

Support for parents and carers

Developmental and emotional milestones (0-18 years)



While developmental and emotional milestones offer a helpful guide to what many children experience at different ages, it's important to remember that every child is different. The information included here is a general description of what most children can do at certain ages. Your child might reach some milestones earlier and others a little later. That's okay. What matters most is supporting them at a pace that's right for them.

These milestones can also offer reassurance. If your child says something that feels upsetting—like “I hate you”—it can be comforting to know that this is a common way for five-year-olds to express big emotions. Understanding this can help you respond with empathy, rather than taking it personally.

As your child approaches two years old, you might notice behaviours like kicking or biting. It's a normal part of development, even though it can be challenging. Research shows that children are at their most physically reactive between the ages of two and three.



This is where your support—as a parent, carer, grandparent or childcare professional—makes a real difference throughout this very important stage of their lives.

By helping children navigate these intense emotions, you’re helping them to build vital brain connections which support them to control their anger and impulses later in life.

If you’re ever unsure or concerned about your child’s development, reaching out to a health visitor or GP can be a helpful step. You’re not alone—support is available.

Together, we can help children grow into emotionally resilient, confident individuals.



0-12 months

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<p>Birth to 4 weeks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Baby getting used to life outside the womb – often quite disorganised – baby needs to feel calm, safe and have a routine. <p>4 to 6 weeks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• More settled – beginning to settle into a regular pattern.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• During the first year, babies’ bodies develop very fast. The nervous system becomes organised – the rate and level of this process seem at least partly related to the quality of the relationship between baby and parent.

0-12 months (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<p>6 weeks to 3 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be starting to smile and will smile in response to a positive interaction with another person. • Starting to develop different cries and facial expressions that indicate when hungry, tired, uncomfortable or overwhelmed. • Enjoys looking at the human face, in particular parents or familiar adults. • Starting to vocalise more. <p>3 to 6 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smiling is usually established. • Temperament is becoming clearer. • Gradually becoming more aware of their own feelings. • Enjoying the familiar and starting to anticipate regular events, such as the sight of a bottle prior to being fed. <p>Separation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gradually able to tolerate small amounts of time from parents. • May be able to comfort themselves for a short time, but this is variable, and there may be times when the baby cannot do this, particularly if he is frightened. • Recognising others, mother, father, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles. • By 6 months, starting to recognise differences in familiar people. • At times may be aware of strangers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In general, babies gain control over their bodies from head to foot and from their centre outwards to arms and legs, and then their fingers and toes. • The first control is of eye muscles – focus 6–9 inches. • From birth, babies are interested in looking at the faces of their parents. • By 3 months, babies respond by smiling. • By 3 months, will lift head and upper chest when prone using forearms to support. • Grasps rattle for a short while. • Hands move when distressed/excited at the sound of approaching noise. • 5–6 months: reaches for object – picks up with raking movement. • 6–9 months: babies copy carers' speech sounds. • By 6–12 months: babies make various sounds – babbling, cooing, gurgling and laughing. • At 9–12 months, sits unsupported for 10–15 minutes; attempts to crawl. • Increased capacity to recognise feelings such as joy and displeasure. • Becomes more aware of being separate from parents. • Recognising strangers and can react in a distressed way if a stranger tries to interact too quickly.

0-12 months (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<p>6 to 12 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sleeping may change with altered sleeping arrangements, e.g., move from parent's room to separate room from around 6 months. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They are starting to be able to distract themselves when things go wrong. More persistent in pursuing their own goals, especially in play. Enjoys sharing games with parents and others. Laughter occurs more often when engaging in exciting interactions with parents and familiar adults.

12-18 months

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<p>12 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The toddler begins to learn to separate emotionally from the main parent and to develop their own identity. <p>12 to 18 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows anxiety about separation from a parent – tends to feel out of control of the situation and become more nervous and anxious. Not until 18-24 months can toddlers carry a picture of their loved ones in their minds. <p>18 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Key words are 'me', 'mine' and 'no' – begin to distinguish between 'you' and 'me'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing fine pincer grasp. Pulls to stand, and by about 1 year, most babies walk unaided. From 1 year becomes very active – gets into everything. Climbs on a chair to reach something – stack containers and starts to learn simple instructions. Has 'mama', 'dada' and 2 or 3 other words. Jabbers. Responds to own name and 'no-no' and 'give it to me'. By 18 months, they have between 6-20 words but understand more.

