

Understanding Disabilities: Screening for Disabilities in Children

Kathryn Conrad, PhD, Extension Specialist, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences
Lori Gallimore, EdD, Extension Specialist, 4-H Youth Development

Developmental disabilities are lifelong conditions in which a person experiences physical, learning, language and/or behavioral impairments and typically requires intervention to address these impairments. In the United States, it is estimated that developmental disabilities are on the rise, with one in six children receiving a diagnosis.¹ Although having a developmental disability is not uncommon, educators, parents and other professionals often feel less equipped if they suspect a developmental delay might be present in children. This fact sheet provides information on child development, including typical developmental milestones and monitoring for disabilities.

Developmental Milestones ²⁻⁴

Developmental disabilities often emerge when a child is delayed in meeting a particular developmental milestone. Milestones are skills that mark typical development for a child, follow a predictable sequence, and often build on one another. There are several different milestones based on a child's age and stage in development. Ages and stages of development are universally recognized time frames that characterize development from birth to death.

Types of Milestones ⁵⁻⁶

Developmental milestones are categorized as motor, sensory, language, cognitive, and social and emotional that typically occur during a specific age and stage of development.

Motor

Motor milestones relate to physical development and acquiring certain motor skills, like moving the head side to side and supporting the head without help (1-3 months), sitting independently (6 months), walking independently (1-2 years) and throwing a ball (4 years). Delays in motor milestones potentially lead to physical or behavioral impairments.

Sensory

Sensory milestones relate to the development of the senses. Most often, completing any developmental task involves multiple senses. For example, to wave at someone involves vision, balance and spatial awareness, among others. Delays in sensory milestones potentially lead to autism spectrum disorders or sensory processing disorders, or contribute to learning disabilities.

Language

Language milestones refer to gaining verbal and reading comprehension skills, such as cooing and babbling (3-4 months), saying their first words and imitating words (1 year), following simple instructions (2 years), and recalling parts of a story (4 to 5 years). Delays in language milestones are potentially connected to intellectual or learning disabilities, hearing issues or loss, or autism spectrum disorders, among others.

Stage of Development	Age
Infancy	0-1 year
Toddler	1-3 years
Early Childhood/Preschool	3-5 years
Middle Childhood	6-8 years
Late Childhood	9-11 years
Pre-Adolescence	12-14 years
Adolescence	15-17 years
Emerging Adulthood	18-29 years
Adulthood	30+ years

Did you know?

Although we typically think of five senses, there are eight that are discussed. These include vision, hearing, touch, smell, taste, balance (vestibular), spatial awareness (proprioception) and bodily awareness (interoception).

Cognitive

Cognitive milestones relate to the ability to learn, think, problem solve and make sense of the world, including bringing hands or objects to mouth and exploring (4 months), stretching for objects out-of-reach (7 months), finding hidden objects (1 to 2 years), engaging in fantasy play (4 years), and naming everyday objects (5 years). Delays in cognitive milestones might be associated with several developmental disabilities, including but not limited to intellectual or learning delays or disorders, autism spectrum disorders or ADHD, and sensory integration or sensory processing delays.

Social and Emotional

Social and emotional milestones relate to children's ability to be self-aware and manage different emotions, interact socially with others, learn to manage conflict, and make responsible choices. Some examples of milestones include smiling in response to a caregiver ("social smile") and imitating facial expressions (3 months), showing attachment to caregiver by reaching for them or crying when he/she leaves (1 year), acting defiantly and becoming more independent (2-3 years), and showing more cooperation to the rules (5 years).

Did you know?

Child development is like throwing a yo-yo. When you release a yo-yo, it sometimes deploys and recoils quickly, while other times, it deploys and spins for a little while before recoiling. Children develop similarly, where some may achieve certain milestones quickly while others stay in a particular stage of development and take a little longer to acquire certain milestones.

Developmental Delay Versus Disability

Children who take longer to achieve specific milestones may be considered to have a developmental delay. Developmental delays occur when milestones are not reached by the typical age or stage in development. Delays do not always indicate a developmental disability, however, as disabilities involve more serious impairments and require intervention.

Developmental Monitoring: Early & Often⁷

To ensure children are on track with meeting developmental milestones, it is important to track their progress through developmental monitoring. Developmental monitoring occurs when a pediatrician, doctor or other health professional screens a child for meeting particular motor, sensory, language, cognitive and social-emotional milestones. By monitoring early and often, doctors can recognize the signs of a developmental delay or disability and offer suggestions for interventions. As the brain is developing most rapidly during the early years of life, intervention is most effective the younger a child is in his or her development.

Where can I find more information?

If you are interested in learning more, find additional fact sheets as part of our **Understanding Disabilities** series.

[W 947-A Understanding Disabilities: An Introductory Guide](#)

[W 947-B Understanding Disabilities: Behavioral Health FAQ Sheet](#)

[W 947-C Understanding Disabilities: Intellectual and Learning Disabilities](#)

[W 947-E Understanding Disabilities: Respectful Etiquette and Language Guidelines](#)

[W 947-F Understanding Disabilities: Responsive Care](#)

[W 947-G Understanding Disabilities: Anxiety in Children and Youth](#)

[W 947-H Understanding Disabilities: Sensory Processing Disorder](#)

References

1. Zablotsky et al. (2019). Prevalence and trends of development disabilities among children in the US: 2009-2017. *Pediatrics*, 144, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-0811>
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019). Facts about developmental disabilities. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/developmentaldisabilities/facts.html>
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020). Positive parenting tips. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/index.html>
4. Arnett, J. J., Zukauskienė, R., & Sugimura, K. (2014). The new life stage of emerging adulthood at ages 18-29 years: Implications for mental health. *Lancet Psychiatry*, 1, 569-576. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(14\)00080-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(14)00080-7)
5. Child Mind Institute. (2017) Parents guide to developmental milestones. Retrieved from <https://childmind.org/guide/developmental-milestones/>
6. Biel, L., & Peske, N. (2018). Raising a sensory smart child: *The definitive handbook for helping your child with sensory processing issues*. Penguin Books.
7. Lipkin et al. (2020). Promoting optimal development: Identifying infants and young children with developmental disorders through developmental surveillance and screening. *Pediatrics*, 145, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-3449>



UTIA.TENNESSEE.EDU

Real. Life. Solutions.™