

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Child development: Infants and toddlers (0–3 years old)

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

We also appreciate that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Understanding how a child's reactions, thoughts, behaviours and sense of control are influenced by their development can help you imagine what life is like for your child right now. Knowing what children are (and aren't) likely to be able to do and understand at their current age helps you respond in ways that support their positive development and mental health.

This fact sheet describes the main developmental experiences and capabilities of babies and toddlers up to around three years of age, and offers ways parents, family members and other adults can support children's healthy development and wellbeing.



Key things to remember about children's development

- Every child grows and develops at their own pace, and so their developmental journey is unique. Some children master certain skills earlier than others and some take longer or need a bit more help and direction.
- A child's development is shaped by their unique genes as well as their relationships and experiences at home and in the other places they learn and play.
- Neurodivergent children and children with a physical or intellectual disability may think, move, communicate and/or process senses differently, which can influence their developmental pathway.
- The best way to support your child's development and wellbeing is to provide a safe and secure environment and respond warmly, consistently and appropriately to their needs.

A note about developmental ‘stages’ and ‘milestones’

Health professionals and other resources may refer to ‘stages’ of development or lists of developmental ‘milestones’ to check whether a child’s development is ‘on track’ or if there are any areas of concern. Milestones are specific skills or capabilities children typically develop by certain ages. Milestones are based on neurotypical processes and can’t reflect the unique characteristics and experiences of each child. For this reason, we’ve chosen not to refer to specific ‘stages’ or ‘milestones’ in this resource.

If you’d like more information about milestones, we recommend the following resources:

- [Understanding infant mental health and wellbeing](#) (Emerging Minds Families)
- [Milestones for newborns 0–3 months](#) (Raising Children Network)
- [Milestones for babies 3–12 months](#) (Raising Children Network)
- [Your baby’s growth and development – first 12 months](#) (Pregnancy Birth & Baby)
- [Toddlers’ development](#) (Raising Children Network)

Children’s development from birth to around three years old

In the first three years of their life, a child grows and learns a lot, quickly. From birth to around three years old, their brain will almost triple in size!

Physically, your baby will go from having very little control over their body to crawling, standing, walking then running. At the same time, they’re rapidly developing language, communication, social and emotional skills as they learn to understand what is being said and what is happening around them.

As children are learning and growing so quickly, it can be difficult to know if their behaviours are:

- part of normal developmental changes
- due to expected developmental delays (because they were born prematurely, for example)
- related to their experiences (for example, if your family has experienced a flood or bushfire, or a parent is unwell); or
- signs of possible developmental concerns.

An infant and toddler’s closest relationships – with their parents, extended family and other adult caregivers – are the most significant factors in their life. The quality and stability of those key relationships influences how the child’s brain grows and functions, and their wellbeing and learning throughout life. Stable relationships with nurturing adults help children thrive.

In this audio clip from the Emerging Minds podcast (2 minutes, 53 seconds), new parents Sarah and Claudius share what they’ve noticed about their baby Christopher’s development in his first year.



LISTEN TO THE AUDIO

Developmental experiences of infants and toddlers (0–3 years)

As a parent of an infant or toddler, it can be difficult to understand how your child is experiencing the world and why they’re behaving the way they are. This table shows the main developmental experiences and capabilities of babies and toddlers up to around three years of age, along with ways parents, family members and other adults can support children’s healthy development.

Before you read this list, take a moment to think about what you’ve been noticing about your child.

Have you noticed any changes in:

- their movement and physical abilities?
- how they communicate with you?
- the ways they respond to other people, or try to get their attention?
- how they like to play?

As you read the suggestions for ways to support healthy development, consider:

- What are you already doing that is supporting your baby’s or toddler’s development?
- Are there any ideas here that you might try?



