

Stacy Gehringer ([00:06](#)):

Hello. Welcome everyone. Thank you for tuning into the CASCW Podcast Channel. My name is Stacy Gehringer and I'm the Outreach Director at the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. We are excited to share our latest podcast series with you. This series is titled Early Development and Child Welfare and features interviews with a variety of professionals in the fields of early childhood and child welfare listeners will enjoy content related to attachment, culture, screening, brain development, infant mental health, and more. Please be sure to subscribe to our channel for future episodes. Thank you for listening and take care.

Christine Cole ([00:51](#)):

Hello, I'm Christine Cole from the Washington State Health Care Authority, and I'm here with Kristin Ayer. She is an instructor of professional development at CEED with the University of Minnesota, provider of reflective supervision and consultation and an endorsed infant mental health specialist. Today, we will be talking about a developmental lens, particularly social and emotional development in order to provide some background on developmental theory and how it applies to child welfare. To start Kristin, I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind defining development in a developmental lens as well as why it's critical for young children.

Kristin ([01:23](#)):

Sure. Thanks Christine. I'm so happy to be here. So a developmental lens, so development in general has our views have evolved over time. Um, and there's been different frames to explain development. We really are reminded now that development is in early childhood, represents a period of exponential brain growth, which allows for opportunity and vulnerability, but it doesn't happen in isolation. And so we think about development or a developmental lens as both cumulative or skills that build upon each other. And also as a transactional process, meaning the outcome depends on transactions or interactions between the child and his or her environment. So we all know that development is the product of the interactions of genes and all experiences beginning prenatally and throughout early childhood. But what I really want to hold in mind throughout our time together today is that when we work in child welfare the child comes to us with what maybe some typical development, and typical developmental skills or normal development. Um, but they also come to us with their own history. And this is really important piece of understanding development or taking a developmental, using a developmental lens in your work. And we wonder in this space about trauma and did it impact development and what are the relationships that have affected development thus far for the child. And so it gives us some, some space here to think about, um, how development, what development means and what stages this child is in.

Christine ([03:25](#)):

Awesome. Kristin. Yeah. So you touched on how there is typical development. And so when we're often thinking about young children, we talk about babies, young children, toddlers, preschoolers. I'm wondering if you could broadly summarize the major goals or like you said, there's typical development. What is typical development during those different stages?

Kristin ([03:45](#)):

Sure, sure, absolutely. So when we talk about babies and young children, we put them again into age categories, right? Infant. We think about maybe the first year, year and a half, toddlers sort of that year and a half to three and preschoolers that three to five age group. So the major goals for infants, the number one priority that infants are, are developing is attachments with caregivers. So these attachments with their primary people in their worlds really look differently, but something to keep in mind about this developmental phase is all children are attached. And attachment really solidifies between eight and nine months of age. And so this attachment maybe looks differently for each child. Maybe it's a secure attachment with its provider, maybe it's a little insecure or unsure. And then there's this disorganized attachment to where the sense of safety really is the source of alarm.

Kristin ([04:52](#)):

And so that's just something to keep in mind in terms of development. Um, when we're looking at infants in their first year, year and a half. They're also tasked to regulate their states and attachment plays a big role in this. Um, so their states are really, um, sleep awake, arousal, hunger, sort of the needs that children have. And they can't do this in isolation, right? They, they do it with a co-regulator, or their attachment partner, right? So when a baby cries, somebody responds, and this is a huge piece of the development of babies and young children, um, in this first year. And it really is this dance, this back and forth dance that the child brings something cue and the adult responds and these interactions over time really build this attachment, which allows them to later be able to explore the world in new ways and take in information.

Kristin ([06:02](#)):

So, um, I would say attachments regulating states and then developing, this sort of the back and forth interaction. Some people call serve and return kind of like a tennis match, the back and forth, um, helps children develop trust in people. And trust is such an important piece of development because children can't develop again in isolation, they need this regulating partner that helps them when they get aroused, right. When they're hungry, when they're crying to sort of regulate back to a state where they can take in information. And that's where we find opportunities for growth in other areas of development, like motor and language. And so then we think about toddlers, right? And toddlers, oh, this phase is such a, such a lovely and challenging phase, isn't it?

