

Positive Parenting during the First Critical Years

— Child Development

A comprehensive guide to the milestones of development, with practical advices on skill and behavior enhancement during the child's first critical years.



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It is often said that a child and parent are born at the same moment. As frustrating as this may initially seem, it sets free every new parent that bears questions on how they can contribute positively to their child's development. With no user manual in hand, a parent's role is one of the most, if not the most, demanding roles in the adult life of an individual.

The first years of a child's life are critical to their development and well-being. Scientific evidence has suggested that the environment's influence and the very early experiences in one's life shape their potential and affect how happy, healthy, and creative they can later become. Conversely, the everyday life of a parent is full of contradictory emotions, with one succeeding the other at a rapid pace. From the day they adopt this role, they face a series of challenges daily, while aiming through their behavior and attitude to have a positive impact on their child's life as much as possible. The child develops and evolves constantly, absorbing the stimuli of their environment; therefore, the parent's role proves crucial.

Positive parenting aims to maximize every child's potential, through the awareness of scientific knowledge related to early child development, but also to enhance parental skills. The understanding of how a child grows up and develops, namely the stages and milestones in their development, constitutes the basis of positive parenting, at any moment and in the most appropriate manner.

The Onassis Foundation, aiming to support young parents in this difficult yet magical journey of a new family's creation, presents the "Positive Parenting during the First Critical Years" initiative. Through a series of online meetings focused on thematic areas such as developmental milestones, enhancing the parent-child relationship, behavioral issues, as well as socialization and boundary-setting issues, we stand next to those who need guidance in something completely new in their lives; for every new parent who is learning with their child and wants to learn more and for all of you who are trying to develop your skills in play, rewarding, and "don'ts."

Following the overwhelming response of parents to the previous online meetings, which exceeded 22,600 views on the Onassis Channel on YouTube in a few months, the Onassis Foundation complements the overall initiative with two online guides, provided free of charge and accessed by all, without any fees or time restrictions.

Put together in the context of this initiative, this guide includes the basic "snapshots" in the development of a child from 0 to 5 years, catering to the parents' enhancement, so that they become aware of what is expected at every age and be able to observe the emerging skills of their child.

More precisely, it offers parents advice towards more positive interaction and enhancement of the child, based on their developmental stage. Parents are required to manage their child's behavior and respond to their needs; therefore, it appears that the most effective intervention occurs when they know and anticipate the expected functions and behaviors per age.

It must be noted that under no circumstances should this guide be considered a substitute for formal pediatric attention and care. For any concerns, you will have to refer to your pediatrician or a developmental pediatrician.

Growth and Development

As children grow up, the size of their bodies and body parts increases. These are considered quantitative changes and are measured in kilos, centimeters, etc. We observe the growth of a child from their birth by measuring the weight, length, or height, as well as the head's perimeter.

At the same time, children already begin to develop from the moment they are born, continuously gaining more skills and improving their functionality. Development or Neurodevelopment relates to qualitative changes, which are exponentially more complex and focus on adaptation. It is measured by "observations" and information that is received by the parents.



STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT

The child's development is related to the maturation of the central nervous system. Though we refer to "stages of development," this indeed is an ongoing process that follows a foreseeable sequence. Each stage of development depends on the previous. The growth and development rates vary from child to child and become more intense at certain periods.

DEVELOPMENTAL DOMAINS

The development of a child refers to four domains:

- (a) Movement and physical development and precisely, gross motor skills (the way a child supports their nape or torso, the way they walk, etc.), and fine motor skills (the way a child holds things with their hands, the way they write, etc.)
- (b) Communication, specifically receptive and expressive language
- (c) Cognitive development
- (d) Social and emotional development.

DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES

The notable and characteristic skills of children, such as smiling at somebody for the first time, making their first steps alone, saying their first meaningful words, etc. are called developmental milestones. Children reach milestones in all areas of development, namely the way they talk, move, play, and learn. For every milestone, there is an expected age range for its emergence, e.g., a child says their first meaningful word between seven to fourteen months. If a child surpasses this age without gaining this certain skill, they should probably be examined by a pediatrician or a developmental pediatrician. This updated guide includes the revised milestones of development, such as the skills gained by most children (75%) at the specific age (www.cdc.gov/ActEarly).

