

# Milestones: children 0–4 years



**Babies and young children develop quickly in the first few years of life. This is a guide to what you might expect in their first four years – often called developmental ‘milestones’.**

**All children are different and some will do things faster or slower than others. If you think your child is ‘out of step’ for their age, check with your child health nurse or your doctor. It is important that children get help early if they need it.**

## Brain development

In the early years a baby’s brain grows faster than at any other time. What they feel, see and hear at this time affects how their brain develops. When babies feel loved, safe and secure the connections for feeling good and learning are strengthened. Responding to them warmly and consistently and giving them what they need helps them learn the world is safe, and builds their confidence and trust.

### Some ways to help babies and toddlers develop their best:

- respond promptly and warmly when they are upset
- look into their eyes, smile and talk
- share stories, songs and rhymes
- share books with them often
- point things out and tell them what they are
- give them a variety of things to look at, touch and play with
- help them explore their world safely.

**Enjoy talking, playing and having fun with your child - it’s great for their development and builds your relationship with them.**

## The first year

### Babies 0–3 months

Babies have feelings from birth. They may feel content or uncomfortable but are not able to think about why they feel that way. They may ‘pick up on’ and ‘match’ your feelings such as when you are happy, calm or upset.

From birth babies may:

- watch your face when you talk to them
- turn to the side to suck when their cheek is touched
- startle with sudden noises such as hand claps or door slamming
- suck well from breast or bottle.

By 8 weeks they may:

- smile at you
- move both eyes together most of the time
- lift their head when lying on their tummy
- kick both legs strongly
- seem to listen to you and watch your face
- make sounds other than crying, and ‘talk back’ to you
- have sleep patterns which vary greatly.



By 2–3 months they should follow your face or a moving light with their eyes, and look at their own hands and play with their fingers.

**Out of step?**

- not smiling by 8 weeks
- not calming down, at least for a little while, when picked up
- being unusually floppy or stiff
- having different muscle tone or strength in an arm and leg on one side compared with the other side
- having unusually ‘good’ head control due to stiff muscles
- always holding fingers in a tight fist
- not startled by sudden noises
- having feeding problems beyond ‘normal’ range. Find out more from your child health nurse
- crying for long periods, or ongoing problems settling
- being unusually undemanding
- not watching your face when you speak to them by 3 months
- not making sounds other than crying by 3 months.

**What babies hear, see and feel in the early years affect how their brain develops. They develop best in warm, nurturing relationships.**

**Babies 3–6 months**

**Relationships and feelings**

- make eye contact as you smile at each other
- enjoy being played with, laugh and kick by 4 months
- chuckle softly and laugh aloud by 3–5 months.

**Out of step?**

- don’t seem interested in things around them
- don’t show delight in being with people
- don’t seem to know parents or other familiar people.

**Doing, seeing and hearing**

- enjoy looking at people and bright objects
- follow moving objects with their eyes
- enjoy watching people do things
- react to familiar things by smiling, cooing and excited movements
- turn their head to moderate sounds such as a normal speaking voice by 3 months
- look at their own hands and play with their fingers by 3 months.

By 3–5 months:

- reach for an object and hold it briefly
- keep holding an object being playfully pulled away
- lift their head and chest when lying on their tummy, and begin to roll from their back to tummy
- quieten or smile at the sound of your voice, or if they see you
- turn their head or eyes towards you when you speak from beside or behind them.

**Out of step?**

- don’t open hands or straighten fingers
- don’t kick legs
- arms and legs are bent most of the time
- don’t use both hands and both legs equally well
- don’t follow activities with eyes
- don’t make eye contact with people
- don’t turn to look for you when you speak
- not startled by loud noises
- unhappy or unsettled most of the time.

**Learning to talk**

- make lots of little voice sounds such as squeals or grunts
- take turns when ‘talking’ with parents
- turn their head towards a person talking by 5 months.

**Out of step?**

- don’t make many voice sounds.

**It is important for babies to have some tummy time on the floor each day from birth. It helps them develop muscles for crawling and head control. Never leave them alone on their tummy.**



## Babies 6–9 months

### Relationships and feelings

- know familiar people and are unsure of strangers
- are upset when separated from main carer
- delight in playing 'peek-a-boo' games.

