

# learning links

Helping Kids Learn

[www.learninglinks.org.au](http://www.learninglinks.org.au)

Information Sheet 11

## Does your child need help?

By Kerry Butler, Early Special Educator

### **S**ometimes it's hard to know if your young child has special needs.

Is your child doing all the right things at the right time? Are they developing as expected or is there something you should be concerned about?

It is natural to be concerned about your child's welfare. It is also natural to feel unsure of your ability to notice any problems. It can be especially difficult if you are as new to parenting as your child is to their world.

If you are an experienced parent, often the fact that your child is not doing things at roughly the same time as your older children may make you watch more closely for anything else that doesn't seem quite right.

The most important thing to remember is if you are concerned in any way about your child's development, whether it is something you, your family or friends have noticed, it is wise to seek help. The earlier you seek help, the more you and your child will benefit.

### **Trust your judgement**

The first thing to do is trust your intuition. Parents seem to have an intuitive sense as to whether something is wrong, after all you know your child better than anyone else.

Keeping a level head when you are worrying about your child is important but also very difficult for any mum or dad. Warning signs are really just warning signs and should be discussed with your paediatrician or family doctor at your next visit. You can also go to an Early Childhood or Community Health Centre to get more information.

There are a lot of people to help you with any concerns. The earlier you go for help, the more likely you are to be able to assist your child reach milestones at expected times.

If there is a problem with your child's development, this does not always mean a lifelong difficulty and it is certainly no reflection on your ability as a parent. Help may only be needed for a short period of time.

Children go through different stages of development such as crawling and exploring their environment to help them develop more difficult skills.

By checking out any concerns and intervening early, possibly with simple things that can be included in your daily routine, your child may avoid further and more challenging problems in later years.

### **Your Baby's Development**

There is no hard and fast timetable for development as there are a lot of individual differences. The range of what is considered 'normal' is wide and being slower to walk and talk is not necessarily an indication that something is wrong.

Although human beings seem to have a predisposition to language, how quickly each child learns to speak is often affected by their family situation and the environment in which they live.

Children also have different personalities and levels of activity. They do not perform when we would like them to perform, nor do they all reach developmental milestones at the same time.

Your family history can also play a part. Grandmothers and grandfathers in almost every family can talk for hours about stories of children in their family being slow to walk or talk or other things that seem to run in the family.

Babies and young children also receive different levels of stimulation just by being in different environments. Spending lots of time in bouncers or walkers may lead to delays in gross motor skills only because the child has not had sufficient time for them to practice the skills needed for crawling and walking.

Young children need opportunities to explore, move and learn from the environment, adults and other children. If their environment does not allow for the activities that lead to normal growth and development, your child's development may be delayed.

**Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.**

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

**Early Childhood Services** for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

**School Age Services** for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

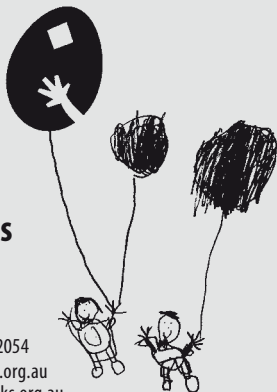
**Family Services** helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

**Professional Development** for teachers and health professionals.

Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

**Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.**



## Learning Links

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Delays in achieving certain milestones can also occur in children who were born prematurely or have a history of illness or hospitalisation.

Given all these possible factors, diagnosing a developmental delay or disability is not an easy task.

The first step is recognising that there may be a problem. When this happens, a parent can go to a specialist service to determine the extent and possible cause of the problem. You don't always need a referral from a doctor to access early childhood intervention.

### Early Childhood Intervention

One of the most important reasons to monitor the progress of your child is early identification of possible problems. The earlier a problem is identified, the earlier intervention can be started and this can make the world of difference to both you and your child.

Early childhood intervention helps give your child the best possible start in life. It may also help prevent the need for more costly intervention in the future.

It can give your family a clearer understanding of your child's difficulties and possible future problems as well as helping to find support if required.

It will also help you understand your child's strengths and weaknesses and gain knowledge to make the best decisions for your child. It will give you the confidence to work with professionals, as well as allow you to meet other families of children in similar circumstances.

### How your child is assessed

When your child's general development is being assessed, a professional will be looking for patterns in a child's behaviour or abilities that may be different from those of other children of the same age.

No one factor is likely to determine whether there is a basis for concern. In some instances such as a child with Down Syndrome, the disability is more obvious. Unfortunately, in many cases it is hard to tell if a very young child has a problem.

The person doing the assessment needs to know as much as possible about your child's strengths and weaknesses and how they learn and relate to other people.

Sometimes an assessment is play-based with a team of therapists and educators. This allows specialists and parents to observe and consult with each other to ensure every aspect of your child's development is considered carefully in a natural and non-threatening environment. Parents may be asked to play with their child to see the interaction.

You will be asked questions about your child's development from birth, your concerns, your plans for the future and any specialist services you may have used in the past.

Any early warning signals can then be grouped and may indicate a particular type of delay or an area where your child's development is not as it should be.

An assessment is just a picture of your child on that day. Children, like adults, have bad days and this will be taken into consideration.

### Possible Problems

There are many different areas where development delays can occur.

Some of the more common problem areas include:

- cognitive delays – a delay in the development of a child's thought processes such as reasoning and solving problems;
- fine motor difficulties – difficulty handling and playing with toys;
- gross motor difficulties – problems with moving to explore and play at home, pre-school the playground or park;
- difficulties with social interaction and behaviour problems – difficulty dealing with day-to-day situations;
- communication – listening, interacting, talking; and
- hearing, feeding and sight problems.

There are a range of warning indicators for each of these development areas.

Some of the more common indicators for delayed development when compared to other children of the same age are:

- limited play skills;
- difficulty using utensils to play, build and eat;
- not imitating other's actions;
- not interested in interacting with familiar people;
- not exploring their environment;
- inability to move, sit and climb in a variety of ways;
- failure to respond or an unusual response to the environment;
- non-responsiveness to loud noises and voices;
- lack of visual interest in faces, lights or noise;
- failure to show a range of emotions or extreme emotional outbursts; and
- being noticeably floppy or rigid.

### **If I think my child has a problem what do I do next?**

Probably the most important thing to do if you are concerned about your child's development is talk to your doctor or local community health centre as soon as possible.

In NSW, the State Government and the NSW branch of the Early Childhood Intervention Australia have a telephone information service which can provide information of the location of different services throughout the state. Whilst they cannot assess whether a child has a problem on the telephone, they can suggest where you could go for help. The telephone number is 1300 656865 and cost is the same as a local call.

In other states, you can contact Early Childhood Intervention Australia. Contact names and addresses for all states can be obtained from the state branches.

## **Niftey**

Niftey (National Initiative for the Early Years) identifies the early years as critical for early brain development. Early brain development is strongly influenced by the environment and security of relationships that surround a young child – they set a base for learning, behaviour and health throughout life.

A society that wants a highly competent population will need to ensure that all its children have the best opportunities during the critical early years of development.

Research into the effectiveness of early childhood intervention has shown that it makes a significant difference to a child's development and reduces the need for special education services later in life.

## **learning links**

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### **Early Childhood Services**

– all enquiries to Head Office

### **School Age Services**

– contact your local branch

### **Family Services**

– contact your local branch

### **All other enquiries**

– Head Office

### **Head Office**

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