



# Department of Early Education and Care

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

## EEC Child Care Licensing

### TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE: Importance of Developmental Milestones

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A child's growth is more than just physical. Children grow, develop, and learn throughout their lives, starting at birth. A child's development can be observed in how s/he plays, learns, speaks and behaves.

Developmental milestones are behaviors or skills that illustrate a child's growth in a number of areas. The milestones have been established based on what most children can do at a certain age. Examples are the age at which a child smiles for the first time, takes his first steps, or says his first words. Developmental delays exist when a child does not reach his/her milestones at about the same time as other children the same age.

All children develop at their own pace. Some children achieve their developmental milestones earlier and some later than other children. Some are able to speak earlier than others, but walk later. Some children skip certain milestones, for example bypassing crawling almost completely and proceeding directly to walking. In spite of the many variations in child growth, failure to achieve developmental milestones at the expected times is an important "early warning" sign that should not be ignored.

In the United States, 17% of children have a developmental or behavioral disability, and many more have delays in language or other areas. Fewer than half of these children are identified before starting school. Recognizing when a child has missed a developmental milestone allows the parent to seek additional information, screening, evaluation, and if necessary, treatment for her child. Most developmental delays in children are not serious, and children eventually catch up with their peers. However, if a more serious delay or a disability is present, providing help early is important in helping the child reach his full potential.

A child's pediatrician is a great source of information and advice. However, most children spend very little time with their pediatrician, and much more time with parents and other caregivers. If an educator suspects that there may be a problem, s/he should not ignore it. The educator should document his/her concerns and talk about them with a supervisor, if applicable. The educator should also bring his/her concerns to the parent's attention, and encourage the parent to seek advice and information from a pediatrician, developmental specialist, or an organization like Early Intervention (if the child is younger than 3 years old); from the local education authority (if the child is 3 or older), or from organizations like Easter Seals.

For downloadable copies of developmental milestones checklists, tips on talking to parents, information on positive parenting and other useful resources visit the Centers for Disease Control website at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/child/default.htm>

Information for this paper was taken from the article titled "Developmental Screening" in *Learn the Signs. Act Early*, at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities.