



What we know about holistic child development

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WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT HOLISTIC CHILD DEVELOPMENT

1.1 Children around the World

Situations of children

Children are, just like adults, entitled to Human rights, inherent to the human person, inalienable and universally important human beings. But are these rights truly in effect for children? And if they are able to claim their rights, do we listen?

“Children are the future”, is what people might say. However, at the same time, children are often not treated like a human being but like “a human becoming”, immature and irrational or as mere by-products of other units of study such as the household, family or parent. We fully agree that children *are* the future but then, something needs to be done to ensure they *do* have a future.

All nations, except the United States of America and South Sudan, have ratified the United Nations Convention of the Rights on the Child. The rights of children have been described in detail in 54 articles, in order to protect children from harm, to provide them the right to live to the fullest and to grow into mature adults.¹ African countries have added the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child² to ensure protection of all African children by African States. The wellbeing of the child is said to be important, but what is the current status of children’s wellbeing? Some data from the report from UNICEF, *The State of the World’s Children, 2014*³ show we have a long way to go:

- Life expectancy at birth: in the Netherlands 81 years, in Malawi 55 years, in India 66 years.
- Population growth rate (2010 - 2030): in industrialized countries 0.4, in Africa 2.1, in Asia 0.8.
- Mortality rate under five per 1000 live births. In industrialized countries: 6, in Africa 111.
- 6.6 million children died in 2012 before reaching the age of 5, mostly due to pneumonia, diarrhea and birth complications.
- Percentage of people using safe drinking water: in Netherlands 100%, in DRC 46%.
- About 150 million children between 5 and 14 years perform labor; in Sub-Saharan Africa, this is actually 1 in 3 children in this age group!

ReK believes children have the right to be respected as fellow human beings, who require our full attention to allow them to grow up to their full potential. As such, everything is necessary to support children and to enable their environment (parents/caretakers, community and society and government) in such a way, that they also are able and willing to take their responsibility in protecting and supporting them.

In order to support children in an effective and appropriate way, it is important to have knowledge about children: the way they develop, the stages of development, the

¹ <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/crc.htm>

² http://www.unicef.org/esaro/children_youth_5930.html

³ State of the World’s Children, 2014, UNICEF



dimensions that play a role; and also which factors influence their development, in both positive or negative ways. In this chapter, we will discuss this in more detail.

Definitions of Child Development

Child:

There are several definitions of a child. The most common one is defined in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child: “a child is any human being below the age of 18 years, unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier”.⁴ Some definitions focus on the social aspects of being a child, referring to a child as a member of a family with biological parents or non-biological caregivers. Others focus on the physical development of children, marking the stage whereby a child can produce children of its own as the end of childhood. The definition of a child also differs from one culture to the other. ReK will use the UNCRC’s definition, aware that in some cultural context the definition might be different. Sensitivity regarding this is important, but the UNCRC and the ACRWC are leading authorities and have since been ratified by all but two countries.

Child development:

“Child Development refers to the biological and psychological and emotional changes that occur in human beings between birth and the end of adolescence, as the individual progresses from dependency to increasing autonomy.”⁵

Children’s wellbeing:

From a child’s rights’ perspective, this could be defined as the realization of children’s rights and the fulfillment of the opportunity for every child to be all she or he can be. The degree to which this is achieved can be measured in terms of positive child outcomes, whereas negative outcomes and deprivation point to the denial of children’s rights.”⁶

1.2 Child Development: Dimensions and Stages

Holistic development

In order for a child to grow into a mature and responsible individual, the development of different domains is important:

- Physical development: Child growth, development of the body, development of motor skills, balancing, skills like crawling, walking, running etc.
- Cognitive/ intellectual development: Capacity to learn, remember, to symbolize information and problem-solving skills.
- Social and emotional development: Learning to relate to others, dealing with different feelings and behavioural skills.
- Spiritual development: Learning morals and values, good and bad, ethical development, beliefs and faith development.

It is through a combined and balanced development of these four domains that a child comes to full development and wellbeing.

