

Supporting Gross Motor Development in Babies and Children Under 5 Years: Part 1



This Good Practice Point aligns to the NMC 2022 Standards of Proficiency for SCPHN Health Visitors, in particular Sphere of Influence D: Population health: enabling, supporting and improving health outcomes of people across the life course. See the [Nursing and Midwifery Council](#) for more details.

Please read this Good Practice Point in conjunction with GPP: Gross Motor Skills Development in Babies and Children under 5 years: Part 2 (bit.ly/3wLfzoK). This discusses typical gross motor skills development and the 'red flags' for atypical development that warrants follow-up, further assessment, or a watchful wait approach.

Child development

Child development is the process by which a child grows physically and mentally, acquiring skills in cognition, communication, movement and coordination enabling them to reach their full potential. Child development is affected by multiple factors including genetics, early child experiences, home and environmental factors.

Support and encouragement of child development in the early years is crucial to laying strong foundations upon which babies can develop and progress through childhood, adolescence and into adulthood.

Each child is unique and will develop at their own pace. However, there are well known 'milestones' which children usually achieve within specific ages¹. Delay in achieving developmental milestones, or concerns about the quality of a child's movement, could indicate a significant health condition warranting urgent assessment and treatment.

Through their universal reach, health visitors and health visiting teams are ideally placed to support families with their child's development and identify early developmental 'red flags'.

Child development can be broken down into four domains:

- **Gross motor:** the skills that children develop using their whole body² which influence gross movement.
- **Fine motor:** the skills that involve smaller muscles, which are critical for developing skills such as eating, drinking, dressing and coordination³.
- **Speech, language and communication:** the process by which children learn to communicate with the world around them.
- **Social and emotional:** the process by which children develop their emotional regulation and ability to form relationships.

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For additional resources see www.ihv.org.uk

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Good practice points for health visitors and health visiting teams

Health visitors and health visiting teams play a crucial role in supporting families with their children's development. National universal child health programmes across the UK set out details of contacts which families and children can expect from health visiting services. This enables important opportunities for surveillance, screening and review of child development. This GPP shares some points to support you in promoting gross motor development.

Communication

- Effective communication with the child and family is key to facilitating positive outcomes. Actively listen to parental/carer concerns, they are experts in their child's development.
- Develop therapeutic relationships and work in partnership with families, seeking consent and fully involving them in formal observations and reviews of their child's development.
- Work in partnership with parents and take a family-centred approach. Discuss child development in collaboration with what parents/carers say and see, actively listening to and considering their perspectives, address concerns sensitively.
- Connecting parents and carers to other services when needed: with consent, communicate with other health professionals (GP, child development team, community/general paediatrician, physiotherapist, occupational therapist) and seek their expertise in considering potential 'red flags' and immediate referrals, or a watchful wait approach. See GPP: Gross Motor Skills Development in Babies and Children under 5 years: Part 2 (bit.ly/3wLfzoK).
- On discussion and collaboration with other health professionals, advise on age and ability-appropriate physical activities that parents can facilitate for their child to promote their gross motor skills development, in particular when red flags are identified and while children are on referral waiting lists.
- Parental/carer stress and anxiety can be heightened when developmental concerns are identified. Maintain regular communication with parents/carer, offer support, monitor and review parental wellbeing during this time, following local protocols and pathways.

Assessment and professional judgement

- When undertaking development assessments, consider the child within their context. This includes immediate surroundings and the wider social and environmental context and how these may impact on child development.
- All health visiting team members carrying out developmental reviews need to be trained and supported to undertake their roles effectively.
- Ensure timely reviews of child development, as indicated in national child health programmes, are prioritised.
- Use recommended assessment tools as part of a holistic assessment which should also include professional observation and clinical judgement.
- Be mindful that parents can view domains of development in isolation and may not associate red flags in gross motor skills development with potential wider developmental concerns.
- With parental consent, work in partnership with other professionals who may have contact with the child, such as playgroup or nursery provision, and seek their professional opinion as part of an overall holistic assessment - this is particularly important when concerns have been identified to build a picture of the child's strengths and any difficulties they may have.
- If professional judgement (based on fully-informed decision making) results in taking a 'watchful wait' approach, plan timely follow-up reviews to discuss and re-assess developmental progress. Continue to offer ongoing support during this time.
- If development is atypical for a child's age, consider the **'red flag' for urgent follow up and assessment following local pathways**. See GPP: Gross Motor Skills Development in Babies and Children under 5 years: Part 2 (bit.ly/3wLfzoK).

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Connecting families to other support services

- Early intervention to optimise child health outcomes requires timely, accurate and appropriate referrals, and an awareness of local pathways to support further assessment and plans of care.
- Ensure that the correct referral process/documentation is used and the key information is reported, to ensure the professional receiving the referral has the information they require.
- Health visitors provide a vital safety-net for babies and young children living in families who may have difficulties engaging in support/ treatment, or may actively disengage. Follow your local protocols for child safeguarding where applicable.
- See GPP: Gross Motor Skills Development in Babies and Children under 5 years: Part 2 (bit.ly/3wLfzoK) for important points to include when making referrals to other healthcare professionals and teams.

Continued Professional Development

- Develop your knowledge and skills in child development and identification of typical child development for age, and development that is atypical for a child's age.
- Recognise your needs and gaps in this important area of health visiting practice and use your professional development review to agree areas where you want to expand your experience and build on your knowledge and skills.
- Take time to reflect on practice and access opportunities for clinical supervision.
- Engage in training opportunities, for example, iHV's Motor Development Toolkit (out soon) and other wider training.

References

1. Sharma A, Cockerill H, Sanctury L. Mary Sheridan's From Birth to Five Years. 5th Edition. UK: Routledge; 2021.
2. GOV.UK. Physical development. Gross motor skills. 2024. [Accessed 09.03.2024]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/44LQmqU>
3. GOV.UK. Physical development . Fine motor skills. 2024. [Accessed 09.03.2024]. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3WGzMqa>

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