Mary Holwell:

I think all of us appreciate that term red flags as something that gives us a warning about a possible risk, that a red flag draws our attention to something that requires some kind of action from us. I wonder Anoo, if you could give us some examples of red flags that educators might look out for and note when they are working with children.

Anoo Bhopti:

Yeah, thanks Mary. And before I get into that, I really want to share that when I work very closely with educators and I think I go back to them to ask them, if I see red flags I go back and ask them what are their experiences with children, and are they noticing these things. So red flags means it sounds very medical, we don't like to use such terms, and they are kind of a bit scary for parents as well, but really it's a guide for you to understand that, look, is the child actually doing these things? So it's a very developmental term that we use with children. So that an idea... and I think most of you would have an idea of what development looks like, but I'll just go over that so that we can, if it's not something you've thought about for a while, it'll help you just start thinking.

Anoo Bhopti:

So what are these red flags? So it's important to understand what should children be doing at that age. And we don't like saying should and could, but it's just a ballpark that, for example, in the first zero to 12 months, in the first zero to six months, the gross motor skills are very different. And then six to 12, they're very different because they learn very quick. So at the early... And I know that you work with babies, so it's fantastic... Knowing that the first six months can be predictive of delays. So oftentimes they'll be, oh, let's just wait and see. So I just want you to think about, don't wait and see, just start really looking, start observing. So this zero to six month olds, it's important to observe how they're moving, okay. So when you put them down, are they lying on their back and their tummy time?

Anoo Bhopti:

So I know you do that, but are they able to lift their heads? Are they able to push on their arms? Are they able to reach for toys? So these are things that you look for in... So we call that prone and supine, which means on their back or on their tummy. Another thing that you would notice is, because you change their nappies and that's a perfect time to notice another red flag. Are they showing you any tight legs or are their legs really floppy? Are they really loose? So again, that tells you, because when you change hundreds of nappies, you can actually tell when some children have tighter, stiff legs and some have loose. So do you feel that? When you're feeling that consistently, because some days they'll be tired if they're annoyed or anxious or in pain, but if it is something you keep on seeing, then you need to... That's a red flag for sure.

Anoo Bhopti:

Another thing is when you carry them from their beds or from the floor, are they feeling too loose? Are they feeling too tight? So these are all the zero to 12 month old's flags that you might be able to pick up when you're working with them. Then another thing to notice is... So I know that they get opportunities to lie down and on their mats at mat time. Are they rolling over? So now if they're 12 months old and they're still not rolling over, if they're still not actually sitting up on their own so you can make them sit, but they don't really get up on their own from that lying position. If they're not able to maintain their sitting balance and play, so you have to prop them up with cushions or make a corner, because I know you're very strength based,

Anoo Bhopti:

so you will somehow get them to play, which is what we love, we want them to play, we don't want this to restrict their play, but you need to just be mindful. They're 12 months old, and so it doesn't matter if they're not walking, but if they're not sitting up or not maintaining their sitting balance, or if they're not attempting to stand up, then I think that is definitely a red flag in the gross motor skills. And then once at 24 months, they need to be walking. So zero to 18 is like... We kind of wait till 18 and then we give them a few more months if we are seeing that they're all ready. So if they're not walking, but if they're cruising and if you just hold one finger and they start walking, that's great, so that means they're on the right path.

Anoo Bhopti:

But if they're not showing you any indication and that could be a red flag. Are they able to take two to three steps without support? Do they crawl up the steps? If not, are they able to crawl around? Are they able to climb up in and out of the chair? All these things are what we see children at 24 months do, so two year olds. Are they able to kick and throw a ball? So this is really something you can do in your play time, because they need to have that understanding that the ball is coming towards them, but also that they have to have that much balance, that they can kick it and throw it with their hand, at least do if not an overarm then an underarm throw, are they able to squat to pick up an object, and are they able to dance to music?

Anoo Bhopti:

Do they have those skills where you're starting to see? So these are all very important gross motor skills that you might just want to keep a track of and then say, okay, 24 months is here and now it's moving on towards three year olds. Let's keep a track on what's going on. And then those are definite red flags. I also want to flag some fine motor skills that children engage in when they're in their preschools. So very early, children start showing an interest of using their hands. So even when they are zero to six, they start reaching and playing with toys. But when they're seven to eight months onwards, they start reaching, grasping, showing pincer grasp. They start moving objects from one hand to the other hand, they start using, holding spoon. They start putting spoon in their mouth.

