



# THE 6 FUNCTIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS (FDLS)

## FDL 1 - Self-Regulation & Shared Attention

**Description:** This level is characterized by the child's ability to enter and sustain a state of shared attention with another person, while remaining focused, organized, and calm. These skills are first learned between birth and 3 months.

**Signs of difficulty within this level may include:** fleeting attention/distractibility; difficulty with self-regulation (i.e. difficulty or inability to remain calm and content); frequent periods of inattention, distress, irritability, or lethargy (i.e. low level of arousal); presence of the child's comfort zone (CZ) such as: lining up objects, flipping through books, or other repetitive and isolating behaviors.

### Goals for Parents and Caregivers:

- Harness all available senses (i.e. touch, sound, sight, etc.), as well as motor capacities, to help child stay calm and regulated in order to draw child into shared attention.
- Involve child in enjoyable interactions that involve looking (look and examine faces), hearing (focus on voices), touch (pleasurable tickles, stroking or sharing an object or toy) and movement.
- Increase the interactive circles of communication and sustain shared attention as child develops.
- Use constructive and playfully obstructive strategies with affect cues to stretch the child's capacity for shared attention

### Examples of Progress in FDL 1:

- The child is calmed by being held, talked to, touched, looked at, and interacted with. Is starting to be able to calm down. Remains calm for 2 or more minutes at a time.
- The child shows more interest in the world. Focuses on sights and sounds for three or more seconds.
- The child holds head upright; follows objects with eyes; and responds to sounds.
- Makes eye contact.
- The child is able to stay connected with people while playing a game that she enjoys.
- The child is able to calm himself down after getting overly excited (such as during rough housing)
- A child who tends to be passive will be able to motivate herself to pay attention and join in with others and sustain interest.
- The child will begin to be able to tolerate transition to a new activity, which may not have been his choice.
- The child has sleeping and eating patterns that are becoming more regular.

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Content adapted from the DIR<sup>SM</sup>: Stages in Functional Emotional and Intellectual Development and from the works of Stanley Greenspan, MD and Serena Wieder, PhD



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## Goals for the Child:

1. Child will sustain shared attention with a special adult in sensorimotor interactive play using the child's preferred and pleasurable sensory and motor modalities, such as movement, looking, touching, or listening.
2. Child will regulate his sensory system in order to sustain shared attention with support.
3. Child will regulate his sensory system in order to sustain shared attention independently.
4. Child will increase shared attention by increasing interactive circles of gestural communication, resulting in a continuous flow of interactions between child and adult rather than trying to focus on a particular object or toy.
5. Child will sustain shared attention with a peer in interaction.
6. Child will sustain shared attention in a group.
7. Child will sustain shared attention independently across contexts.

*\*note when the above goals are being met consistently*



# THE 6 FUNCTIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS (FDLS)

## FDL 2 - Engagement and Relating

**Description:** This level is characterized by the child's ability to form relationships and attachment and to engage another person with warmth and pleasure. Engagement is sometimes referred to as intimacy or the ability to bond with and relate to others. This skill is first learned between 2 and 7 months.

**Signs of difficulty within this level may include:** difficulty with relationships and attachment, avoidance of people, decreased desire or ability to engage with people, decreased response to adult attention or affection, distrust, and/or apathy.

### Goals for Parents and Caregivers:

- Woo (entice) the child into engaging you with pleasure and delight. An example of this is when a child smiles, focuses on faces, moves arms or legs to the rhythm of caregiver's voice, vocalizes in response to caregiver's cadences, turns or reaches toward caregiver.
- Encourage growth of intimacy and caring – notice the gleam in the child's eye when child interacts with you along with a sense of falling in love.
- As the child develops, deepen the relationship to include the full range of feelings such as assertiveness, anger or sadness. Notice that these feelings can be incorporated into the quality and stability of the child's engagement (e.g., does he/she withdraw or become aimless when under stress, does she stay connected when angry or scared?)
- Emphasize the importance of relationships constantly in order to help the child develop a sense of security, intimacy, caring and empathy for other. Relationships also provide the foundation to encourage progress in related areas where child must work really hard to develop motor planning, language acquisition, and a positive attitude toward all learning.

