

Child Development Milestones

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When we look at child development, we always want to look at the whole child, not just one set of skills, so experts have divided developmental milestones into the 5 categories below.

Children develop skills on a fairly predictable timeline, but can have uneven development – for example, a 24 month old may have the motor skills we expect of a 30 month old, and the communication skills typical of an 18 month old... if you look at that same child 6 months later, they may have surged in their communication skills. Temperament and interest levels have big effects on which skills they focus most on, but parents can also ensure they have opportunities and encouragement to develop in all these areas.

It is helpful for parents to have a good working knowledge of typical development (see the resources below for great information) so they know if their child is on track, and children may also benefit from occasional screenings (see below) to make sure children are progressing well.

Gross Motor (aka Large Motor)

These skills include: running, jumping, throwing, kicking, climbing, and dancing.

To build these skills, ensure that your child has plenty of time and opportunity to move: playgrounds, indoor gyms, hikes in the woods where they can balance on logs, going up and down stairs, tumbling on a mat. Try for a mixture of free play time where they explore movement on their own, and playing together. Kids love wrestling with parents, dancing, chasing around the house together, kicking a ball together. You can teach basic skills of any sport – just don't expect them to follow rules yet!

Fine Motor

Fine motor skills allow a child to pick up and manipulate small objects. These skills help them to feed themselves, dress themselves, hold a pencil, and other essential skills for independence.

You can help build these skills with activities like: coloring / drawing / painting, threading beads onto a pipe cleaner, threading pipe cleaners through the holes on a colander, putting dried beans inside a bottle, taking lids on and off containers, feeding them small and slippery finger foods (like diced peaches), letting them feed themselves with a fork or a spoon, and stacking blocks.

If your child tends to still mouth small objects, that doesn't mean you shouldn't let them use small items... but you should supervise them when they play, and put small items away when you're done.

Social-Emotional Development

These skills can be seen when your child copies your actions, notices the emotions of other people, shows empathy for others, or plays games where they are pretending to be/do something.

These skills are primarily built in interaction with others. However, children can also learn a lot about social interaction and emotions by reading books or watching TV. When you read to your child, talk about what emotions the characters may be feeling. Talk about the ways they are interacting with each other – are they being nice? Mean?

Language & Communication

Communication is not just saying words out loud. Especially for a young toddler, we want to know: do they seem to understand the words that are said to them (e.g. Can they follow simple directions – like ‘close the door’? If asked to point at a picture of a cat, can they do so? Do they point/gesture to indicate what they want? Do they follow your gestures? Can they name a few familiar objects?)

The best way to build language skills is to follow your child’s lead... rather than throwing language at them about what *you* see around you, first watch them. What are *they* looking at? What has their attention at the moment? Talk to them about *that*, giving them words to describe what they see.

Cognitive Development: Problem-Solving

This is about using tools, and solving challenges. For example, a child who sees a toy you put on the counter out of reach, then gets a stool and pushes it over to the counter and climbs up on the stool to get the toy is a great problem-solver! (And a frustrating child to parent!)

To build problem-solving skills, give them challenges: puzzles, shape sorters, tasks that require multiple steps (first you take the lid off the box, then you put the toy in, then you put the lid back on the box), sorting objects by color or size or other characteristics, and putting toys away in their proper places. Allow your child to become frustrated without always “rescuing” them from that frustration. Notice their triggers, and signs that frustration is building, and move in for a little extra support, but don’t just take over and do the task for them – they can learn through those challenges

Great Resources for Understanding Child Development, Tailored to the Age of Your Child:

- Just in Time Parenting from eXtension. 8 page newsletters, include sections on milestones (how I talk, how I understand, how I move), activities parents can do to enhance development, and tips for managing the predictable challenges of each phase. Issues are in 2 month intervals (e.g. 19 – 20 months; 21 – 22 months, etc.) Subscribe to receive free email updates, or download any newsletter issue now at: <http://jiptp.extension.org/>
- Zero to Three. Healthy Minds, Nurturing Your Child’s Development: Each 2 page handout includes a summary of what your child is capable of, ideas for activities you can do to enhance development, and questions to ask yourself about your child. Toddler handouts for 12 – 18 months, 18 – 24 months, and 24 – 36 months. www.zerotothree.org/about-us/areas-of-expertise/free-parent-brochures-and-guides/age-based-handouts.html

Screening Tools to Assess Whether Your Child is Developing Normally

- Ages and Stages Questionnaire: <http://asqoregon.com/>. This questionnaire takes about 15 minutes to complete online. It will ask 6 questions in each of 5 areas of development: small motor skills, large motor, communication, problem-solving, and personal-social. If your child is developing normally, you will see that you will mark some of the skills as “yes, my child has mastered this”, some as “my child can sometimes do this” and some as “not yet.” (If you mark *several* items in a category as “not yet”, that might be of concern...) After you complete the questionnaire, you will receive a brief summary of the results.
- Note: In the Seattle area, free ASQ screenings by a professional are available at Parent Trust for Washington Children. www.parenttrust.org/index.php?page=asq
- Centers for Disease Control / Learn the Signs, Act Early. One page checklists of “What Most Children Do at This Age” AND checklists of “Act Early by Talking to Your Child’s Doctor if Your Child Does Not Do...” In English and Spanish. Toddler checklists for 1 year, 18 months, 2 years, 3 years. www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/downloads.html

Resources for activities that stimulate development

- Ideas for Activities to enhance all areas of development, and an overview of brain development: www.bbbgeorgia.org/parentsActivities.php
- Learning Opportunities in Everyday Activities: www.bornlearning.org/learning-on-the-go
- For each age, ideas to enhance learning in creative arts, language, literacy, math, science, emotional growth: www.pbs.org/parents/child-development/