

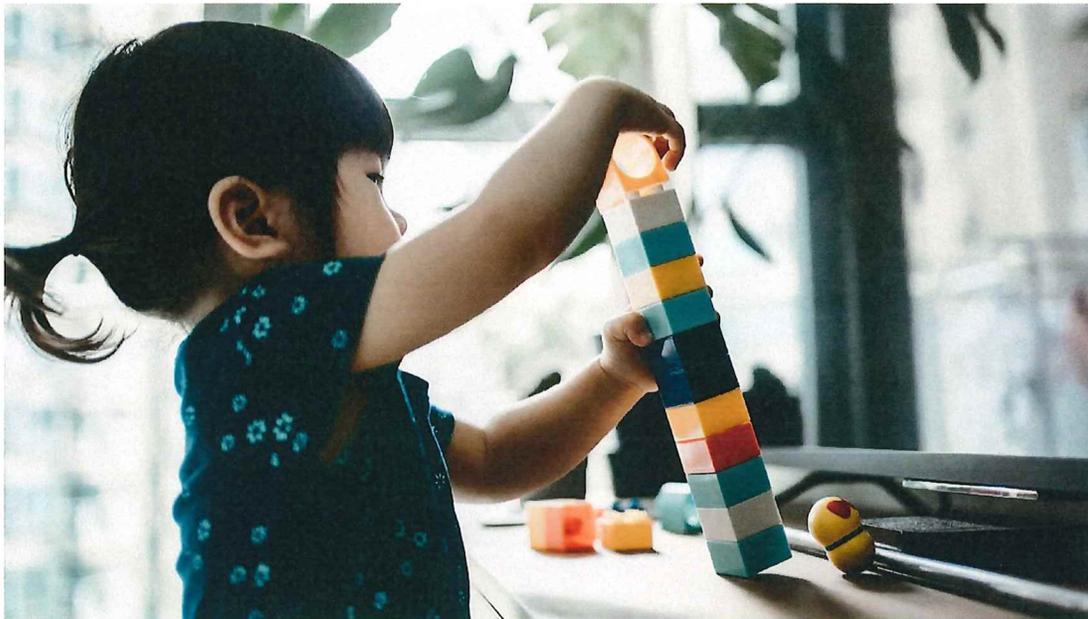
What You Need to Know About Developmental Delay



Medically reviewed by [Karen Gill, M.D.](#) — By [Ann Pietrangelo](#) — Updated on [April 24, 2023](#)

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A delay in reaching language, thinking, social, or motor skills milestones is called developmental delay. It can be caused by things like heredity, pregnancy complications, or premature birth. The cause isn't always known.



Children reach developmental milestones at their own pace, and some move faster than others. Two siblings in the same family may reach milestones at different rates.

Minor, temporary delays are usually no cause for alarm, but an ongoing delay or multiple delays in reaching milestones can be a sign there may

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If you suspect your child has a developmental delay, speak with their pediatrician. Developmental delay sometimes indicates an underlying condition that only doctors can diagnose.

Once you get a diagnosis, you can plan for therapies or other early interventions to help your child's progress and development into adulthood.

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Fine and gross motor skill delay

Fine motor skills include small movements like holding a toy or using a crayon. **Gross motor skills** require larger movements, like jumping, climbing stairs, or throwing a ball.

Children progress at different rates, but most children can lift their head by 3 months old, sit with some support by 6 months, and walk well before their second birthday.

By age 5, most children can stand on one foot for 10 seconds or longer and can use a fork and spoon.

Exhibiting some of the following signs can mean that your child has delays in developing certain fine or gross motor functions:

- floppy or loose trunk and limbs

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- inability to sit without support by 9 months old
- dominance of involuntary reflexes over voluntary movements
- inability to bear weight on legs and stand up by about 1 year old

Falling outside the normal range isn't always cause for concern, but it's worth getting your child evaluated.

