

Physical development in babies and children

By [Kidspot team](#) |



There's one thing for sure – babies and kids will grow. But physical development is about more than just hitting the right percentiles on a height chart.

All babies grow in the same order but at completely different rates. One seven-month-old might be crawling around and chattering madly. Another might be playing silently on his playmat. One five-year-old can look like he's still only four, while another can look like he belongs with the seven-year-olds.

Developmental achievements are often called 'milestones' and there are certain physical milestones.

Gross motor skills involve the coordination and control of large muscles and skills like walking, sitting and running.

Fine motor skills (or manipulation) involve the coordination and control of small muscles, and skills like holding a rattle, picking up crumbs and scribbling with a pencil.

Vision is the ability to see near and far, and to interpret what's seen.

Hearing is the ability to hear, listen to and interpret sounds, whereas speech is the ability to produce sounds that form words. [Language](#) is something different again, but also important.

[Emotional and social behaviour](#) and understanding is your child's ability to learn and interact with others, including skills for play and communicating with other people and children.

What parents need to know about physical development

Physical development provides children with the abilities they need to explore and interact with the world around them. A young child's physical growth first begins as muscles gain strength and children gradually develop coordination. The development of muscular control is the first step in this process. Think about the words physical development. They encompass so many different tasks and abilities. The term motor development refers to physical growth, or growth in the ability of children to use their bodies and physical skills. Motor development often has been defined as the process by which a child acquires movement patterns and skills. Genetics, size at birth, body build, nutrition and culture can all influence motor and physical development.

Gross motor skills versus fine motor skills

Gross motor development

This is the area of physical development that most parents think of first - the child's general ability to move around and use the various parts of his body. Activities like rolling over, crawling, walking, running and jumping are gross motor skills. These skills usually involve using the entire body or several parts of the body at one time.

Some of the areas that are considered when evaluating the area of gross motor development are:

Muscle tone: How tightly or loosely do the muscles work for your child? If a child's body has high tone, then his movements might be jerky or disconnected. If a child's body is too loose - or low tone - then her movements might be slow and lack strength.

Muscle strength: How strong is your child? How much pressure can he apply with his hands and legs? How much pressure can his body withstand?

Quality of movements: Are the movements smooth or does she seem to jerk her limbs? Does she seem to move either particularly slow or fast? Does it take effort for her to move around?

Range of movement: An important area in physical development is a child's ability to make movements that span the entire length of her body. A significant milestone is the ability to make movements that go from one side of the body to the other, referred to as "crossing the midline". This skill is necessary for a child to do tasks such as throwing a ball or passing an object from one hand to another. This concept is also important for the area of fine motor development.

What to expect of physical development

Physical development by six months

He will show basic distinctions in vision, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, temperature and perceiving pain. He will also lift his head when on his stomach and possibly show squeals of delight as well as grasp objects and roll over.

Physical development by 12 months

He can control his torso and hands, sit without support, crawl and has growing control of legs and feet. He may stand or creep across the floor.

Physical development by 18 months

Can creep or crawl up stairs, possibly walk, draw lines on paper with crayon and will show growing physical independence.

Physical development by age two

He can go up and down steps, run, sit self on chair, use a spoon and fork, turn single pages in a book, kick a ball, attempt to dress himself, build a tower of six blocks, kick a ball and has bowel and bladder control (though he may not care to show it and be toilet trained!).

Physical development by age three

He can run well, march, stand on one foot briefly, ride a tricycle, feed himself (with a bit of mess), put on his own shoes and socks (though not tie laces!), unbutton and button.

Physical development by age four

He can skip on one foot, cut with scissors, wash and dry his own face, dress himself, throw a ball overhand and other skills to show growing independence.

Physical development by age five

He can hop and skip, dress without help, has good balance and smoother muscle action, skate or ride a scooter, print and write simple letters, establish whether he is left or right handed. Girls' fine motor skill development is likely to be about one year ahead of boys.

Physical development by age seven

He can stand on one foot with eyes closed for three seconds, walk on a line in heel-toe fashion, skip on both feet, possibly ride a bicycle without training wheels, jump rope, catch and bounce a tennis ball and tie shoelaces.

Physical development by age nine

He has the capability to roll, bat, kick and throw a ball, which makes him able to play organised sports such as soccer, cricket and basketball. His strength and coordination will continue to develop with practice.

Physical development by age 12

Puberty can start to appear at this age, which is why you'll see kids developing at different rates between the ages of eight and 18. With growth spurts come clumsiness and a lack of coordination. If your child is not athletic, help him find a sport or physical activity he enjoys. At this age, kids who don't excel athletically are tempted to avoid all physical activity.

What parents can do to boost physical development

Australia's Department of Health and Ageing has two recommendations for parents to encourage optimal physical development.

1. Children and young people should participate in at least 60 minutes (and up to several hours) of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity every day.
2. Children and young people should not spend more than two hours a day using electronic media for entertainment (e.g. computer games, Internet, TV), particularly during daylight hours.

Encouraging physical activity in school-aged children can:

- Build strong bones and muscles
- Improve balance and develop skills
- Maintain and develop flexibility
- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight
- Improve cardiovascular fitness
- Help relaxation
- Provide opportunities to make friends and improve [social and emotional development](#)
- Improve self-esteem

This article was written by Alex Brooks for Kidspot from sources including Child Development Info and Raising Children.



Kicking a ball strengthens the gross motor skills needed for other physical activity.