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child>

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_development

⁶ Article for Social Indicators, Research An Index of Child Wellbeing in the European Union, Bradshaw, 2006

Development stages

There are different stages in child development. In each of these stages children learn different skills and competences. The number of stages differs in different cultures. However the four elementary stages are considered to be:

Early childhood - From conception to 7 years, when children form their foundation for further development.

Middle childhood - This is the period of life between ages 8 - 12 years when children attend school, make friends outside the immediate family, master new physical and mental skills and start to become individuals.

Adolescents - Youngsters in the age range of 13-18 are being prepared.

Youth - Young adults in the age range of 18 till 25 are to be future citizens with the rights and responsibilities attached to this role.

All stages are important for the development of children. In each stage, they learn skills and competences needed in their lives. In the following table provides a general overview of these skills. However, in different countries and contexts the different stages could be different in terms of behavior and age groups.

Table 1: Skills and Competences of Children in each Stage⁷

	Early Childhood	Middle childhood	Adolescence	Youth
Physical development	Physical growth Motor movements: crawling, sitting, standing walking Eye-hand coordination starts developing Exploring physical movements Focused on satisfaction of own direct needs (food, safety)	Physical growth Motor movements continue to develop: standing on 1 leg, jumping. Eye-hand coordination fully developed. Catching a ball is now easy	Development of gender characteristics: pubic hair, breasts, genital development Fast growth can cause clumsiness, especially in boys	Fully grown.
Cognitive development	Speech development: sounds, words, short sentences	Speech development increases, great progress in cognitive development, interest of	Interest in school changes, becomes more focused on personal interests. And no interest in	Focused on useful skills and knowledge needed for a profession suiting their

⁷ Adapted from Psychosocial Manual, War Child Holland 2009

	Identification of colors, shapes	children for learning, exploring and discovering	school if they dislike it.	interests and abilities.
Social and emotional development	<p>First 2 years focused on 1 or 2 people, scared when they are not around.</p> <p>Slowly more towards others, but still mainly people in direct environment.</p> <p>Learning connection by behaviour, feelings and consequences: if I cry mummy comes. If I touch the warm stove, it hurts</p> <p>Ego-centric: not yet understanding the needs of others, Playing mainly individual. They play alongside others, but not as a team</p>	<p>More social contacts with peers, friends, then with adults. Initially playing with mixed sexes is no problem, but soon there is more focus on own sex.</p> <p>Understanding the needs and feelings of others, taking care of each other.</p> <p>Understanding connection between behaviour and feelings. (I am laughing because I am happy I can play with my friends)</p> <p>Group is important</p>	<p>Friends are more important than adults.</p> <p>Interested in opposite sex. Feelings can fluctuate fast, mood swings</p> <p>Identity development: who am I? What do I find important?</p> <p>Peer pressure is strong. Only later in this stage the adolescents develop themselves into individuals with own identity.</p>	<p>Friends are important.</p> <p>Feeling ready for (sexual) relationship and feeling ready to start a family of their own.</p> <p>Standing on their own feet can cause mixed feelings</p>
Moral and spiritual development	<p>Growing sense of existence of God; fellowship with peers; practice prayer and the singing of spiritual songs</p>	<p>Learn to depend on God & faith development; express God's creation in creative ways; develop moral/ethical values</p>	<p>Youth fellowship; develop personal conviction towards religious beliefs; religious convictions result in active citizenship; role modelling; managing relationships</p>	<p>Continuation of growth in personal beliefs, now ready for sharing/testing them in a relationship</p>