Two Months

Social & Emotional Milestones:

- Calms down when spoken to or picked up
- Looks into your face
- Looks happy to see you heading toward her
- Smiles when you talk or smile at her

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Produces sounds other than crying
- Reacts to loud noises

Cognitive Milestones:

- Begins to track you while you move
- Looks at a toy for a few seconds

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Holds her head up when lying on her tummy
- Moves both arms and legs
- Instantly opens his palms

ADVICE for a two-month-old infant:

Try to look your baby in the eyes and smile. Respond with a smile when they smile at you. Speak to your baby in a soft tone and sweet manner, saying simple phrases in “baby talk” and animating your voice. Read and sing to your baby to help them develop and understand language. Respond with excitement and talk to your baby when they make sounds as if you are in a conversation with them. Hug your baby often, maintaining “skin-to-skin” contact. Observe and respond to your baby’s “signals” in order to understand their needs. Develop a consistent sleeping and feeding schedule (routines).



Four Months

Social & Emotional Milestones:

- Smiles on his own to attract your attention
- Chuckles (quietly, not fully developed laughter yet) when you try to make him laugh
- Looks at you, moves, or makes sounds to get/keep your attention

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Makes vowel sounds, such as “ooo” or “aaa” (cooing)
- Makes responding sounds when you talk to him
- Turns her head to the sound of your voice

Cognitive Milestones:

- If she is hungry, opens her mouth when she sees a breast or a bottle
- Looks at her hands with curiosity

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Keeps his head steady, without support, when held
- Holds a toy when you put it in his hands
- Uses his hands to swing at toys
- Brings her hands to her mouth
- Rests on her elbows and forearms when lying on her tummy

ADVICE for a four-month-old infant:

Respond positively to your baby. Show excitement, smile, and talk to them when they make sounds as if you are having a conversation with them. Give them opportunities to reach for toys and explore space safely (for instance, by placing them on a blanket with safe toys). Let them see, listen, and grasp safe objects (not small, sharp, or hot) under your supervision.

Six Months

Social & Emotional Milestones:

- Recognizes familiar faces
- Likes to look at self in the mirror
- Laughs

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Exchanges sounds with you reciprocally
- Sticks her tongue out and blows
- Makes squealing sounds

Cognitive Milestones:

- Puts things to her mouth to explore them
- Reaches to grasp a toy he wants
- Closes her lips to show that she doesn't want to eat anymore

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Rolls over from tummy to back
- Supports with outstretched hands when lying on tummy
- Leans on his hands for support when in a sitting position

ADVICE for a six-month-old infant:

Play reciprocally with your baby. Speak softly to them, animating your voice. Imitate the sounds and expressions they make, smile when they smile, and copy the sounds they make, as this enhances sociability. "Read" to your baby by showing them colored pictures and talking about them. Show your baby new objects by naming them. When your baby looks at something, point to it and talk about it. When your baby is lying down, put toys nearby and encourage them to reach for them.

Nine Months

Social & Emotional Milestones:

- Is shy, attached ("clingy") to familiar adults, or afraid of strangers
- Manifests various facial expressions, such as being happy, sad, angry, or surprised
- Looks at you when you call her by her name
- Reacts when you leave (looking, searching for you, or crying)
- Smiles or laughs when you play "peek-a-boo"

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Makes different sounds, such as "mamama" or "papapa"
- Raises his hands to be held

Cognitive Milestones:

- Searches for objects (such as a spoon or a toy) when they are dropped out of his sight
- Bangs two objects together

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Gets into a sitting position on her own
- Sits without support
- Uses his fingers to pull food toward him
- Transfers objects from one hand to the other

ADVICE for a nine-month-old infant:

Call your baby by their name as often as you can. Imitate their sounds (babbling) and expressions. Repeat the sounds they make and say simple words using those sounds. For example, if they say "dadada," repeat "dadada" and then say "daddy". Teach your baby simple gestures such as waving "hello" or nodding "no" to help them show you what they want before they speak. Let your baby reach, touch, and play with safe, clean, and colorful toys, so they can examine them for a while or shake, bang, or throw them. Play with your baby, by putting blocks in and out of a container. Read to them and name the pictures as you show them. Hide objects within their sight (e.g., under a cloth), encouraging them to find them. Play peek-a-boo. Place objects a bit further away, for example on a small mat, and encourage them to reach for them.

