

Recognizing *Developmental Delays* and Behavioral Concerns

Children develop at different rates, but some missed milestones or ongoing behavioral patterns may signal a developmental delay or behavioral concern. Identifying these patterns early is key to getting children the support they need to thrive.

What is a Developmental Delay?

A developmental delay occurs when a child does not reach milestones in motor function, speech, or social skills within the expected age range. A delay is different from a “slow start”; it is a continuous delay in development that may require professional intervention.



Key Areas of Concern



Communication and Language

- **Infancy:** Lack of babbling or gesturing (pointing or waving) by 12 months.
- **Toddlerhood:** No single words by 16 months or no two-word phrases by 24 months.
- **Preschool and School Age:** Difficulty being understood by others, inability to follow simple instructions, or a sudden loss of previously acquired speech.



Motor and Physical Skills

- **Gross Motor:** Excessive floppiness (low muscle tone) or stiffness in the limbs; not walking by 18 months.
- **Fine Motor:** Difficulty grasping objects, using utensils, or showing persistent tremors or uncoordinated movements.



Social and Emotional Development

- **Social Engagement:** Limited eye contact, lack of interest in peers, or not responding to their name by 12 months.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Persistent difficulty transitioning between activities, or frequent, intense behavioral outbursts that are not age-appropriate.
- **Social Reciprocity:** Difficulty understanding social cues or a lack of joint attention (sharing interest in an object with another person).



Cognitive and Learning

- **Problem Solving:** Lack of interest in cause-and-effect play (for example, dropping a toy to watch it fall).
- **Attention:** Significant difficulty sustaining focus on age-appropriate tasks or play.

Identifying Concerning Behavioral Patterns

Occasional “acting out” is a normal part of development. These patterns, however, may warrant a clinical evaluation:

- **Regression:** A significant loss of previously mastered skills, such as toilet training, language, or social engagement.
- **Persistent Aggression:** Frequent physical aggression toward self, others, or property that does not respond to redirection.
- **Withdrawal:** A consistent preference for isolation, lack of emotional response, or appearing disconnected.
- **Repetitive Behaviors:** Intense focus on specific objects or repetitive movements (e.g., hand-flapping or rocking) that interfere with daily life.

Next Steps for Families

If you observe these patterns, it does not necessarily indicate a permanent disability, but it does warrant further investigation.

Document Observations: Note specific behaviors, when they occur, and how long they last.

Consult Your Pediatrician: Share your concerns clearly. They can perform standardized developmental screenings.

Seek Early Intervention: In many areas, families can access evaluation services through local school districts or state-funded early intervention programs.



For more resources, visit
mhamd.org/earlychildhood

