

Meeting Learning Challenges: Working With Children Who Have Developmental Delays

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Although I intend to work with every child in the best way I know how, I'm aware that some developmental delays can go unnoticed because they are hard to detect. What signs should look for, and what can I do to help children in my group who may have some of these delays?

Delays occur in many different areas of development. Let's look at four of the most common.

Language Delays

One of the most common developmental delays of early childhood is in the area of language development. A preschool child who speaks very little or in single words or phrases rather than full sentences, or who isn't responding to "why" questions, is easily recognized as having a problem. It's also easy to detect a child who's having trouble being understood because of mild articulation difficulties. However, a child who is talking up a storm and using complex sentences but has a hard time responding to what other people are saying has a problem that is less obvious.

Before deciding what to do about a particular child's language problem, consider which form of delay is involved. Preschoolers should be able to have a nice two-way conversation and answer all the "w" questions (who, what, why, where). An adult should not have to work too hard to have seven or eight exchanges. If this isn't happening, consider whether it's because the child can't express himself, doesn't understand what you're saying, or doesn't speak clearly enough to be understood.

Practice Builds Skill

Once you have identified the problem area, begin working with the child by giving him lots of extra practice in that area. For example, if a child is good at talking but has a hard time following instructions or answering questions, play games that involve following simple directions: "Please go to the art table and bring a crayon to me." It's helpful to integrate the practice into the child's daily routine, designing the games around things the child is interested in. If you don't see significant progress from practicing, whether it is for receptive or expressive language or articulation, I suggest that you call in a speech pathologist.

Motor Delays

While problems with motor skills are also common, they may not be as obvious as many of the language delays. The child who has markedly low muscle tone, who has a hard time walking, running, and skipping, and who is often tired is not hard to spot. But it is more difficult to detect a problem in a child who is active and energetic but a bit uncoordinated. This is a child who seems to enjoy running, jumping, and skipping, who might enjoy paper-and-pencil tasks, and is even good at picking up his cereal or putting beads on a string. The key things to look for include how well he performs coordinated actions such as throwing and catching a ball, or hopping three times on one leg and then three times on the other. By age 3 to 5, you should see the child gradually improving in his ability to throw, catch, and hop, first on one leg and then on the other. If the child is still lagging behind in these areas, it suggests that he needs a little extra practice. Also be aware of how the child handles fine-motor activities. Can he hold a pencil in the proper way? Can he make lines? Can he make an X? Is he making circles? Is he improving at making squares and triangles as he goes from age 3 to 5? A child who is lifting the crayon or the pencil or holding it properly but is painstakingly crafting his lines is probably delayed in the fine-motor area.

Games for Motor Development

Again, the first step in working with motor delays is to provide more practice. If the child has trouble throwing or catching, get a large, soft ball and play dodgeball games with it. Don't make it seem like work. Just allow the child the pleasure of throwing, catching, kicking, and hitting it away.

If the child is having trouble with alternating movements, such as going up and down stairs or hopping, try lots of games where you repeat movement patterns. To improve fine-motor skills, get a big pencil or a big, thick crayon (which is easy to hold) and play scribble games that encourage creative drawing. You can also try copycat games that challenge the child to draw circles and squares.

If, despite all the practice, progress still seems to be lagging, you may want to bring in an occupational therapist who can help with additional exercises and decide whether to work with the child directly.

Visual/Spatial Delays

There is a third important area of developmental delay-visual/spatial thinking. A child may have appropriate language skills but, she gets lost because she has a poor sense of direction. This is a child who keeps going to the wrong door to get places. She may not be able to find toys when they've been misplaced. In addition to affecting children's thinking and problemsolving abilities, difficulty in this area can directly affect self-esteem. If children are constantly feeling lost, they're going to be very insecure and anxious.

Once again, the first helpful step is to provide practice. Try treasure hunt or hide-and-go-seek games. Then, as children master these, move on to activities that include copying shapes or reproducing towers.

Sensory Delays

There is a fourth important delay seen in some young children. This delay involves modulating the senses. Some children are overreactive to certain sound frequencies, such as motorized sounds or high-pitched noises. Bright lights or a light touch will bother others. Children who are either excessively or insufficiently sensitive to different sensations can have a hard time in the world. For example, they may experience another child accidentally brushing up against them as an assault. When the noise level gets high, they may feel overloaded and overwhelmed.

It's helpful to pinpoint difficulties in this area early and to gradually expose the child to the sensations that are hard for him to tolerate. If you give the child a lot of control over the sensory environment, he can, for example, play music but make it go loud or soft or super-soft. With a dimmer switch, a light-sensitive child can play with bright and soft lights. Children who are insufficiently reactive often tend to crave sensation and seek it out by running into everyone and everything. Here you can play running games. By inviting children to run fast, slow, and super slow, you are teaching them to experience sensations but in a very controlled and regulated way.

All four areas of possible delay are likely to affect learning. In school, children have to be able to interact and answer questions. They have to be able to take in information and process it. Both language and motor skills have an impact on their ability for self-expression. We can't talk without controlling muscles around the mouth and tongue. To write, we need good control of our arm and hand muscles. And, in order to understand how one step follows another when doing a problem, we need motor-planning skills. Learning also draws on visual/spatial skills that allow our understanding of concepts such as bigger, smaller, higher, lower. With practice and perseverance, you can reduce the potential negative effects of these common delays on the growth and development of young children.