### Examples of Progress in FDL 2:

- The child responds to simple overtures and shows curiosity and assertive interest (e.g. by watching the parents face closely).
- The child will happily or willingly stay engaged with peers and adults for long periods of time.

### Goals for the Child:

1. The child will form relationships with special adults through pleasurable and enjoyable interactions.
2. The child will sustain engagement in reciprocal social interactions with special adults that bring pleasure and joy.
3. The child will sustain engagement in reciprocal social interactions when annoyed and protesting.

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4. The child will increase sustained engagement by increasing the circles of communication.
5. The child will increase sustained engagement through a wider range of emotions, such as jealousy or fear.
6. The child will sustain engagement with a peer with adult mediation.
7. The child will sustain engagement with a peer "expert player".
8. The child will sustain engagement within group interactions.

*\*note when the above goals are being met consistently*



# THE 6 FUNCTIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS (FDLS)

## FDL 3 - Intentionality and Two-Way Communication

**Description:** This level is characterized by the child's ability to participate in back and forth affective signaling and communication to convey intentions, interests and needs. These skills are first learned between 3 and 10 months.

**Signs of difficulty within this level may include:** difficulty with initiation and ideation, difficulty opening and closing 2-10+ circles; decreased response to a parent or caregivers overture; decreased ability to use gestures or body language to communicate (i.e. reaching, pointing, vocalizing, etc.); decreased interest in cause and effect; decreased ability or desire to interact.

### Goals for Parents and Caregivers:

- Follow the child's lead and challenge him to communicate with you through the exchange of gestures and emotional signals about his affects (interests, needs, or intentions) and also respond to your affective signals in a back and forth reciprocal pattern.
- Encourage communication. Use affect cues (signals) to woo and wait for the child's purposeful social gestures (facial expressions, making sounds, reaching, pointing, throwing, movement, etc.) to express his desires, objections or other feelings.
- Encourage the flow of continuous communication by opening and closing circles. A circle is **opened** when the child evidences some interest or **initiates** a behavior; e.g., the child looks at a toy, and the parent or caregiver **follows the child's lead** by picking up the toy and showing it to the child. The child **closes** the circle by reaching for the toy, while **acknowledging** (looking at) the parent, nodding with a smile, etc.
- Encourage communication by building on the child's interests, initiative, and purposeful behavior. Challenge him to do things to you, help him achieve his goal, and later build obstacles to add steps and increase the number of circles.

### Examples of Progress in FDL 3:

- The child is beginning to have his own ideas. You begin to have a sense of the child's Personality
- The child shows desires by pointing, reaching, making sounds to get something or to be picked up.
- The child purposefully creeps or crawls; comprehends and initiates different sounds; and discriminates between people.
- The child engages in back and forth interaction, gestures. (Ping-pong).
- The child acts with purpose and intention. (Reaches up to be picked up).
- Older children will be able to open and close circles with adults and peers even when they are feeling a variety of different strong emotions.

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## Goals for the Child:

1. The child will interact in a back-and-forth rhythm in animated exchanges using facial expressions, sounds, and other gestures.
2. The child will initiate purposeful interactions around desires (open circles) and will close circles following adult's response to her initiative.
3. The child will increase number of purposeful interactions around desires for sensorimotor activities, to go somewhere, to obtain objects, or in response to adult strategies to expand the number of circles; for example, when the adult poses obstacles, plays "dumb," or creates extra steps to reach desired goal.
4. The child will increase number of purposeful interactions using imitation.
5. The child will increase number of purposeful interactions using simple gestures, such as reaching, taking, pulling, or pointing.
6. The child will increase number of purposeful interactions across widening range of emotions, such as dependency, assertiveness, and jealousy.
7. The child will increase purposeful interactions in various processing areas, including visual-spatial, motor planning, perceptual motor, auditory processing, and language.
8. The child will sustain purposeful interactions with a peer with adult mediation.
9. The child will sustain purposeful interactions with a peer "expert player."
10. The child will initiate purposeful interaction with a peer spontaneously.
11. The child will sustain purposeful interactions within group interactions

