

FOCUS

on Early Childhood Mental Health



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2/10

Understanding Developmental Differences

Dana started walking when she was 10 months old; Carrie didn't walk until she was 15 months. Alex talked in full sentences by 2 years; Justis said only a few barely understandable words by age 2. There is nothing unusual about these differences between children and most parents and caregivers know this. Even so, parents often worry if their children don't reach certain developmental milestones when they think they should, and caregivers often have unrealistic expectations of children and create learning environments that treat everyone the same or don't encourage each young child to grow and learn in his or her own unique way.

Tips for parents:

- Take advantage of resources that describe normal child development and list major developmental milestones by age. Often the milestones are listed by "developmental domains," such as physical development, social and emotional development, thinking skills and communication skills.
- Trust your own instincts and ask questions if you sense that your child's development doesn't seem normal
- Listen to expressions of concern from people who work with and regularly observe your child; they might be able to be more objective than you can.
- Enjoy each stage of your child's development and remember that, unless there are definite developmental delays or other problems that need to be addressed, eventually he or she will catch up to others (for example, once your child starts talking, he or she might never stop!).

Tips for caregivers:

- Understand and apply the concept of "developmentally appropriate practice" as defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Create environments in early learning and child care centers that don't expect every child to do the same thing at the same time and at the same pace.
- Treat each child as a unique individual, and work to achieve that delicate balance between not expecting children to do more than they can and encouraging them to try new things they couldn't do before.

Resources:

- "Baby and Preschool Stages: Parent and Caregiver Guides to Social and Emotional Development" – development "wheels" available from the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health, www.mi-aimh.org
- "The ABCs of Child Development," www.pbs.org/wholechild/abc
- "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8," National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009; <http://www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/dap>