Christine ([07:05](#)):

Oh, for sure. Toddlers are, I think the most challenging stage for a lot of adults, for sure.

Kristin ([07:12](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. They challenge us and we challenged them for sure. So that 18 months to three years, um, the major sort of developmental, um, developmental milestones we're looking at is developing locomotion, right? They're, they're learning to walk, use their motor newfound motor abilities to explore the world. Um, and we also have a huge growth in what we call representation skills or, which help imagination and also language development. And so this is an important milestone for this age group. And just to expand on that a little bit more language is really meaning-making right. And so they're trying to sort of decode what we give them. And so, language is looked at in terms of receptive language, what they understand and also expressive language, but there's a huge growth period here, that we see in toddlers, which also sort of folds into these big feelings that we know toddlers have, but aren't yet able to manage. And I think that's one thing that adults sometimes find challenging, right? The big feelings that we don't know where they're coming from, we don't know what it means to them. Um,

and then looking at that behavior and understanding where it's coming from can be a challenging part, but, but that understanding is really important to help them manage and regulate that big emotion.

Christine ([08:54](#)):

Definitely Kristin. What comes to mind when you share that I think about so many, both professionals and parents that I've worked with that, um, when we make that jump to starting to be able to speak, uh, we think that now we've got like a little adult and they still aren't a little adult yet. They're just learning to figure all this out. And they still have a lot that they can't manage or control yet. Um, but we get so excited about that jump, that leap from, uh, not having verbal skills to having verbal skills that sometimes we, I think get a little ahead of ourselves in what they can manage on their own still.

Kristin ([09:28](#)):

And the verbal skills usually come with objects first. They can name objects, but naming those feelings, I mean the whole world is just felt to their core, but yet they don't have the language to express those big emotions. Like I'm frustrated, I've tried to put my shoe on 18 times and it's not working or you won't let me touch that thing. That just looks incredible to me. Um, and so I'm disappointed, you know, those are such, um, higher level thinking words, but as, as adults, we can help them learn the words and label and name those. Um, but again, they can't do it alone. Right. Um, yeah, they need that, that organizing adult to help them put words to the, to the feelings that they are having.

Christine ([10:16](#)):

Definitely you're doing a really good job highlighting this relational piece that you were talking about, the transaction of how it's this back and forth between the infant, that toddler and that caregiver, for sure.

Kristin ([10:27](#)):

Yeah. there's actually one idea that comes to mind is the, the theorist Donald Winnicott tells us that there is no such thing as a baby. And when you think about it, just being said, it sounds kind of funny, but, um, really with a baby can survive without an adult. They have to have somebody there to meet their needs. Um, and so we can't look at development or use a developmental lens without looking at both what the parent brings or caregiver and what the child brings as well.

Christine ([11:02](#)):

Kristen, would you mind telling us a little bit about preschool and, uh, and what we're looking for for that stage as well?

Kristin ([11:09](#)):

Absolutely. So preschool is this sort of blossoming of all of these new found skills that are acquired through this sort of co-regulation within your family system. And now we're sort of able to use some of these new skills with the world and in new places, like with new peers and maybe new adults. Um, and I love this sense of emerging independence and mastery, and it's what makes the three years so difficult because children become aware of their capabilities and what they are able to do. Um, and they want to master them. But with that comes a lot of, um, a lot of what adults might see as mistakes. Um, so this independence in mastery is really important. Like I'm thinking about the child that really wants to pour

their own drink. Um, and they really want to do it. They know they want to try and they try and they spill everything all over.

Kristin ([12:13](#)):

But these opportunities are so important for not only the sense of independence, but also for their own sense of self and capacity and what they can do. There's also in preschool, this emotional competence that's sort of refined, again, taking what I know into the world, understanding what they can do and doing it in this different context really helps form this emotional competence of being able to explain when they're frustrated, when they want a turn, when they're angry with somebody, when things are really happy, and feel great. So this preschool age allows for that sort of next level of emotional competence. And then another big, huge, developmental milestone is the blossoming of executive function skills and self-regulation. And I know a lot of theorists in the field talk about this as like an air traffic control system. Where children in the preschool age have to manage a lot of information and it really involves sort of moving parts, right?

Kristin ([13:32](#)):

What I'm bringing, what somebody else expects of me, what context you're in. The social constructs around, around that interaction. And so executive function skills really needs three parts, or we think about it in three parts, the working memory. So remembering what the rules are and what I want to do with it. Um, or, or what, what I want to experience. Inhibitory control. So we're in more of a group environment, right? And so my needs can't always come first. Which is moving out of that egocentric phase and then this mental flexibility of, of really being able to, um, hold something in mind, wait, take turns. So, um, executive function skills really are a really important part of the developmental trajectory of preschoolers. The other thing that I really think about is just an awareness of self and my own thoughts and my own feelings and realizing that others have thoughts and feelings too, and that they can affect others. And again, developing all of this within the context of a larger sort of extended community. This is when a lot of children move on to preschool and have bigger, bigger experiences with more people, more adults, and more expectations.

Christine ([15:05](#)):

Kristen, thank you for covering all that. I love how you explained. There's so much complexity to child development, but there's also, so there's very specific pieces to be holding in mind. And, um, it just, it's a lot, it's a lot that you just covered that happened just in that little frame of zero to five, that there's so much going on. I'm imagining that a lot of our listeners and myself are interested in thinking about how do you know a child is on track developmentally. So thinking about all these different stages and all the pieces that are going on, what are you looking for to signal that things are going in that typical development trajectory?

Kristin ([15:43](#)):

That's a really good question. And I think that sort of depends on the age of the child, obviously, and the context we have to take that into consideration, but I think we all have sort of, we've all been around enough children to sort of have a gut sense of what's typical and atypical. Obviously there's specific markers, but I think a lot of that we sort of inherently can identify as maybe not being on track. But when we look at children who are on track, we really look at foundational social, emotional skills. And that really, when we think about that, we think about interact, how do we interact with other people?

Are we interested in other people could attachment or we identify at least one caregiver, that child has a meaningful relationship. Do they know who their safe people are?

Kristin ([16:39](#)):

and do they go to them in times of stress and need, we always look at regulatory behaviors too. What has this child learned developmentally about when things get difficult or challenging how they handle it or cope with it. Their ability to calm down to again, stay regulated and present in the moment. I am also thinking about in terms of development, is, does this child explore the world? Are they curious because that sort of sends the message that they have to feel safe, right? They have to feel regulated. They have to feel calm and they have to be in a place of sort of regular regulation to be able to then explore the world. Language development is also a huge marker. Both what children understand and what they can say. And then there's, again, this physical abilities. Can they explore the world physically? Do they have the capacity to do so? And that would be, that would be different again for each age, but again, we kind of have these general markers, right? Like a year, year and a half is when children started, you know, walking, exploring, depending on their, you know, if they're typically developing children. And so that's one thing I think in terms of thinking about a developmental lens in child welfare is you don't feel pressured to know all of the developmental stages, but sort of check in with what you know is typical development.

Christine ([18:23](#)):

Kristen, I think that's such a good point. You know, you mentioned listening to your gut and trusting. I was just thinking in preparing for this podcast, my husband was teasing me about like, don't, you know, all these stages of development. And I said, even I have to go and look back and check every once in a while, but you know, you have this like sense of this feels a little off this isn't quite what I, what I think where we're supposed to be. Um, a question that came to mind as you were describing that emotion regulation, that coping and calming piece is that, I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit about what's normal in terms of emotion regulation during this zero to five period. I think about sometimes children are like acting out with their bodies or sometimes they need someone to help them calm down. And I know there's often a lot of questions of like, is that normal in terms of our expectations of how much they can do on their own versus needing someone else to help them with regulating?

Kristin ([19:16](#)):

Yeah, absolutely. So I think it, again, it depends on the age and the expectation. So, you know, infants obviously need a lot of support with that. They need a lot of attentive regulation, both physical and through our voices, through our touch. And so we would expect an infant to cry cause that's our only way of communication. Right. And so as the child gets older, we expect them to have big emotions. We expect them to sort of lose control and have tantrums. That's a totally normal, normal part of the developmental process. And we want them to sort of feel that so that we can support their development in understanding their internal capacities to be able to come, but they can't learn that by themselves. And so that's sort of the main point that I want people to remember is, is that children that are attended to picked up calmed once they start those big feelings, internalize ways to do that when they're older.

