

Episode: 17**Title: Child Development: Understanding the Bigger Picture****Hosts: Mahek Bansal & Larissa Ferrari****Mahek Bansal**

Hi, everyone. Welcome back to the new PossibilOTs podcast. Larissa and I are super happy to be with you again. Today we are starting our first series on the podcast. So Larissa and I thought it would be fun to have a few episodes under a series that are all related to an overall topic, so that it gives us an opportunity to go a little bit more in detail into the topic and share our experiences and hear from you as well. So our first series, we thought we would start with just understanding the pediatric population. We're paediatric OTs, and in order to do what we have to do, we need to have a good understanding of the people that we work with.

We are going to start by talking about child development, but we want to have an understanding of the bigger picture of child development because I think it's easy to know the milestones or know the developmental targets. There are lots of checklists and things like that out there, but I think as OTs, we need to have that bigger picture understanding of where this information fits in our scope and our clinical reasoning and how we use this information to guide our OT process.

Larissa Ferrari

That was a great introduction, Mahek, and I think that's it. I think we can find this information in a lot of places, and they're valuable for everyone - parents, paediatricians, physiotherapists, teachers, and everyone. So how in OT, we can use this valuable information, data that has been collected, like, for years in research, but apply it to our setting, is that it? Is that the only thing we have to look? Or is that thing that we should look beyond in our clinical reasoning to support our little ones? I guess that's the main thing we wanted to discuss today and talk about.

Mahek Bansal

Exactly. Like we said, there are lots of resources available for child development, so we can probably link some of them with our episode. But we're not going to necessarily go into what the milestones are. We're thinking more about how the milestones are important for us and how we use them as OTs. But when we talk about child development, what we're talking about is the cognitive, the social, the emotional regulation, the speech and language, physical skills, sensory awareness, all of these developmental areas and how they sequence and develop in children. It applies to the whole lifespan, but as pediatric OTs, we're talking more zero to 18. As OTs, we are experts in understanding the holistic picture of a family. So the environment, the client, the family, and the occupations.

When we think about child development, we also need to think about it in those same factors. We need to think about - yes, we have an understanding of this is a typical sequence of child development, but we also need to understand, look at it from the picture, then, of the client that we're supporting and how these factors, their meaningful occupation, their environment, and the people who they are and the people around them, how does this impact what child development might look like for them?

Larissa Ferrari

Yes, great observation. And I think it, from my point of view, is not looking straight away to

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where they're at in the child development, like in reaching milestones, but maybe start from what's the family main concerns in their life. And again, like you said, considering the culture, the context of their life, the stage of the life they're at, and then understanding the performance and the participation, and then linking back to what research and what these books and everything that we learn when we are in uni. What components of these milestones might be affecting participation? So it's almost like getting information from parents, from teachers, if there are any, other member families, if it's important, if they have shared participation in raising that child, how the child's performing the task, what's the home, what's the environment?

Where should they be sitting when they eat, when they play, how they play, how the family is involved in this play. And once we have the bigger picture of the function, then we can use this data of child milestones to help us.

Mahek Bansal

Definitely. And I think from what you're saying, Larissa, is that child development looks different with every client, and what's expected for that child looks different. And that's, from what you've already mentioned, is their environment, their culture, their family practices. And there's no right or wrong. It's just different. And that's okay. And as our job is to understand the differences and to support this client and their family in what's meaningful for them, rather than having these sort of checklists to impose on what their routine and structure is like.

So I think understanding those factors that can impact child development or the functional output of child development is really important for us so that when we are starting to work with a family, we can use these as, oh, okay, there might be a cultural difference here, or we can start flagging these things and having it in the back of our minds to support our clinical reasoning. I guess the other things that might impact child development could be things like trauma, could be things in their past experiences or even the family's past experiences. Trauma has a really big impact on child development. And even things that have happened in our society, like COVID. COVID had a really big impact on child development.

Children who couldn't have the same level of social interaction or social opportunities, who weren't maybe able to have the same sensory awareness because they were at home a lot of the time, or that sort of back and forth interaction supports so much around play and language and things like that. So all of these things can impact child development. And it just means that we need to meet the child at where they're at and look at what's important to the child and family

Larissa Ferrari

The environment as well. For example, as you said, COVID, their relationship with school, when they were at school age, during COVID that was a big impact. And then now going back to school again, as you said, I can't compare them to children who were going to school for a whole year. I have to understand where they're at and what's expected and where we can go from, so we can navigate towards good performance, good experiences in participation, and to be as functional as they can. Even, as you said, like minor things, like their emotional development, their tolerance to sensory input, all these things, they can

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impact all of our functions so much, our ability to hold our posture when we're seated, our ability to make friends, to maintain friendship.

So there's so many things involved in these underlying difficulties that can seem really minor, but they actually impact child development. But there's a way we can navigate through this.

