

Understanding Children's Development

How people look, think, feel, communicate and act will change as they grow. Many factors influence the path of change. Biology and genetics act together with a person's situation and experiences. Research with children and adults shows us how changes in the early years shape later growth. Children's developmental skills affect every part of their lives, including:

- what they need
- what they experience
- how they form and keep relationships
- how they communicate
- what they understand
- how they work out problems

For young children, the family plays a crucial role in their development. This fact sheet will help you understand your grandchild's development and recognize how family interactions influence these changes.



Individual Differences

Each child develops at his or her own rate. Not all children develop the same skills at the same time. Some babies walk at 10 months and others walk at 14 months. One child may learn to read at 4 years and another not until 7 years. When children develop, skills can be "uneven" as well. One child may develop thinking skills "on time" but seem behind in his or her social skills. Culture also plays a role in how children grow and change.

Areas of Development

People who study children have named different areas of development. While these areas all overlap, it is helpful to talk about each of them separately.

1. Physical and motor development means development of the body. This includes

- growth of the body and brain
- development of the senses (vision, hearing, etc.)

- big motor skills (running, jumping, moving)
- small motor skills (using hands and fingers)
- health and nutrition

2. Cognitive development means solving problems and involves

- learning
- memory
- thinking
- reasoning
- creativity

3. Social and emotional development means how children get along with others and how they feel. This area includes

- being able to understand and talk about emotions
- knowing their place in the family
- playing
- gender roles

- knowing right from wrong
- making friends and building other relationships
- personality
- behavior and other problems

4. Communication and language development describes verbal and nonverbal skills, including:

- talking
- understanding words
- gestures and communicating without words
- reading
- writing

Children do not develop in just one area at a time. Their development is ongoing and complicated.

The following table shows children's skills in each of the four areas of development from birth to age 8. The table is a general guideline and can be different for each child.

Child Development From Birth to Eight Years of Age

Physical and motor development	Cognitive development	Social and emotional development	Communication and language development
Birth			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensitivity to pain • Babies enjoy gentle touch • Smell, taste, seeing, feeling and hearing are well developed • Rapid brain growth • Babies should sleep on their backs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Babies solve problems mostly by using their senses and motor skills • When an object goes away, infants stop looking for it • Babies depend on adults to help them figure out most everything 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infants express their needs mainly through crying • It is very important for basic needs to be met • Infants are ready to begin forming attachment relationships with parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Babies can recognize familiar voices • Infants can mock certain facial expressions • They communicate by crying to express anger, pain, discomfort and fatigue
6 months			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid growth in size – baby’s weight at birth has nearly doubled • Babies begin to eat solid foods and fruit juices • Babies grab at things and hold onto objects, like rattles • Vision improves; reaches 20/20 by end of this period • The ability to see color increases dramatically • Babies can roll over from tummy to back and from back to tummy • Babies can sit with support; some can sit without support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Babies begin to understand that they can cause simple things to happen (for example, if the child drops her bottle, someone often comes and picks it up) • Infants become interested in their environment and like to do fun things over and over • Babies begin to do things with a purpose, but they do not plan ahead • Babies look for things that move (for example, they look down if a toy or spoon drops) • Babies at this age do not usually look for things that are hidden 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Babies smile and laugh to show happiness • Exchange between baby and caregiver is especially important; babies learn to respond and show excitement • Babies are very interested in faces and emotional expressions shown in faces • Infants are beginning to engage in a “dance” or turn-taking with adults (e.g., the baby makes a sound, the caregiver responds and the baby then takes a turn making a sound) • Babies recognize and prefer their familiar caregivers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Babies begin to remember sounds and their meanings, especially their own name • Infants begin vocalizing: first ooohs and aaaahs, then with consonants (e.g., babababa), then they begin babbling parts of words • Infants begin imitating speech sounds such as “baba” or “dada,” but they do not use these sounds as real words yet • Babies turn toward loud sounds • Infants blow bubbles or make raspberry sounds, just for the fun of it
6 months to 1 year			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Babies often are beginning to sleep through the night • Babies get their first teeth • Height and weight increase dramatically • Babies can stand up while holding on to something for support • Most babies learn how to crawl (although some infants go right to walking without ever crawling) • Babies can grasp objects with thumb and finger (pincer grasp) • They like to eat soft finger foods and sit in a highchair • Infants can turn pages of board books and put objects in containers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Babies do more things with a purpose, and they keep trying to get things they want • They can solve many problems using their motor skills, such as passing an object from one hand to the other to explore it better • Infants begin to search for things if they go out of sight (object permanence) • Babies store things in their short-term and long-term memory and can use this information • Infants may imitate caregivers’ actions or activities and begin to understand simple instructions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children may seem fearful of strangers • Emotions are developing and are seen in a baby’s face and body language – joy, fear, anger and surprise • Babies like to play social games like peekaboo and pat-a-cake; they like caregivers to repeat these games over and over • Infants imitate more games with their caregivers and enjoy taking turns in simple games • Babies learn to expect what happens next and they especially like routines • Babies love to hear music and singing; they respond especially well to familiar songs and lullabies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children recognize and imitate basic sounds of language • Infants combine syllables into word-like sounds • Children may point or gesture to communicate wants and needs (e.g., pointing to bottle or cup when they want it) • Babies can wave goodbye • By the end of this period, they may begin to use several real words, such as saying “dada” or “mama” to the right parent • Infants can respond to their own names • Infants begin to understand what the word “no” means, but that doesn’t mean that infants will stop doing something

