



Child development: the first 5 years

Key points

- **Development is how children grow physically and emotionally and learn to communicate, think and socialise.**
- **Positive experiences and warm, responsive relationships in the first 5 years of life are critical for child development.**
- **In the early years, your child's main way of learning and developing is through play and interactions with you.**
- **Other influences on development include genes, nutrition, physical activity, health and community.**

About early child development

'Development' means changes in your child's physical growth. It's also the changes in your child's social, emotional, behaviour, thinking and communication skills. All of these areas of development are linked, and each depends on and influences the others.

In the first 5 years of life, positive experiences and warm, responsive relationships stimulate children's development, creating millions of connections in their brains. In fact, **children's brains develop connections faster in the first 5 years** than at any other time in their lives. This is the time when the foundations for learning, health and behaviour throughout life are laid down.



Babies are born ready to learn, and their brains develop through use. Stimulating and caring environments with plenty of different activities give children many ways to play, develop and learn, as well as many chances to practise what they're learning.

Relationships: the foundation of child development

Children's relationships (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/loving-relationships/relationships-development>) affect all areas and stages of their development. In fact, nurturing relationships are the foundation of healthy child development.

Through warm, responsive relationships, **your child learns vital information about themselves and their world**. For example, your child learns that they're loved, safe and secure. They also learn about what happens when they do things like cry, laugh or ask questions.

Your child also learns by seeing relationships among other people – for example, by seeing how you behave with other family members or friends. This learning is the foundation for the development of your child's communication, behaviour, social and other skills.



Your child's relationship with you is one of the most important relationships in their life. Relationships with other family members, carers, early childhood educators and other children are also very important for your child's development.

Play: how child development and learning happen

In the early years, play (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/play/why-play-is-important>) is children's main way of learning (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/babies/play-learning/learning-ideas/learning-baby-to-preschool>) and developing.

Play is fun for your child. It also gives your child **opportunities to explore, observe, experiment and solve problems**. Your child will need your support and encouragement to do this. But it's important to aim for a balance between supporting your child and letting your child try things on their own and sometimes make mistakes. Finding out for themselves about how the world works is a big part of your child's learning.

Plenty of time spent playing, talking, listening and interacting with you helps your child learn key life skills. These skills include communicating, thinking, solving problems, moving and being with other people and children.



Play is a great relationship builder. Playing with your child sends a simple message – you're important to me. This message helps children learn about who they are and where they fit in the world.

Other things that shape child development

Your child's genes and other factors like healthy eating, physical activity, health and the neighbourhood you live in also influence your child's development.

Healthy eating

Healthy food gives your child the energy and nutrients they need to grow and develop. It also develops their sense of taste. Healthy family food and eating patterns in the early years can set up [healthy eating habits](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/nutritious-food/healthy-eating-habits) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/nutritious-food/healthy-eating-habits>) for life.

Physical activity

Being [physically active](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/play/physical-activity-for-young-children) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/play/physical-activity-for-young-children>) is vital to your child's health. It gets your child moving, develops motor skills, helps your child think and gives your child an opportunity to explore their world. So your child needs plenty of opportunities for active play, including active [outdoor play](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/play/outdoor-play) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/play/outdoor-play>).

Health

Minor childhood illnesses like [colds](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/colds) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/colds>), [earaches](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/earache) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/earache>) and [gastroenteritis](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/gastro) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/gastro>) generally won't have any long-term effects on development. But [disability](https://raisingchildren.net.au/disability) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/disability>), [developmental delay](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/development/development-tracker/developmental-delay) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/development/development-tracker/developmental-delay>) and chronic or long-term conditions can affect development. Health and disability professionals can help you understand your child's condition and how it affects development.

Neighbourhood and local community

Your child's development is supported by positive relationships with friends and neighbours, and access to playgrounds, parks, shops and local services like child care, playgroups, kindergartens, schools, health centres and libraries.

Child development: differences among children

In general, development happens in the same order in most children, but skills might develop at different ages or times. For example, children usually learn to stand, and then they learn to walk. But this development can happen any time between 8 and 18 months.

So if you're wondering whether your child's development is on track, just remember that **development happens over time**. Differences among children are usually nothing to worry about.



If you feel that something isn't quite right with your child's development, trust your instinct and get help early. See your [child and family health nurse](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/child-family-health-nurse) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/child-family-health-nurse>), [GP](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/general-practitioner) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/general-practitioner>) or [paediatrician](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/paediatrician) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/a-z-health-reference/paediatrician>).

Being a parent

Whether you're a parent, grandparent, kinship carer or foster parent raising a child, you're always learning. It's OK to feel confident about what you know. And it's OK to admit you don't know something and ask questions or get help.

It's also important to look after yourself. [Looking after yourself](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/looking-after-yourself/looking-after-yourself) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/looking-after-yourself/looking-after-yourself>) physically, mentally and emotionally is good for you, and it's good for your child. When you're well, you can give your child the loving attention they need to grow and thrive.

Remember that part of looking after yourself is asking for help, especially if you're feeling [stressed](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/looking-after-yourself/stress-grown-ups) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/looking-after-yourself/stress-grown-ups>), [anxious](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/looking-after-yourself/anxiety-tips-for-parents) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/looking-after-yourself/anxiety-tips-for-parents>) or [angry](https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/looking-after-yourself/anger-management-for-parents) (<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/first-1000-days/looking-after-yourself/anger-management-for-parents>). There are many people who can support you and your child, including your partner, friends, relatives, child and family health nurse and GP.

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