

Child Development Overview

“All children have the right: to be happy, thriving, self-actualized, educated, healthy and content; to have the opportunity to reach their full potential as individuals capable of healthy relationships and productive lives; and to have a fair chance in life with opportunities for healthy, balanced, and well-rounded development.”

***- Mission and Guiding Principles for
Pennsylvania’s Child Dependency System***

As foundational as the issue of “safety,” child development is core to all that occurs within dependency court proceedings. Understanding the typical stages through which children develop and grow as well as the potential impact of trauma on that development is critical to the decisions the courts make about child safety, well-being and permanence. As noted in the above Mission and Guiding Principles for Pennsylvania’s Child Dependency System quote, “healthy child development” is one of four overarching beliefs.

This section provides three primary resources, ten additional resources and a laminated child development at-a-glance chart. The chart provides general information regarding the trajectory of a child’s emotional and social development. Because child development is generally viewed as a sequential process, with one stage of development building upon the successes of previous stages, disruption in any stage can have a negative impact on development in future stages. As such, each of the primary resources addresses potential consequences of stress and trauma on development, with one article specifically focusing on the architecture of brain development.

The Dependency Benchbook highlights many required judicial decisions, most of which will have a dramatic impact on child development. From safety and placement decisions (Chapter 5) to visitation planning (Chapter 7) to hearings regarding Permanency (Chapter 10) or Termination of Parental Rights (Chapter 12), the court should consider a child or youth’s developmental stage and associated milestones.

Clearly, the needs of an infant differ from the needs of a school-aged child or a teenager, so understanding the full range of development needs for each stage of development is crucial. For example, for a school aged child, the court might focus on the core developmental issue of “competence” demonstrated through school success and involvement in extra-curricular activity. In contrast, for a teenager, the court might focus on the core developmental issue of “social identity and connectedness.” Information provided in this section is intended to form a general understanding of the developmental process.