

When Kids' Development Lags:

How to know when your child needs help

By Lauren Rose, C.S.W.-R

An old friend called me last month. Since she had her first child, an adorable little girl, 15 months ago, she has been floating in the clouds. Sure, parenthood was filled with its share of difficult moments, but nothing she hadn't expected. That was until she enrolled her child in a Mommy & Me program. Gradually, she started to notice that her little girl was not doing things that all the other children were doing. She read and reread the chapters in the usual parenting books to gain some perspective. And, though they reassured her that each child develops at her own pace and a wide variety of "normal" exists, she couldn't help feeling something wasn't right with her daughter.

This scenario is repeated daily in various towns across our county, state and country.

The competitive times in which we live place a great deal of stress on parents. We strive to provide our children with a great many opportunities to grow, both in and out of the home. Many of us spend our precious free time reading parenting magazines to improve our parenting skills, gleaning ideas of what our child should be doing at each developmental stage, and reassuring ourselves that we are doing a good job. So, when we worry, how do we know if our concerns are justified? Is there something amiss with our sweet little one, or are we just overly zealous parents looking for a problem? Are we overreacting?

I wish I could write the magic answer here. "Read on and discover the cure to all your concerns..." but, not surprisingly, it's not that simple. In my counseling practice, the general rule of thumb is when a parent is distressed, there is reason to explore further. This is



You know that each child develops at his/her own pace and that a wide variety of "normal" exists. But if you still can't help feeling that something is not quite right, seek help, Rose urges.

a view to which I believe most professionals ascribe. Parents know their children best; they have watched them develop and grow. They see them in many different settings and can recognize concerns. We all want our children to achieve their personal best. We may know they're not the next Einstein, Michael Jordan, or Madeline Albright, but we are still biased. As parents, we naturally tend to focus on our children's strengths, rather than their weaknesses. Therefore, when you think your child isn't keeping pace, you are probably right. Don't be afraid to be honest with yourself about your child's limitations.

Does this mean you should rush your child to the country's top specialists because he can't stack blocks as high as the boy next door? Absolutely not. Remember, each child is different. However, that said, don't discard your concerns either. Find someone whose opinion you value and with whom you can talk. This may be an experienced parent, your spouse, a teacher, a therapist, or your child's pediatrician. Air your concerns, don't keep them to yourself.

Think about whether your concerns are specific to one behavior.

For example, Johnny won't sit and listen to a book. It may be that he just doesn't enjoy books; or even more simply, Johnny may not like the books you have at home. Perhaps books with interactive features such as flaps to lift or buttons to press may interest him. Maybe he likes activities that are more participatory, like singing along with a CD or building with blocks. As long as he can attend to some activities for an age-appropriate amount of time, don't sweat it.

Perhaps your worries are more globally defined. Molly won't sit still for any activity if it lasts more than two minutes. If she truly cannot attend to any activity and she is over two, she may need some help developing her attention span. In this situation, Molly's parents might want to seek assistance and have their daughter evaluated to determine the cause of her inattention.

A child with delayed milestones in more than one area of development should definitely be seen by a professional. For example, at 15 months, my old friend's daughter was not using any functional words. She was a very quiet child, and she was not walking or pulling to stand. All these could be

viewed as being on the late end of the normal developmental scale. But they could also be early signs of a greater developmental issue. Her parents could certainly wait a while and see how things develop on their own — but they would certainly worry, watch each and every behavior, and be pushing their daughter to make gains. There is no harm in seeking help in this situation. In a best-case scenario, the child would show no diagnosable issues and would develop skills on her own (though possibly at a later than average pace). Once in a while, a child may have some issues that can be identified. While

this may be devastating to a parent, the end results can be nothing but positive: the child will get the help he or she needs. A child with true developmental issues will not outgrow them and will need intervention and support to develop age-appropriate skills. Better to discover this at an early age and provide the services while a child is young and more likely to progress. Better, too, for parents to learn that they are not "crazy" and to gain the support they need.

I encouraged my friend to contact her local Early Intervention Program. Today her daughter is receiving daily therapy and making great strides. My friend is learning about her daughter's limitations and how to best help and encourage her. In my practice, I have seen hundreds of children with developmental delays. While each child is different, the majority catch up quickly when help is provided. Skills progress and frustration decreases. The value of intervening early cannot be downplayed.

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