



Supporting a Child with Global Developmental Delay:  
A Guide for Parents



# What is global developmental delay?

Global developmental delay (GDD) is when a child is significantly delayed in all areas of development. This means it can take them longer to reach certain milestones than other children their age.

All babies, toddlers and children develop certain skills during predictable age ranges. For instance, most children learn to walk between the ages of 6 and 18 months. It's important to remember that all children are different, so there will be variations within these ranges.

However, a child with global developmental delay will take much longer to develop skills; they fall significantly outside the age ranges for certain milestones. Some will require additional support in order to catch up, but some may never develop certain skills.

Skills can be split into four main categories:

## Motor



This includes fine motor skills (like picking up small objects and drawing) and gross motor skills (like sitting up, walking and jumping).

## Speech and Language



This includes making sounds, speaking or being able to convey information to someone else, as well as understanding what someone else is trying to communicate.

## Cognitive



This is a person's ability to learn new things, process information, organise their thoughts and remember things.

## Social and Emotional



This is about how a person interacts with others and how they process their own emotions.

If a child doesn't reach two or more milestones in each of these areas, they can be classed as having global developmental delay. It might be that the delay is suspected soon after birth in some children, due to difficulties feeding or low muscle tone. In some cases, it isn't detected until later, when learning and behaviour difficulties might be noticed.

# Signs of Global Developmental Delay

As discussed, there are certain milestones that children are expected to reach at particular ages; you might have already spotted some of the signs listed here.

- Lack of hand-eye coordination (e.g. difficulties throwing and catching)
- Appears uncoordinated when standing or moving and has poor balance
- Needs more time to learn a physical skill (e.g. swinging a racquet)
- May not retain physical skills as easily
- Cannot respond quickly to their surroundings or anticipate what might happen next
- Struggles with spatial awareness
- Low endurance
- Underdeveloped fine motor skills (e.g. writing, picking up small objects, using scissors)
- Needs to have instructions repeated or have someone show them what to do (needs to see how something is done, rather than relying only on verbal instructions)
- Difficulty learning to talk
- Slower to develop vocabulary, meaning they could struggle to communicate what they need or to understand what someone else is trying to communicate
- Needs support to manage emotions
- Needs support with self-regulation and behaviour (might be unable to settle and focus on a task for long periods of time)
- Needs help with self-care tasks (e.g. tying shoelaces, doing up buttons and zips, using cutlery)
- Needs support to access age-related curriculum content in their nursery or school
- Might have social communication difficulties, such as understanding personal space and taking turns in a conversation
- Seems to isolate themselves socially
- Has difficulty with sequencing skills and remembering sequences for everyday routines, speech and movement
- Prone to bed-wetting and might have difficulties toilet-training



# What causes global developmental delay?

Global developmental delay tends to be caused by a genetic difference or can be as a result of differences with the structure or development of the brain or spinal cord. A child may also be at risk of global developmental delay if they are born prematurely or if they become ill (for example, congenital rubella or meningitis). An accident or illness that affects the brain can lead to global developmental delay. It's also worth noting that a child with another condition, like [Down syndrome](#) or cerebral palsy, may also have global developmental delay.



# Diagnosis

If you have concerns about your child's development, speak to your health visitor, GP or paediatrician. Early diagnosis can be an important step towards getting the correct support in place for your child as soon as possible. This support can help them reach their full potential.

The health visitor, GP or paediatrician might ask you questions about your child's development and will want to discuss anything you have noticed. If you've spotted any signs listed in this guide, you could chat to them about these. After this, you might be given certain activities to complete with your child for a few weeks. You'll probably be asked to return for another appointment to see how your child is progressing.

Alternatively, the medical professional might suggest further assessments if your child isn't meeting expected development milestones.

- A paediatrician might order specific tests for specific conditions that could potentially be causing the delay in your child's development.
- You might see an **educational psychologist** if your child needs help with their learning.
- A **speech and language therapist** can help your child to develop their speech or to communicate more effectively. They can also provide support if your child finds chewing and swallowing difficult.
- An **occupational therapist** could help your child develop physical skills, but they can also assist if your child finds it tricky to carry out everyday tasks. This could include playing, getting dressed or feeding themselves.
- You might see a **physiotherapist** if your child needs help to sit up, crawl or walk - anything linked to movement.
- A clinical psychologist could assist with emotional or behavioural support.

There are other professionals who might be involved in supporting your child too. They're likely to ask questions, observe your child and assess their development.

Your child might be referred for medical tests to determine the cause for any developmental difficulties, or you might be referred to genetic services to investigate potential genetic causes.



