



A Guide to Development: From 18 Months to 3 Years

The first three years of a child's life is a period of rapid development. All children develop at their own pace. The information on this page is just a guide, so there is no need to worry if your child takes a slightly different course.

The importance of the senses

Children learn through their senses. As well as touch, taste, sight, smell and hearing, the senses also include 'proprioception' (body awareness) and 'vestibular' (balance and movement).

It is important for your child's development that they get lots of opportunity to experience a wide range of sensations.

Big muscle and movement skills

You might hear these referred to as 'gross motor' skills.

Age	Developmental Overview	What You Can Do
18 mths – 2 years	By the age of two, most children should be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - walk alone and are beginning to run - pull toys behind while walking - carry a large toy or several toys while walking - stand on tiptoe - kick a ball - climb onto and down from furniture unassisted - walk up and down stairs holding on to support. 	<p>You can help by ensuring your child has lots of movement opportunities. Provide large, safe spaces for moving about and exercising arms and legs.</p> <p>Show your child how to get down from furniture and up and down the stairs. Offer them push-and-pull toys, which will help them to develop their balance.</p> <p>Large, soft balls are good for rolling, throwing and kicking at first. You can then introduce balls of different sizes. You can also use balloons and scarves for throwing and catching – they are slower moving they are easier to catch.</p>
2 – 2 ½ years	By the age of two-and-a-half, most children enjoy rough-and-tumble play and should be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - run, kick, climb and jump. 	<p>Continue with activities as above.</p> <p>As your child gets older, allow them to get involved in rough-and-tumble play in a safe environment. Make sure they have lots of opportunity for regular outdoor play, such as trips to the local park.</p>
2 ½ - 3 years	By the age of three, most children should be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - climb well - walk up and down stairs with alternating feet (one foot per stair) - ride a tricycle - bend over easily without falling - throw a ball overhand. 	<p>Continue with activities as above.</p> <p>Between two-and-a-half and three is a good age to introduce a tricycle. Many children have difficulty pedalling at first so you could try a trike without pedals, or take the pedals off, so they can get their balance and get used to the movement while still being able to have their feet on the ground.</p>

Hand and finger skills

You might hear these referred to as 'fine motor' skills.

Age	Developmental Overview	What You Can Do
18 mths – 2 years	<p>By the age of two, most children should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - scribble on their own - turn a container over to pour out its contents - build a tower of three or four blocks - turn the pages in cardboard book - use one hand more often than the other. 	<p>You can help by encouraging your child to do things that require one hand to 'hold' and the other to 'do', such as threading beads or pasta on a string, playing with construction toys and building blocks, and using tweezers or tongs to pick up small play pieces.</p> <p>Provide lots of opportunities for making marks using chalks, crayons, felt tips, soap crayons, finger paint, paint brushes, etc.</p>
2 – 2 ½ years	<p>By the age of two-and-a-half, most children should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - manipulate small objects with their hands more skilfully - build a tower of up to 6 blocks - scribble on paper - eat easily with a spoon - help to get themselves dressed. 	<p>As your child gets better at manipulating smaller objects, do lots of activities that let them use their fingers, such as clay or play dough, blocks, finger-paint, pick-up objects, stacking objects, scribbling and dressing games.</p>
2 ½ - 3 years	<p>By the age of three, most children should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - make up-and-down, side-to-side, and circular lines with a pencil or crayon - turn book pages one at a time - build a tower of more than six blocks - screw and unscrew jar lids, nuts and bolts - turn rotating handles for example on a musical toy. 	<p>Continue with activities as above.</p> <p>Try to involve different sensations, for example drawing in sand, in gloop (a mixture of corn flour and water), on sand paper, on a tray covered in lentils, rolling out lines with play dough, etc.</p> <p>Begin to include activities such as playing with money/coins and snipping with scissors.</p>

Making sense of what you're looking at

You might hear this referred to as 'visual perception'.

Age	Developmental Overview	What You Can Do
18 mths - 2 years	<p>By the age of two, most children should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - find objects even when hidden under two or three covers - begin sorting by shape and colour - point to an object or picture when it is named for them - recognise the names of familiar people, objects, and body parts. 	<p>You can help by playing games where you hide toys and your child has to find them, for example under a box or blanket. You could also try hiding a toy under one of two cups. Move the cups around, asking the child to watch carefully and tell you which cup hides the toy.</p> <p>Encourage sorting activities - by size, colour and shape. Read and look at books together, pointing to and naming familiar objects.</p> <p>Play with insert puzzles and toys – i.e. with holes and shapes to match. Help your child at first by giving them one shape and covering all the other holes (the circle is easiest to start with). Help them insert the shape. Then do the same with more difficult shapes. Once they are able to do this by themselves, make it harder by leaving more than one hole uncovered, and then give them more than one shape at a time.</p>

2 – 2 ½ years	By the age of two-and-a-half, most children should be able to: - match an object held in their hand or seen in the room to a picture in a book.	Continue with above activities. You could also try hiding small toys in a sand box or tray and asking your child to identify the objects by feeling for them.
2 ½ - 3 years	By the age of three, most children should be able to: - make mechanical toys work - sort objects by shape and colour - complete puzzles with three or four pieces - name at least one colour correctly.	Continue with above activities. Gradually make insert boards harder by uncovering more holes and shapes at once, and by placing the shapes in a random order, rather than placing them next to the corresponding holes. Begin to encourage simple two piece, three piece or four piece jigsaws as appropriate.

Social and emotional development

At about 18 months, toddlers are becoming more independent and can get angry, especially when stopped from moving somewhere. They may hit, kick or struggle if an adult tries to control them. They need their parent or carer to tell them what is right and wrong.

By the age of two:

- tantrums are common (crying, kicking and biting)
- children begin to show feelings of pride, pity and sympathy
- fear of noises is normal, for example thunder, trains, hand dryers or flushing toilets
- a child will play alone or alongside others, but they won't be able to share.

Between two and three years of age, confidence grows and children can be separated from their parents and carers more easily, but will still need reassurance. At this age they can find it difficult to wait for adult attention as they live for the moment.

Children begin to put words to their emotions in a very simple way and are able to use language to comment on and explain their feelings. They can be very affectionate as they start to realise that those around them have feelings too. Moods can change very rapidly and dramatically. Children can often be laughing one minute and crying the next, often for no apparent reason.

Between two and three, children mostly engage in their own activities, but will do this alongside other children. They may participate in simple group activities, such as singing or dancing. As they move towards three, they may be able to begin taking turns, as they start to learn about sharing. They begin to recognize danger and know who to turn to for help.

By the age of three, children:

- are still self-centred. They are magical in thinking, believing that wishes can make things come true
- often have imaginary friends, who can be blamed if things go wrong
- don't get so frustrated and get less angry when stopped from doing what they want.

Behaviour management

Between eighteen months and two years, toddlers have a short attention span and move between activities quickly. Challenging behaviours can usually be managed by distracting them with another activity.

Between two and three years of age it is normal for children to show extreme behaviour. They can swing between being very dependent or independent, very aggressive or calm and both helpful and stubborn.

At this age, adults can support children by helping them to put their feelings into words and helping them to understand what is happening. Distraction still works, as may bargaining, but reasoning does not work at this age.

Managing your child's behaviour can be difficult, but evidence shows that harsh parenting and smacking can get in the way of a child's emotional development.

Further links

- Feeding and mealtimes
- Potty training
- Getting dressed
- Getting ready for writing