

Support for parents and carers

# Developmental and emotional milestones (0-5 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><b>Birth to 4 weeks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Baby getting used to life outside the womb – often quite disorganised – baby needs to feel calm, safe and have a routine.</li></ul> <p><b>4 to 6 weeks</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• More settled – beginning to settle into a regular pattern.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 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.</li></ul>

## 0-12 months (cont.)

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<p><b>6 weeks to 3 months</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• May be starting to smile and will smile in response to a positive interaction with another person.</li> <li>• Starting to develop different cries and facial expressions that indicate when hungry, tired, uncomfortable or overwhelmed.</li> <li>• Enjoys looking at the human face, in particular parents or familiar adults.</li> <li>• Starting to vocalise more.</li> </ul> <p><b>3 to 6 months</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Smiling is usually established.</li> <li>• Temperament is becoming clearer.</li> <li>• Gradually becoming more aware of their own feelings.</li> <li>• Enjoying the familiar and starting to anticipate regular events, such as the sight of a bottle prior to being fed.</li> </ul> <p><b>Separation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gradually able to tolerate small amounts of time from parents.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• Recognising others, mother, father, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles.</li> <li>• By 6 months, starting to recognise differences in familiar people.</li> <li>• At times may be aware of strangers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• The first control is of eye muscles – focus 6–9 inches.</li> <li>• From birth, babies are interested in looking at the faces of their parents.</li> <li>• By 3 months, babies respond by smiling.</li> <li>• By 3 months, will lift head and upper chest when prone using forearms to support.</li> <li>• Grasps rattle for a short while.</li> <li>• Hands move when distressed/excited at the sound of approaching noise.</li> <li>• 5–6 months: reaches for object – picks up with raking movement.</li> <li>• 6–9 months: babies copy carers' speech sounds.</li> <li>• By 6–12 months: babies make various sounds – babbling, cooing, gurgling and laughing.</li> <li>• At 9–12 months, sits unsupported for 10–15 minutes; attempts to crawl.</li> <li>• Increased capacity to recognise feelings such as joy and displeasure.</li> <li>• Becomes more aware of being separate from parents.</li> <li>• Recognising strangers and can react in a distressed way if a stranger tries to interact too quickly.</li> </ul>

## 0-12 months (cont.)

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

## 12-18 months

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

## 12-18 months (cont.)

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

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

## 2 years

Emotional milestones	Developmental milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Toddlers normally show extremes of behaviour between 2 and 3 years – very dependent/independent, very aggressive/calm, helpful/stubborn.</li> <li>More independent – gets angry when stopped from moving somewhere, tantrums common (cries desperately, kicks, bites, rough with other children).</li> <li>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.</li> <li>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.</li> <li>Less fear of strangers.</li> <li>Fear of noises, thunder, trains, flushing toilets.</li> <li>Plays alone or alongside others but won’t share.</li> <li>Short attention span and easily distracted.</li> <li>Harsh parenting and smacking get in the way of a child’s emotional development.</li> <li>Toddlers like routine, and any changes upset them.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can run, push and pull large toys.</li> <li>Climbs on furniture and up and down stairs holding on to the rail.</li> <li>Throws a small ball overhead.</li> <li>Sits on a small bike and scoots along with their feet.</li> <li>Hand preference is usually obvious.</li> <li>Enjoys picture books and recognises detail.</li> <li>Modifies pencil grasp, spontaneously scribbles to and fro and in a circular motion.</li> <li>Knows 50+ words and begins to form simple sentences.</li> <li>Talks to self.</li> <li>Names familiar objects and parts of the body.</li> <li>Carries out simple instructions. Spoon-feeds well and chews competently.</li> <li>Verbalises toilet needs – may be dry during the day.</li> <li>Enjoys imitating domestic activities.</li> </ul>

## 3 years

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

## 4 years

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

## 4 years (cont.)

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

## 5 years

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

## 5 years (cont.)

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