# The Next Steps

With the correct support in place from professionals, family members and friends, your child can thrive. Some children might need additional support for a period of time, others might require additional support for longer, in order to develop the skills they need. Some children never achieve certain milestones; this could be due to another underlying condition. Make sure you speak to the medical professionals involved to fully understand your child's circumstances and how they can be best supported.

As with the process for diagnosis, there will likely be a variety of professionals involved with your child's support, all dependent on their specific needs. They might receive support from a speech and language therapist, a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist, an educational psychologist, a clinical psychologist, a psychiatrist or a paediatrician. They can keep you updated with how your child is progressing and give you suggestions for strategies to use at home.

For example, an [occupational therapist](#) can work on the following:

- Developing underlying skills to support gross and fine motor skills
- Building your child's confidence so they can take part in more activities
- Helping them master a skill, then very gradually increasing the complexity (e.g. clapping hands, then clapping in a certain pattern or in response to a particular prompt)
- Simplifying everyday tasks to make them achievable, therefore building your child's confidence
- Using simple, clear and concise language
- Presenting a task with very few instructions
- Using non-verbal cues, like pictures, models and gestures
- Helping your child master the final step of an activity first, then working backwards
- Developing your child's attention skills
- Talking to you, as a parent or carer, about having appropriate expectations



# The Next Steps

A [speech and language therapist](#) can help you child with the following:

- Providing you, as a parent or carer, with daily activities to try at home to help develop communication skills
- Setting step-by-step goals that are achievable and show your child's progression (age-related goals often jump in steps too big for your child's progress to be noticeable, so they need to be broken down into smaller steps)
- Using language that is appropriate for your child's level of understanding
- Coordinating with your child's school, to make sure they can best support your child in developing their communication skills and help them access the curriculum
- Supporting your child with chewing and swallowing
- Using visual strategies to help your child communicate, such as pictures, symbols and gestures
- Supporting your child with fluency and articulation



# What can I do to support my child?

## Learn Through Play

Playing is a great way to connect with your child and helps them learn at the same time. Playing with others will also help your child develop their social skills, as they'll be watching how other children interact. They might be involved in role-playing games that could help them navigate everyday social situations, like going to a shop or visiting a relative.

## Stick to a Routine

As much as possible, stick to a routine at home and be clear about your expectations each day. You could explore some of our [visual timetables and 'now and next' boards](#) to help your child understand what is happening and what to expect next. The more they practise this routine, the better they'll become at remembering what to do.

## Break It Down

Following on from the need for routine, break down each daily task into steps. For example, what does your child need to do when they're getting dressed? What should they put on first? By breaking tasks into smaller steps, you are making the task more manageable and being clear about what you expect of your child.

## Get Their Attention

Before giving your child any instruction or telling them something, make sure you have their attention. Is there a background noise that could be distracting? Are your instructions clear and simple? You might find that, instead of speaking your instructions, visual aids or hand gestures work best for your child; explore what they best respond to.



# What can I do to support my child?

## Be a Role Model

Your child might need support with social skills and social situations, so model for them what they should do. For instance, when they're talking to you or showing you something, be present, give them eye contact and listen/watch carefully.

## Use Praise

Praise your child's efforts and encourage them to keep going. Remember, there may be days when it feels like your child is making progress, then other days when it seems they've taken steps backwards. As long as they're trying, that's all anybody can ask!

## Keep in Touch with School

Your child's school will need to know how your child is progressing at home and will be keen to discuss and share strategies with you. Does your child need extra time to complete some tasks? Could they benefit from visual instructions for certain activities? It might be that your child receives extra support in the classroom or certain interventions; ask about how these are going and what you could do at home to help.

## Meet with Others

It can feel isolating and lonely when you are caring for a child with global developmental delay; your own family and friends might not quite understand what you're going through. Reach out to other families who do. Join support groups or search for online chats where you can speak to others who are experiencing or have experienced this themselves. They can provide you with a safe space to talk about any struggles and provide you with advice and support.



# What can I do to support my child?

## Look After Yourself

It can be exhausting focusing on your child's condition 24/7. Make sure you take some time away from your child so you can relax and recharge; you can't pour from an empty cup. Your child needs you to be their biggest supporter and advocate, so looking after yourself is essential. It also sets a good example to them; prioritising our wellbeing is just as important as a healthy diet, exercise and sleep routine.



Disclaimer: We hope you find the information on our website and resources useful. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of current professional research. However, please be aware that every child is different and information can quickly become out of date. The information given here is intended for general guidance purposes only and may not apply to your specific situation.

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