*\*note when the above goals are being met consistently*



# THE 6 FUNCTIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS (FDLS)

## FDL 4 - Social Problem-Solving, Mood Regulation, & Formation of Sense of Self

**Description:** This level is characterized by the child's ability to use complex circles of communication by stringing together a series of gestures, actions and words into an elaborate problem solving sequence of interactions which helps child develop a sense of self. These skills are first learned between 9 and 18 months.

**Signs of difficulty within this level may include:** difficulty or inability to open and close up to 20 circles of communication in a row (i.e. interactions may be brief and ideas are disconnected); decreased interest in simple cause and effect or pretend play ideas; decreased receptive and expressive communication; difficulty with motor planning, sequencing, or engaging in activities that involve 3 or more steps; difficulty following spontaneous 1-step commands; decreased problem solving skills and/or persistence.

### Goals for Parents and Caregivers:

- Become an interactive partner with your child as she learns to use a continuous flow of gestures with you to pursue her interests and wishes and to meet her needs.
- Combine affect cues with action (be animated and show affect through tone of voice and facial expressions) while creating interactions. Your goal is to help your child learn to open and close multiple circles of communication. This begins by using a dialogue without words through subtle facial expressions, a gleam in the eye, and other emotional signals or gestures, to a dialogue with problem solving words.
- Support the child in opening and closing 20 to 30+ back and forth circles of communication. For example, the child takes the parent by the hand, walks her to the door, point that she wants to go out, and perhaps vocalize a sound or word to further the caregiver's understanding of his intentions.
- Expand the conversation with your child by asking where he wants to go, what he needs, who else will come, what they will get, what else and where else, etc. These conversations are necessary for negotiating the most important emotional needs of life, e.g., being close to others, exploring and being assertive, limiting aggression, negotiating safety, etc.
- Increase interactive range of affects and emotions when solving problems (e.g. feed hungry baby, bandage hurt knee, fix broken truck, chase away hungry wolf, etc.).
- Encourage different emotional patterns, e.g., dependency, assertiveness, pleasure, etc., organized into integrated, problem solving affective interactions. Look out for child polarizing and being dominated by one or another feeling state (organized aggression and impulsivity, organized clinging, needy or dependent behavior, organized fearful patterns).

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## Examples of Progress in FDL 4:

- The child imitates motor actions (throws ball to mom, pop beads). Can imitate pretend play (feeds the baby, but imitates only the motor action without the symbolic act of pretending to be parent).
- The child follows a few one-step directions, uses objects functionally, delayed searching (looks persistently for bottle).
- The child begins to understand others' emotions (happy, sad, fearful) by reading words/intonation (Yuck), facial expressions, gestures
- When feeling different emotions, the child can remain engaged, and interactive (when the child gets upset because his brother has his toy, he stays connected and communicating, instead of becoming self absorbed or having a tantrum.)

## Goals for the Child:

1. The child will express communicative intent through gestures or words to get what he wants.
2. The child will sequence (motor plan) in order to execute an idea, such as a desire for a cookie, to pull a chair over to a cabinet, climb up, open cabinet, open container, get cookies and smile at mom.
3. The child will sequence (motor plan) in order to execute a desire; for example, in order to play with Dad, who is reading the paper on the couch, the child will climb up, bounce on Dad, and pull him onto the floor to play.

*\*note when the above goals are being met consistently*





# THE 6 FUNCTIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS (FDLS)

## FDL 5 - Creating Symbols and Using Words and Ideas

**Description:** This level is characterized by the child's ability to create ideas (symbols) observed in pretend play and words (phrases and sentences) to convey some emotional intention. These skills begin between 24 and 30 months.