12-18 months (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Uses words to replace or accompany pointing.• Drinks from cup with help.• Chews.• Holds a spoon and tries to use it.• Puts wooden cubes in and out of the cup when shown.• Quickly finds the hidden toy.• They play pat-a-cake and wave 'bye-bye'.• Sits or stands without support while being dressed.

18 months	
Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Will hug and kiss parents, family and other people they are familiar with.Expresses likes and dislikes.An increasing need to be more independent.Increasingly wants to do things for themselves.Increasing self-awareness.Developing a sense of being a separate individual.Reacts aggressively when experiencing strong emotions.	<p>Large movement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Walks with more confidence.Runs but may find avoiding obstacles a challenge at 18 months but by 2 years more able to avoid them.Walks upstairs with help, and by 2 years, starting to walk downstairs.Enjoys climbing.Learns to kick a ball. <p>Fine movement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Builds tower of 3 at 18 months.Dexterity increases by 2 years.Scribbles and begins to copy a straight line at around 20 months. <p>Communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">By 2 years, increased the number of words and starting to put 2-3 words together.Gradual increase in emotional inflexions in speech.Points to parts of the body around 20 months.Follows simple instructions.Starts to use words such as 'no' and 'more'.

2 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Toddlers normally show extremes of behaviour between 2 and 3 years – very dependent/independent, very aggressive/calm, helpful/stubborn. More independent – gets angry when stopped from moving somewhere, tantrums common (cries desperately, kicks, bites, rough with other children). Begins to show feelings of pride, pity and sympathy. These feelings connect the child to himself and to others. Two-year-olds are usually aware of praise and smile. Needs a parent to tell him what is right and what is a ‘no-no’ – tone of voice important. The first step in recognising right from wrong. Less fear of strangers. Fear of noises, thunder, trains, flushing toilets. Plays alone or alongside others but won’t share. Short attention span and easily distracted. Harsh parenting and smacking get in the way of a child’s emotional development. Toddlers like routine, and any changes upset them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can run, push and pull large toys. Climbs on furniture and up and down stairs holding on to the rail. Throws a small ball overhead. Sits on a small bike and scoots along with their feet. Hand preference is usually obvious. Enjoys picture books and recognises detail. Modifies pencil grasp, spontaneously scribbles to and fro and in a circular motion. Knows 50+ words and begins to form simple sentences. Talks to self. Names familiar objects and parts of the body. Carries out simple instructions. Spoon-feeds well and chews competently. Verbalises toilet needs – may be dry during the day. Enjoys imitating domestic activities.

3 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Play is the work of this age – focus on becoming confident and efficient. Quite balanced – normally happy and contented. Still self-centred and magical in thinking – believes wishes make things come true. Has imaginary friends who can be blamed when things go wrong. Bargaining works, but reasoning does not. Distraction still works. Doesn't get so frustrated and gets less angry when stopped. The biggest fear is that their parent will abandon them – especially at night. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enjoys walking, climbing and running. Likes drawing/threading/playdough and simple jigsaws. Begins to take turns as a start to sharing. Large vocabulary is mainly intelligible to strangers, but many ungrammatical forms persist. Able to follow instructions. Asks many 'what, where and who' questions. Listens eagerly to stories. Uses fork and spoon. Pulls pants/knickers up/down.

4 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4-year-olds enjoy silly games/talk and showing off. Through play, they continue to seek a balance between dependence/independence. May see a return of some '2-year-old stubbornness'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Up and down stairs with the adult following. Climbs ladders/trees. Rides tricycle expertly. Increasing skill in ball games. Threads small beads on lace. Holds pencil in a mature fashion. Copies an X.