Child Development From Birth to Eight Years of Age (cont.)

Physical and motor development	Cognitive development	Social and emotional development	Communication and language development
1 to 1.5 years			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid growth continues – on average, weight has tripled since birth • Brain growth is rapid • Toddlers are learning to stand and walk alone • They can throw a ball and pick up small objects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Toddlers are curious and begin to experiment with their environment • Toddlers can follow an object in the distance and can judge the location in comparison to themselves • Toddlers learn by doing and watching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiar caregivers are crucial because trust is developing • With help, children develop confidence in exploring their environment and meeting other individuals • Feelings of pride develop, based on their new skills • Emotional highs and lows are common 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children speak first words by this time (usually objects and people, especially parents and familiar caregivers) • Children begin to understand many words, even more than they can say (e.g., ball is a big, round toy) • Points to pictures in books
2 to 3 years			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children become much more slender-looking as their proportions rapidly change • Most children have 20 teeth • Weight of child's brain is 90% of an adult's • Children can jump in place and run • Can walk up steps easily • A child clearly has a dominant hand used for drawing, throwing, pointing • Potty training usually occurs • Child can use a spoon and fork to feed themselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using language to solve problems greatly increases; less reliant on adult help for expressing themselves • Children solve problems very differently than adults and make certain errors (e.g., focus on one thing rather than many things at the same time) • Thinking is concrete (tied to the here and now) • Children learn colors, shapes, the alphabet and how to count • Can name their body parts • Can help dress and undress themselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin to learn rules and expectations for behavior; these are influenced by what they observe in their families and day care • Children to regulate or control their own emotions based on interactions and relationships with others • Children develop complex emotions like pride, shame, guilt and embarrassment • They take pride in their new accomplishments • Enjoy games and taking turns; sharing is still hard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary continues to grow • Sentences include combinations of objects and action words • Children understand that many different words can be used to describe the same thing • Children enjoy and remember having stories read to them • Understand more abstract concepts, like "another" or "later" or opposites • Begin to ask "why" about many things
4 to 5 years			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children have good control over stopping and turning their bodies • Fine motor development, including drawing, is improving • Able to balance on one foot briefly • Potty training is complete for most children • Children can throw overhand and underhand and they can catch a ball well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children learn to attach meaning to a variety of symbols, such as mementos • Children can talk about people and things that are not physically present (e.g., past events and memories); however, sometimes memories are influenced by conversation • Can brush teeth and dress self as ways of showing self competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children develop positive and negative emotions for a variety of situations • Children can adjust their behavior based on the understanding that others have wants and goals that may differ from their own • Children can begin to control their true feelings, depending on the social context • Pretend play is very important 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children's sentences are made up of four or five words • Comprehension is increasing, but children often misunderstand the complicated language of adults • Most of children's speech can be understood • Children can carry on conversations • Children love to hear stories and they can tell parts of stories

Child Development From Birth to Eight Years of Age (cont.)