Kristin ([20:26](#)):

And so if we see a toddler who's just out of control, crying hysterically, and we think that they can solve it by themselves, that's a big red flag because, they won't internalize strategies because they can't come

up with them themselves. And so one of the biggest things that we're looking for in terms of a developmental lens is can an adult, or does an adult go to and help strategize, like maybe they needed just a blanket or maybe they need to come sit by an adult or maybe they need to suck their thumb or a pacifier or whatever it might be to get back to a state where they can take a deep breath and take in information. And so does that answer your question?

Christine ([21:13](#)):

It totally does. Kristen, thank you. I think, you know, that piece of what you said, it's expected that they're going to have big feelings and that, you know, we're gradually needing less support, but we still need support during this age. I think is just an important piece for us to touch on. It's hard to remember that they still need help every once in a while. So I appreciate it. Kristen, another question that came to mind as you were talking about these different developmental stages and what is typical and like trusting our gut. I know in the beginning you talked about that history has a big part to play and how children are presenting with their development. And it feels like that might be something I'm wondering if you can go deeper into that, of how that might show up in these different stages and what presents as on track and typical.

Kristin ([21:59](#)):

So what points really, I think you're asking are, what's relevant, right? That we know about development or a developmental lens in child welfare work. And I think typical development is important to understand I'm going to go back to that, that typical versus an individual history. So it's important to understand typical development, but in child welfare with so many children experiencing trauma, and relational strife, the history that the child brings is really key to understanding their developmental trajectory. And so it becomes important for us to understand ways to gather that information or to have those conversations with the adults. Which I want to acknowledge isn't always supported in the systems for which we work. And so that might be something important for people that are working in child welfare to think a little bit more deeply about is what information do I want to know and how do I ask the questions with the adults that would know the history?

Kristin ([23:04](#)):

We talked about regulation, but it's such a huge part of supporting development and using a developmental lens in your work. Because relational trauma really disrupts this process for children and children become very dysregulated. So regulation strategies with new partners or people that might be in their life are really important to understand, and navigate and advocate for, for young children. So another point that that we need to take into consideration is behavior. And behavior is really a clue to a child's developmental story. So we, we need to ask when we look at a behavior, why, why is this happening? So let's think about potty training for a second. If a child, is not potty trained, maybe by four or five, sort of the typical two to three or four age range, we really want to use development to support our understanding, right?

Kristin ([24:06](#)):

Or think about development, the developmental aspects to understand why they might be struggling at this point. And so when we think about the developmental pieces, motor being one of them, can the child get to the restroom. Can they physically do that piece fine motor? Do they have the ability to actually take off, unbutton those little buttons that they have, or take off their overalls or whatever it is by themselves. Or do they need support that maybe they're not getting. And then for cognitive sort of

the planning aspect of getting from what you're doing to the, to the toilet, to be able to go. Language, can I ask for help? Do I have, do I have supports if I need it? Um, and then the social emotional piece, again, who's my partner in this and who's helping sort of scaffold or break down these tasks that might be difficult and you know, it may, and then we bring the sort of brain development and neurological aspect into it. Is my body ready for that? Do I have the capacity within myself to do that. And some, for some children, especially under great amounts of stress, who've experienced trauma, this is really can be a very challenging task, but again, if we use that developmental lens to really understand their behavior, we have a lot more information to make much better decisions for them to support them.

Christine ([25:41](#)):

Kristin, I love how you just spelled out these different pieces, because when we think about development, it gets grouped into this one lump sum. And you just your example, that's such a nice job of spelling out, you know, fine motor gross motor language skills or executive functioning. And it's all within the context of this one behavior that you're highlighting. And what seems so important to me about what you just described as behavior. I think we can so easily just make assumptions about, rather than being curious, like you just described about what is this behavior telling me and what do I know about this developmental story of this child? And I just appreciate you taking that time to kind of go through all of that. I think a question that's coming up for me, Kristen, um, is that a lot of folks don't come into the field specifically for child development. And I don't think we planned on this question, so just bear with me, but I'm just, I'm wondering like how, how does someone start to take that developmental lens and that pause to consider those different pieces? When maybe that's not something that they've been trained in or that's not their background.