### Out of step?

- show no or little response when seeing people they know well
- don't make eye contact
- cannot be comforted by a parent or close carer.

### Doing

- swap small items from one hand to the other
- hold an item in each hand
- pick up items with their thumb and one finger
- bang objects together
- roll from their back to their tummy
- sit for several minutes without using their hands for support
- get into a crawling position on their hands and knees
- start to look at and feel objects before taking them to their mouth
- start to hold food such as a biscuit and feed themselves
- look in the right direction for things that have fallen down
- start to drink from a cup held by an adult by 6–9 months
- move around more and roll and creep on their tummy by 8 months.

### Out of step?

- not starting to move around by any means
- don't show an interest in or reach for objects
- don't recognise parent or main carer
- not interested in surroundings or new objects.

## Hearing and learning to talk

- turn towards quiet sounds
- babble with sounds like 'dada' and 'baba' and then try to put babbling sounds together
- recognise several words, e.g. looks for Daddy if 'Daddy' is said
- copy sounds made by other people.

### Out of step?

- babbling is not developing.

## Babies 9–12 months

### Relationships and feelings

- know familiar people and withdraw from strangers by 9 months – only like familiar people to feed, dress and comfort them
- give cuddles
- become anxious if main carer is out of sight
- stretch up arms to be picked up
- love to be talked to and played with
- copy gestures such as coughing or waving
- cannot understand 'no' or 'danger'.

### Out of step?

- show little or no response when seeing people they know well
- don't make eye contact
- cannot be comforted by parent or close carer.

### Doing

- point with their index finger
- drop and throw things on purpose
- put objects in containers
- pass objects easily from one hand to the other
- sit unsupported
- move around by crawling or 'bottom shuffling'
- pull up to standing
- walk while holding on to furniture
- find a toy hidden under a cloth
- pick up a crumb with tips of finger and thumb
- pick up and drink from a lidded cup
- stand by themselves and take a few steps forward by 11–13 months.





### Out of step?

- holds their body stiff and cannot be put into a sitting position
- not moving around in any way
- not interested in new objects and don't reach for them
- not sitting by 9 months.

**Babies learn and develop best when you spend time talking and playing with them.**

### Hearing and learning to talk

- look for quiet sounds made out of sight
- shake their head for 'no' and nod their head for 'yes'
- show pleasure in babbling loudly
- like to look at picture books and can say some sounds at certain pictures
- turn to the direction a sound comes from by 10–12 months
- know and respond to their own name by 12 months
- babbling develops further. Can say 3 'words' such as 'mama', 'baba' 'dada' by 12 months.

### Out of step?

- don't babble or make other sounds when someone talks to them.

**Sharing a book with baby every day helps their healthy development. It is never too early to start.**

## Children 1–2 years

This is a year of firsts – first steps, first words, first tantrums. Most children are moving freely, running, climbing and exploring. They are self-centred and see everything and everyone as being there for them alone.

### Relationships and feelings

By 18 months:

- enjoy cuddles
- show different feelings and easily move from happy to sad to angry
- likely to be afraid of strangers
- show a strong attachment to parents or main carer
- wave goodbye and point at things
- show distress when left by a parent – is often clingy when the parent returns.

### Out of step?

- don't show preference for people they know well
- don't seem to like cuddles.

By 2 years:

- play near other children, but not yet with them – unless the other children adapt their play to fit the 2 year old
- unable to share or take turns.

### Doing

By 12 months:

- pull themselves up on a lounge chair
- side step around the chair whilst holding on
- push a small trolley along in a straight line, but can't turn corners.

By 18 months:

- walk – at first with feet wide apart, but as balance improves, walk with feet closer together and straighter
- walk downstairs while holding your hand
- fall over if they try to run
- climb on to low furniture
- open an cupboard door
- place objects such as 3 small blocks on top of each other
- use a spoon right side up
- drink from an open cup
- start to scribble with a pencil
- turn pages of a book
- try to kick a large ball if shown how



- begin imaginary play, e.g. give teddy a drink
- by 15-22 months do puzzles of 1-3 pieces.

