

Early years Curriculum Description For Clerkship

Early Years Program

This program focuses on the clinical strategies that a physician in a primary care setting can use to optimize neurodevelopment in the infant and preschool child. Although these strategies are applicable to many different medical fields besides family medicine, this program demonstrates some of the main principles of family medicine and its role in providing evidence based and best practice health care. Some of these principles are as follows:

1. Promotion of optimal health and reduction of risk for disease: For the infant, risk reduction strategies can be implemented even before conception and the family physician who cares for women and families throughout the life cycle can initiate such strategies when birth control examinations begin. This activity will continue through pregnancy as preparation for the safe arrival of the infant is planned. Positive parenting promotion, child safety, and immunization are examples of this ongoing care after the child is born and continues to grow.
2. Early detection of problems: As in other areas of family medicine, the early detection for those problems for which interventions can make a positive difference is a major objective. In primary care, expertise in detecting early signs of risks or problems is an important skill. Because of the many factors that can affect neurodevelopment in the early years, a physician needs awareness, skill and strategies to detect risks and developmental problems. Many other health professionals will contribute to the important tasks of delineating a problem and assisting with remediation.
3. Ongoing monitoring in the presence of a problem: Many issues require other specific expertise for diagnosis and treatment however the primary care physician remains an important link to ongoing care of a patient. A particular key role will be in addressing the impact of a problem on the family and assisting in the coordination of multiple services. When an infant has problems, many specialty services may be involved. The family physician's knowledge regarding the family and community is needed. Special expertise to monitor the child's problem in this context is vital to reduce the risks of secondary problems.

The format of the Early Years Program is two half-day workshops that, through case discussions, illustrate the above principles. Another half day affords the clerk an opportunity to visit one of the community services used to promote healthy development (eg. Early Years Center) or to provide a remedial intervention (eg. Speech Pathologist). It is expected that the student will have the opportunity to see some of these strategies in action through prenatal visits and well baby examinations in their family medicine clinical placement.

Goals and Objectives of the Program

1. The student should gain knowledge regarding neurodevelopment from fertilization to adulthood with particular emphasis on:
 - The extensive development in utero and in the first year
 - The interplay between genetic endowment and environmental factors in brain development
 - The effect of nutrition, care and nurturing on the early wiring of neural pathways of the infant and young child
 - The importance of this early period of neurodevelopment for the future learning capacity, emotional regulation and risks for mental and physical disease
2. The student shall learn about the importance of parenting in child development, in particular:
 - Attachment issues and assessing parent-child interactions
 - Factors that pose risks to adequate parenting and intervention
 - Universal need for parenting support and training
3. The student shall examine factors that adversely affect neurodevelopment from preconception through early years of life as well as interventions to remove or modify these factors. Some specific topics will be:
 - The effect of abuse and marital conflict on development
 - The impact of postpartum psychiatric problems
 - Early recognition and interventions for developmental delays such as motor, cognitive, communication (speech and language), psychosocial
 - The impact of special needs child on the family (marriage and siblings)
4. The student will gain knowledge as to the use of validated “tools” to facilitate comprehensive screening and record keeping during pre and postnatal life. Such tools will include:
 - Ontario Antenatal Record
 - Antenatal Psychosocial Health Assessment (ALPHA)
 - Rourke Baby Record
 - Nipissing Developmental Surveillance Tool
5. The students will gain knowledge regarding the important role of other health professionals in the promotion and remediation of neurodevelopmental issues. Such professions will include public health programs, speech pathology, early intervention services, occupational and physiotherapy, early childhood educators etc. An interdisciplinary approach to these problems is stressed.
6. The student should endeavor to gain skill in assessing for risks and delays and in developing a plan to address them, including discussing the issues with parents.

Students can access the background information for this program from the Ontario College of Family Physicians website at www.cfpc.ca. To access the manual directly, search using the title, Healthy Child Development: Improving the Odds. It is recommended that this material be reviewed prior to the first Early Years Workshop.