



Parents want their babies and children to be the best that they can be. Parents and grandparents often compare babies to see who is the first to walk or say a word as they watch them grow and develop new skills.

If your baby seems to be slower to learn new things you may worry about it or you may decide to wait and see. You may take your baby or child to have various tests and checkups, or you may just accept that everyone is different. This guide may help you to decide how best to help your child.

Everyone is different

There is a very wide range in what is considered 'normal' in how babies and children grow and develop. This varies from the very 'bright' children to those who take longer to learn new things but who are still able to lead a happy life. We all have a different combination of things we can do well and we all have things we are not so good at.

While babies and children all pass through more or less the same stages of development, they do so at different rates.

Growing and learning is not a smooth path and there are lots of ups and downs on the way. Children often have 'spurts' of learning, like growth spurts, where they seem to be learning something new every day. Then there may be a period of 'marking time' while they take in or practise what they have learned.

There can even be some slip backs, especially if children are under some emotional stress or are unwell. At these times they can seem to forget what they have learned.

Sometimes children let one skill go for a time, while they work hard at learning something new. For all these reasons, comparing your baby or child with another, while it is interesting for parents, is not very useful in checking out how your child is going.

However, sometimes you know that your child hasn't yet learned to do many of the things that you would expect for his age, or he starts school and seems to have a lot of difficulty in keeping up with the work.

Developmental delay (sometimes called intellectual disability) is a term that might be used if your child is developing more slowly in learning new things than other children of the same age.

Having a check up

We all know of children who 'grow out of' problems or who did not walk or talk for a long time after others and then suddenly 'took off'. However, it is best to get your child checked early because if there is a problem early help means a better future.

If you are concerned about your child at any time it is your right to have your concerns checked out. The place to start is probably your local child health centre or your doctor. Ask for your child to have a thorough check.

The following checks will be done to see if more testing in special areas is needed:

- your child's general health
- hearing and seeing
- development for his age—what he can do
- behaviour
- what else has happened and is happening in his life.

Occasionally you will meet a professional whom you feel does not take your concerns seriously and does nothing except reassure you, without checking your child. If this happens get another opinion.

If you are worried it is important to get your child checked—parents usually know their children better than anyone else.

A child given help before he is aware of having a problem is more likely to respond and improve. A child who has had repeated failures is likely to avoid trying and may be labelled by others as 'lazy'.

Some causes

Some things which can cause children's development to be delayed include:

- ear infections causing hearing problems. This is very common and it is important to get it seen to as soon as possible as it can cause speech and learning problems. A child who cannot hear well can also get into trouble for 'not doing what she is told'.
- hearing loss either from an illness or inherited
- lots of illness and hospitalisation (missing out on chances to learn)
- birth injury or other injury
- problems with vision
- being born too early
- being exposed to some drugs (such as alcohol) before birth
- family stress which means that a baby does not get consistent loving care in the early weeks and months
- ongoing family stress (or child abuse) so a child is too anxious or distressed to learn
- genetic or inherited conditions.

The good news

Research shows that even if children have one of the above problems, loving parenting, early treatment and the right opportunities to learn, can make a huge difference to how children cope as they grow up.

What parents can do

- Have your baby or child checked if you are worried.
- Think of yourself as a partner when working with health professionals.
- Ask questions ... about what you can do to help, about what else is available to you and your child.
- Some babies don't ask for much attention and don't cry very much. Even so, spend lots of time holding, stroking and responding to her little signals. The bonding that you have with your child is one of the most important building blocks for development.
- Provide interesting surroundings for your baby, different things to look at and do.
- Talk to your baby as you do things for her. Use simple words. The more you talk to your baby or your young child, the more you help her learn to talk for herself.
- Give your baby or child time to try things for herself, but help her if she is becoming too frustrated. For example, if she is trying to reach for something on the floor you could push it a bit closer, so she has a chance to reach it and feel successful.
- Everyone needs to feel needed—so even if your child does not do it well, let her be involved in helping you.
- Give lots of opportunities to succeed. Even small successes can make children feel they have some control over their lives and this helps them to feel good.
- Give lots of encouragement for small successes or getting things partly right. Don't wait until she can do the whole task properly.
- Allow your child enough time to do the things she wants to do.
- Give children lots of opportunity to do things they can do well (this helps build their self-esteem). Don't always make them practise what they can't do.
- Try to combine learning and fun.
- Allow plenty of time for play. Let your child and yourself have fun.

Helping your child to cope

- Most babies and young children will be happy with who they are, if they get messages from you that you love them and are proud of what they can do.
- When they start school they will compare themselves with other children, no matter how hard you try to avoid this.
- It is important to them to be able to join in the games and succeed at school tasks. Talk with your child's teacher, so that your child can get help when he needs it.
- Help your child to build his confidence by finding things he can enjoy and succeed at. Things like fishing, caring for a pet, cooking and growing a garden can all be done successfully by most children. Follow your child's interests in finding what he would like to do.
- Help him to find groups or clubs and hobbies where he will have opportunities to do well.

Looking after yourself

- Parenting is a demanding job and if you have a child who needs extra help or treatment of some kind it can be very, very time consuming and tiring.
- Don't expect to be able to have a perfect home.
- Try to sort out what is most important to do, and do that first.
- Make choices about what you do—don't try to do everything. Leave the things that don't really matter too much.
- Take time out for yourself regularly and before you need it.
- Don't be too proud or ashamed to ask for help when you need it.
- Make time for you and your partner, make time for parenting is a demanding job and if you have a child who needs friends. Caring relationships for you can give strength and support to care for others.

Reminders

- Development is a journey, not a race.
- Try not to worry about how your child is developing compared with others.
- Notice your child's progress and what she can do now, compared with what she used to do.
- If you are really concerned get your child checked.
- Ask questions ... ask what you can do to help your child, and ask what other help is available to you and your child.

Contacts

Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
healthdirect Australia (free health advice line, staffed by registered nurses)	24-hour	1800 022 222
Maternal and Child Health	8am–5pm Monday–Friday	6207 9977
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

Websites

www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides
www.raisingchildren.net.au	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens

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