Anoo Bhopti:

They start... So quite young. So by the time they're two, they're doing a lot of those things. So if you start noticing that they're not using their hands at all, or they're not using their hands as much as other children, and they're already two, that is definitely a red flag. If I tell you what they can do, you'll be quite surprised. 24 month old kids can actually draw with crayons, they can hold the crayons, they can turn pages in a book, they can feed themself with utensils, they can use a cup. And by the time they're three, they do a lot more. So you know how you... We are going to have three year old kinder now, which is fantastic. So three year old kinder kids can do a lot of fine motor skills. And when I get to play, I'll tell you about play, but let's just look at their motor skills and their flags there.

Anoo Bhopti:

So at three they're beginning to even cut with scissors, they like to snip, they like to use objects, they like to trace on thick lines. And I know I'm an OT, so I'll tell you this, but these are opportunities for you to set up things intentionally for them when you work with them. And they will thread things, so they'll thread beads, they'll thread rolls, they'll thread pasta, whatever it is, they will coordinate their hands. They'll brush their teeth, they'll brush their hair, and they can even start doing big buttons. So it is a fabulous age, three to four, when they're learning to get really skilled in their movement skills. And if you're not seeing those skills, then it is definitely a flag that you can notice. Now, shall I just talk a little bit more about problem solving cognitive skills and the flags there as well, Mary?

Mary Holwell:

Yes. That would be really useful I think, Anoo.

Anoo Bhopti:

Yes, because in some ways, problem solving and cognition is hand in hand with fine motor and gross motor skills. And we kind of underestimate how important those observations are in... when you notice children. So I just want you to be quite astutely aware of these things that children do. They will show you, when they're under six months, they will shake an object if you put it in their hand. They will try and swipe and reach for an object, which shows you that they're looking, they're attending, and then they're reaching. So these three things are not just fine motor skills, they're cognitive skills, they're problem solving skills. They are actually making up in their mind that I will have to use my hand to swipe that object.

Anoo Bhopti:

I can't grasp it yet, but I can swipe it so I can touch it. So it shows an intention and it shows that that cognition is developing, but also that that problem solving is developing because that's what you want. You want them to start learning problem solving skills at a very early age. So that's early, but that's what you need to look for. Then they also start showing you if they're bored. So this is interesting, when babies display boredom they don't look at you. They start looking at other things or they disengage. So if you offer them the same thing over and over again, they will disengage and they get bored. And that's actually a flag because children, babies with autism don't do that. They don't actually show that they're bored. They will continue to play with the same toy over and over again.

Anoo Bhopti:

And they don't get bored. So that's kind of a flag. Why is the child just stuck on the same toy? And they might actually get bored with a different toy, or they might get disengaged if you change. So that is... Can you see how that can be a flag? So looking for the child feeling bored, showing ability to coordinate, looking, hearing, and touching, so that if you call their name they turn towards the voice, towards the sound, to locate where you are, to locate where it's coming from, and they try and touch you. So these are things that are very much indicative of their cognitive skills and their social skills and their communicative skills. They start enjoying games and toys. As they get a bit older they'll bang objects, they will scrunch paper, but they'll also mouth things, because they're now at the oral stage where they want to put everything in their mouth, and that's fine.

Anoo Bhopti:

Don't stop them from putting things in their mouth, because we want them to experience different textures and sensations of shapes and sizes. But once they're two years old and they're still mouthing everything, then that's a red flag. Because once they learn about textures, once they learn how to engage in more functional play, they will stop mouthing. So mouthing is part of exploration, which I'll talk about when we reach play, but definitely they will be showing you these few things. So a red flag would be if they're not interested in play or they don't engage or they start engaging in repetitive activities; rather than showing interest in new songs, they want you to keep going back to just one song or the one same thing or the one same person. And then just before we move on, just be aware of communication skills as well and be aware that babies communicate really early in life.