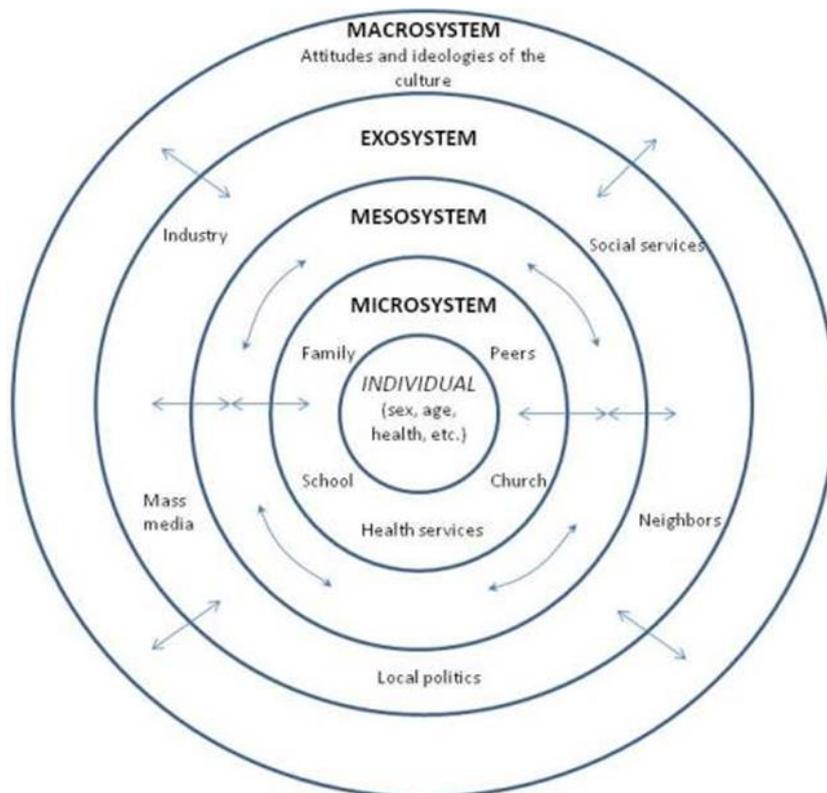
Important Note: Some characteristics of child development are based on the universal child, for instance in the stages in physical development. There are, however, differences per culture in what is considered important in terms of development, for instance in social, emotional and spiritual development. Additionally, the division of the stages in terms of age can differ per culture. It is therefore important to be culturally sensitive in child-centered programming.

1.3 Children and their Environment

The development of children is being influenced by different factors: biological and genetic factors and factors in the physical and social environment of the child.

All these influences on children are shown in the socio-ecological model, developed by Bronfenbrenner⁸ (figure 2). It shows the different influences on children, which will influence their development in a positive or negative way.

Figure 1: The socio-ecological model of influences in the development of children



The following groups could be identified as having an influence on the development of the child's wellbeing:

The child itself:

- Biological and genetic influence form the characteristics of the child: their physical features, but also the basics of their character and personality are caused by biological and genetic factors.

⁸ Ecology of Human Development, Bronfenbrenner, 1979



- With everything that happens around a child, it is the child who, in a way, decides what to do with this influence. It is a free choice, inherent to human beings.

The family (direct family and extended family):

- The biological parents or the caregivers are an important influence on the child, in all dimensions of their development and at all stages.
- Siblings are an important influence, both older siblings e.g. as role models and younger siblings e.g. as in need of care
- In many cultures, extended family is very important in raising children and thus influences the development of children.

Community:

- This is a wide variety of people: school environment, peer groups, neighbors and community leaders.

Society:

- Pressure groups, civil society, but also culture, policies, facilities, economic situation.

Resilience

The resilience of a child (and that of the family/caregiver) is a crucial part of their wellbeing. There are different definitions of resilience. The Dictionary says: *The ability to recover quickly from illness, change, or misfortune*⁹. UNICEF describes resilience as “the ability to anticipate, withstand and bounce back from external pressures and shocks - whether physical, emotional, economic, or disaster or conflict-related - in ways that avoid a fundamental loss of identity and maintain core functions”.¹⁰

Edith Grotberg says in her research about resilience: “Resilience is important because it is the human capacity to face, overcome and be strengthened by or even transformed by the adversities of life. Everyone faces adversities; no one is exempt. With resilience, children can triumph over trauma; without it, trauma (adversity) triumphs. The crises children face both within their families and in their communities can overwhelm them. While outside help is essential in times of trouble, it is insufficient. Along with food and shelter, children need love and trust, hope and autonomy. Along with safe havens, they need safe relationships that can foster friendships and commitment. They need the loving support and self-confidence, the faith in themselves and their world, all of which builds resilience.”