Speech and language delay

According to the [National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders](#) , the most active time for learning speech and language is the first 3 years of life, as the brain develops and matures.

The language learning process begins when an infant communicates hunger by crying. By 6 months old, most infants can recognize the sounds of basic language.

At 12 to 15 months old, infants should be able to say two or three simple words, even if they aren't clear.

Most toddlers can say several words by the time they are 18 months old. When they reach the age of 3, most children can speak in brief sentences.

Speech and language delay aren't the same. Speaking requires the muscle coordination of the vocal tract, tongue, lips, and jaw to make sounds.

A speech delay occurs when children aren't saying as many words as would be expected for their age.

A language delay occurs when children have difficulty understanding what other people say or can't express their own thoughts. Language includes speaking, gesturing, signing, and writing.

It can be hard to distinguish between speech and language delay in young children. A child who understands things and can express their

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Poor hearing can cause speech and language delay, so your doctor will usually include a hearing test during diagnosis. Children with speech and language delay are often referred to a [speech-language pathologist](#).

Early intervention can be a big help.

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Autism spectrum disorder

[Autism spectrum disorder \(ASD\)](#) is a term used to describe several neurodevelopmental conditions. Autistic people may think, move, communicate, and process senses differently from neurotypical people.

Autism is usually diagnosed in early childhood and includes a noticeable delay in language and social development.

Your pediatrician will ask about your child's development at each of their well visits. In fact, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) recommends that all children be screened for symptoms of autism at 18 and 24 months using standardized screening tools.

Symptoms are sometimes obvious early on, but may not be noticed until a child reaches 2 or 3 years of age.

Signs and symptoms of ASD vary, but usually include delayed speech and language skills and challenges communicating and interacting with

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Every autistic person is unique, so symptoms and the way people experience them vary greatly.

Some symptoms include:

- not being responsive to their name
- dislike of cuddling or playing with others
- lack of facial expression
- inability to speak or difficulty speaking, carrying on a conversation, or remembering words and sentences
- repetitive movements
- development of specific routines
- coordination problems

There is no cure for ASD, but therapies and other approaches can help give your child extra tools to communicate, relieve stress, and, in some cases, manage daily tasks.

Causes and chances of developmental delay

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about **17 percent** of children between the ages of 3 and 17 have one or more developmental disabilities.

Most developmental disabilities occur before a child is born, but some can occur after birth due to infection, injury, or other factors.

Causes of developmental delay can be difficult to pinpoint, and a variety of things can contribute to it. Some conditions are genetic in origin, such as **Down syndrome**.

Infection or other complications during pregnancy and childbirth, as well as premature birth, can also cause developmental delay.

Developmental delay can also be a symptom of other underlying medical

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- autism spectrum disorders (ASDs)
- cerebral palsy
- fetal alcohol spectrum disorders
- Landau Kleffner syndrome
- myopathies, including muscular dystrophies
- genetic disorders, such as Down syndrome and fragile X syndrome

Remember that children develop at different rates, so it's possible that what you think of as a delay might be normal for your child. However, if you're concerned, it is important to get your child evaluated by professionals.

School-age children diagnosed with a developmental delay, may be eligible for special services. These services vary according to need and location.

Check with your physician and your school district to find out what services are available. Specialized education, especially when started early, can help your child progress and achieve more in school.

Treatments for developmental delays vary according to the specific delay. Some treatments include physical therapy for help in motor skill delays, and behavioral and educational therapy for help with ASD and other delays.

In some cases, medications may be prescribed. An evaluation and diagnosis from a pediatrician is crucial to come up with a treatment plan specially designed for your child.

Outlook

Many genetic and environmental factors figure into a child's development and can contribute to delays. Even women who have a healthy pregnancy and proper care during and after pregnancy can have children with

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Although causes of delays can be hard to pinpoint, there are many treatments and support services available to help.

The sooner you can diagnose a delay, the better it will be for your child's development into adulthood.

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