Twelve Months

Social & Emotional Milestones:

- Plays reciprocal games with you, such as “clapping hands”

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Waves “bye-bye” with her hands
- Calls his parents “mama,” “papa,” or any other special name
- Understands “no” (pauses briefly or fully stops when you tell him to)

Cognitive Milestones:

- Puts something inside a container, such as a block inside a cup
- Searches for things she sees you hide, such as a toy under a blanket

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Pulls up to stand
- Walks while holding onto furniture
- Drinks from a cup without a lid as you hold it for him
- Picks objects with thumb and pointer, such as small pieces of food

ADVICE for a twelve-month-old infant:

Teach your infant “wanted behaviors.” Show them what to do and use positive words or give them hugs and kisses when they do so. Apply a name to what you do, e.g., “Mommy is washing your hands.” Build upon what your infant says, e.g., if they say “Ba,” you can say, “Yes, here is the ball.” Name the people and things in their environment. Show them how to communicate with gestures, such as waving with their hands, and associating the gesture with the respective word, e.g., “Hello.” Redirect your infant promptly and firmly by giving them a toy or switching their position when they are engaged in behaviors you do not want. Use “no” for behaviors you deem dangerous. Limit screen time (TV, tablets, phones, etc.) on video calls with loved ones. Screen time is not recommended for children under the age of 2. Children learn by talking, playing, and interacting with others.

Fifteen Months

Social & Emotional Milestones:

- Copies other children when playing, such as taking toys out of a box when another child does so
- Shows you an object she likes
- Claps when he is excited about something
- Hugs a cloth doll or other toy
- Shows you affection (hugs or kisses you)

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Tries to say one or two words other than “mama” and “papa,” like “ba” for ball
- Looks at a familiar object when you name it
- Follows instructions given both verbally and with gestures, e.g., he gives you a toy when you hold out your hand and say, “Give me the toy”
- Points to request something or ask for help

Cognitive Milestones:

- Tries to use things (such as the telephone, cup, and book) correctly
- Stacks at least two small objects, such as blocks

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Makes a few steps on his own
- Uses her fingers to eat a small amount of food by herself

ADVICE for a fifteen-month-old toddler:

Help your toddler learn to speak. The first words of your child are not fully formed. Repeat and add to what they say. Say the names of the objects your toddler is pointing at and wait a few seconds to see if they make any sounds before you hand them to them. If they do so, acknowledge it and repeat the name of the object, e.g., “Yes, milk!” Find ways for your toddler to help you in your daily activities. Let them bring your shoes or put something in your bag before you go out. Maintain consistent sleeping and feeding routines.

Eighteen Months

Social & Emotional Milestones:

- Moves away from you but looks to make sure you remain close
- Points to show you something he is interested in
- Holds out his hands for you to wash
- Looks at a few pages in a book with you
- Helps you dress him by pushing his arms into the sleeve or lifting his feet

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Tries to say three or more words other than “mama” and “dada”
- Follows one-step instructions without gestures, such as handing you a toy when you say “Give it to me”

Cognitive Milestones:

- Copies you when you do household chores, such as sweeping with a broom
- Plays with toys in a simple manner, such as pushing a toy car

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Walks alone, without holding on to anyone or anything
- Scribbles
- Drinks from a cup without a lid and might sometimes spill a little
- Eats by herself with her fingers
- Tries to use a spoon
- Climbs on and off a chair or couches without help

ADVICE for an eighteen-month-old toddler:

Use positive words and pay more attention to “wanted behaviors” like the ones you want to see recurring. Pay less attention to unwanted behaviors. Encourage play pretend (give your toddler a spoon to pretend they feed their teddy bear). Help your toddler learn about the feelings of others (e.g., “This child looks sad, let’s give her/him a toy”). Ask your toddler simple questions (e.g., “What is this?”). Provide them with simple choices, preferably between two options.

