

marching to a different drum - developmental delay

There is a very wide range of what is considered 'normal' in how babies and children grow and develop. This varies from the Einsteins of this world to children who take longer to learn new things but who are still able to lead a happy life, have a job and contribute to their community.

Parents want their babies and children to be the best that they can be. If your baby seems to be slower to learn new things, you may worry about it, you may decide to wait and see, you may take your baby or child off to have various tests and check-ups, 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

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



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 may be interesting for parents, is not very useful in checking out how your child is going.

Sometimes you know that your child hasn't yet learnt to do many of the things that you would expect for their age. If this happens there are some things you need to think about.

Having a check-up

We all know of children who grow out of problems or who do not walk or talk for a long time after others and then suddenly take off. 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 they are aware of having a problem is more likely to respond and improve, whereas a child who has had repeated failures is likely to avoid trying and may be labelled as 'lazy'.

It is your right to have your concerns checked out. The first place to start is probably your local child health centre or your doctor.

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 their age - what they can do
- behaviour
- what else has happened and is happening in their life.

Occasionally, you will meet a professional who you feel does not take your concerns seriously and does nothing except reassure you, without checking your child. If this does happen, you have the right to get another opinion.

Some causes

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

- ear infections causing hearing problems
This is very common and it is important to get the problem seen to as soon as possible as it can cause your child to have 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 (missing out on chances to learn)
- birth injury or other injury
- problems with vision
- being born prematurely
- 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 to be able to learn
- genetic problems.

The good news is that 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

- If you are worried, have your baby or child checked.
- Think of yourself as a partner with health professionals.
- Ask questions e.g. what can you do to help? What else is available to you and your child?
- Even if your baby does not cry much, spend lots of time holding, stroking and responding to any little signals.
- Provide interesting surroundings for your baby that include 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 your young child, the more you help them learn to talk for themselves.
- Give your baby or child time to try things for themselves but offer help if they get frustrated.

- Give lots of opportunities to succeed. Even small tasks 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.
- Allow your child enough time to do the things they want to do.
- Give children lots of opportunity to do things they can do. 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.
- Most babies and young children will be happy as long as they get messages that you love and accept them.
- It is important for 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 they need it.
- Help your child to build their confidence by finding things they can enjoy and succeed at. Activities such as 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 to find groups, clubs and hobbies where they will have opportunities to do well.

Looking after yourself

Parenting is a big job and if you have a child who needs extra help or treatment of some kind it can be very, very time consuming.

- 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.
- Take time out for yourself regularly and before you need it.
- Ask for help when you need it.

Services for parents and children

- Parentline (8am to 10pm 7 days/week) **1300 301 300**
- Kids Help Line (24 hr) **1800 551 800**
- Community Child Health Service (24 hr) **3862 2333**
Outside Brisbane **1800 177 279**
- Child Care Information Service **3224 4225**
Outside Brisbane **1800 637 711**
- Women's Infolink **1800 177 577**
- *dvconnect* womensline (24 hours) **1800 811 811**
Domestic violence counselling and refuge placements
- *dvconnect* mensline (10am to 6pm) **1800 600 636**
Counselling, support and information

Your local library has a range of excellent books on parenting.

Look in your local White Pages for your Queensland Health Community Child Health Service and for information about their parent education courses (Positive Parenting Program - Triple P)

Adapted from information contained in the Parent Easy Guide Series © Parenting SA, Government of South Australia 2000.

Published by the Department of Communities. For reorders phone 3224 4225 if in the Brisbane metropolitan area or 1800 637 711 if outside the metropolitan area.

Tip sheets are also available from the Department of Communities website at www.communities.qld.gov.au



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