

Your Child's Development Journey

A Guide for Families

A practical guide for families navigating early intervention •
Ages 0–3

Finding out your child may have a developmental delay can feel overwhelming. This guide is here to help you understand what that means, what to expect, and — most importantly — what you can do. The first three years of a child's life are the most critical window for brain development, and early support makes a real difference. This guide was created by an infant development specialist who works with families just like yours every day. Keep it, reference it, bring it to appointments. You are your child's greatest advocate, and you don't have to figure this out alone.

What's Inside:

- What a developmental delay actually means
- The 5 areas of development explained simply
- Milestones from birth to 3 years
- Activities you can do at home right now
- Words you'll hear — what they actually mean
- Questions to bring to every appointment

01 What Does This Even Mean?

A developmental delay means that a child is reaching certain skills later than most children the same age. For some children, early support is all they need to close the gap. For others, it may be the first step in understanding something that needs longer-term attention. Either way, early action always makes a difference — and knowing now is better than waiting.

Every child develops at their own pace — but there are general windows when most children reach key milestones. When a child falls significantly outside those windows in one or more areas, early intervention services can help bridge that gap.

Early is everything

The brain is most flexible in the first 3 years of life. Support given early has the greatest impact.

You are part of the team

Research shows that children make the most progress when families are active participants — not just observers.

A delay is not a diagnosis

A developmental delay is a description of where your child is right now. It is not a life sentence or a label.

02 The 5 Areas of Development

Think of development like a team of five players — gross motor, fine motor, language, cognitive, and social-emotional. Each player has their own role, but they work together. When one player is struggling, the rest of the team feels it. And when you give that player extra support, the whole team gets stronger. A delay can show up in one area or several — here's what each one means:

Gross Motor

The big movements — rolling, sitting, crawling, standing, and walking. Gross motor skills depend on core strength, balance, and muscle coordination.

Fine Motor

The small movements — reaching, grasping, transferring objects hand to hand, and eventually using fingers with precision. These skills are the foundation for feeding, dressing, and writing.

Language & Communication

Both understanding language (receptive) and using it (expressive). This includes babbling, gesturing, first words, and putting words together. Communication starts long before a child says their first word.

Cognitive

Thinking, learning, and problem-solving. This includes cause and effect, object permanence (knowing things exist even when out of sight), imitation, and early play skills.

Social-Emotional

How a child connects with others — eye contact, social smiling, attachment, responding to emotions, and learning to self-regulate. These skills are the foundation of all future relationships.

03 Milestones 0–3

Remember that team we talked about? Every player develops on their own timeline. These milestones are just a look at what development can look like at each stage. Some players hit every milestone right on schedule, and some need a little extra support to get there. Both are okay. Use this as a guide, celebrate every win, and if something feels off, trust your gut and talk to your provider.

0–6 Months

- Lifts head during tummy time
- Responds to voices & sounds
- Social smile by 2 months
- Reaches for and grasps objects

6–12 Months

- Sits independently
- Babbles (ba, da, ma)
- Waves, claps, peekaboo
- Pulls to stand

12–18 Months

- Walks independently
- Uses 3–20 words
- Points to show interest
- Scribbles with crayon

18–24 Months

- Runs, climbs stairs
- Uses 50+ words, 2-word phrases
- Simple pretend play
- Uses spoon and fork

24–36 Months

- Jumps, kicks a ball
- Uses 3–4 word sentences
- Follows 2-step directions
- Sorts shapes and colors

04 What You Can Do at Home

You don't need special equipment or training to support your child's development. The most powerful thing you have is time with your child. Here are simple, everyday activities organized by developmental area:

Gross Motor

- Tummy time every day — start with 2–3 minutes and build up
- Place toys just out of reach to encourage rolling and reaching
- Let your child move freely on the floor rather than in bouncers

Fine Motor

- Offer objects of different textures, sizes, and shapes to explore
- Let them feed themselves — even if it's messy
- Simple containers to put objects in and take out