**Signs of difficulty within this level may include:** scripted, rehearsed, or otherwise unmeaningful expressive language; disinterest in or difficulty engaging in pretend play (i.e. tea parties or monster attacks); difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions; decreased negotiation skills; lack of humor; difficulty engaging in elaborate ideas that involve multiple steps; frequent use of actions rather than words (i.e. the child hits instead of saying: *don't do that!*).

### Goals for Parents and Caregivers:

- Encourage the child to relate sensations, gestures and behaviors to the world of ideas that have meanings which can be shared with others in pretend play and drama. Whether the animals are fighting, the dolls are hugging, or there is a tea party, ideas (symbols) are guiding this play.
- Enter the child's ideas through his make believe world as a character in his drama using words and actions together. Let child initiate the play idea and through interaction (dramatization in roles), elaborate with expanding themes and range of emotions (closeness, assertiveness, fear, anger, jealousy, aggression, etc.) which child can explore and express safely.
- Encourage action words instead of acting out to convey intent and feelings. When feelings and impulses are elevated to the level of ideas they can be expressed through words and play instead of acting out (e.g., child doesn't have to hit his friend, but can say, "I'm mad.").
- Engage in long conversations with your child to communicate interests, feelings, desires and objections throughout the day.
- Promote symbolic play in order to provide the distance from real life and immediacy of needs to differentiating self from others through different roles, feelings, and actions (child pretends to be a mommy comforting the frustrated baby who broke his toy).

### Examples of Progress in FDL 5:

- The child gains the ability to use ideas (words) to convey feelings and intentions. ("More juice?" "No open!" "Kiss baby.")

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- The child imitates familiar pretend actions, such as hugging or feeding a doll. But now the child views herself as the doll's mommy. Increasingly the child develops symbolic play skills as a way to understand complex feelings (Dolls go to bed, hug, or fight).
- Symbolic play begins to have emotional themes, closeness, assertiveness, fear, anger, (Feeding the doll: doll tells you it doesn't like pink ice cream; Pretends to go to the park: doll is afraid of slide.)
- The child involves you in his play, i.e. he is not exclusively playing by himself
- The child jumps, runs, scribbles, comprehends simple designs.
- The child throws ball, draws a line, or reproduces a simple design.

## Goals for the Child:

1. The child will initiate the use of realistic ideas in interactive imaginative play, such as by hugging the dolls.
2. The child will initiate the use of ideas using realistic verbal interactions.
3. The child will express ideas derived from her affect or intent, such as saying "Play outside!" when she wants to go outside.
4. The child will express ideas derived from her affect by combining words and reality-based actions, such as sequence of pretending to be hurt and going to the doctor to get better.
5. The child will engage in conversations to express ideas.
6. The child will elaborate on ideas through increasing verbal and symbolic play sequences, such as getting hurt in a crash, going to the doctor, being examined, and going home.
7. The child will create imaginary (not reality-based) ideas using magical thinking/powers.
8. The child will assume different roles and act as the character in role-play.
9. The child will predict how others will feel or act in certain situations.
10. The child will respond to other's feelings appropriately.
11. The child will demonstrate confidence to resolve conflicts that come up in social situations, such as waiting, trading toys, taking turns, playing together, asserting self to retrieve his toy, joining in, or defending others.
12. The child will assume multiple roles and use figures to represent characters.
13. The child will expand ideas to include a wide range of themes and feelings.

*\*note when the above goals are being met consistently*



# THE 6 FUNCTIONAL DEVELOPMENTAL LEVELS (FDLS)

## FDL 6 - Emotional Thinking, Logic, and a Sense of Reality

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**Description:** This level is characterized by the child's ability to build logical bridges or make connections between different emotional ideas. Reflection and the ability to understand another person's perspective also begin to emerge during this level. You may also notice children creating their own games, rules, and possibly toys. These skills begin between 36 and 48 months.

