

PRACTICE GUIDE

Physical and cognitive developmental milestones

Developmental milestones are the skills children develop within a certain age range. Most children learn these skills in the same order, but not always at the same time¹.

This practice guide offers a starting point for exploring milestones across the developmental areas of a child's growth. It is designed to guide assessment and intervention decisions that support the positive development of a child.

The linked resources can be used to refresh knowledge of child development or to focus on specific milestones and behaviours, helping to identify whether a child's presentation is typical or may indicate trauma, delay, or regression.

Developmental areas

Developmental milestones are observed in the following five areas, tracking a child's understanding and skill development over time.

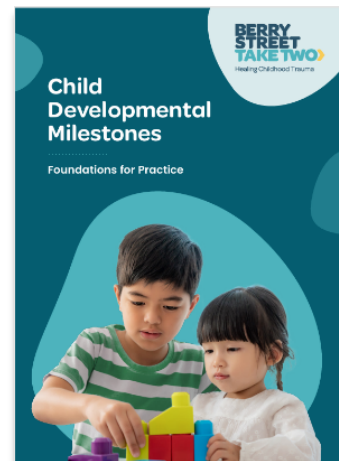
	Area	Description	Examples
	Gross motor skills	Big body movements.	Rolling, sitting, crawling, walking, skipping, hopping, kicking.
	Fine motor skills	Small body movements.	Holding toys, using cutlery, holding pencil and drawing, dressing self.
	Social and emotional development	Bonding with others, showing feelings and react to things.	Reactions to separation, new people, coping with adverse situations.
	Cognitive skills	How they think, learn, solve problems, and explore their surroundings.	A baby recognising familiar faces. A child understanding rules of a game and the concept of fairness. A teenager managing their time, organising their space or belongings.
	Speech and language	How they hear, make sounds, use words, and understand what others say.	Babbling noises, responds to name, developing sentences through to participating in discussions and express opinions clearly.

Developmental norms

Babies grow and develop quickly in their first 12 months across the full range of developmental areas. Some children may walk or talk earlier or later than others and that's normal¹.

Understanding what is typical is essential for identifying delays or differences².

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' approach to child rearing is child-led rather than age-related. Explore this perspective alongside conventional developmental frameworks using the [Child Developmental Milestones, Foundations for Practice resource](#)². This resource is organised by age range and covers the 5 developmental areas including sleep for each stage.



Premature babies

The earlier a baby is born, the higher their chance of having delays with growth and development. For premature babies (born before 37 weeks) milestones are expected for their corrected age (the age baby would be if born on their due date) until they are 2 years or have 'caught up'.

[Pregnancy birth & baby](#) website provides milestones and expectations for premature babies.

Holistic development and parenting support

The [Raising Children Network](#) offers a comprehensive suite of resources and information to support parents and professionals in understanding child development from pregnancy through to adulthood. The content is organised by age and stage of development and covers all areas of development.

With picture-based and video resources, use this resource to provide education and support to parents and carers, strategies to implement to support a child's healthy development.



Developmentally expected sexual behaviours

Sexual development is an area which can cause concern for adults and what is considered developmentally appropriate is shaped by the cultural and family values held.

Evolve Therapeutic Services' resource [Recognising developmentally expected sexual behaviours](#) provides typical and expected behaviours, presented across ages spanning infancy to late adolescents along with parenting guidance, indicators of concern and ways to consider the behaviour within the context it occurred.

evolve Therapeutic Services			
Working together, maximising potential			
Recognising Developmentally Expected Sexual Behaviours			
Knowing what sexual behaviours are developmentally expected at different ages helps caregivers, educators, and professionals support healthy development and notice when behaviours may be concerning and need further attention.			
Below is an overview of developmentally expected sexual behaviours and interests from birth to age 17. Every young person is different and cultural or family values can shape how these behaviours are expressed and addressed. These behaviours are typically part of healthy development. However, it is important to look at the context, how often the behaviour occurs, and its impact when determining whether a behaviour is concerning.			
0-2 (Infancy)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At this age they are exploring and discovering their bodies through touch sensory play. Engagement of physical closeness - cuddling, hugging, snuggling. Exploration of self and caregiver's response. Sensuous genital touching as part of general body exploration e.g., during nappy changes and bath time. No genital sexual play. Removing clothes to feel independence such as for comfort and sensory feedback. No awareness of sexual meaning - purely sensory exploration. Self-touch may occur - without intent to self-stimulate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spontaneous, curious, excited, unrefined. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Begin healthy development by using correct anatomical names and encouraging curiosity and exploration.
3-5 (Early childhood)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At this age they are naturally curious about their bodies and others', and begin learning about privacy, boundaries, and appropriate social behaviour through exploration and guidance. Curiosity about one's and others' bodies, including genitalia. Asking simple questions like "Where do babies come from?" Asking questions about anatomical differences (boys vs. girls). Occasional self-stimulation (rubbing genital area) without sexual intent. Role-playing about relationships (dressing, hugging, kissing, using the "kissers" touch) may occur during the "daddy's house" or "mummy's house" play. Using correct, accurate and/or "simpler" terms for body parts. Modelled, age-appropriate exploration with peers of similar age, with no coercion, force, or sexual stimulation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Occurs with peers of similar age and ability. Not secretive or coercive. Curious in nature. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set clear, gentle boundaries around privacy (private parts, "the talk about private parts with a doctor or carer" etc). Encourage age-appropriate exploration.