Kristin ([26:49](#)):

Yeah. I'm so glad you brought that up. I think it's such an important question that when working in child welfare at different, you know, you might be at different pieces and enter into the family unit in different ways is so important to keep in mind. And I think a lot of us really identify with parents because we can communicate with them a little bit better. They kind of make sense. We can ask questions and interact. And a lot of times young children can't give you that story and you're a stranger in their world, right? And so it's a little bit harder to get that information, but I think what we have to keep in mind if we use a developmental lens is that there is both an adult and a child involved, and we really need to help those working with infants and toddlers to pause, to take both of those perspectives in mind.

Kristin ([27:43](#)):

It's really important. It's kind of like writing a book report after reading half the book. We can't really tell the full story. We have some perspective, or we could imagine what could be happening, but when we don't pause and slow down to take a little bit of time to think about what's what both partners are bringing to this development. U We can't possibly have the full information. And I just want to recognize that it takes a lot of time to do that and, and sort of acknowledge that we work within systems that don't necessarily allow us to do that. But I think advocating for that or knowing that using this developmental lens and looking at both what the parent brings, then where the child is at is most helpful to young children, is just really important to keep in mind.

Christine ([28:35](#)):

Yeah, Kristin, I'm wondering for the folks listening, if there's even like a couple of resources or places to look, to start to develop those skills or to start to build on what they're hearing about this developmental lens today, that would be important to share.

Kristin ([28:51](#)):

Yeah, I think, well, there's something that comes to mind and that's because I do this work quite often is, reflective spaces. So identifying places and relationships within your work that allow you to slow down enough to question, what does the child bring? What does the parent bring? What questions can I ask to get more information? Or how can I be curious is really important. And there's a whole sort of arm of the field that's moving in this more reflective space. And sometimes it's called reflective supervision or reflective consultation. And it looks like a certain amount of time to pause and slow down and reflect on, on families sort of with, with more intention to make meaning of their experiences and to have a little bit more depth of knowledge of both what we're bringing, but also what, what the families we're working with, what their experiences are and what they're bringing.

Christine ([29:52](#)):

Hm. I love that. I really appreciate you highlighting the importance of reflection. I've heard a lot as you've been talking today about this like curious stance and this wondering, and like you said, it takes, it takes a lot of time to develop that skill. And so I appreciate you also acknowledging that this isn't something we just like all of a sudden have, um, it takes it, it's also a developmental process, for us all to hold in mind.

Kristin ([30:17](#)):

Exactly.

Christine ([30:17](#)):

For sure. I know you touched on this a little bit, Kristen already, um, you were talking about, uh, how our listeners maybe are working more with adults and feel connected to adults and can resonate with them more. Um, is there anything else that you would want to touch on, on why it's so important for professionals in social work and child welfare and child protection, um, to develop, uh, this lens for their work for child welfare work in particular,

Kristin ([30:44](#)):

You know, I think child welfare is really high stakes, right? We're making big decisions for little ones, that will impact their life to come. Right. We know these relationships are important. We know their brain is developing at rapid at rapid speed. We know, you know, relationships really are the key for that. Um, and so really taking time to slow down and look at both perspectives, help us make better decisions for young children, right? Child protection means protecting the child and how we do that is really important to be thoughtful about. And one thing that I think we need to think about in terms of creating space to think about it from a developmental lens is what we are bringing. And so I have sort of an example of a child that I hope I can share. So I worked on the south side of Chicago at an infant and toddler center, and there was this one little boy, Richard, who would do this spinning activity.

Kristin ([31:47](#)):



He would take this broom and he would spin it. And sometimes he'd let go. And the broom would go flying. And the teacher there was really frustrated. It brought up a lot of stuff for her. She was so frustrated by the behavior. She didn't understand it. She actually, we learned had someone close to her die in a car accident. And so this reckless behavior was a real trigger for her. And she couldn't see through to the, what the, what the child was bringing. And so through this sort of slowing down process, we were able to take a developmental stance and use a developmental lens to understand his behavior a little bit more. And long story short, this spinning was a regulatory behavior for him. So after having sort of taken some, you know, testing out some different options and different strategies and having a hypothesis, we found that Richard actually behaved so much better when he had this sort of neurological stimulation, or this ability to regulate himself in this spinning way. And so sort of that space to understand what you're bringing and sort of what's getting in the way of seeing the child's perspective is just a really important aspect of taking this developmental lens stance in our work.

