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When to worry about your baby's development

While each child will develop at their own rate, there are certain key milestones that parents tend to look out for. These can be reassuring when we notice them, but looking for milestones can also cause a lot of worry – especially if your child reaches them later than some of their peers.

Baby milestones

Whilst not all babies are the same, there are generally some key breakthroughs that you might expect your child to hit by a certain age.

First smile

Infants develop rapidly, both growing and developing new skills all the time. One key milestone parents often look for is baby's first smile. According to [Sarah Beeson MBE](#), former health visitor and author of parenting guide 'Happy Baby, Happy Family', this can sometimes be seen at a very early stage. "Some babies are smiling at 10–14 days," she says. "You can always tell a proper smile by twinkling eyes, as opposed to a grimace they might make if they have trapped wind or other pain."

But don't worry if your little one isn't grinning from the word go – the majority of babies will smile for the first time between around 6 and 12 weeks.

First words

According to Beeson, speech and language is one of the most important developmental areas to look out for. "This doesn't necessarily mean that your child has to be speaking," she says. "If your child understands what you are saying and reacts to it, that's great. Interaction with your baby is important."

Usually children will start to babble and may pronounce key words such as 'mama' and 'dada' by around 12 months, with more words developing as they grow.

Pincer movement

The pincer movement, where a child uses their fingertip and thumb to chase a pea around their high-chair tray, for example, is an important moment of development for your child. "This shows that your child is beginning to develop their fine motor skills," explains Beeson. "Hand-eye co-ordination requires intelligence and dexterity - it's a real lightbulb moment."

Most children will develop this movement by 9 months, and Beeson recommends that if you don't see this particular skill by this point it's worth getting their eyes checked as it may indicate a problem with vision.

Playing peepo

Many infants have a lot of fun playing 'peepo' with their parents or carers. But most of us don't realise that the ability to play this game is a real indicator of progress. "This ability to play 'peepo' or to hide an object only to reveal it again is a real eureka moment," explains Beeson. "It shows that they understand that although an object is hidden from view, it still exists."

Most infants are able to grasp the concept of this game before they reach 1 year old.

Motor skills/physical milestones

Many parents look for several movement-based milestones as their children grow. These include rolling, sitting, crawling, pulling themselves up and finally walking. "Most babies can roll over by 6-7 months," says Beeson. "But some babies don't bother with rolling - it's not an essential thing."

Most babies will learn to sit with support by 6 months, and without by around 8 or 9. Crawling, or bum-shuffling will often happen by ten months, and the majority of babies walk by around 20 months - with some taking to their feet much more quickly.

What can I do to help my baby?

According to Beeson, those of us who wish to support our baby's progress should allow our children to take the lead, rather than selecting milestones to look out for. "Let your child lead you to where they're developing a skill. So if you can see they're not quite there but they're getting there, you can facilitate that emerging skill. There's no forcing needed - no flash cards, nothing special. Babies want to develop, they want to achieve these things," she advises.

Talking to your baby - however young - is also important. "It can feel a bit silly, talking away to a baby," says Beeson. "But try acting like a football commentator, just talking about what you're doing without expecting a response. This is really good for your child's speech and language development."

Finally, Beeson recommends that we encourage children, rather than dictating to them. "Rather than saying 'put your shoes on'," she says. "Say - 'oh, look! There are your shoes! What should we do?'" This encourages children to feel as if they've made the decision themselves, and reduces any likely refusal or conflict.

What if I'm worried?

If you feel your child is slow to meet a milestone, or isn't making the same progress as their peers, it's natural to worry. However, it's important to remember that for every video of a child's first steps you see on Facebook, there are many other children who are still barely pulling themselves up.

That said, it's also important to listen to your anxieties and seek support and help if you are concerned. There are various professionals available to listen to and support you in your worries.

Health visitor

"Whilst most people associate health visitors as being only involved in the early weeks of baby's life, they're actually there to support you until your child reaches school age," says Beeson.

Educational staff

Staff at your child's nursery or pre-school will also be able to advise you on certain developmental traits, and provide reassurance or information on who to contact for further help.

GP or nurse practitioner

It might also be worth having a word with your GP or nurse practitioner who will be able to address your concerns.

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