4 years (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If 'naughty', may blame others or be 'naughty' on purpose to get a reaction. • May be aggressive again – biting, kicking, and throwing objects. • Has a sense of past/future. • Fear of darkness remains. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speech is grammatically correct and intelligible. • Listens to and tells long stories, sometimes getting confused. Repeats nursery rhymes. • Eats skilfully. • Washes/dries hands. • Brushes teeth.

5 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More balanced again. • Quite independent and often serious and realistic. • Less frustrated and less angry – may bang doors/stamp feet, say 'I hate you' and 'I wish you were dead'. • Mostly friendly and talkative to strangers. • Bargaining continues to work. • Calming downtime helps them to regain self-control. • Fears of being hurt are common. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Runs lightly on their toes. • Active and skilful in outdoor play. • Grips strongly with either hand. • Good control in writing, drawing and painting. • Writes a few letters spontaneously. • Speech fluent – may have some phonetic confusion. • Recites rhymes and songs. • Enjoys jokes – asks the meaning of abstract words. • Uses knife/fork competently.

5 years (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May also worry that parents may not be available when needed, e.g., something happening to a parent while the child is at school. Tender and protective towards younger siblings or pets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undresses/dresses. Appreciates clock-time in relation to a daily routine.

6 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents are less central to the child's world. More involved in school life and making new relationships. Prefer to keep school and home life separate e.g., 'What did you do today?' 'Nothing!' Like their work and efforts to be noticed. Can be very unsettled by a teacher leaving. A teacher is seen as 'theirs', and this threatens security and stability. Preoccupied with aspects of life such as life, death, illness, and religion. Searching questions such as 'Where do babies come from?' Friendships can be intense. Will be upset if excluded at times of sadness, e.g., family bereavement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has a sense of competitiveness and rivalry. Ability varies widely at this age. Their attention span is still quite short. Their intellectual skills are developing, but still tend to think in concrete images, e.g., moving house (will question if the building is moving). Speech difficulties will be improving. Speech may be fluent, but vocabulary is still limited. Has endless questions, very inquisitive. Reading simple stories between ages 6-7. More able to control antisocial impulses and develop a sense of what is right and acceptable.

6 years (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plays in single-sex groups and may actively dislike the opposite sex. • Girls may have a best friend. Boys are usually in groups but may have a special friend. • May show interest in bodies of the opposite sex. • Plays 'doctors and nurses'. • Can differentiate fact from fiction and believe and make-believe at the same time, e.g. Father Christmas.

7 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A clear sense of own identity. • Growing confidence and self-esteem through experience of different situations. • Understands other people's thoughts, feelings and wishes better. • Argues with parents when views differ. • Quarrels with siblings but learning reasoned arguing. • Feels more secure and able to cope in the 'real' world. • Can be self-critical and sensitive to other people's comments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More independent; may want to go to school alone. • Self-control increasing; 'more sensible.' • The ability to reason develops along with vocabulary. • Still has a sense of competitiveness and rivalry. • Sense of time is still poor – five minutes could be forever. • Understands pretend play – knows it is not real but enjoys the fantasy. • Play tends to be more with other children than with parents. • Friendships may come and go.

7 years (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likes the order and routine of class groups but is still happier in small group activities. • Shows a strong attachment to a teacher and may compare parents to a teacher. There needs to be a strong home/school relationship to leave the child free to learn. • There needs to be a strong home/school relationship to leave the child free to learn. • Can be muddled by complex family relationships, as in divorce and stepfamilies. • Needs clear explanations and reassurance. • Generally, accepts a new baby without too much jealousy if included and reassured. • May reserve their worst behaviour for those they love best, i.e., family. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will compare friends. • Enjoys pocket money and learning how to use it. • Enjoys board and card games with parents – these help to learn about winning and losing safely. • Will collect anything: tickets, bottle tops, cards. Like to 'own' them and swap with friends.

