

Child development pediatrician: from the early to the new challenges

Pediatra do desenvolvimento infantil: dos primeiros aos novos desafios

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Child development clinics have undergone a significant transformation since they were created, evolving from rudimentary diagnostic centers to comprehensive, multidisciplinary facilities designed to address a wide range of developmental issues in children. This evolution reflects broader changes in medical knowledge, societal attitudes, and health care systems. Understanding this progression offers valuable insights into how we can further improve support for children with developmental challenges.

The concept of specialized care for children with developmental disorders began to take shape in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Early pioneers, such as Gesel, Piaget, Prechtl, Dubowitz, Brazelton, Mary Sheridan, Amiel-Tison, Kanner, to name just a few, were instrumental in this movement. These early efforts were primarily focused on the observation and documentation of child development milestones but laid the groundwork for a systematic approach to identifying and understanding developmental disorders¹. However, at that time, child development clinics were often included in broader pediatric or psychiatric services, lacking the specialization and comprehensive approach seen today.

The mid-20th century marked a significant turning point with the establishment of specialized child development clinics. These clinics emerged in response to the growing recognition that developmental disorders required distinct approaches and expertise.

Advancements in medical knowledge led to an increased understanding of various developmental disorders, including autism, cerebral palsy, and learning disabilities, and highlighted the need for dedicated diagnostic and therapeutic services. Parents of children with developmental disorders started to form advocacy groups, demanding better services and support. It was at this point that clinics began to incorporate a multidisciplinary approach, involving pediatricians, psychologists, speech and language therapists, psychomotor therapists, and occupational therapists. This comprehensive model allowed for more accurate diagnoses and effective interventions tailored to each child's needs¹.

The latter part of the 20th century saw further integration and expansion of child development clinics with the creation of multidisciplinary teams, a concept that became standard practice. These teams work collaboratively to provide holistic care, addressing the medical, psychological, and social aspects of developmental disorders¹.

In Portugal, there was a growing awareness of the importance of addressing these issues and, as in other countries, there was a rise in similar multidisciplinary teams and child development centers in the 1970s and the 1980s. There was also a rapid growth in the development and implementation of early intervention programs aimed at identifying developmental delays as early as possible, often starting

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with screenings in infancy. Child development clinics began to forge partnerships with educational institutions. This collaboration ensured that children were accommodated in terms of their education and received support, facilitating better outcomes both academically and developmentally. Advances in medical technology, including improved imaging techniques and genetic testing, enhanced the diagnostic capabilities of clinics. These technologies allowed for more precise identification of underlying causes of developmental disorders. Increased public awareness about developmental disorders, driven by advocacy groups and media coverage, led to a greater demand for specialized services.

The evolution of child development clinics has continued into the 21st century, marked by several key trends and innovations:

- Modern child development clinics emphasize holistic and family-centered care. This approach recognizes the critical role of families in the therapeutic process and aims to empower parents with knowledge and resources to support their children effectively.
- The advent of telehealth and digital tools has revolutionized access to care. Telehealth services allow families in remote or underserved areas to receive expert consultations and therapy sessions. This was extremely significant in our country during the Covid-19 lockdown, allowing children and families to remain in touch with their team of providers. The impact of Covid-19 as reported by Dias et al.² was severe in these children and there are several issues that need to be further adjusted.
- There is a growing focus on inclusivity and the need to address the unique requirements of diverse populations. Clinics are increasingly aware of cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic factors that influence access to care and the effectiveness of interventions. Efforts to provide culturally sensitive services and reduce disparities are central to modern practices.
- Child development clinics now often work with broader community services, including schools, social services, and recreational programs³. This integration ensures a more cohesive support network for children and their families.
- Ongoing research continues to inform best practices in diagnosing and treating developmental disorders. It is important that curiosity driven researchers, such as Sampaio e Caseiro⁴ keep digging into new aspects to further increase knowledge about these disorders. Innovations in neuroscience, genetics, and behavioral science are constantly being integrated into clinical practice, enhancing the effectiveness of interventions.

Despite significant advancements, child development clinics face ongoing challenges:

- Many clinics operate with limited resources, affecting their ability to serve all children in need. This group of disorders, being highly prevalent in the population, results in an increased burden for primary care services, or even for general pediatrics, so it is important to create new multidisciplinary teams in child development centers integrated into both primary care settings and hospital settings. Increased funding and support is crucial to expanding services and reducing wait times.
- There is a nationwide shortage of specialists trained in pediatric developmental disorders. Addressing this shortage requires investment in training programs and incentives to attract professionals to this field. I am glad that the need for a pediatric sub-specialty in this field was finally acknowledged in our country, because it was the first step in the right direction, but there are many more to be taken.
- Ensuring equitable access to services remains a challenge, particularly for families in overcrowded city areas, rural and remote villages, or low-income areas. Expanding telehealth services and community outreach can help bridge this gap, but integrating these tools into everyday practice requires careful planning and training to ensure they are used effectively and ethically.

Looking forward, child development clinics must continue to focus on innovation, inclusivity, and accessibility. By leveraging advances in technology, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and advocating for policies that support comprehensive care, these clinics can better serve children and families, providing early intervention programs and ensuring that all children can reach their full potential.

In conclusion, the journey of child development clinics from their early beginnings to modern multidisciplinary centers reflects the dynamic nature of medical science and societal progress. As we move forward, continued dedication to improving these essential services will be crucial in addressing the diverse needs of children with developmental challenges, fostering their growth, and enhancing their quality of life.

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