Importance of the Early Years

Early child development sets the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health. The experiences children have in early childhood shape the brain and the child's capacity to learn, to get along with others and to respond to daily stresses and challenges.

Early Brain Development

There are some important concepts that help us understand early brain development:

- ◆ Beginning in the last trimester of the prenatal period, brain pathways are formed by developing new connections. This growth increases after birth and follows a predictable sequence (McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).
- ◆ At birth, newborns start with very similar brains and brain structures.
- ◆ There are “sensitive periods” during a child's development, when the wiring of the brain for specific abilities is established (Couperus & Nelson, 2006).
- ◆ Providing responsive, nurturing and stimulating experiences establishes the wiring of the brain connections. Children who are well supported and nurtured physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually will develop a multitude of neural connections that will serve them well throughout their life course.
- ◆ A child's interest and curiosity are the motivators that create new connections to acquire new skills. Each new skill builds on a skill already learned. (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Miller & Keating, 1999; Posner & Rothbart, 2006; Shanker, 2008). The child's environment can support and enhance his interest and curiosity.
- ◆ Early brain development establishes a child's social competence, cognitive skills, emotional well-being, language, literacy skills and physical abilities, and is a marker for well-being in school and life resiliency (Blair, 2002; Posner & Rothbart, 2006; Shanker & Greenspan, 2009).



Visit: www.HealthyBabyHealthyBrain.ca to view videos that will help parents support their baby's brain development.

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Self-regulation

- ◆ Self-regulation is the critical, interlocking component of social, emotional, language, cognitive and physical domains of development.
- ◆ Early experiences shape early brain development and set the stage for the acquisition of self-regulation skills.
- ◆ Self-regulation is a child's growing ability to regulate his emotion, behaviour and attention. This characterizes his growth from a helpless newborn to a competent child. By the time a child is four or five years old he has established basic voluntary regulatory systems to adapt his emotions, behaviour and attention according to the situation.
- ◆ This ability is the foundation for the skills needed to plan and problem-solve, understand others' intentions, emotions, desires or beliefs, interpret behaviour and regulate social interactions. The regulation of attention is essential for a child's learning disposition and habits, such as persistence, curiosity and confidence (Shanker, 2010).
- ◆ The child's environment and interactions can promote or hinder the brain activity where self-regulation skills are developed. Adults can seek out opportunities to enhance a child's strengths and build strategies to address challenges.

Tuning into Toddlers, a three-part DVD series on parenting toddlers and building their emotional regulation explores the topic further. Visit: www.attachmentnetwork.ca/shop/tuning-toddlers-dvd

Resilience

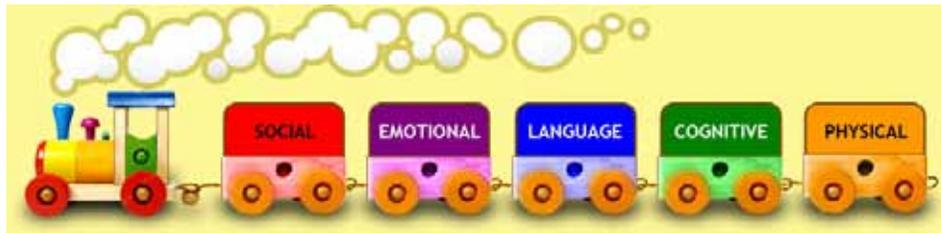
- ◆ Resilience is the ability to cope with and bounce back from a challenge, and then thrive.
- ◆ Resilience is something that is built throughout one's lifespan, and parents are instrumental in helping to build their child's resilience.
- ◆ The following factors support the building of a child's resilience:
 - A secure bond with a caring adult
 - Relationships with positive role models
 - Opportunities to learn skills
 - Opportunities to participate in meaningful activities
- ◆ Resilient people are healthier and live longer; happier in their relationships; more successful in school and work; and less likely to get depressed.

For more information on resilience in children refer to *Building Resilience in Young Children: Booklet for parents of children from birth to six years*.
www.beststart.org/resources/hlthy_chld_dev/pdf/BSRC_Resilience_English_fnl.pdf

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Domains of Development

Human development is complex and all aspects are interconnected. Yet, in most texts and writings, early human development has been artificially divided into developmental domains. This categorization can assist professionals in ensuring that all areas of the child's development are observed and supported, thus furthering his whole development. Professionals must keep in mind that all domains or areas of development are interconnected. For example, learning to talk is usually placed in the language domain, but involves physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. In this resource, children's development has been grouped into the following domains:



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Early Learning

In the past decade, there has been considerably more interest and investment in the early years both in Canada and abroad. By supporting young children and families now, society will benefit later with “healthy, educated, confident and productive adults” (Expert Panel on the 18 Month Well Baby Visit, p. 2). Dr. Charles Pascal’s report, *With Our Best Future in Mind* (2009), provides Ontario with an action plan to implement a comprehensive vision for investing in the early years. His report can be found at: www.ontario.ca/en/initiatives/early_learning/ONT06_018876.

