

## **Developmental Milestones in Children**



Parents are instinctively interested in their child's development and want to make sure their child is progressing appropriately. As children grow, they pass through key developmental milestones at certain ages. Tracking these milestones help us gauge how a child is progressing, but it's normal for children to learn these skills at different rates.

Understanding what milestones are and whether children are meeting them can help parents identify problems early or reassure them that their children are on track. Below, we review the main types of milestones, why they matter, and how you can use them effectively to guide your parenting journey.

### **Why Developmental Milestones Matter**

You can think of the developmental milestones as a checklist. They represent what an average child can do around a particular age. The exact timing of when each individual child reaches each milestone will vary quite a bit. However, not meeting one or more skills well after the expected range can be cause for concern.

Milestones involve physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and communication skills that kids need to learn as they develop and grow. Often these skills build on each other. For instance, first, a baby pulls up, then they stand, followed by taking their first steps.

By looking at the different milestones, parents, doctors, and teachers are better able to understand how children typically develop and watch for any potential problems. For example, your child's pediatrician will ask about milestones at well check-ups, and your child's preschool teacher or child care provider may alert you if your child is behind their peers on a particular skill. In either case, the professional may suggest further evaluation for your child or activities you can do to help them meet the milestone.

### **Types of Child Development Milestones**

Most parents are familiar with the physical milestones like holding up their head, grasping, and sitting up. However, there are other areas of growth to pay attention to as well. In fact, there are four basic categories for developmental milestones.

#### **Physical Milestones**

These milestones involve both large motor skills and fine motor skills. The large motor skills are usually the first to develop and include sitting up, standing, crawling, and walking. Fine motor skills involve precise movements such as grasping a spoon, holding a crayon, drawing shapes, and picking up small objects.<sup>1</sup>

For example, between the ages of 9 to 12 months, children begin to achieve physical milestones such as standing up or even early walking.<sup>2</sup> However, as noted above, the

range of when these skills happen is large, with some kids walking as early as 9 months and others not taking their first steps until around 14 to 15 months or even later. As long as they are eventually mastered, getting to these skills later in the expected range does not normally have any lasting impact or reflect future impairments.<sup>3</sup>

## **Play's Impact on Child Development**

### **Cognitive Milestones**

Cognitive milestones are centered on a child's ability to think, learn, and solve problems. An infant learning how to respond to facial expressions and a preschooler learning the alphabet are both examples of cognitive milestones. Other examples include looking for dropped objects and problem solving.

### **Social and Emotional Milestones**

Social and emotional milestones are centered on children gaining a better understanding of their own emotions and the emotions of others. These skills also involve learning how to interact and play with other people and the development of empathy.<sup>4</sup> Some examples include showing a preference for caregivers, expressing emotions via facial expressions, and self-soothing.

### **Communication Milestones**

These milestones involve both language and nonverbal communication.<sup>5</sup> A one-year-old learning how to say their first words and a five-year-old learning some of the basic rules of grammar are examples of important communication milestones. Other communication milestones are making cooing sounds and looking toward the person who is talking to them.

## **Every Child Is Different**

While most of these milestones typically take place during a certain window of time, as noted above, parents and caregivers must remember that each child is unique. Not all kids are going to hit these milestones at the same time—nor should they. The ranges simply give a framework for approximately when to expect certain skills to develop.

Some children might reach certain milestones very early, like learning talk much earlier than their same-age peers. Other children might reach the same milestones much later. This doesn't necessarily mean that one child is gifted or that another is delayed—it simply represents the individual differences that exist in the developmental process. However, as mentioned above, significant delays can point to a problem that warrants evaluation from their pediatrician.

As most developmental abilities are progressive, meaning more advanced skills like running usually occur after simpler abilities such as crawling and cruising have already

been achieved, delayed skills can have cascading effects. However, in most cases, all the milestones will eventually be met with no lasting developmental issues.<sup>6</sup>

Whether a child is born prematurely or full-term can also greatly impact the timing of these skills, with preemie's skills coming a bit later—most preemies catch up by age two.<sup>7</sup> Personality has an influence on your child's development as well, which can be especially obvious with twins or other multiples. For instance, one child may be very physically active and enthusiastic at learning to walk, while the other may be more laid back, content for the time being to observe others from their seat on the floor.

Check with your child's pediatrician if you are ever concerned about their development. You can also contact your state's Early Intervention program if your child is under 3 years old or at any local elementary school if your child is 3 or older.

### **A Word From Verywell**

By understanding developmental milestones and what age range is typical for kids to meet them, you and your healthcare professional can keep a watchful eye on your child's growth and development. If your child has developmental delays, early intervention can help lead to more successful outcomes. There are multiple programs available to help kids—and their parents—with delays from birth through high school.