

Handy Handouts®

Free informational handouts for educators, parents, and students

Developmental Delay

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Developmental delay is a special education eligibility category defined by the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It is assigned when children do not meet the expected milestones in several areas of development.

IDEA addresses developmental delay under two parts. Part C covers children who are younger than the age of three and Part B covers children ages three to nine years old. It is important to note that each state has the ability to add to the definition of developmental delay outlined by IDEA. States also have the ability to choose the age range of children developmental delay will cover (i.e., any range between three and nine years old.)

A disability is something a child can make progress towards improving, but it is likely it will not be outgrown. A delay is something a child can make progress towards improving and likely will overcome. Children with a delay may reach the developmental milestones later as they grow and mature, especially with the right interventions and supports in place.



The Areas of Developmental Delay



1. Cognitive Skills – These are required to think, learn, and solve problems. Delayed cognitive skills may impede a child’s ability to learn to count, recall the names of colors, or learn and retain new words.



2. Social and Emotional Skills – Relating to peers, expressing emotions, and the ability to modify behavior are all important skills when communicating with others. A delay in social skills may affect a child’s ability to ask for help, learn in a group, or communicate appropriately with peers and adults.



3. Communication Skills – Speech and language skills are also at risk for delay. Children with delayed speech and language skills may not meet developmental milestones like cooing and babbling at the appropriate time. As children age, they may have difficulty with receptive language (understanding) and/or expressive language (use).



4. Physical Development – Gross and fine motor skills are included under physical development. Children who experience fine motor delays may have difficulty writing, holding utensils, or grasping objects. Gross motor delays affect sitting, walking, running, jumping, climbing, etc.



5. Activities of Daily Living – Daily living skills are those needed to function independently throughout the day. These include bathing, getting dressed, and eating.



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Determining Developmental Delay

If your child is under the age of three and you have concerns about his/her development in any of the areas listed above, contact your pediatrician. Your pediatrician may recommend a developmental screening—a quick, general assessment of your child’s skills. The results of the screening may or may not indicate a need for a more in-depth evaluation, which may result in early intervention services to address any weaknesses present. If this is the case, your child may be referred to a program designed to address the specific delays present. If your child is three years or older but not attending school, you can contact your local school district—even if your child does not attend school yet. The school district should provide information about whether your child needs an evaluation under special education law, or IDEA.

Aging Out of Developmental Delay

According to IDEA, a child may no longer carry the developmental delay disability category on his/her IEP after age nine, or by the end of the school year of his/her ninth birthday. It is important to remember that some states may employ different age ranges for developmental delay, and may require children served under special education receive a different eligibility category by an earlier age. If your child’s IEP team determines he/she continues to require special education services, your child will undergo a re-evaluation to determine what eligibility category best fits his/her academic and learning needs. If the re-evaluation determines your child is performing on the same level in all areas as his/her same-age peers, a dismissal may be most appropriate.



Resources:

Diagnostic And Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5. Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013.

“Developmental Delay” accessed October 5, 2018 from <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/dd/>.

“What You Need to Know About Developmental Delays” accessed October 5, 2018 from <https://www.understood.org/en/learning-attention-issues/treatments-approaches/early-intervention/what-you-need-to-know-about-developmental-delays>.

“Categories of Disability Under IDEA Law” accessed October 8, 2018 from <http://www.ideapartnership.org/topics-database/idea-2004/idea-2004-part-b/1397-definitions-of-disability-terms.html>.

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