



# Child development

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Babies are born ready to learn, and their brains develop through use. Development is the term used to describe changes in children's physical growth, as well as their ability to learn the social, emotional, thinking and communication skills they will need for life. All of these areas are connected and each one depends on the influences of the other. During the first five years of life, a child's brain develops more, and faster, than any other time in their life.

Development is different for every child. It is important to remember that children grow and develop at different rates. Most skills and events happen in a similar order, but the age that they happen may vary for each child. What is considered "normal" can vary considerably. Assessing a child's development can take time and requires developing a relationship with the child, their family and community. It is recognised that attachment to family, community and culture is vitally important.

Children's emotional attachment to key caregivers affects all areas and stages of their development. Children's most important relationships are with their parents, families and carers. In early life a child's primary relationship is with their parents but as they begin to expand their environment, attachment to other family members and close carers (including those outside their family) becomes important. These relationships are the foundation for a child's healthy development.

Parents and families have a wealth of knowledge about their family, community and culture and it is important to recognise this as an important source of knowledge and to encourage parents to develop and trust their instincts. When a baby has loving, caring experiences, the connections in the brain for feeling good and learning are strengthened. The same happens with the connections for talking, learning, exploring, thinking and all other skills that children will need. In the early years, a child's main way of learning and developing is through play. Importantly, play is a great relationship builder. Spending time playing with children sends the message that they are important and this helps them learn about who they are and where they fit in the world.<sup>1</sup>

If parents or carers are worried that a child seems 'out of step' with others of the same age, the best approach is to encourage them to talk with their doctor, Aboriginal health service worker, a Child and Family Health Nurse or other qualified health or education staff member. Health and education workers have various knowledge and skills about different aspects of development and can provide help and resources to children, families and communities. By doing this they can either be reassured that everything is progressing well, or be able to access the help they need. It is important to recognise that there are many different services available and that families have choices in which services they use.

There are two main reasons why it is important to determine whether a child's development is following the expected trajectory. First, early intervention has repeatedly been shown in research to result in improved developmental and educational outcomes for children. Early intervention can involve speech therapy, occupational therapy (focusing on fine muscle movements and social skills) and physiotherapy (focusing on large muscle movements, mobility and coordination) or a combination of these approaches. The earlier that early intervention is started, the better the outcome for the child, because of the plasticity of the infant's developing brain. As the child becomes older, more of the brain pathways have completed their development. Second, there may be an underlying reason for the child's delay that could be modified.<sup>2</sup> For example, high lead levels from lead contamination in the environment can result in developmental problems; there may be an underlying genetic cause that requires family counselling; or there may be a specific health problem (e.g. thyroid deficiency) which could be treated.

<sup>1</sup> Raising Children Network. Child development: the first five years. Retrieved from website: [http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/child\\_development.html](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/child_development.html)

<sup>2</sup> Anderson LM, Shinn C, Fullilove MT, Scrimshaw SC, Fielding JE, Normand J, Carande-Kulis VG, Task Force on Community Preventive Services. The effectiveness of early childhood development programs. A systematic review. *Am J Prev Med.* 2003;24(3 Suppl):32.

### Health messages

- > Children learn and grow strong through playing – all children learn best if you spend time and play with them.
- > Strong relationships with family, carers and culture are the foundation for a child's healthy development.
- > There are key areas for child development
  - Speech and language – talking, listening, understanding, responding.
  - Small movements – using a knife, fork and spoon, holding a pen, coordination.
  - Big movements – walking, running, climbing, jumping, catching, throwing, balance and coordination.
  - Thinking – games, puzzles, concentration, problem solving, making choices.
  - Emotional – sharing, showing compassion, playing with other kids, coping with change.
  - Sensory – touch, smell, feel, seeing and listening.
- > Enrol at Kindy – Aboriginal children can start at 3 years old.
- > The CaFHS 'My Health and Development Record' (Blue Book) is an excellent source of information and gives practical tips on supporting your child's development. See the 'Your child's development' and 'Developmental milestones' sections.
- > Talk to a health professional or an early education staff member if you are at all concerned about your child's development.



### Examples of practical actions

- > Become familiar with the CaFHS 'My Health and Development Record' (Blue Book), particularly the 'Your child's development' and 'Developmental milestones' sections.
- > Become familiar with your local Aboriginal health services and be able to refer families as needed.
- > Be aware of the variety of early childhood development services in your local area – support parents in their choices.
- > Talk with parents and carers about their child's development – be supportive and reassuring on normal variations in development.
- > Support parents and carers with their concerns about their child's development and help them to seek referral to appropriate health professionals in order to access early intervention.



For more information

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