

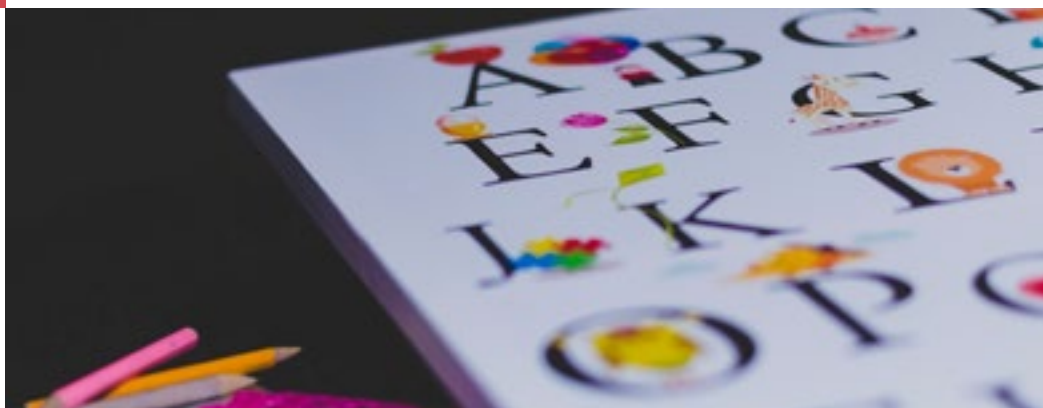
# Developmental delay

Parents want their babies and children to be the best they can be. Parents, family members and friends often compare babies as they grow and develop and notice the first to walk, to say a word or develop a new skill.

**If your baby or child seems slower to learn new things than others of the same age, it is best to get them checked. If there is a problem, early help means a better future.**

# ParentLink

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## Everyone is different

There is a wide range of what is considered to be 'normal' growth and development for babies and children. It varies from very 'bright' children to those who take longer to learn new things but are still able to lead a happy life. We all have different things we can do well and things we are not so good at.

While babies and children go through 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 they may 'mark time' while they take in or practise what they have learned. There can even be some slip backs, especially if children are under 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 the best way to know how your child is going.

Parents usually know their children better than anyone else. If you realise that your child hasn't yet learned to do many of the things that you would expect for their age, or they start school and seem to have trouble keeping up, it is important to get them checked (see ParentLink Guide 'Milestones 0-4 years').

- A child given help before they are aware of having challenges is more likely to respond and improve.
- A child who has had repeated failures is likely to avoid trying and may be labelled as 'lazy'.

The term 'developmental delay' (sometimes called 'intellectual disability') might be used if your child is learning new things more slowly than other children of the same age.



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## Having a check up

We all know of children who ‘grew out of’ problems, or who did not walk or talk for a long time after others and then suddenly ‘took off’. If you are concerned about your child at any time it is your right to have them checked out. The place to start is your local child and family health service or your doctor. Ask for a thorough check up. The following will be checked to see if more testing is needed:

- their general health
- hearing and seeing
- development for their age — what they can do
- behaviour
- what else has happened and is happening in their life.

If you meet a professional who you feel does not take your concerns seriously, or reassures you without checking your child, get another opinion.

## 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 they are told’.
- hearing loss either from an illness or inherited
- lots of illness and hospitalisation, which mean 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.

Research shows that 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, e.g. what you can do to help; what support is available for you and your child.
- Provide interesting surroundings for your baby and different things to look at and do.
- Talk to your baby as you do things for them. Use simple words. The more you talk to your baby or young child, the more you help them learn to talk for themselves.
- Give your baby or child time to try things for themselves, but help them before they become too frustrated. If they are trying to get something on the floor you could push it a bit closer, so they have a chance to reach it and feel successful.
- Give lots of opportunities to succeed. Even small successes can make children feel they have some control over their lives and this helps build their self-esteem. Don't always make them practise what they can't do.
- Give lots of encouragement for small successes or getting things partly right. Don't wait until they can do the whole task properly.
- Everyone needs to feel needed — so even if your child does not do things well, let them be involved in helping you.
- Try to combine learning and fun.
- Allow plenty of time for play. Let your child and yourself have fun.

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 their little signals. The bonding that you have with your child is one of the most important building blocks for development.

## Developmental delay

## 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 them.
- 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 that they are 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 they need it.
- Help your child build confidence by finding things they enjoy and can succeed at. 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 they would like to do.
- Help them find groups or clubs and hobbies where they will have opportunities to do well.

## Looking after yourself

- Parenting a child who needs extra help or treatment of some kind can be very time consuming and tiring. It is important to look after yourself so you are better able to support your child.
- Make choices about what you do. Don't try to do everything. Leave the things that don't really matter too much.
- Don't expect to have a perfect home.
- 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, and for friends. Caring relationships can give you strength and support to care for others.

Development is a journey, not a race. Notice your child's progress and what they can do now, compared with what they used to do.

This guide's content was produced by Parenting SA, Women's and Children's Health Network.

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Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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## Looking for more information?

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[www.parentlink.act.gov.au](http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au)

Child and Family Centres — for parenting information and support  
[www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/childandfamilycentres](http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/childandfamilycentres)

Raising Children's Network — covering topics for parenting newborns to teens  
<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>