



Developmental Delay

Babies and children usually go through the same stages of development but some children learn to do things faster or slower than others. If your child seems slower to learn new things or out of step with others of the same age, it is best to get them checked straight away. Getting support early can make a big difference to children's development.

Every child is different

Every child develops at their own rate, and there is a wide range of what is considered to be normal development. Babies and children can:

- have 'spurts' of learning, like growth spurts, where they seem to be learning something new every day. Then they may 'mark time' while they take in or practise what they have learned
- 'slip back' at times, especially if they are under emotional stress or unwell. They can seem to forget what they have learned
- let one skill go for a while as they work hard at learning something new.

For all these reasons, comparing your baby or child with another, while it is interesting for parents, is not the best way to know how your child is developing.

What is developmental delay?

'Developmental delay' is a term used when children are slower to reach milestones than is expected for their age. They may have problems with:

- movement
- communication, speech, language
- learning
- behaviour
- play
- social skills, interacting with others.

They may have problems in one of these areas or more than one area.

- Some delays in development are temporary and with support and intervention children can meet their milestones and develop along with others their age.
- For other children delays can continue for much longer. They may be the first sign of a long-term condition for which your child may need specialised intervention, treatment or support.

The term 'developmental delay' or 'global developmental delay' is often used until more is understood about a child's development or another diagnosis is made, usually when children are older, eg school age.

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The most important thing is to have your child checked early. Research shows that loving parenting, early treatment and the right opportunities to learn can make a huge difference to how children develop.

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Causes of delay

While there are many different causes of developmental delay, for a lot of children the specific cause or factors involved are never known. It can occur during pregnancy, around the time of birth or after the child is born.

Some causes include:

- genetic or inherited conditions
- being born too early (premature)
- birth injury or other injury
- hearing or vision problems
- lots of illness or hospitalisation which can mean missing out on chances to learn
- family stress which can mean a baby does not get consistent loving care in the early weeks and months
- being exposed to some drugs before birth, eg alcohol.

Having a check up

You are the person that knows your child best. If you are concerned about their development at any time, it is important to take them to a child health nurse, doctor, paediatrician or other health professional for a check-up.

When you meet with professionals it can help to:

- take as much information about your child with you as you can, eg your 'Blue Book' (My health and development record) or reports from other professionals. You could also take a photo or video of your child that shows your concerns, and keep a diary of what happens, when and how often. These help the professional understand the situation
- bring a friend or family member with you if you want to. They can support you and be a second person hearing the conversation
- ask questions, eg what you can do to help your child; what support is available for your child and you
- think of yourself as a partner working with the professional.

If a health professional doesn't take your concerns seriously, or reassures you without checking your child, it is OK to seek a second opinion.

It is also important to talk with staff at school. They can help your child to be involved in activities, to interact with others and to learn. Additional support is usually available in children's centres, preschools and schools for children with developmental delay and a range of disabilities or learning difficulties. Staff will help you access support and you can work together to develop a plan for your child.

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It is important to work in partnership with health and education professionals to achieve the best outcomes for your child.
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What parents can do to help children develop

Your health or education professional may provide advice about what you can do at home to help your child's development. It is important to follow their advice.

Some things that help all children develop are to:

- talk with baby from birth. Look into their eyes, smile and use simple words. Talk as you do things for them. Say what will happen next, eg I'm going to pick you up now – here we go'
- listen to their little noises and copy them back. This is the start of learning to talk
- play little mimicking games, eg when they poke their tongue out, you could do it back
- share books with babies, toddlers and children for a few minutes each day – it is never too soon to start. This is a time for closeness, hearing your voice, and learning that books are enjoyable. Children also enjoy songs and rhymes.

Some babies don't ask for much attention and don't cry very much. Even so, spend lots of time holding, stroking and responding to their little signals. The relationship you have with your child is one of the most important building blocks for development.

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The more you talk to your child, the more they learn that sounds make words and that words have meaning. It helps them learn language and to talk for themselves.
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Children learn from playing, exploring and trying things out. You could:

- give babies a variety of things to look at, touch, shake or hold. Take them outside for a walk. Let them see, feel and hear a variety of different things
- make sure children have a variety of things to play with and places to explore - this can be done without expensive toys. Notice what they are interested in and follow their lead

- give children time to try things for themselves, but help them before they become too frustrated. If they are reaching for something you could push it a bit closer, so they have a chance to get it and feel successful
- give lots of opportunities to succeed. Even small successes can make children feel they have some control over their lives and this builds self-esteem. A child who has repeated failures is likely to avoid trying
- give lots of encouragement for small successes or getting things partly right. Don't wait until they can do the whole task properly
- follow your child's interests in finding what they would like to do. Caring for a pet, cooking, growing a garden or fishing can be done successfully by most children. Help them find groups or clubs and hobbies where they will have opportunities to do well
- don't always make children practise what they can't do well
- let children be involved in helping you, even if they don't do things well. Everyone needs to feel needed. It can help to know that children with developmental delay go on learning. They may take longer to learn new skills and need plenty time to practise. It can help to break new skills down into small steps.

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Children's development is a journey, not a race. Most children will be happy with who they are if they get messages from you that you love them and are proud of them.
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Looking after yourself

It can be upsetting if your child's development is delayed or they are diagnosed with a disability or learning difficulty. You may feel shock, grief, anger or worry at different times. You may wonder what this means for their future and for your family. It can help to remember that there is support available for your child and you. Caring for a child who needs extra help can be very time consuming and tiring.

It can help to:

- talk with family, friends, carers or professionals about the kind of help and support you need. This might change as your child's needs change. Don't be afraid to ask for help
- contact services such as those on this page and find out what they can offer
- make time to look after your own health and wellbeing and do things you enjoy
- put your energy into things that matter - less important things can wait

- make time for important relationships in your life - these can be a source of strength
- consider whether counselling or other support for your emotional wellbeing would be useful - your doctor can be a good place to start
- connect with parents in a similar situation - this can be a source of support and a great way to share information and ideas. You can discover that you are not alone.

It can help to remind yourself of your child's progress. Notice what they can do now compared with what they used to do.

You can get further advice and information from:

- School, Mrs W Jennings – SENDCo
- Your GP
- School Nurse
- <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/conditions/global-development-delay>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/learning-disabilities/diagnosis/>
- <https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk/childhood-development-additional-needs>

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