

# Early Indicators of Developmental Delays in Infants and Toddlers

by Jennifer Neitzel

## Importance of Early Identification

Early intervention services, when they are begun early, can significantly influence the development of young children with disabilities, including autism spectrum disorders (ASD), and those who are at risk for delays in a variety of skills, including cognitive, language/communication, play, and social (Bruder, 2010; Guralnick, 1997). Over the years, the field of early intervention has grown to include not only preschoolers with developmental difficulties, but also infants and toddlers under 2 years of age. This evolution is based upon the notion that earlier intervention not only supports young children's development, it also may prevent further difficulties down the road (Hebbeler, Levin, Perez, Lam, & Chambers, 2009; Guralnick, 1997).

High-quality early intervention can begin only after a child has been identified as having a possible developmental delay in one or more areas. To provide intervention as early as possible, parents and practitioners must be able to identify children with potential delays early in their development. According to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (Gartland & Strosnider, 2007), early identification is used to determine whether or not a child might have developmental difficulties that could hinder their learning now and in the future. In recent years, prominent national organizations, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), also have emphasized the importance of identifying infants and toddlers who might be at risk for autism (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/index.html>).

However, because there is broad variability in children's development, early identification of developmental delays, including autism, can be particularly difficult with infants and toddlers under the age of 2 years. Many young children will focus on mastering one particular skill before moving on to others. For example, an infant might spend much of his time learning how to crawl and have little interest in babbling. Another child, on the other hand, might be more interested in learning how to talk. Typically developing children will quickly catch up in the areas they have neglected once they have mastered a particular skill of interest; however, children who experience true developmental delays will continue to experience difficulties. Parents and professionals must be particularly attuned to children's development in all areas, as well as their overall patterns of development, to accurately identify whether or not they are at risk for developmental delays. Knowing the signs, or "red flags," at different ages is essential so that intervention can be provided to very young children and their families as soon as possible (AAP, 2009; Turvo, 2009; see Figure 1).

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**FIGURE 1. Developmental Red Flags in Infants and Toddlers**

### 1 to 3 Months

- Doesn't respond to loud noises
- Doesn't follow moving objects by 3 months
- Doesn't smile at people by 2 to 3 months
- Doesn't grasp objects by 3 months
- Cannot support head well at 3 months
- Crosses eyes most of the time at 3 months

### 4 to 7 Months

- Seems very stiff *OR* floppy
- Head still flops back when body is pulled to sitting position
- Shows no affection for caregiver
- One or both eyes consistently turn in or out
- Doesn't seem to enjoy being around people
- Does not respond to sounds around them
- Has difficulty getting objects to mouth
- Does not turn head to locate sounds
- Doesn't roll over by 6 months
- Cannot sit with help by 6 months
- Does not laugh or make squealing sounds by 5 months
- Does not reach for objects by 6 months
- Does not follow objects with both eyes
- Does not bear some weight on legs by 5 months

### 8 to 12 Months

- Does not crawl
- Cannot stand when supported
- Does not search for objects that are hidden (10 to 12 months)
- Does not learn to use gestures such as waving or shaking head
- Does not sit steadily by 10 months
- Does not show interest in "peek-a-boo" or "patty cake" by 8 months
- Does not babble by 8 months ("dada," "baba," "mama")

### 18 to 24 Months

- Cannot walk by 18 months
- Walks exclusively on toes
- Does not speak at least 15 words by 18 months
- Does not make 2-word sentences by age 2
- Does not know function of common household objects by 15 months (brush, phone, fork, spoon)
- Does not imitate actions or words by 24 months
- Does not follow simple one-step instructions by 24 months
- Infrequent communication with others (words, gestures)

### Red Flags in Early Development

Parents often are the first people to identify potential delays in infants and toddlers. In fact, parents' concerns about their child's acquisition of developmental milestones are particularly accurate in the areas of speech/language and cognitive skills. Research has shown that language/communication assessment is the most sensitive indicator of developmental delays in young children (Tervo, 2009). Parents and practitioners should be particularly concerned if children's development in these areas stops or regresses, for example, if their child was saying a few words and then all of the sudden stops using these words.

Specific "red flags" of development are particularly helpful when trying to decide if an infant or toddler is at risk for developmental delays or autism. For instance, gross motor skills (e.g., crawling, walking), fine motor skills (e.g., grasping objects), receptive language (i.e., understanding what is said), expressive language (e.g., speaking), and social skills are particularly important when determining whether or not very young children are not developing as expected. Figure 1 outlines specific "red flags" that should alert parents and professionals when to seek help for a particular child.

It is important to keep in mind that all babies reach key milestones at different rates. Reaching one or more milestones late is generally not cause for concern; however, if a child consistently acquires skills much later than other children, a parent or professional should consider contacting a psychologist or pediatrician (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2009). By getting help as soon as they suspect possible developmental delays, including autism, in infants and toddlers, parents and

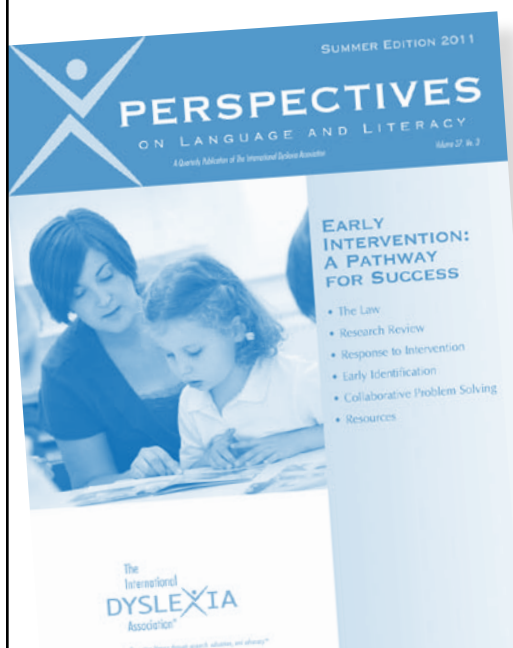
professionals have the opportunity to provide these young children with high-quality early intervention services that can reduce or prevent future learning difficulties.

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