Christine ([33:15](#)):

Kristin, I love that example what's coming to mind for me is when we're thinking you've talked about regulation a lot and you just described, you know, a spinning behavior as helping his body to be regulated. And I'm wondering if we can just take a quick moment for you to maybe describe some other examples or ways that children might be presenting in ways that it seems like a strange behavior, but that it's regulating and what, what we mean by regulating. Cause I think we've talked about it a couple of times. And I think you, and I know what that means, but I want to make sure our listeners know what we mean by that as well.

Kristin ([33:52](#)):

Sure. So regulating, you know, really means getting yourself back into a state of, of calm, right? And each person sort of has their own strategies. You know, as an adult, we have some ingrained strategies of like turning off the lights or being in quiet or silence. You know, some people really want to go work out and go run 15 miles and that helps them sort of be centered and children's behaviors sort of develop in certain ways. So depending on whether they've had this co-regulation and these sort of strategies given to them or not. Children will find ways to do that. And sometimes that looks like jumping up and down or jumping on everything, sort of this physical way of regulating, like getting the energy out to regulate yourself. And sometimes it looks like hiding in a corner, hiding under a blanket. So again, those, you know, we want children to be regulated so they can take part in the world, so they can be interactive with others take in information that develops their cognitive abilities or motor abilities.

Kristin ([35:06](#)):

And so you know, sometimes you'll see children in school that just need a heavy blanket that sort of keeps them there and helps them, their body sort of give them some information of where they are in the world so that they can be present. So it looks really different for different children. But I think the underlying question then that becomes really important is why are we seeing this behavior? Is it for regulation? Is it for meeting their own needs? It might not look like that. Right. It might look like a behavior that we want to label as aggressive or disruptive. But I think again, taking that step back and figuring out why could they be acting in that way is just a really important piece of understanding this particular child's development.

Christine ([36:01](#)):

Yeah. That they're trying to take care of their body so that they can do what they need to do. Kristin for the, you know, child welfare workers, are there specific things that they should pay attention to when it comes to regulation? You know, you gave the example of needing space by themselves or that it might, we might want to label it as aggressive. Do you have any tips for when to be concerned about the ways in which children are self-regulating.

Kristin ([36:27](#)):

Yeah, When to be concerned. Well I think behavior is information. And so we're concerned when it's interfering with their functioning, right. When they can't explore the world, when they can't interact with other people, when they can't sort of follow social norms, when they're endangering other people. And so those are kind of things to look at. And again, once we know, we ask why this is happening, then we, as adults can sort of figure out the best strategies to meet their need of regulating, but also keep them safe or keep them in a place where they can meet their needs. Right. And when they can, where they can function. But again, that takes time a little bit of time to slow down and think about sort of deeply. We can't just jump to an assumption that children are doing this to really affect their relationship or get attention or whatever it might be. Actually, children with regulation issues a lot of times are unfairly labeled with labels like ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder, things like that. And so it is again using a developmental lens, asking those questions of why helps us make better decisions for children.

Christine ([37:57](#)):

Yeah. I think that's super important. I I'm wondering Kristin about, you said, you know, typically children get these, these labels and how do you feel like that impacts the adults in children's lives in terms of, you know, you've talked a lot about children's development is relational. And so I'm wondering how these labels and these like, diagnoses might impact the adults relationships and how that interplays with development.

Kristin ([38:24](#)):

Yeah that's really a good question to wonder about isn't it? I think you know, we all want to understand right. And label, and I think labels have become a big part of us, our need as adults to understand a child's behavior. And I think, you know, I guess it depends on how it affects their relationships. Um, but it does, if you have that label, you go into new environments with that label, like once preschoolers start going to school, they will have that. And there's assumptions that are, that are made. And so I think labels have this capacity to help and also they have a capacity to really hinder our relationships with others.