8 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A lull between the dependence of babyhood and the independence of adolescence. • Absorbing all life experiences, positive and negative, receptive to good experiences, vulnerable to bad. • Strong emotions are felt but can be difficult to cope with. • May be idealistic, e.g., 'I'll never smoke'. • Family is very important – assume it is stable. • Routine is important. • School and class routines are reassuring, especially if have moved to Junior school. • Teachers and peers build confidence in themselves. • Still needs help with decisions and boundary setting. • Need 'grown-ups' to listen to their fears and worries. • Makes 'same sex' friendships. • Friendships are based on thoughtfulness and consideration as well as mutual activity, rivalry and quarrelling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to participate in competitive and other sports. • Speech and the ability to count developed further through board games. • Enjoys 'toilet' humour. • Coordination improves – able to play musical instruments. • Enjoys 'facts'. • Likes to watch television. • Likes 'crazes' or trends and collecting items.

9 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family is important - needed for a secure base and also for encouragement to do well. • Aware of family members' strengths, weaknesses and capabilities and of caregiver's anxieties. • Growing independence but can still act impulsively, with variation in the degree of organisation. • Many can express themselves verbally but may need help to express their thoughts and fears at difficult times, particularly around parental separation, divorce and life events. • May benefit from talking to someone outside of the family. • Beginning to understand parents and people in power do not always have all the answers. • Perceptive and beginning to understand groups and individuals, and what is important about the opposite sex. • Play is still important with a need for a 'best friend', though there may be more than one 'best friend'. • Curious about death and dying but beginning to have a more adult understanding of the finality of death and its implications. • Interested in sexual matters and relationships. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Steady growth in height; boys are generally taller and heavier than girls. • Generally, not experienced bodily puberty changes. However, some girls experience early changes and may have started menstruating. • Boys generally do not start bodily changes for some years. • Personal hygiene and the importance of keeping clean becoming increasingly important as sebaceous and sweat glands start to become more active. • Aware of how they fit in - aware of slight physical characteristics - and can be magnified - calling each other names. • Although they may tease about physical and personality defects/differences, also show concern for others.

9 years (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joke about sex but do not necessarily understand the language used and the implications. • Some nine-year-olds experience anxiety about whether they will grow up to be 'normal' – they might be aware of sex/sexuality, e.g., homosexuality, but do not fully understand and remain anxious. 	

10 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discovery that the rules of life are increasingly complicated, and that the world seems a much bigger place. • More independence is achieved, and the nature of friendships is changing. • Now able to set and achieve own goals. • There is a mental change that occurs at this time. • They discover the wider picture and have to think about subjects. • Increased awareness of where they stand with others, they will know their ranking in class. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can master most things to do with the body, and intricate coordination skills are developed by practising and honing their preferred sporting activities. • There may be a generalised body growth, with a change in the shape of the body. Although there are common issues for both sexes, the experiences of boys and girls are different. • Sexual matters are usually approached in a joking, bantering manner within their separate groups. • Knowledgeable joking by boys that conveys they have a wealth of knowledge means they don't have to worry about girls.

10 years (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware of social and cultural differences. • They may feel pressured if they have learning difficulties or are considered very able. • Anxious to please their parents and feel the pressure to succeed, and often seek out a middle position to not stand out from their peers. • Friendship provides an opportunity to move away, both emotionally and actively, from a focus within the family. • Hobbies and pursuits are important, allowing them to make gains. • Increasingly concerned about issues of justice and fairness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some girls may have started their periods and be more advanced physically than other girls and boys as a group. <p>Girls</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breast buds may start to develop and may be uneven, with one side developing before the other. • Pubic hair may have already started to appear, and underarm hair usually appears two years after pubic hair. • Sweat glands will start to increase, the skin may start to become spotty, and blackheads appear. <p>Boys</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • Growth of testes, and pubic hair • Facial and underarm hair growth starts approximately two years after pubic hair growth. • Sweat glands will start to increase, and this may cause spots and blackheads. • The voice may start to deepen, but this usually develops at a later age.