### Out of step?

- not yet walking
- not holding a spoon or not able to get food into their mouth
- not picking up small objects.

By 2 years:

- explore more widely, open doors and drawers and push buttons
- run fast without falling over when turning corners or stopping
- squat steadily to pick up objects
- bring a small chair to the table and sit on the chair at the table
- walk backwards pulling a toy or trolley
- kick a ball forwards
- get up without using their hands.

### Out of step?

- not walking steadily by 2 years, or is limping.

### Learning to talk

By 18 months:

- babble loudly to themselves and others
- listen to what is said and understand a few things such as 'no' or 'stop'
- point to one or two body parts
- follow a few simple instructions such as 'please get your shoes'
- identify a few familiar objects when they are named such as 'show me the ball' or 'where is the spoon?'
- know and use 8 or more words in addition to 'mama' and 'dada'. The words may be unclear but you can tell what they mean.

### Out of step?

- not babbling much
- not starting to use some meaningful words
- not listening when people speak to them.

By 2 years:

- listen to things that are said to them
- start to put 2 words together such as 'daddy's car'
- remember 2 things at a time such as 'please get the ball and bring it to Daddy'
- play pretend games, e.g. driving a car, or cooking
- join in with songs and nursery rhymes
- point to 6 body parts
- babble while playing, with a few recognisable words in the babble
- tell you most of what they want with words, such as 'outside', 'milk', 'want more' or 'go away'.

### Out of step?

- still mostly silent while playing
- don't respond when people talk to them
- not pointing to objects when named
- uses signs, grunts or gestures but not words when they want something.

## Children 2–3 years

This is a time when toddlers want to become more independent. They have new things to learn and strong feelings to deal with. They can lose control of feelings and this can scare them. They need lots of physical contact and reassurance that they are lovable.

### Relationships and feelings

By 2½ years:

- try hard to be independent and say 'no' a lot, or 'me do'
- not able to control feelings, and tantrums are common especially when they are tired or frustrated
- not able to share with others or take turns
- resist attempts to stop them doing things
- play imaginative games such as putting a doll to bed, driving a car around on the floor or feeding toys.





### Out of step?

- has frequent tantrums
- don't play with adults or older children.

By 3 years:

- try to copy adults and is able to be helpful, such as putting toys away
- play games using lots of imagination and joins in with other children's play.

### Out of step?

- not playing imaginative games
- becoming obsessed with certain objects
- not using toys as they are 'meant' to be used such as only playing with the wheels of a car rather than pushing it along a 'road'
- are mostly 'in their own world' rather than interacting with others.

### Doing

By 2½ years:

- climb on and off furniture
- run smoothly and climb on play equipment
- throw a ball more or less where they want it to go
- kick a large ball gently but not always where they want it to go
- stack 5–6 blocks
- climb up stairs
- feed themselves with a spoon and drink from an open cup
- help to dress and undress themselves
- are very active and resist attempts to stop them doing things. They don't understand about danger, even if they say that something is dangerous.

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**Children learn through play. Give them a variety of things to look at, touch and play with, and opportunities to explore their world safely.**  
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### Out of step?

- not running smoothly, or has a limp
- far more active or less active than other children
- cannot feed themselves most of the time.

By 3 years:

- push or pull large wheeled toys around to where they want them
- walk alone up and down stairs
- push the pedals on a toy such as a tricycle
- stand and walk on tiptoe
- jump with both feet
- kick a ball forcefully
- throw and catch a ball with outstretched arms
- undress and put on some simple clothes
- draw a straight line and a circle when shown
- eat with spoon and fork
- begin to manage toileting. Some children will not manage this until they are nearly 4
- know that they are a girl or a boy.

### Out of step?

- not running as smoothly as other children
- not climbing skilfully.

### Learning to talk

By 2½ years:

- understand a lot more than they can say
- put words into short sentences such as 'look Mummy dog'
- talk during play
- let people know what they want using words rather than signs
- realise that language can get others to respond.