Common developmental experiences between birth and around three years of age	How you can support your child's healthy development
<p>Infants and very young children are focused on forming and maintaining a strong emotional connection ('attachment bond') with their parent or parents. A newborn baby is completely reliant on their caregiver for survival. Later, infants and toddlers rely on their parent/s for security and comfort as they learn about the world around them.</p>	<p>Having a warm and responsive relationship with a parent helps infants and young children to feel safe and confident to explore their world. Always respond to your baby when they cry by going to them and trying to settle them. It's OK to not always know how to help; by simply trying to comfort them, you're showing your infant that you're there for them when they're upset, and that builds their trust in you.</p> <p>When your baby makes sounds to get your attention, look into their eyes and respond with a smile and encouraging noises. Repeat the sounds they're making, or have a pretend conversation (for example, you might say something like, 'Oh, right, then what happened?'). Even just a few minutes of looking at each other and responding with a smile or sound when your baby coos and babbles builds your connection.</p> <p>For more tips on bonding with your infant, listen to the Emerging Minds podcast or visit the Raising Children Network.</p>
<p>Babies are born ready to communicate, and in their first three years rapidly develop language. Around the age of one, they might talk in their own language or say a few clear words. By two, most toddlers can use some words to express their needs – for example, 'up Daddy' or 'more grapes'. And by three, children are often putting together simple sentences.</p>	<p>Talk and sing to your child as much as you can. Even before they can understand the words, hearing your voice helps your baby to develop their own communication skills, and builds your parent-child bond.</p> <p>Limit their screen time. Giving your baby or toddler a phone or tablet to look at while you're busy might seem harmless, but the latest research shows more screen time for infants is linked with developmental delays in communication, fine motor, problem-solving and social skills.¹</p> <p>Children develop those important skills through interactions with you, and other adults and children – which is why it's so important to talk and play with them as much as you can at this age. For infants (under two years) no screen time is best, and for toddlers, no more than one hour a day is recommended.²</p>
<p>Very young children gradually develop a sense of 'agency': they learn that someone will respond when they express their needs, and that they're able to control certain outcomes.</p>	<p>When you respond to your infant's signals – like crying because they need feeding or comfort, or putting up their arms because they want to be picked up – they learn to trust their own feelings and their body's signals. That is a foundation for positive mental health in later life.</p> <p>Help your toddler to build confidence in their own agency and explore new environments by planning play dates or family trips to the park. Stay close so they know you're there for them if they need you, but allow them to take age-appropriate risks.</p>
<p>Infants don't yet have a sense of themselves as being separate to their primary caregiver – which means they're strongly aware of their carer's emotional state.</p> <p>At around three years, a child starts understanding they're separate from their parent/s and that they can have thoughts and feelings that are different to yours.</p>	<p>Infants will naturally tune in to your emotional state, so if you're feeling stressed or burnt out, it's important to take care of yourself.</p> <p>As your child grows, you might like to name your emotions for them, so they begin to get a sense of your own internal experiences.</p> <p>When you're reading books with your toddler, talk with them about what a character was thinking or feeling and how you were aware of that (e.g. because of their facial expression or something they did or said).</p>

Common developmental experiences between birth and around three years of age	How you can support your child's healthy development
<p>Toddlers feel new and big emotions like frustration, shame and excitement for the first time. This can be hard for them to deal with and may come out in 'big' behaviours like hitting or kicking, tears or tantrums.</p>	<p>Children need their parents' support to understand and manage big emotions. Try to be curious about the feelings underneath the behaviour. Notice your child's emotions (e.g. when they first start to get frustrated, or seem unusually quiet), and help them to understand which behaviours are not OK and find safe ways to manage their big feelings.</p>
<p>Young children learn and develop through play.</p>	<p>Infants and babies learn and build connections with their caregivers through back-and-forth interactions. When you respond to, talk to, and interact with your baby, it helps them develop skills to cope with stress and emotions, now and in the future.</p> <p>In their early years, play is how children learn and develop.</p> <p>For babies, just looking at your face while you talk or sing to them is a form of play. As they grow, playing simple games like 'peek a boo' helps infants form a connection, learn about emotions and develop social skills.</p> <p>Toddlers love boxes and blocks for building things, or things they can safely climb and jump on, like a pillow pile on the floor.</p> <p>The Raising Children Network has great play ideas to encourage development at different ages.</p>
<p>Once they get to around two years old, toddlers will start playing with other toddlers. At first, they might play beside others without interacting much (this is called 'parallel play'), before gradually starting to cooperate and enjoy playing in bigger groups.</p>	<p>Organise opportunities for your toddler to play with other toddlers. You might organise a play date in the park or find a playgroup in your area. Playgroups allow your child to play with other children in a different and safe environment – and you can enjoy some adult conversation too.</p>
<p>Very young children thrive on routine. Infants and toddlers can become confused and distressed when there are big changes, especially to their family structure, familiar environment or daily routines. Routines help create a sense of safety and security.</p>	<p>Develop, and try to stick to, daily and weekly routines. Babies and toddlers' emotions and behaviour are particularly influenced by daily routines, such as having enough sleep, nutritious food, play time and time for moving.</p>
<p>Toddlers are rapidly developing physical capabilities – like running, climbing, kicking a ball, holding a crayon or pencil, and feeding themselves – and an interest in exploring the world around them.</p>	<p>Encourage your toddler to try new things and work out how to face challenges. When they're learning to go up and down stairs, for example, ask them: 'What's the best way for us to go down the stairs?'. When they do something new, give them lots of praise and positive attention.</p> <p>When your toddler is around 2–3 years old, start involving them in planning and 'problem solving'. For example, if you're planning to go to the park, look at the sky together and talk about what you need to take, depending on whether it's sunny or looks like it might rain.</p>