Developmental concerns

Concerns for a child's development or behaviour can come to the attention of Child Safety as child protection concerns, through child strengths and needs assessments or during case management.

Regular checks with a GP or child health nurse can map development and guide early intervention if a delay is identified. Children's Health Queensland provide [Milestones checklists for child development](#) which can be used to track how a child is growing and learning. If a milestone has not been met by the age listed, has regressed, or a there are concerns, these checklists can guide discussion to seeking necessary supports.

Note – these are conversation tools and not for screening or diagnosis.

Milestones checklist for child development					Has your child reached these milestones by each age?	Flag it early
	By 2 years	By 2.5 years	By 3 years	By 4 years	By 5 years	
Social and emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Notices when others are hurt or upset. Looks at your face to see how to react to a new situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plays next to other children (parallel play). Comforts others who are hurt or sad. Notifies and plays with other children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comes down when 10 minutes after you leave. Notifies and plays with other children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prefers playing with others than alone. Follows others who are hurt or sad. Shows simple emotions at home like cleaning the same after eating. Shows simple emotions at home like cleaning the same after eating. Shows simple emotions at home like cleaning the same after eating. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows rules or takes turns when playing with others. Shows simple emotions at home like cleaning the same after eating. Shows simple emotions at home like cleaning the same after eating. Shows simple emotions at home like cleaning the same after eating. 	
Language and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Says and understands at least 10 words. Does two or more words together like "bye-bye". Speaks using words including words and sentences. Can point to things in a book when asked. Can point to at least 2 body parts when asked. Uses gestures other than waving and pointing, like blowing a kiss. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses action words when putting two or more words together like "toe go" or "toe". Names things in a book when you point and ask "which one?". Says words like "no", "yes" or "all". Follows two-step directions like "sit on the floor and close the door". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Names an action in a picture when asked "what is she doing?". Says their first name when asked. Can have a conversation with at least two back and forth turns. Also asks what, where or why questions. Other people understand them most of the time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Answers simple questions like "what is a crayon?". Says sentences of more than 4 words. Says some words from a song, story or nursery rhyme. Talks about at least one thing that happened during the day. Speaks using more words correctly. Other people understand them all of the time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses or recognises simple rhymes, like "butter, butter, butter". Shows a conversation going with more than three back and forth turns. Tells a story play how, what or made up when at least two back and forth turns. Answers simple questions about a book or story read to them. Speaks using most words in sentences. Play and find it hard to say 9, 11 and 10. 	
Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kicks a ball. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses their hands to bend things, like a string. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Uses a fork. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Serves themselves food or pour water. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hops on one foot. 	