Supporting early learning is based on the following facts and premises:

- ◆ Children are cared for as their families provide nutrition, shelter, nurturing, stimulation and protection. The care they receive enables them to learn and develop to their full potential with increasing influence from the world outside the family.
- ◆ Parents want to understand how their child develops and learns. Prenatal and parenting classes, drop-in programs, home visiting and many other opportunities can be explored to support parents from various cultural, educational, geographic and socio-economic backgrounds.
- ◆ High-quality child care settings and preschool education improve children’s developmental outcomes. Two longitudinal studies, the High/Scope Perry Preschool project and the Carolina Abecedarian project, compared children who received high-quality, early-years programs with children who did not. When comparing the two groups of children over several decades, key differences emerged. The children who received the quality program scored higher on language, literacy and numeracy tests throughout their schooling; finished more years of school; and had higher rates of employment (Campbell & Pungello, 2000; Schweinhart, 2004). In Canada, Quebec has developed an educational program adapted from the High/Scope model that fosters full and holistic development of children through an evidence-based curriculum and has demonstrated positive results (Gouvernement du Québec, 1998). Other studies have also found that participation in quality early childhood education and care settings has been positively linked to child outcomes such as improved language, literacy and numeracy development, school readiness and social skills (Barnett, 1995, 2004; Barnett, Lamy & Jung, 2005; Berlinski, Galiani & Gertler, 2006; Boethel, 2004; Magnusen et al., 2004; McCall, Larsen & Ingram, 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Ziegler & Styfco, 2003).



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- ◆ Parent participation in early childhood education and care settings not only improves children’s development (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004; Mustard 2006), but also strengthens families and parenting skills through connecting and sharing with other families (Gordon, 2005; Wilson, 2006). When parent and family involvement is planned into the early childhood education and care setting, and relationships between professionals and family members are built on trust and respect, the greatest benefits are reaped (Bernhard, Freire & Mulligan, 2004; Gonzalez-Mena, 2005). Clearly, when children have access to quality early childhood environments and experiences, it can set the stage for positive trajectories later on in life.

Holistic Concept of Healthy Child Development



There are many interrelated factors which influence a child’s overall healthy development. Education, health, social status, access to quality health and social services, housing, access to stimulating early learning environments, adequate nutrition, clean water and a secure and nurturing parent-child relationship all play a role (see Section 2, Developmental Health). Given the importance of the early years in shaping a child’s brain development, every child has a right to an enriched and supportive environment in order to reach his full potential.

To meet the needs of children and families, an integrated and holistic approach to service delivery is essential.

Families of young children need access to health care, quality and affordable childcare, parenting supports and education within their local community. The concept of a ‘community hub’ is not a new one. More than a decade ago, McCain & Mustard (1999) called for centres which operate using “a ‘hub and spoke’ model” (p. 17), to provide “seamless supports and access to early intervention for families in need” (p. 17). In a few communities, this holistic, seamless approach has been used with success (e.g., Toronto First Duty sites, integrated Best Start sites). But the goal of “An integrated continuum of early child development and parenting centres to serve all Ontario children” (McCain & Mustard, 1999) is still a work in process.

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In keeping with this holistic approach to service delivery, care must be taken to address the needs of the whole child. Within this holistic concept of healthy child development, paying attention to the social, emotional, physical, cognitive and language domains of each child's development serves as a guide for professionals to ensure all areas of a child's development are included. The On Track guide also contains information about a child's sensory, aesthetic and ethical or moral development.

Although children's development follows a sequence, there are many variations within the continuum of development. Children develop skills at similar ages and stages, but there are many growth spurts in a child's development. With these peaks and valleys in growth, some children may reach some developmental milestones earlier than others. Every child is different and unique, and the environment in which each child develops is also different and unique. Through careful and regular observation, professionals working with young children can monitor the child's development over time.

The Importance of Observation

As a child's development occurs on a continuum, the most effective and comprehensive way to assess children is through observation. Observation is "the process through which data are gathered about a child's overall development, learning styles, interests, attitudes, and behaviours" (Vaclavik, Wolanski & Wannamaker, 2001, p. 10). Its use is endorsed by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2006). Jablon, Dombro & Dichtelmiller (2007) describe observation as "an ongoing cycle of asking questions; watching, listening, and taking notes; reflecting; and responding" (p. 93).



Through careful observation of children, some atypical patterns of development may arise. By using the information in the On Track guide, professionals may be alerted to some concerns in a child's development and provide additional support to the child and family. These concerns should be followed up with the appropriate referral, which may then lead to early identification of a specific difficulty and subsequent early intervention. Some services can be accessed without a formal referral; others may require a referral from the child's primary health care provider. In some cases, the professional may want to consult with a particular specialist (e.g., physiotherapist, speech/language pathologist, psychologist, psychiatrist, paediatrician, occupational therapist, child protection worker) for either additional information or a referral.

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Referral is the first and most important step to supporting children and families when concerns arise. As a professional, your role may include:

- ♦ Writing a referral
- ♦ Encouraging parents to seek a referral from the appropriate specialist or program
- ♦ Supporting parents through the process of obtaining a referral

Parent engagement has been identified as an important element in supporting healthy child development and is linked to improved outcomes. At any level, professionals working with young children will also be working with parents. This is particularly important when supporting a family through the identification of an atypical developmental pattern and the resulting referral. Section 6, Frequently Asked Questions, has been dedicated to supporting parents and professionals.

