

Developmental Milestones: Understanding Your Child's Behavior

When a child is diagnosed with ASD, it can be difficult to figure out which symptoms are a result of autism and which are just typical for development. The information below from Ashley Murray, Psy.M., Emily Schreiber, M.A. and Rebekah Ridgeway, Psy.D. can help parents to navigate these behaviors.



Some parents express difficulty in understanding whether their child's behavior is developmentally appropriate or related to his or her diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder. This can lead to increased frustration and uncertainty of how to respond to specific behaviors. Based on a child's developmental level, parents are able to better assess whether their child's behavior is developmentally appropriate or warrants further discussion with their pediatrician. For example, it can be helpful for parents to know that it is developmentally appropriate for a two-year-old child to begin testing his or her parents' limits and having temper tantrums (e.g., dropping to the floor, crying, pounding fists). However, this behavior is not considered developmentally appropriate if your child is in his or her middle school years. Additionally, in terms of social interaction, it is considered developmentally appropriate for one-year-olds to enjoy playing by themselves with toys. However, by preschool age, children should be engaging in cooperative play with others.

Oftentimes parents of children with autism spectrum disorders have the most difficulty determining if their child's social and emotional development is appropriate for his or her age or if the child's behaviors are related to the diagnosis. To help make this distinction, understanding developmental milestones for these two areas can be useful. The following chart presents social and emotional developmental milestones and is separated by the child's age. Having resources to identify developmental milestones can aid parents in assessing their child's behavior and determining if they should seek additional support for their concerns.

If your child is demonstrating behavior that you believe is not developmentally appropriate, it is always important to discuss this with your pediatrician and other members of the treatment team. Your team may be able to make suggestions on how best to address these concerns and make referrals as needed for additional evaluations. Additionally, if you have concerns regarding other areas of your child's development, your treatment team can provide you with expected milestones in all areas of development.