Language & Communication

- Narrate your whole day — describe everything you're doing
- Copy your baby's sounds back to them and wait for a response
- Read together every day — point to pictures and name them

Cognitive

- Play peekaboo — it teaches that things still exist when hidden
- Give cause-and-effect toys like rattles and pop-up toys
- Let them problem-solve — resist the urge to do it for them

Social-Emotional

- Make eye contact and smile during every caregiving routine
- Name feelings out loud — 'You seem frustrated. That was hard.'
- Keep routines consistent — predictability builds security

05 Words You'll Hear — What They Actually Mean

Early intervention comes with a lot of acronyms and terminology. Here's a plain-language guide to the words you'll hear most:

Assessment

The process of gathering information about your child's development through observation, parent interviews, and standardized tools. Helps the team understand where your child is right now.

Evaluation

A formal, structured process used to determine if your child qualifies for services. Done by a licensed professional using standardized tests. An assessment is ongoing — an evaluation is the official qualifying step.

Regional Center

In California, nonprofits contracted by the state to provide services to children with developmental disabilities ages 0–3. They connect families with coordinators, evaluations, and providers.

IFSP

Individualized Family Service Plan. Your child's personalized roadmap — outlines current abilities, goals, and what services they'll receive.

Early Intervention (EI)

A federally funded system of services for children under 3 with developmental delays or disabilities.

Service Coordinator

Your main point of contact, assigned through the Regional Center. Helps navigate the system, connect with services, schedule evaluations, and coordinate your child's care team.

Intake

Your family's first official meeting with the Regional Center. You share concerns, provide background, and the evaluation and services process begins.

Infant Stimulation Specialist

A developmental specialist who works with infants 0–3 using play-based activities to support all five areas of development. They visit families at home and coach caregivers on how to support growth day to day.

OT — Occupational Therapist

Helps children develop skills for everyday activities — feeding, dressing, sensory processing, and fine motor skills like grasping and hand coordination.

PT — Physical Therapist

Focuses on movement, strength, balance, and coordination — the building blocks of gross motor development. Helps children work toward rolling, sitting, crawling, standing, and walking.

SLP — Speech-Language Pathologist

Works on communication — not just talking, but understanding language, social communication, and feeding/swallowing. In early intervention, SLPs often work on babbling, first words, and early back-and-forth.

Developmental Delay

When a child reaches milestones significantly later than expected for their age in one or more areas.

Age-Equivalent

A score describing your child's development in terms of a typical age. 'Age-equivalent of 10 months' means they're performing skills typical of a 10-month-old.

Progress Note / PR

A report written by your child's provider documenting progress toward their goals.

Natural Environment

Services happen where your child naturally lives, plays, and learns — at home, at the park, at daycare — not in a clinic. Learning in real-life settings leads to better outcomes.

Transition

The process of moving out of early intervention services (at age 3) into school-based or other community services.

06 Questions to Ask at Appointments

You are a full member of your child's team. These questions will help you stay informed, advocate confidently, and get the most out of every appointment.

Talking to Your Pediatrician First

- Is this typical for their age, or is it worth looking into?
- Should we wait and watch, or act now?
- What should I be tracking before our next visit?
- If you do see a concern, what happens next?

When Services Are Getting Started

- Can you explain each goal in plain language?
- How will we know if my child is making progress?
- What can I do at home to support these goals?
- Are there any services my child qualifies for that we aren't currently using?
- What should I expect in the first few months?

Once You're In — Regular Check-ins

- What did you work on today and how did it go?
- What should I be practicing with my child this week?
- Are you seeing progress? Where and how?
- Is there anything that concerns you today?
- Do you think my child needs any additional support?

If Something Feels Off

- I don't feel like we're seeing enough progress — can we talk about that?
- Can we add a goal around this area?
- I don't feel like the current services are enough — what are our options?
- What are my rights as a parent in this process?