Why learn about child development?

A solid understanding of milestones and developmental pathways across each domain of children’s development can benefit child care providers in several ways. The National Association for the Education of Young Children, in their Position Statement principles that should guide early childhood professional practice, explain,

“Knowledge of how children within a given age span typically develop and learn provides a general framework to guide teachers in preparing the learning environment, considering curriculum, designing learning experiences, and teaching and interacting with children. Also important for educators to know are the sequences in which children gain specific concepts, skills, and abilities, building on prior development and learning…. Familiarity with known learning sequences should inform curriculum development and teaching practice."

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children Birth to Age 8, NAEYC Position Statement (2009)

Dig a bit deeper, and there are five benefits that child care professionals gain when they take the time and effort to learn about the typical growth and development of children.

Benefit 1: Knowledge of child development and learning provides the best foundation for planning for a group of children.

Knowledge of child development is the first of three types of knowledge child care providers need in their work with children. The other two are: knowledge of individual children; and knowledge of family, community, and culture from which the child comes. Knowing what is typical at a certain age is the best place to start when experiences and environments are planned for that age of children. Plans based on typical child development and learning meet the needs of the majority of children, but the provider then makes changes to accommodate individual children who may be ahead or behind.

Benefit 2: Knowledge of child development and learning provides the best starting point for planning for a new child.

It’s also the best place to start when a provider enrolls a new child about whom little is known. Until the provider can observe and assess the child herself, it’s helpful to start by assuming the child will benefit from experiences and environments planned for typically developing children of his or her age.
Benefit 3: Knowledge of child development and learning helps to plan next steps for supporting children’s progress.

Knowledge of the sequence of knowledge or skill development in any given area helps providers set achievable, appropriate learning goals for children. It also helps providers plan activities and experiences that challenge children just enough to progress without frustrating them with a challenge that is too far beyond their abilities.

For example, the provider observes that a baby is getting up on his hands and knees and rocking. If she knows the progression of skills, the provider knows that the next skill the baby will try is crawling. This means the provider can encourage the baby in a variety of ways to move forward when the baby is on all fours.

Benefit 4: Knowledge of child development and learning enables providers to create curriculum and environment that aligns to state standards/guidelines for early childhood programs.

Many child care programs must base their curriculum and practice on state standards or guidelines for early childhood learning and development. Regardless of the specific standards developed by a state or organization, all are based on the same “body of knowledge”—the research foundation—of how young children grow and learn.

Standards can be an excellent source of developmental progressions and milestones for all areas of child development. When providers are required to “align to the state standards,” it simply means that the experiences, activities and environment that they plan are based on what is known about typical child development. To find your state’s Early Learning standards/guidelines, visit the Office of Child Care Technical Assistance Network. [https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/state-early-learning-guidelines](https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/resource/state-early-learning-guidelines).

Benefit 5: Knowledge of child development and learning helps providers feel confident that their professional practice has a solid basis that aligns with the larger child care professional community.

The foundation of high quality caregiving and teaching is knowledge about how most children grow and learn that has been gathered by many trained observers (i.e., researchers) who have observed many children.

Child care providers who continually expand their own knowledge of child development and learning, and apply that knowledge when they plan and make decisions in their program, can feel confident about their practice. They also have a solid foundation when they explain their decisions and practices to parents and colleagues; a foundation that goes beyond personal opinion or feelings.