



# Mott Poll Report

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## Milestones: How Parents Understand Child Development

As infants and toddlers age, they naturally acquire new skills in multiple areas including communication, interactions with others, and physical development. Steps along this developmental pathway are known as milestones. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children 0-5 years how they learn about developmental milestones and where they seek information or help if they have concerns about their child.

Parents feel either very confident (40%) or confident (50%) about knowing when children should achieve most of their milestones, with moms more likely than dads to be very confident (46% vs 33%). Most parents say they learn about the ages children are supposed to meet milestones from healthcare providers (80%). Other sources include family members (53%), the internet (45%), experience with their other children (44%), friends (37%) and childcare providers (28%).

To check if their child is behind in developmental milestones, parents report they have compared their children to a sibling (38%), a friend's children (34%), or other children in their family (28%). Dads are more likely than moms to have compared their child to a friend's children (41% vs 28%) or to other children in their family (32% vs 25%).

Nearly a quarter of parents (23%) say they have ever been worried their child might be delayed in their developmental milestones. In addition, some parents report they have heard about developmental concerns about their child from family members (9%), healthcare providers (9%) or friends (4%). Parents who have worried their child might be delayed are more likely to learn about milestones from the internet than parents who have not worried (57% vs 42%). Parents who have worried are also more likely than parents who have not worried to compare their child to a friend's children (58% vs 27%).

Among parents who suspected their child was behind in their milestones, most asked for advice from healthcare providers (63%) or childcare providers (24%); however, 18% say they did not seek advice from either of these providers. Other actions by parents who suspected their child was behind on their milestones include looking up information online (64%), asking advice from family or friends (38%) and seeking advice on social media (4%).

## Addressing developmental delay

When parents thought their child was behind...

**82%** sought help from a healthcare professional

**18%** only looked up info online or asked friends/family



### Report Highlights

Nearly 1 in 4 parents say they have worried their child was or might be delayed in their milestones.

Among parents who suspected their child was behind in their milestones, nearly 1 in 5 did not seek advice from a healthcare or childcare provider.

9 in 10 parents are either confident or very confident they know when their children should achieve most of their milestones.

## Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in January 2021 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 0-18 years living in their household (n=2,002). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 60% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 779 parents with at least one child age 0-5. The margin of error for results presented in this report is ±2 to 8 percentage points.

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## C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

Co-Director: Sarah J. Clark, MPH  
Co-Director: Gary L. Freed, MD, MPH  
Poll Manager: Dianne C. Singer, MPH  
Data Analyst: Acham Gebremariam, MS  
Publication Designer: Sara L. Schultz, MPS



**SUSAN B. MEISTER  
CHILD HEALTH EVALUATION  
AND RESEARCH CENTER**  
MICHIGAN MEDICINE

## Implications

Developmental milestones are skills that children usually acquire at roughly similar ages and are set in the range that most children demonstrate that skill. Milestones can be grouped into four basic categories: physical, social/emotional, communication, and cognitive.

Healthcare providers look at a child's developmental progress during well-child visits to see if the child is "on track" for their age. For example, depending on the age of the child, a provider would check to see if an infant is rolling over (physical development), smiling at a parent (social/emotional), babbling (communication), or responding to facial expressions (cognitive). Parents in this Mott Poll shared how they learn about developmental milestones and where they seek information or help if they have any concerns.

Parents are interested in their child's development and often want to know if they are progressing appropriately for their age. Most parents in this poll felt either confident or very confident in knowing the ages at which children should achieve most of their milestones. The main source of information for parents about milestones is from healthcare providers. For many parents, well child visits are the best time to discuss age-appropriate milestones and to learn what to look for by the next check-up.

Parents are important partners in monitoring children's developmental milestones because they are with their child every day and can share with healthcare providers about when and how often their child demonstrates a particular skill. Childcare providers also can be helpful in observing when a child meets different developmental milestones.

One in three parents have compared their child to an older sibling or a friend's child to assess their development. However, it is important for parents to keep in mind that child development is a process that unfolds over time, and there is a range of normal for when kids gain certain skills like laughing, walking or talking. While most milestones typically take place in a predictable sequence during a certain window of time, parents and caregivers must remember that each child is unique. The age ranges for the achievement of milestones simply give a framework for approximately when to expect certain skills to develop. Some children might reach certain milestones, like learning to talk or walk, much earlier than their same-age peers. Other children might reach the same milestones much later. This doesn't necessarily mean that one child is advanced or that another is delayed—it may simply represent the individual differences that exist among children in the developmental process.

In this Mott Poll, about one-quarter of parents revealed they have been worried their child might be behind in their developmental milestones. In most cases, worried parents talked with their child's healthcare and/or childcare provider. However, nearly one in five parents did not consult a professional about their concern over developmental delay. Instead, they only looked up information online, sought advice on social media or asked for advice from family and friends. This is problematic because it may delay getting a child the help they need as usually the earlier a child gets help, the more progress they can make in getting back on track. Depending on the situation, healthcare providers may look for specific causes of a delay, refer a child to a specialist for testing or therapy, or give parents things to work on at home. Sometimes delays in meeting specific milestones may run in families or be associated with birth order. Working with the child's provider is the best way to develop a plan best for each individual child.

One important role of healthcare providers is to offer guidance in special situations. For example, parents of premature infants should remember that expectations about the timing of developmental milestones need to be adjusted to account for how early a child is born. Healthcare providers can provide information to help parents adjust the timetables for development so they know when to anticipate milestones for their child.