Two Years

Social & Emotional Development:

- Notices when others are sad or upset; for instance, stops what he is doing or looks sad when someone is crying
- Looks at your face to see how to react to a new situation

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Points to objects in a book when asked; for instance, when you ask, “Where is the bear?”
- Says at least two words together, like “more milk”
- Points to at least two body parts when asked
- Uses more gestures than simply waving hello and pointing, such as blowing a “kiss” or nodding “yes”

Cognitive Milestones:

- Holds something in one hand while using the other; for instance, holds a box with one hand while removing the lid with the other
- Tries to use switches, knobs, or buttons on a toy
- Plays with more than one toy at the same time, such as putting toy food on a toy plate

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Can kick a ball
- Runs
- Walks up (not climbs) a few stairs with or without help
- Eats with a spoon

ADVICE for a two-year-old toddler:

Help your toddler learn the sound of words, even if they don’t say them clearly yet (e.g., if they say “nana,” you might say, “Do you want a banana?”). Watch your child while playing with other children: toddlers at this age want to be with other children but do not know how to share or solve problems. Show them how to share, take turns, and deal with conflicts. Get your child to help you in your everyday activities and thank them for doing so.



Thirty Months

Social & Emotional Milestones:

- Plays next to other children and sometimes plays with them
- Shows you what she can do by saying, “Look at me”
- Follows simple routine instructions when given, such as helping to pick-up his toys when you say, “It’s clean-up time”

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Says around 50 words
- Says at least two words together, including an “action” word, such as “Run doggie”
- Names things in a book when you point to him and ask, “What is this?”
- Says words like “I” or “we”

Cognitive Milestones:

- Uses things to play pretend, such as feeding a doll a small block as if it were food
- Demonstrates simple problem-solving skills, such as standing on a small stool to reach something
- Follows two-step instructions, for instance, “Put your toys down and close the door”
- Shows he knows at least one color, such as pointing to a red crayon when you ask him “Which one is red?”

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Uses her hands to twist things, such as turning doorknobs or unscrewing lids
- Takes off some clothes on his own, such as loose pants or an open jacket
- Jumps off the ground with both feet
- Turns book pages, one at a time, when you read to her

ADVICE for a thirty-month-old toddler:

Encourage free play where your child can follow their interests and try new things. Use positive words and pay more attention to “wanted behaviors,” the ones you want to see. Give your children food options, simple and healthy. Let them choose what they want to eat or wear. Limit the options to 2 or 3. Ask your child simple questions about books or stories, such as “Who,” “What,” and “Where.” Give your child crayons to draw on paper. When you make a line, see if they copy it. When they achieve this, show them how to draw a circle. Limit screen time (TV, tablets, phones, etc.) to no more than 1 hour per day of children’s programs with an adult present.

Three Years

Social & Emotional Milestones:

- Calms down within 10 minutes after you leave her, just like at a daycare
- Notices other children and joins the group to play

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Talks with you, using at least 2 reciprocal conversations
- Asks questions using “Who,” “What,” “Where,” and “Why,” such as, “Where is mommy?”
- Says what action is happening in a picture when asked, such as “running,” “eating,” or “playing”
- Says first name when asked
- Speaks well enough to be understood by others most of the time

Cognitive Milestones:

- Draws a circle when you show him how
- Avoids touching hot objects, such as a stove or the oven when warned

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Strings objects together such as large beads or macaroni
- Puts on some clothes by himself, such as loose pants or an open jacket
- Uses a fork

ADVICE for a three-year-old toddler:

Encourage your child to solve any problems occurring on their own, with your help. Ask questions to help them understand the nature of the problem. Help them to come up with solutions and try them out. Talk about your child’s feelings and help them to express how they feel. Set simple and clear rules that your child can follow. Have a simple conversation with your child, involving questions and answers. Encourage them to tell you how a story continues. Read a book together and ask simple questions about it. Play with blocks, jigsaws, simple pegboards, and shapes. Show them how to write and copy shapes on paper. Draw together. Play together with the ball. Try to support your child in doing things on their own (such as getting dressed and undressed, eating, and washing their hands), without doing them yourself instead. Give them simple chores at home (such as watering a plant). Use praise and apply the principles of positive discipline. Create predictable routines and warn ahead of any changes.