Milestones checklist for child development					Has your child reached these milestones by each age?			Flag it early
	By 2 months	By 4 months	By 6 months	By 9 months	By 12 months	By 15 months	By 18 months	
 Social and emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Smiles back and seems happy when you talk or smile at them.Looks at your face.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Smiles naturally to connect with you.Chuckles (not yet a full laugh) when you try to make them laugh.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Laughs.Shows familiar people.Looks back at themselves in the mirror.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Looks at you when you call their name.Looks, reaches or cries for you when you leave.Shows different expressions like happy, sad, or angry.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Plays games like peek-a-boo or pat-a-cake.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Shows you things they like or dislike.Shows affection with hugs or kisses.Claps when excited or blows a kiss.Hugs toys like a doll.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Points to show you something interesting.Checks where you are while exploring.Looks at a few pages in a book with you.Hugs with everyday tasks like dressing or washing their hands.	<p>When you see these signs, please contact your GP or child health nurse for advice.</p>
 Language and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Makes sounds other than crying.Reacts to loud sounds.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Makes cooing sounds like "oo" and "ahh".Makes sounds back when you talk to them.Turns head towards the sound of your voice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Makes squealing sounds.Makes sounds making words with you.Blows "raspberries".	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Makes different sounds like "mama" or "dada".Looks for familiar objects.Reaches for or points to objects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Says names for parents or caregivers, like "mum".Waves "bye-bye".Reaches for or points to objects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Says one or two words other than names.Looks for familiar objects by name.Follows directions with both gestures and words.Points to ask for object or for help.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Says at least three words besides names.Follows one-step directions without any gestures, like pointing.	<p>When you see these signs, please contact your GP or child health nurse for advice.</p>
 Movement and self-care	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Moves both arms and both legs.Opens hands briefly.Holds head up during tummy time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Holds head steadily when held.Makes a toy when you point to their hand.Swings at toys with their arms.Pushes up on to elbows in tummy time.Brings hands to mouth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Holds head from tummy to back (both ways).Leans on hands to support themselves when sitting.Pushes up with straight arms when on their tummy.Gets into a sitting position by themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Sits without support while using hands to play.Uses fingers to "crawl" food toward themselves.Makes things from one hand to another.Gets into a sitting position by themselves.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Walks holding onto something or someone.Drinks from a cup (no lid) as you hold it.Picks up small things between thumb and pointer fingers, like small bits of food.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Pulls up to stand.Walks holding onto something or someone.Drinks from a cup (no lid) as you hold it.Picks up small things between thumb and pointer fingers, like small bits of food.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Takes a few steps on their own.Uses fingers to feed themselves food.Stacks at least two small objects, like blocks.	<p>When you see these signs, please contact your GP or child health nurse for advice.</p>
 Thinking and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Watches you as you move.Looks at a toy for several seconds.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Opens mouth when they see their hands or feet.Looks at their hands with interest.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Uses their mouth to explore objects.Reaches to grab a toy they want.Closes lips when they do not want any more food.Looks at nearby things.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Bumps two things together.Watches an object as it falls.Looks for things when you hide them, like a toy under a blanket.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Explores things in different ways, like shaking or banging.Puts things in containers.Looks for things when you hide them, like a toy under a blanket.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Tries to use things the right way like a pencil, cup or bowl.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Copies you using clothes, like a sweater with a bow.Plays with toys in a simple way, like pushing a car.	<p>When you see these signs, please contact your GP or child health nurse for advice.</p>
<p> Warning signs at any age – see your GP</p> <p>Strong caregiver concerns</p> <p>Loss of ANY skills</p> <p>Lack of response to sound or visual stimuli</p> <p>Lack of, or limited eye contact</p> <p>Differences between right and left sides of the body in strength, movement or tone</p> <p>Obvious low tone (floppy) or high tone (stiff and tense) that significantly affects development and functioning</p>								<p>Important: The milestones in each age group are the expected age at which they should have developed. If your child has not met a milestone by the listed age, see your GP or child health nurse for advice.</p>

Development and trauma

Child protection practice will require analysis of a child's development and behaviour considering both typical developmental pathways and characteristic signs of trauma at differing ages and stages.

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (Victoria) provides the resource [Child development and trauma guide](#) presenting typical developmental trends, alongside age-based indicators of trauma, the impact of trauma and practical strategies for parenting a child at each age and stage, following the experience of trauma.

Click each cell to load the specific age resource.



Communication milestones

All children learning to speak and communicate make mistakes and can be hard to understand. In the early years, children simplify speech to make it easier to say and can:

- substitute sounds ('lellow' instead of 'yellow')
- simplify difficult sounds ('twuck' instead of 'truck')
- drop syllables ('poo-ter' instead of 'computer')³.

Delays in communication skills may signify underlying issues such as:

- hearing impairments
- speech and language disorders
- developmental delays
- neurodevelopmental conditions (such as autism spectrum disorder).

Communication is essential for building relationships, expressing emotions, and interacting with others. Difficulties in communication can affect a child's ability to connect socially and may lead to frustration or behavioural challenges.

Speech Pathology Australia publishes the [Communication Milestone Kit](#). This provides developmental expectations by age and supporting resources to prompt discussions with parents and carers.



References

1. Healthdirect Australia, 2026, *Developmental milestones*. Retrieved from: <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/developmental-milestones>, accessed May 2026.
2. Berry Street, 2024, *Take Two: Child Developmental Milestones Guide*. Retrieved from: <https://www.berrystreet.org.au/uploads/main/Take-Two-Child-Developmental-Milestones-guide.pdf>, accessed May 2026.
3. Raising Children Network, 2026, *Speech disorders in children*. Retrieved from: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/development/language-development/speech-disorders>, accessed May 2026.

Version history

First published:	2006
Most recent update published:	October 2026
Owner:	Office of the Chief Practitioner