**Signs of difficulty within this level may include:** difficulty or inability to answer open-ended what questions, why questions or questions about time (i.e. when); difficulty recalling past events or understanding/anticipating what will happen in the future; lack of empathy; difficulty with peer relationships; decreased negotiation skills; decreased ability to explain reasons for actions, feelings, etc.

### Goals for Parents and Caregivers:

- Challenge your child to connect her ideas together by seeking her opinion, enjoying her debates, and negotiating for things she wants using logical reasons. Begins with logical conversation involving at least two give and takes: "Time for school." "I don't want to." "Why?" "I feel sick now."
- Encourage your child to engage in pretend play with both peers and adults where the story or drama "makes sense", with a beginning, middle and end where elements in the drama logically fit together.
- Promote the use of pretend play, words, and/or visual symbols to elaborate a partially planned pretend drama (theme or idea is identified in advance), or engage in logical conversation dealing with causal, spatial, and/or temporal relationships between themes.
- Challenge your child to create connections between differentiated feeling states, e.g., "I feel happy when you are proud of me!" Identify relationship (contingency) between feelings, thoughts and actions.
- Expand identification and differentiation of more and more subtle feeling states, e.g., lonely, sad, disappointed, annoyed, frustrated, etc.

### Examples of Progress in FDL 6:

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- Creates logical bridges between ideas (Can hold a simple, logical conversation involving at least two exchanges: "Time for school." "I don't want to." "Why?" "I feel sick." Or, alternatively "because there is a fierce dinosaur at school.")
- Is able to engage in pretend play with another person where the story or drama makes sense (the bears are going to visit the grandmother and then have a big lunch).
- Pretend play, words, and/or visual symbols convey two or more logically connected, emotional ideas ("Hit bad guy because he did bad thing." "Hug nice dolly.")
- Interactive pretend play with both peers and adults where there are a number of elements or elements in the drama that logically fit together. (Whereas in Stage 5 a child might dress up a doll, then seeing a crayon, scribble, then, seeing a drum, pretend to be a drummer, a child at Stage 6 connects the pieces. (She might have the drummer play for the dressed-up little girl and use the crayon to make invitations for the performance. Or, the doll might have a tea party, call friends to invite them, prepare refreshments, set the table, and determine the seating pattern.)
- Child skips, hops, copies cross, can recall four or more numbers or words, asks and answers "why" questions, classifies and quantifies objects, recalls recent past.
- Child takes turns with a toy, copies circle, uses full sentences and answers "what, where, who and doing" type questions, has a sense of quantity (big/little) emerging

## Goals for the Child:

1. The child will close all symbolic circles in both pretend play and reality-based dialogues.
2. The child will respond to "Wh" questions, including who, what, where, when, and why.
3. The child will debate, negotiate, and make choices when deciding what to play, what to do, where to go, and who goes first.
4. The child will connect ideas in logical ways that make sense (not fragment, change topic, or become tangential).
5. The child will integrate concepts of time in ideas.
6. The child will integrate concepts of space in ideas.
7. The child will integrate concepts of quantity in ideas and problem solving.
8. The child will explain reasons for feelings and actions.
9. The child will compare and contrast ideas, preferences, and other people's views.
10. The child will give opinions, selecting appropriate dimensions for views.
11. The child will create dramas with a beginning, middle, and end.
12. The child will identify motives of other people or characters' actions and understand different points of view and feelings.
13. The child will predict feelings and actions of other characters.
14. The child will recognize complex intents, such as deception, sarcasm, and conflict.
15. The child will reflect on feelings in both pretend dramas and conversations taking place in reality.

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- 16. The child will expand play to full range of emotional themes, including conflict, aggression, and morality.
- 17. The child will reach higher levels of abstraction and will be able to see details as well as the big picture (trees and the forest).
- 18. The child will recognize strengths and weaknesses in self and others.

*\*note when the above goals are being met consistently*