11 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Increasing independence, becoming more self-aware.Developing own interests can lead to conflict in the family.Needs parental support to help explore and understand their developing skills and relationships.Adopted children become increasingly curious about birth parents.Developing ideas of what it is to be a man or a woman. Parental attitudes will be a big influence.May join with older children as want to feel more grown-up and be tempted into risky behaviour, e.g., smoking, drinking alcohol.Friendships – girls: although part of a larger group of friends, a lot of ‘best friend’ swapping can happen, causing upset.Friendships – boys: groups are often more activity-based, e.g., football, skateboarding, rather than focused on interpersonal relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Puberty – boys: physical changes often start later than in girls, and lack of height may affect self-esteem.Some boys may start to notice broader shoulders and an enlarged scrotum.Puberty – girls: a time of rapid physical development, hips widen, breasts developing, getting taller, periods starting for some.11-year-olds need to be kept informed about the changes happening to them so they understand their bodies and feel prepared.Changing school – some children look forward to the change as a step towards growing up, while others find the upheaval difficult.Developing an independence of mind, having own opinions, thinking and learning more logically.Hygiene – may need reminding about personal hygiene.Appetite – usually good. Some girls may start to diet.Sleep – reluctant to go to bed and get up.

12-14 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body changes may evoke a variety of feelings – denial, dread, apprehension, relief, delight, pride, disgust, excitement, worry and self-consciousness. <p>Sexuality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masturbation – relief of tension, feelings of guilt, and fantasies. • Parent's anxiety. • Making new relationships – changing relationships with parents. • Homosexuality – sorting out confused desires and urges, experimenting as establishing their identity. <p>School life</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making friends – in and out of school and being part of a group. • Social stress, pain and pleasure of being included and excluded. • Very influenced by peers. Losing bonds with parents. <p>Establishing own identity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebellious and conforming – moving between the two. <p>Experimenting and testing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Music and clothes may be closely related. <p>Testing the limits</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible difficulties: Stealing, eating disorders, drugs and alcohol, promiscuity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginnings of puberty. <p>Girls</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May have periods, develop breasts and grow pubic hair, changing body shape. • Smelling, sweating and unfamiliar cramps and aches. <p>Boys</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May experience first ejaculations (often as dreams). • A sudden increase in growth, develop body hair, spots and voice changes. <p>Sexuality</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Masturbation. <p>School life</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased exposure to a range of thinking, learning and acquiring new technical skills. • Extra homework. •

12-14 years (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<p>Life in the family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflicts within and outside the family. Wanting the responsibilities of being grown up and, at the same time, wanting things done for them. Separating from parents. 	

15-18 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Period of emotional upheaval, change and confusion. Strong desire to move away from family and authority and develop their own identity and beliefs. Need to have their own space and be recognised as individuals. School and society may be perceived as a threat to establishing their own identity. This may develop into conflict and arguments rejecting adult advice. May appear as idealistic, arrogant or self-righteous, provoking discussion and challenging parents' opinions and beliefs in an attempt to show their independence but also to engage parents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time of great physical growth and change. Adolescents may become preoccupied with their bodies – too fat, too thin – 'Is it normal'? By this age development of growth and puberty may be well advanced in girls, but in boys may be very active. Feet and hands grow first, making teenagers appear ungainly, and the trunk grows faster than the legs. Shoulders and hips widen as a result of sex hormones, but boys develop wider shoulders and more muscle than their female counterparts.

15-18 years (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The reverse may also be apparent, withdrawing from family life and avoiding conversation and contact when in reality, they are really still in need of their parent's attention.• Mood swings occur as the teenager copes with alternate feelings of fearing, then desiring, to be an adult, sometimes needing space and at other times nurturing.• Boundaries may be a source of anguish, the parent concerned with safety and the young person stating, 'It's my life'.• Expectations may be the result of a caregiver's wishes rather than the teenager's hopes and dreams, and this may lead to unhappiness on both sides.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most girls will already have started their periods, but it is not unusual for this to happen between these ages.• Other sexual characteristics may be already apparent or developing, such as pubic hair, breast enlargement in girls and the deepening of the voice, facial hair and enlargement of the penis and testes in boys.• Sebaceous and sweat glands become more active, giving rise to skin problems such as spots and acne.• Even eyes grow and change shape and may give rise to changes in vision.• The age at which these changes take place varies immensely for each individual. However, it is worth mentioning that the age at which maturation occurs may have an effect on the adolescent's development. Early onset of puberty in girls has been linked to feelings of low self-esteem, and late-onset in boys has been reported to have the same effect.