

Developmental Delay

Child Development Service



Health
Northern Sydney
Local Health District

Child development

Development is the term used to describe how a child explores and learns as they grow older. Early skills like rolling, sitting and crawling develop into more advanced abilities such as walking and running. Likewise a child's early sounds and babbling develop into speech. These achievements are called "developmental milestones". We know that most children achieve milestones around certain ages and this is referred to as normal development.

When a child does not reach a milestone within the expected age range, a child's development in that specific area may be referred to as "delayed".

Areas of skill that children develop include:

- Gross motor skills: how children move.
- Fine motor skills: how children manipulate objects and use their hands.
- Speech and language development: how children communicate, understand and use language.
- Problem solving: how children reason, think and learn.
- Social and emotional development: how children relate with others.
- Self care skills: how children develop independence in daily activities; for example dressing themselves.

What is a global or overall developmental delay?

Parents or others often become aware of delays when a child does not achieve some of the milestones within the expected age range. A developmental assessment conducted by a psychologist or a doctor can then be very helpful to determine a child's current strengths and weaknesses within the various skill areas. When children have documented delays in several skill areas (as previously outlined), they may be described as having a **Global Developmental Delay** or **overall developmental delay**.

This means that a child has not attained the level of skills expected for their age and that the overall result of the assessment of their development indicates an age equivalent significantly below their age level.

There are different degrees of developmental delay: mild, moderate, severe and profound. The long term significance of the delay is often only determined by monitoring a child's development over time. A significant number of children may not catch up. A persistent developmental delay may be indicative of an underlying intellectual disability.

Causes of developmental delay

There are numerous causes of developmental delay including genetic/ chromosomal factors, neurological disorders, metabolic disorders and complications relating to pregnancy or birth. One of the most common causes is an intellectual disability.

Your paediatrician or GP may decide to arrange a number of investigations including a vision and hearing assessment, genetic testing, and blood and urine tests to help determine a cause. However, the medical cause often remains unknown.

The needs of the child with a developmental delay

A child with a developmental delay has the same needs as any other child and will continue to develop new skills. All children benefit from a warm, secure and nurturing environment. They need to feel accepted and valued with their own set of strengths and weaknesses. This is important for the development of self-esteem, which builds confidence for learning new skills.

A child with a developmental delay also needs:

- To hear language that is appropriate to his/her developmental age.
- Extra time to learn and practice new skills.
- To have tasks and instructions simplified and repeated.
- To know his/her efforts are valued.
- To learn in a variety of ways, such as touching, looking and listening.

Who can help my child?

A child with a developmental delay usually takes longer to develop new skills and will often need extra help to develop these skills.

Parents often work in partnership with professionals in early intervention services. The aim of early intervention is to promote optimal growth and development so as to maximise a child's potential. Help can also be sought for behavioural difficulties if required.

Early intervention may include the services of speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, teachers in early education and additional needs playgroups, paediatricians, psychologists and social workers.

The needs of the family

The impact on a family of having a child diagnosed with any sort of difficulty can never be underestimated. Family members may experience grief, disbelief, self-blame and isolation. These emotions are often very intense at the time of diagnosis and may recur over time. They are very normal reactions. Parents may find it difficult to explain their child's developmental delay to other members of their family or friends.

A child with a moderate to severe delay may need a lot of extra assistance with daily living skills such as eating, communicating and dressing, and are often at an increased risk of developing behaviour problems. This can place enormous stress on the family. There can also be extra financial costs such as visits to specialists and extra childcare.

Families need information, support, assistance and a break from time to time. Talking to other parents in a similar situation, joining a support group or consulting an experienced professional may help.

Specific recommendations and contact details regarding intervention services for your child are on the CDS Assessment Day Summary report.

If you would like to speak to someone, phone your contact person at the Child Development Service.

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