Christine ([39:18](#)):

Definitely. Yeah. You did a beautiful job highlighting this piece of, you know, us wanting to understand and make sense of, and also this balance with having a broader curiosity and wondering, not getting stuck in that's the only interpretation to hold. It makes me think about especially for child welfare, how often you might have a case transferred to you, or you might have a new case that, you know, the things in the report say these diagnoses are, these are the things and how to hold those as information to make sense of what's going on for this child and this family. While also being curious about what else we might not know yet or what else it could mean. So I really appreciate you holding that, holding that balance. I feel like you've touched on this a lot during our conversation today, Kristin, and I just want to make sure that we really emphasize this point. I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit more about the

significance of this period of human development and how, why it's so important to pay attention to development during these years.

Kristin ([40:22](#)):

Yes. Oh my goodness. It really is. It's, you know, this is such a period of time where we're sort of laying the groundwork and the foundations to lifetime outcomes for children. So these early relationships really build our foundation for long-term mental health outcomes and health outcomes. And we know that children's emotional development is built into the architecture of their brains during this time period. We know that the timing and quality of early experiences really combined to shape brain architecture, it's sort of laid in there and locked in there in a way. Not that it's not flexible, but it's really building this foundation for how we know ourselves to be in the world. Right. Am I capable? Am I lovable? Do I matter? Do people enjoy being around me? Can I interact and feel interaction and love and connection with other people it's, it's built into our brain architecture through our relationships during this timeframe.

Kristin ([41:30](#)):

So, yes, the social emotional piece of development is foundational to our ways of being in the world as adults in our capacities, but using this developmental lens, I really think of it as being the hopeful part of our work. If we know that there's potential for growth and change, if we can sort of figure out where children are at and we can then sort of see where they're going or see the next steps we can make that change and use development to measure that growth. And so I think, you know, in a world of really difficult things, right, that we have to endure and emotional strife in our work using that developmental lens helps us to have some hope for change and growth.

Christine ([42:25](#)):

I love that, Kristen. It, it makes me think of Center for the Developing Child from Harvard has some podcasts and they talk about brain architecture. I think we actually are going to have another podcast on brain architecture. And they talk about early as better, but it's never too late. And I think that that's that hope piece that you're talking about that as we have these interactions that can, we can change the course of how things are developing in a positive direction. Over time, a question that's coming to mind for me, Kristen is around, as you talk about early relationships, and I know earlier we were talking about these different chunks of developmental stages, infancy, toddlers, preschoolers. I'm wondering if you could share a couple like key things that folks can do in these early relationships to support social, emotional development, just like one or two things that are supportive during each of those stages.

Kristin ([43:17](#)):

Sure. I think when I think of infants, I think of being responsive and so sort of including them in your interaction. So when they are queuing us or making a noise or making a sound, we react, right. We respond and we keep them close. Also talking to children and just telling them what you're doing, what they're doing naming. I think that that is sometimes unfamiliar to caregivers, but such an important way to develop that relationship. That's so important is, is involving him in, in what you're doing. And just simply by naming what you're doing is a great way to do that.

Christine ([43:59](#)):

Yeah. Sports casting is what I like to call it for parents. Just describe sports cast for everyone what's happening at home and with you and with your little one. Yeah.

Kristin ([44:08](#)):

And with infant and with toddlers, I really think of this as, you know, whatever is going to happen in their world is going to happen. They're going to have big emotions. They're going to get dysregulated. They're going to be out of control at times, but if they know someone's with them, I think that's a really important message that we can give to them in terms of developing their social emotional capacities of connectedness is you're not alone. I'll be here with you sort of like, I'll still show up, even when you're feeling terrible, even when you're acting out, I'll be here. And just that message of, I matter. And even when I'm out of control, people care about me is I think so significant. And then in the preschool age, I think it's this sort of observing and reflecting on what they're doing. I noticed you did this thing, like I'm here and I'm present, right. If we're not present, if we're behind our phones, if we're, sort of in our own heads or in our own worlds, that relationship is harder to build. And sort of that development then is a little slower because we don't have sort of that attention to, our milestones that we're achieving, which are super big.

Christine ([45:36](#)):

Kristen, I love how you're describing the such like the huge importance of those relationships of these adults. Being able to be almost like a mirror and helping them to develop that sense of self through this other person noticing and being with and saying like, I'm here. I got you. As kiddos are working through these different milestones.