Four Years

Social & Emotional Milestones:

- Pretends to be someone/something else during play (teacher, superhero, dog, etc.)
- Requests playing with other children if no one is around, like “Can I play with Alexander?”
- Comforts others when they are hurt or sad, such as hugging a crying friend
- Avoids dangers, such as not jumping from heights in a playground
- Likes being a “helper”
- Switches between behaviors depending on where she is (church, library, playground)

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Says sentences with more than 4 words
- Says a few words from a song, a story, or a nursery rhyme
- Talks about at least one thing that happened during their day, like “I played football”
- Answers simple questions, like “What is a coat for?” or “What do we use a pencil for?”

Cognitive Milestones:

- Names certain colors of objects
- Tells what comes up next in a familiar story
- Draws a human figure with at least 3 body parts

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Can catch a big ball most of the time
- Serves herself food or pours water, with adult supervision
- Unbuttons some buttons
- Holds crayons or pencils between fingers and thumb (not in a closed fist)

ADVICE for a four-year-old child:

Help your child prepare for new people and places (e.g., read related stories or play pretend). Cultivate the conversation with your child further. Encourage them to tell you or describe their day at school, a favorite story, or a movie. Read a book together and discuss it afterward. Play with blocks, jigsaws, simple pegboards, and shapes. Ask them about the color, shape, and size of things they see during the day. Draw together. Give them simple chores at home. Use praise and apply the principles of positive discipline. Give simple and clear commands when you want to set boundaries. Simply explain to them the reasons they can't do something (that leads to unwanted behavior). Present them with simple options to choose from. Be a role model for desirable behaviors. Limit screen time to less than an hour in total in the presence of an adult. Don't place screens in your child's bedroom.



Five Years

Social & Emotional Milestones:

- Follows rules or takes turns when playing with other children
- Sings, dances, or acts for you
- Performs simple chores at home, such as matching socks or clearing the table after meals

Language & Communication Milestones:

- Tells a story she has heard or invented by using at least two facts, such as “A cat got stuck in a tree and the fireman saved it”
- Answers simple questions about a book or story after you read or narrate it to him
- Uses or recognizes simple rhymes
- Keeps a conversation going with more than three reciprocal exchanges

Cognitive Milestones:

- Counts to 10
- Names some numbers between 1 and 5 when you point to them
- Uses words for time, such as “yesterday,” “tomorrow,” and “morning” or “evening”
- Pays attention (concentrates) for 5-10 minutes during activities, for instance during storytelling or while making handicrafts (screen time does not count)
- Writes some letters in her name
- Names some letters when you point to them

Movement/Physical Development Milestones:

- Buttons some buttons
- Hops on one foot

ADVICE for a five-year-old child:

Foster the conversation with your child by using complete sentences. Encourage them to tell you or describe their day at school, a favorite story, or a movie. Help them expand their answers by asking “why” and “how” Read a book together and discuss it afterward. Your child might start to “talk back” in order to feel independent and test what happens. Limit the attention you give to the negative behaviors or words. Find alternative activities for them to do that allow them to be independent. Encourage them to play reciprocally with children of their age and to take turns. Give them simple chores at home. Enhance their pre-writing and pre-math skills by copying shapes, letters, and counting. Use praise and apply the principles of positive discipline. Provide simple and clear instructions when you want to set boundaries. Present them with simple choices to choose from. Be a role model for wanted behaviors. Limit screen time to less than one hour in total in the presence of an adult. Don't place screens in your child's bedroom. Organize your child's exposure and use of digital media.

Sources:

Developmental milestone content and artwork provided by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Learn the Signs: Act Early” program (www.cdc.gov/ActEarly; accessed [25-6-2023]).
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