Mahek Bansal

And as we know about child development, a lot of early development can have big impacts later on. And that's where our ability to gather information and put pieces together is really important as OTs, because we might see be seeing a child who's 12,15 years old, but we still need to maybe ascertain what happened or what their picture looked like as an infant or a toddler, because things that could have happened in that time might have had a really big impact on their child development as well. So I think understanding, we have this information that is really important and really helpful in terms of understanding the pediatric population, but we need to have a bigger picture around this, of where it fits within our whole clinical reasoning, where it fits within our scope and our process, and how we use these developmental milestones.

Larissa, it might be helpful to talk about the purpose of these milestones. I think we've sort of touched on it a little bit, but why are these milestones so important? And I think even more recently, milestones have been communicated to so many people, as you said, parents and different health professionals and educators, as a way of flagging concerns almost. So it might be good to talk about what really is the purpose of these milestones for the wider community.

Larissa Ferrari

Yeah, that's great, I hope what people understood until now is that they are part of our clinical reasoning. It's not that we do not consider them, they are just part of a bigger picture in our clinical reasoning as occupational therapists. But they have a big and very wonderful purpose, which is, as you already mentioned, the first one we could flag concerns allied health professionals, for example, or even teachers, because they are involved in a big group of kids. Let's use this word that I don't like that much, but it is a good word.

Teachers kind of understand the "norm" range, so in the child development, they understand that not every child goes in the same pace and they develop in the same pace, but there is kind of a norm a range that is considered a norm when there's something going a little bit out of this norm. We could start flagging some concerns and then find appropriate strategies or support or investigate what might be the triggering cause for this. It could be a delay or it could be the opposite. It could be that the child's expecting even more than what's within that range. So I think you already mentioned the first one, so flagging some concerns, and.

Mahek Bansal

I think for parents as well. Parents are awesome at understanding their child in and out, understanding their child's needs and naturally accommodating their lives and their environment to the supports their child needs without necessarily having a full health background or a pediatric background. But they're just so attuned to their children, which is

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amazing. The purpose of the developmental milestones is another way to reference for them that it's hard if they've got an only child or it's their first child of what is this expected development. So it's a way for parents to have a bit of an understanding and seek early intervention to support them and their child, because as we know, the sooner we can support, the quicker we can support this family.

That's where the developmental milestones can be really helpful for parents. Interestingly, I had a conversation with mum of one of my clients who was here in Australia or in New South Wales. Actually, I'm not sure about outside of New South Wales, but in New South Wales, parents for children who are born here are given what they call a blue book, and it's got all the developmental milestones and they can put their vaccinations and things like that in there. And this parent was saying to me like how it's amazing that they have this blue book and they can use the blue book with their GP and their paediatrician and check in every time and get a great understanding.

But then her child didn't meet the developmental milestones, but there was no blue book now of what is expected of her neurodiverse child. So it was a good way to, open my eyes of the importance of these developmental milestones for parents and for parents to support their child. But again, how things can impact on what we are referencing as typical child development.

Larissa Ferrari

Adding to what you just said, Mahek, when we have on the other side parents that are very attuned to developmental milestones and they have neurodiverse children, I guess it's then up to us to help them to see the trajectory of the child. It might not be reaching all the expected milestones, but they might be going in a good trajectory of achieving some other milestones or to improve their independence, their functional participation, or to guide them to incorporate some activities during the day that is supporting their development and also that positive way of looking where the child is at and how they're developing.

Because I think both when you don't know what to expect, but when you know a lot about what to expect, but you're not seeing these things happening, they both can cause bit of anxiety or worries. So I guess we can support them in both sides of this scenario.

Mahek Bansal

Exactly. I feel like those are probably the main purposes of the developmental milestone and as you sort of just touched on the other is supporting expectations. And I think you sort of just started talking about that supporting the expectations of the people around their children of what they should be achieving or where they're at and understanding their trajectory, even if it might look different or it might be impacted on whatever factors, by whatever factors.

Our role is to support the expectations of the parents and the carers and the people around this child, because while they might not be meeting what is typical, it's still us then supporting them to understand, as you said, the trajectory of where this child's at, what their meaningful goal is or their occupation is, and how we can use what we know about child development to support them in achieving that.

Larissa Ferrari

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As occupational therapists, just maybe going back a few topics that we already mentioned, but I think it's really important when we understand how this child development is linked with performance and functional goals, because I guess that's when we can support the parents with their expectation. They might say, oh, my child is not doing that. And that's expected for the age. But you're like, look, they do that so they can perform this type of task and we are getting there. We are getting independent in that function. So I think it's easier for them to see that crawling is good. Yes, it's great. But why do we crawl? What activities will it support? So when we have this type of conversation with parents and help them to understand these things, I think it helps to manage their expectations as well.

Mahek Bansal

Exactly. So I think we might stop there for this episode. And if you're interested, then wait a couple of weeks for our next episode where we'll continue this conversation, but a little bit more related to our clinical reasoning, how we use child development in clinical reasoning. And hopefully we can give some examples as well from our experiences. But thank you so much for listening. And if you have any thoughts or comments or questions or anything like that, please feel free to connect and share with us. We'd love to hear from you, but until our next episode, bye.