Anoo Bhopti:

So they start communicating when they're zero to three months, really early. And a lot of times if they're not giving that communication back to the parent or to you, then the parent disengages because they don't know what to expect from children, and it can lead to attachment issues. So look for that early communication that they look at you and they'll smile or they'll try and imitate whatever your mouth does. And I've got a video of one, like a newborn, who is imitating the mouth of the person that they're looking at and it's so amazing to see what babies can do. So it really blows my mind when I see zero to two babies and how much they do and how much they learn. And so just being mindful of those communications. Are they looking at you? Are they trying to get your attention and showing you or something? Do they want you to clap for them or are they just... They're not aware of... So those again, telling us that's a flag because they don't care that the adult is engaging with them. They're not really giving the social reciprocation when you talk to them. So those are some other red flags to be mindful of when you're in your rooms with them.

Karen Hope:

And just on that point, it almost... What I'm hearing coming out around this idea of red flags and noticing particularly, is that it sounds, listening to you, that early childhood educators and early childhood teachers perhaps are some of the best placed people to really notice these areas of development, these predictive delays that you talked about, that they're really, if you like to use it, at the coalface of noticing, and it's very important that they understand the messages that you are giving to them.

Anoo Bhopti:

Look absolutely, Karen. I believe that the magic is there. So when I did my first course in neuroplasticity, the teacher who taught us said "the magic is in your hands." So the magic is for you to create those opportunities for these little brains that are developing. And we, as a group of people who work in early childhood intervention, we looked for the, we call them the light touch or the soft entry points, where we can actually work with children without giving them labels. And we feel very strongly that the early educators are the people who can look for these things and already start shaping their brains, providing them... and then of course you alert people to the red flags, but just being with them, noticing these things is absolutely... When I work with children, I get parents to get reports from them for me. I send some questions and I say, can you tell me how they're doing? Or can you send me a video of what they do when they play? And that teaches me a lot of ways I target my occupational therapy intervention. So absolutely, Karen, it's absolute gold where they're sitting and working.

Mary Holwell:

I think the other thing that's quite interesting in what you've spoken about there Anoo, is that there is direction there, I suppose, for an educator who might be working with a slightly older child to ask some questions about how that child's development had been progressing. They might not be seeing some of those things because the child is now a little bit older, but they might have some uncertainty about something and they can pose questions to the family in a different way now, because they have a bit of an understanding of what previous red flags might have been, and I think, that, with that idea that you gave us of the connection between cognition and movement is a really useful one for educators. Because I think often when we think about motor skills, we tend to think, where, in terms of how I record this observation, should I place this? And now all of a sudden we've got a really good entry point to think about something that we might first think of as evidence of the motor skill becoming better developed as suddenly linking to learning and to communication or something else as well. So the repertoire of what educators are looking for is growing and being enriched all the time.

Anoo Bhopti:

Oh, absolutely, Mary. And that is the crux of it. So all the development is... So we call it a dynamic system. So the nervous system is no longer a linear hierarchical system where they learn... You know how, when I was learning, I'm old now, perhaps it's changed now, I hope it's changed. That we learn that children learn to sit, and then crawl, and then walk, and then this, and then that, and it's all sequential. It is, but at the same time that they're learning to sit, they're learning to engage and play in symbolic play, at same time they're learning to use a few words. So it's not that they're only learning movement. So they're learning all these skills around the same time. And in some ways it's overwhelming to get your head around how beautifully they learn.

Anoo Bhopti:

I still think it's very magical. That's the word I use because I really find children quite magical, really, because they do so much, but for us to have that lens, to observe them and remember that if they're not walking, if they're not actually reaching out, that could tell me something else is going on underneath it all.

Anoo Bhopti:

I just want people to be mindful of children's stress response as well, when you see these red flags. So just be mindful that some children have very high levels of anxiety and stress, and some of their responses come from that as well. So kind of trying to find out... And learning how to cope with adversity is really important for healthy development. So in terms of some of the children, if they don't have a caring adult at home, or if they have unrelenting stress caused due to maybe poverty or due to abuse or maternal depression, you are the people who are seeing these children, and not the paediatrician and not the nurse, because they all meet them once in a while. And so if you are picking up something, some of that stress that you see and some of the delay and some of that anxiety response, just engage in that as a red flag as well.

Mary Holwell:

Thanks Anoo, that's really useful. And I think if we can have educators who are building their capacity to notice and observe some of these things and to know that they're meaningful, then together we're all enriching outcomes for children. So I think there's the benefit of hearing different perspectives and building that into our thinking.

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