According to this study, parents and other caregivers have an important role to play and can either help children to deal with the situation or confuse the children, thus also destroy their resilience.

Grotberg mentions three resources of resilience a child can use in times of difficulty:

Table 2: Resources of Resilience a Child can use (by Grotberg)

⁹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/resilience>

¹⁰ http://www.unicef.org/hac2011/hac_lead.html

I HAVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People around me I trust and who love me, no matter what • People who set limits for me so I know when to stop before there is danger or trouble • People who show me how to do things right by the way they do things by themselves • People who want me to learn how to do things on my own • People who help me when I am sick, in danger or need to learn
I AM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person people can like and love • Glad to do nice things for others and show my concern • Respectful to myself and others • Willing to be responsible for what I do • Sure things will be all right
I CAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to others about things that frighten me or bother me • Find ways to solve problems that I face • Control myself when I feel like doing something that is not right or dangerous • Figure out when it is a good time to talk to someone or to take action • Find someone to help me when I need it

All 3 elements are important, and having just one is not enough for a child to be resilient. Only a combination can result in resilience.

Assets and risk factors

The wellbeing of a child is largely determined by available assets (also known as protective factors) and the risk factors that the child faces. There can be different assets and risk factors. In order to promote children’s wellbeing, it is important to identify these factors and find ways to strengthen the assets and to reduce the risk factors. In the table below, you will find some examples of these factors:

Table 3: The contributors towards the necessary assets and risk factors¹¹

	Assets	Risk factors
Child	Good health Good-natured temperament Positive self esteem Good social skills and competences Intelligence Hobbies and interests	Premature birth or other problems Chronic or serious illness Difficult temperament Low intelligence (Early) childhood trauma Insecure attachment
Parents/family	Secure attachment: positive parent-child relationship Parental support	Single parent with lack of support Harsh parenting

¹¹ Adapted from the WCH Psychosocial Training Package 2009

	Daily structure Secured income Support from extended family Harmonious family situation Parents are role models and stimulate positive behaviour	Non-harmonious family situation Homelessness Deprivations, insufficient income Social isolation Parental substance abuse Parental sickness or psychopathology Death of parent or sibling
Community	Good socio-economic situation Access to health care and services Adequate housing Religious faith Good education system Supportive community structure	Poverty Lack of access to community support services Exposure to (community) violence or discrimination Poor schools or no schools Anti-social peer groups Lack of social cohesion

Vulnerability

Vulnerability means: "a high probability of a negative outcome" or an expected welfare loss above a socially accepted norm, which results from risky/uncertain events, and the lack of appropriate risk management instruments.

There are different contributing factors to vulnerability: factors in the child itself, like a disability; factors in the direct environment of children, like being very poor or having no parents; and factors in the wider surrounding environment, like living in a hostile community, having no services nearby. Normally, a combination of factors increases vulnerability. Vulnerability depends on the magnitude, the frequency, duration and scope and can change over time. As such, a disabled child with loving parents, a school nearby and a positive character is less vulnerable than an able child with parents who are working the whole day, neglect the child and make the child miss school regularly.

1.4 Child Development Programming

In this chapter we have concluded that child development involves changes children go through whereby they grow from dependence to a certain level of autonomy. The children develop through various stages in four dimensions, physical, cognitive, social (psycho-social) wellbeing and spiritual, towards a balanced wellbeing. The growth and resilience of the child will largely depend on its environment, the assets that he/she could access (for example; good self-esteem, parental support etc.) and the level of being exposed to negative/risk factors. It is therefore necessary that children and their families are supported to access preventative factors and strengthen as many assets as possible. The following chapters will elaborate on the contribution that ReK and its partners want to make towards children's wellbeing and development.