

the **early years** toolkit

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Factors affecting children's development and what you can do to help

It is entirely normal for children to develop at different rates.

You only need to be concerned about significant differences in obtaining expected milestones. More detailed information and guidance on this can be found in Section Four (LINK).

Children develop at different rates based on several factors which include those that are environmental, cultural and innate.



We can influence some of these but others are out of our control, for example:

- A child's temperament will affect their development. Some children are very keen to explore and move around and may therefore develop their physical skills quickly. Others prefer to sit and play and they may develop their speech and play skills more quickly.
- A child's general health will affect their development. Children who have been unwell or in hospital for a significant amount of time, in the first years of their life may be delayed in their development.
- Premature babies are more likely to show variations in their development when compared with babies born at full term. Professionals will consider this to help them understand the impact of any delay.
- A child's play experiences, for example the opportunities they have to play may affect their development of physical skills.

What you can do to help children's early development:

0 – 12 months

- **A child's environment:** First babies may be slower to roll and crawl as they receive a high amount of one on one attention. Having a TV on throughout the day may distract a child from playing with toys, vocalising and moving around and should be avoided.
- **Positions a child experiences:** Placing a new born baby in a variety of positions is essential for their physical development. The majority of a baby's day should be spent where they can explore and play on their tummy and their back. Prolonged periods in car seats and push chairs should be avoided.
- **Use of equipment with a young child:** Use of baby walkers, standing baby activity gyms, door bouncers and Bumbo style seats should be avoided or their use kept to very short periods. This is because they support the child in a position that they are not developmentally ready for and they replace the need for the child to develop their own physical skills.
- **Interactions with other people:** Babies thrive on praise and interactive play with other children and adults. Young children often learn by copying so that other children around them can be motivating and interesting.
- **Talk to your baby:** It is vital that adults talk to babies long before they can be expected to talk back. This will help the baby to understand and use spoken language themselves. Spending time face to face with babies allows them opportunities to communicate using their eyes, smiling and facial expression.
- **Novel and interesting toys:** You don't have to clear out their local toy shop! Bringing out toys that have not been played with for a while will seem as new to a little one and provoke their interest. Equally, household objects such as wooden spoons, colanders and saucepans can make great musical instruments.
- **Adjusting to new sensations:** Babies have to cope with many new sensory experiences within their environment and learn to adjust to them. It is entirely normal for them to react with displeasure the first time. They will need patience and practice to get used to them, for example the sounds and smells of the supermarket or tastes of new foods.

12 months onwards

- **The child's environment:** On a daily basis a child needs space and a range of different environments to explore to help them to develop their physical skills such as running, jumping and climbing. Activities such as soft play and play parks provide multiple opportunities for children to be challenged and develop new skills.
- **The positions a child experiences:** Prolonged periods in car seats and push chairs should be avoided. Allow children to walk as much as possible. Using reins can help ensure the child is safe. Playing computer games and watching TV promotes a sedentary lifestyle and should be restricted to short periods.

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- **Use of equipment with a young child:** Learning to ride a tricycle or a scooter is excellent for the development of balance, strength and stamina. Trampolines and space hoppers are also useful to promote these skills.
- **Learning from others:** Children learn by example. Families taking part in activities together is really important in promoting a child's development. Good opportunities for this include playing games with children in the garden or park and eating together as a family.
- **Talk to your toddler:** Encourage all of your toddler's communication attempts. Copy their sounds and words, modelling back what you think they are trying to say. Develop their understanding of new words by pointing out and naming new objects, people and places. Ask them, 'where's....?'
- **Interactions with other people:** Communication is a social skill and only develops through opportunities to interact with other people – both adults and children. Toddler groups, stay-and-play sessions and nursery are all helpful environments.
- **Familiarity and routines:** Young children often cope best with learning new things through familiarity and routines. It is not unusual for them to be upset by new things or a change in routine. Sometimes it isn't possible to keep things the same and so preparing children in the way they can best understand will help to reduce any possible upset.
- **Opportunities for exploration:** Mobility, curiosity and interest will encourage little ones to want to explore. This can include being outdoors, messy play and movement sensations.
- **Practice makes perfect:** Children master new skills with practice. They will often do something again and again to help them get it right. They might need encouragement if they are getting stuck or reassurance to come back and try again later.
- **Understanding fussy behaviour:** Some children show a preference for the feel of certain soft clothing or the taste of a certain food. They might reject the alternatives that you are offering. It is always best to gently keep offering the less preferred food or the less favourite garment. This will help the child to be more adaptable in the long run.
- **Limit use of dummies:** Dummies can be used for soothing and comforting babies or young children when they are upset or need to settle to get to sleep. They are recommended for young babies when sleeping to help protect from cot death. However, during waking times they stop the baby or young child from moving their tongue freely and can delay their development of talking. They should be removed while the baby is awake to allow them to experiment with using their voice to coo and babble. Once the child is beyond babyhood, the use of a dummy should be stopped.