By 3 years:

- talk clearly enough for strangers to understand some of what they say
- use words such as 'me' and 'you' correctly
- ask many questions starting with 'what', 'where' and 'why'
- listen to stories, and often ask for favourite stories
- make up long stories while playing.

#### Out of step?

- not using words to let others know what they want
- not talking clearly enough for parents to know what they want
- in a 'world of their own' and don't respond when others speak to them.

## Children 3–4 years

This is a time of moving from babyhood to childhood. They know more words, can express some ideas and have a rich imagination. They love to play and enjoy doing physical things. They are learning how to get along with others, and to share and take turns. They are now happier to spend some time away from parents. They have less need for everything 'right now'.

#### Relationships and feelings

By 3–4 years:

- play cooperatively with other children some of the time
- share and take turns – cannot manage competitive games
- can be apart from parents more easily in places they know well
- are more independent and don't want help
- show caring for other children in distress
- use complex make-believe play
- find it hard to know what is 'pretend' and what is 'real'.

#### Out of step?

- don't interact with other children or adults in play
- are overly aggressive with other children or withdrawn from them
- repeat the same simple play activity over and over again for long periods.

#### Doing

During this year can usually begin to:

- climb on play equipment
- jump off two steps and land feet together
- walk along a plank
- stand, walk and run on tiptoes
- use pedals on a tricycle and turn safely
- stand on one foot for several seconds
- hop up and down on either left or right foot at least once without losing balance
- learn to cut with child-safe scissors
- roll or bounce a ball
- catch a ball with both hands, and throw a ball overarm
- eat well with a spoon and fork
- manage toileting. They may still have 'accidents' when stressed, tired or 'forget' to go to the toilet when too busy playing. Many still wet the bed at night.
- enjoy helping adults around the house
- start to draw pictures of people
- sort and match – identify small and big
- play pretend games such as super heroes and imaginary friends
- dress without help (except zips and buttons)
- explore and collect things.

#### Out of step?

- not doing above activities as well as other children
- cannot jump with 2 feet together
- not able to be toilet trained and still 'wetting' during the day by 4 years
- starting to 'wet' again during the day after becoming dry.





## Learning to talk

- use 4–5 word sentences
- talk in complex sentences that are mostly grammatically correct
- say things most people can understand – even if there are sounds they cannot make, e.g. s, r, z, th, v, f
- enjoy stories and jokes
- ask lots of questions about the world such as ‘why?’ and ‘how?’
- can tell you how old they are
- can talk about what happened yesterday and about tomorrow
- start to put together pieces of a simple puzzle.

## Out of step?

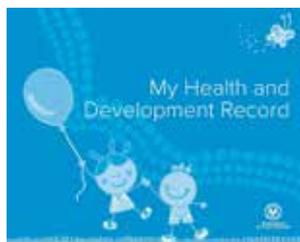
- don’t speak clearly – you can’t understand them most of the time
- not talking in sentences of 3 or more words
- not able to follow simple instructions
- not talking during play
- don’t seem to understand what parents say to them.

## Seeking help

If you are worried that your child seems ‘out of step’ with others of the same age, talk with your doctor or nurse at the Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS). This can help to assure you that all is well, or to get help for your child if they need it.

## Your ‘Blue Book’

South Australian parents are given a ‘Blue Book’ (My Health and Development Record) on the birth of their baby. It is a place to record baby’s health, growth, immunisation and development and has information about milestones at various ages. Take it with you to CaFHS and other health appointments.



**Keep your Blue Book safe - it is an important record.  
Your child might like to see it when they are older.**

## Want more information?

### Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child development and parenting

### Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri to make an appointment. See [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com) for more information on baby and toddler health, development and parenting.

### Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including, ‘Learning to talk’, ‘About babies’, ‘Living with toddlers’, ‘Tantrums’, ‘Time in: guiding children’s behaviour’ and ‘Toilet training’ [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

### Raising Children Network

For information on raising children  
[www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)



**Government of  
South Australia**

### Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department for Education and Child Development and the Women’s and Children’s Health Network.

**Ph: 08 8303 1660**

**[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)**

Parent Easy Guides are free  
in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to  
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