If your family is navigating tough times

When a family is facing difficulties – such as financial or housing stress, health issues or relationship breakdown – it affects everyone, even very young children. It's normal for a child's developmental process to be interrupted and different to what's described above if they, you or the whole family is dealing with tough times.

Find out more about how you can [support your child's development during tough times](#) in our fact sheet.

When to seek advice

As a parent you know your child best. If you have any concerns about the way your baby or toddler moves, speaks, learns or interacts with other people, talk to your doctor/GP or child health nurse.

Please make an appointment to see your GP, child health nurse or another health professional if your infant:

- doesn't smile or interact with people
- isn't moving both arms or both legs
- is still clenching their fingers in a tight fist at six months
- isn't reaching for objects by six months
- doesn't seem to hear or see properly (they don't follow you with their eyes or respond to sounds)
- isn't starting to babble (e.g. 'bubba', 'dada') by around 10 months, or isn't saying any clear words by around 18 months
- isn't trying to stand up by around 12 months; or
- doesn't seem interested in interacting with others (e.g. playing games like peekaboo, rolling a ball) or the world around them.^{3,4,5}

Or if your toddler (2–3 years):

- isn't interested in playing with toys or other people
- isn't walking without support, or is falling a lot
- finds it hard to feed themselves using a spoon or fork or has trouble picking up small items
- doesn't understand simple instructions; or
- isn't using many words, or is not starting to use simple sentences like 'red car fast' or 'let's go Mum'.^{3,4,5}

Identifying a cause or a developmental delay and getting help early can make a big difference to your child's development and long-term wellbeing.

More information

This fact sheet is part of our series on key developmental experiences for children from birth to age 12. This collection of resources looks at what parents and other adults can do to support healthy development at different points in a child's developmental journey.

AVAILABLE HERE

More resources on child development



The following resource offers more information on supporting your infant or toddler's development and wellbeing:

AVAILABLE HERE

Understanding infant mental health and wellbeing



Raising Children Network has more detailed information about development (including language, social & emotional and sexual development) and development concerns in:

- [newborns](#) (0–4 weeks)
- [babies](#) (0–12 months)
- [premature babies](#); and
- [toddlers](#) (1–3 years).

By learning and staying curious about what your child is experiencing, thinking and feeling, you can support their healthy development and their mental health and wellbeing, now and into the future.

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References

1. Takahashi, I., Obara, T., Ishikuro, M., et al. (2023). Screen time at age 1 year and communication and problem-solving developmental delay at 2 and 4 years. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 177(10), 1039–1046. doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2023.3057
2. Department of Health. (2021, 7 May). [Physical activity and exercise guidelines for all Australians](#) [Web page]. Australian Government.
3. Queensland Health Child Development Program and Brisbane North Primary Health Network. (2016). [Red Flags Early Identification Guide \(for children aged birth to five years\)](#). Queensland Government.
4. Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority. (n.d.). [Your child's development](#) [Web page]. ACECQA.
5. Healthdirect. (2021). [Developmental milestones in babies and children](#) [Web page]. Australian Government.