Physical and motor development	Cognitive development	Social and emotional development	Communication and language development
5 to 7 years			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to balance on one foot without support • Able to hop and jump well • Brain size is nearly that of an adult's, although many parts of brain continue to develop into adulthood • All teeth are in place; baby teeth start to fall out • Writing skills and other fine motor skills improve 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children learn how to solve problems in many academic areas (e.g., math, reading, science) • Children are able to follow directions and solve problems, but they can't explain the process if asked • Can discuss past, present and future • Can plan for future in limited way 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children are developing high standards for self and contributing to self-esteem • Children become more interested in their peers; friendships are very important • Moral reasoning becomes more complex • Children often express empathy when others show distress • Imaginative play is very important 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children's sentences are more complicated and involve more words; they are able to put several thoughts into sentences that make sense • Children begin to respond to what other people say in conversations • Children often engage in private conversations with themselves • Can tell stories (real and pretend)
7 to 8 years			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grip strength increases • Children can throw a ball a far distance • Accuracy and balance improve • Interest and skill in organizing games and sports develops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children can tell someone about the many different problem-solving strategies they use • Thinking is more abstract and complex • Planning for the future increases 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children learn that they can have different feelings for the same situation; they understand positive and negative feelings can be associated with each • Peer friendships continue to be very important; they compare self to peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children learn that one word can have several meanings • Understanding of language rules is more developed • Children are learning that writing is another way they can communicate their thoughts

Concerns About Children's Development

Infants and young children placed in foster and kinship care often have difficulties early in life.³ They may have problems such as:

- Medical problems including
 - asthma
 - exposure to drugs in the womb
 - growth problems
 - hearing loss
 - birth defects
- Later development of thinking, language and motor skills, or learning skills more slowly than other children of the same age
- More mental health concerns

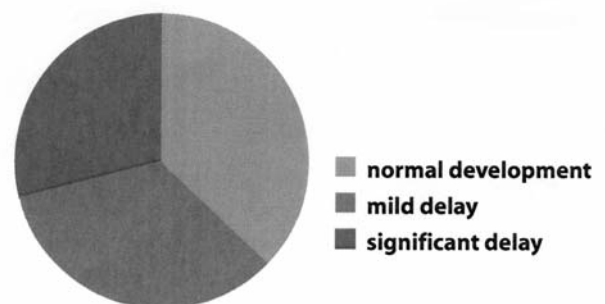
Children placed with relatives are just as likely to show delayed development as children placed in general foster care. Children with delayed development need extra help to build their skills to the expected level for their age. If children go without help, delays may get worse as they get older.

Caring for an infant or young child with developmental delays can be difficult. Research has found the

following concerns are connected with caring for a child with a delay.⁴

- Caregivers may become physically, emotionally and financially exhausted.
- Children with delays are in foster or kinship care longer.
- Too much may be expected of these children.
- Children's communication may be hard to understand.
- Developmental delays can have an effect on family relationships.

Percent of young children with cognitive delays in foster and kinship care ⁴



- Developmental delays can make other problems worse, such as the child's health, reactions to changes, problems in school and behavior problems.
- Children's disabilities and health problems can lower their chances of being returned to their parents.

Special Issues for Children in Kinship Care

Many children are being cared for by family members other than their parents. Some states have begun to look more closely at the needs of these children and their families.

Grandparents and other relatives who care for children have the same needs – or even greater needs – as regular foster parents.³ However, many receive less support and fewer services than foster parents. This can be a problem because

- Grandparents and other family members may need help making decisions about the child's placement and needs.
- Grandparents and other family members may need help getting medical and mental health care or other services for the child.

- Children placed with relatives stay longer than those in foster care, but they don't get as much help or support.

Many professionals believe that grandparents raising grandchildren should have a lot of support and attention, such as grandparent support groups, professional therapy or help from other family members and friends. If you need help or have concerns about your grandchild, make sure you try to find resources to help.

Questions to Ask Yourself

- How is my grandchild developing in each of the four areas described? Do my expectations match my grandchild's skills?
- If my grandchild seems behind in one or more areas or has a health problem, have I gotten advice or help from a professional? Is my grandchild getting what he or she needs?
- What do I need? Am I getting the help I need to take care of my grandchild in the best way possible?

References

¹U.S. Census Bureau. Marital Status by Sex, Unmarried-Partner Households, and Grandparents as Caregivers: 2000. *Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3)*.

²Papalia, E.E., S.W. Olds, and R.D. Feldman. *Human Development*, 8th ed. New York: McGraw Hill Publishers, 2001.

³Clyman, R.B., B.J. Harden, and C. Little. Assessment, Intervention, and Research With Infants in Out-of-Home Placement. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 23:435-453, 2002.

⁴Leslie, L.K., J.N. Gordon, W. Ganger, and K. Gist. Developmental Delays in Young Children in Child Welfare by Initial Placement Type. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 23:496-516, 2002.

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