

Child Development Milestones

Janelle Durham, MSW. Parent Educator. GoodDaysWithKids.com; InventorsOfTomorrow.com

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 five 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 and problem solving skills may be lagging a bit. Temperament and interest levels have big effects on which skills a child tends to focus most on, but parents can 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 so they know if their child is on track (see the resources below for great information), and children may also benefit from occasional screenings (see below) to make sure children are progressing well.

Gross Motor (aka Large Motor)

These physical 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, swimming, trying out wheels (scooters, trikes, bikes). Try for a mixture of free play time where they explore movement on their own, and time playing together. Kids love wrestling with their parents, dancing together, chasing each other around the house, or kicking a ball together.

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 or string, putting dried beans inside a bottle, taking lids on and off containers, picking up small and slippery finger foods, letting them feed themselves with a fork or a spoon or chopsticks, stacking blocks, building with blocks, doing puzzles, tying shoes and so on.

If your child tends to still mouth small objects, just be sure supervise them when they play, and put small items away when you're done watching. But don't feel like you have to avoid everything small.

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 (productive language). It's also understanding words (receptive language), interpreting body language, tone of voice, etc. For example: 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 follow your gestures? Do they notice that meaning may change when the tone of voice changes?

The best way to build language skills is to follow a child's lead... rather than talking non-stop at them about random things, 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 are seeing or doing.

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 (in 2 month intervals to 5 years), covering milestones, activities parents can do to enhance development, and tips for managing predictable challenges of each phase. Subscribe to receive free emails, or download any issue now at: <https://sites.udel.edu/jitp/>
- Zero to Three. Has lots of great resources for understanding and supporting your child's development with easy everyday interactions. <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/for-families/>

Screening Tools to Assess Whether Your Child is Developing Normally

- Ages and Stages Questionnaire: <https://osp.uoregon.edu/home/checkDevelopment>. This takes 15 minutes to complete online. It asks 6 questions in each of 5 areas of development: small motor, large motor, communication, problem-solving, and personal-social. If your child is developing normally, you'll likely mark some 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 "not yet", that might be of concern.) After completing, you receive a summary of the results. Up to 5.5 years.
- CDC / Learn the Signs, Act Early. Checklists of "What Most Children Do at This Age". Your child should be able to do 75% of the items on each list at that age. Includes activity ideas. In English and Spanish. Up to 5 years. <https://www.cdc.gov/act-early/milestones/index.html> You can download their Milestone Tracker app.
- Pathways Sensory-Motor Checklist. Up to 7 years. Include play and social skills, milestones, daily activities, and self-expression. If your child has achieved most milestones, they are on track. If there are multiple items in a category they're not capable of, discuss with a professional. <https://pathways.org/>.

Resources for activities that stimulate development

- Ideas for Activities to enhance all areas of development for babies and toddlers, and an overview of brain development: <https://www.bbbgeorgia.org/fact-sheets>
- For each age, ideas to enhance learning in creative arts, language, literacy, math, science, emotional growth: www.pbs.org/parents/child-development/ Up to age 8
- The Vroom app features 1000+ fast and fun science-backed activities you can do with your child from birth to 5 to support early learning.