Kristin ([45:56](#)):

Yeah. I think too, something else that I've just been thinking about is I know that, you know, relationships are disrupted a lot in child welfare, right? We make big decisions for safety purposes. And I just want to acknowledge that. But I also want people to keep in mind that other caring relationships are really helpful and buffer traumatic stress, right? So we know that children are exposed to loss and separation and which is traumatic and stressful, but if we show up and if we continue to be there and children have these other relationships, it can be a real healing aspect for them in their development and sort of get their development back on track. And so that's an important thing I think, to keep in mind, just as we think about relationships being a foundational part of development is that those other relationships and those other people around them do matter so much.

Christine ([47:00](#)):

That's such a good point. I have a lot of background working with folks who are in childcare and preschool, and I often tell them, you, you are a protective factor for children regardless of what else is going on in their lives. Kristen, I'm wondering about, as you talked about like these, these other relationships, how do you see child welfare, you know, social workers, caseworkers supporting this relational health through their role.

Kristin ([47:27](#)):

Yeah. I think it's something important to keep in mind, right. In all of the work that we do is that if, you know, balancing that the relationships really are a huge aspect. So I think when we, when we show up and we're ready to truly observe to listen and to reflect, we get to know the knowledge that we need to know. Right. We get to know the stories of the adults and the children. And so how we show up is really important if we're willing and open to hear and listen to the whole entire story. So again, the other thing I want to go back to a little bit is we have some understanding about typical development, right? We have our sort of ideas, but we use this again as a marker for growth. And then a way to mark the next

steps and to really keep that in mind is that once we know about the child and where they're at, we can feel like there has been some growth. And, you know, prioritizing relationships and systems where checklists and rules and regulations are at the forefront of our work is really challenging. But if we keep that in mind, I think we're making better decisions for children.

Christine ([48:51](#)):

Yeah. That's so important Kristen. Kristen, the other piece that I'm thinking about is that you've talked a lot about, you know, that caregiver with the child. And so I'm wondering, how do you see again, child welfare folks, social workers, supporting caregivers in their role of children's development.

Kristin ([49:10](#)):

Right, that's a really hard thing, right? Because many caregivers have a hard time understanding what children bring, right. When we don't know their histories, we don't know where they're at developmentally. And so I think that sort of advocating or knowing where the child's at to be able to explain to the caregivers who are on the receiving end of a child, that's been through a traumatic situation is really key to helping support that building relationship. Right. If the adults have some knowledge of maybe what the child's been through or how to show up, it's really key to supporting their relationship which in turn, help sort of kickstart development again.

Christine ([49:57](#)):

I love how often you bring in that, that positive. There's like th there's a lot of hope in what you're sharing Kristen. Yeah. Kristen, we have covered a lot today. I feel like you have done such a great job touching on so many aspects of development. I'm wondering as we start to come to a close, if there's any like actionable steps or key takeaways that folks in the child welfare field, whether they're a social worker, whether they're a supervisor, a policymaker, what are some key takeaways maybe for integrating a developmental lens into this work.

Kristin ([50:31](#)):

Right. Right. And I would say, don't forget about the baby. We just have to keep asking what about the baby? And of course the baby means the child as well, but I think it sort of hits home to making sure that we are taking all perspectives in the work that we're doing. And again, this idea of slowing down. Sometimes when we slow down, we have to recognize the emotional strife we're feeling or the emotional discomfort we feel in really understanding a very difficult story of that, a history of a child. Right. And that's uncomfortable. And I just want people to realize that that's in play, that are working in child welfare. But if we don't slow down, we don't know the full story. Right. And so finding places, relationships that you have within your work or reflective groups or a supervisor, that's willing to just think about this one child for this one moment, I think is again, another way to make sure that we're integrating the developmental lens.

Christine ([51:43](#)):

What I'm hearing Kristen is checking in with yourself, slowing down and don't forget the baby as our key takeaways from today.

Kristin ([51:50](#)):

Absolutely.

Christine ([51:52](#)):

Awesome. Thank you so much, Kristin, for your time today. I think this was a really rich discussion with a lot, for folks to think about.

Kristin ([52:00](#)):

Thank you, Christine. It was a pleasure.

Stacy Gehringer ([52:06](#)):

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