

Early Warning Signs

Risk Factors

The following situations place children at greater risk for health and developmental difficulties:

- Prematurity and/or low birth weight
- Prenatal or other exposure to drugs, alcohol, or tobacco
- Violence in the community or at home
- Poor nutrition
- Family stress (for example, poverty, poor housing, homelessness, death in the family)

General Behavior

Some of the following behaviors are causes for concern in any child. Others may just be part of a particular temperament or personality and should be appraised in light of the child's total demeanor.

The child...

- By six months of age, avoids being held or talked to or resists being soothed and comforted.
- Does not pay attention or stay focused on an activity for as long a time as other children of the same age do.
- Avoids or rarely makes eye contact with others.
- Gets unusually frustrated when trying to do simple tasks that most children of the same age can do.
- Often acts out; appears to be very stubborn or aggressive.
- Acts extremely shy or withdrawn.
- Does not like being touched.
- Does not like having certain types of materials or clothing next to body.
- Treats other children, animals, or objects cruelly or destructively.
- Tends to break things a lot.
- Displays violent behavior (tantrums, fighting, screaming, or hitting other children) on a daily basis.
- Stares into space, rocks body, or talks to self more often than other children of the same age do.
- Often bangs head against an object, floor, or wall.
- Does not recognize dangerous situations, such as walking in traffic or jumping from high places.
- Tends to be sick often; complains of headaches or stomachaches.
- Has sleeping, feeding, eating, or toileting problems.
- Is overly impulsive, active, or distractible.
- Does not respond to discipline as well as children of the same age.
- Has difficulty putting thoughts, actions, and movements together.
- Does not seek approval from parent or caregiver.

Hearing

The child...

- Has a frequent earache.
- Has had many ear, nose, or throat infections or allergies.
- By four months, does not look at the source of sounds or voices or react to loud noises.

- Talks in a very loud or very soft voice.
- Seems to have difficulty responding when called from across the room, even when it is for something interesting.
- Turns body so that the same ear is always turned toward a sound.
- Breathes through mouth.
- Has difficulty understanding what is said.

Moving

The child...

- Has stiff arms or legs.
- Has floppy or limp body posture.
- Uses one side of the body more than the other.
- Has poor coordination or moves in a disorganized, clumsy manner as compared with other children of the same age.
- At three months, still has difficulty holding head up.
- By age one, has difficulty sitting without help, standing up, reaching for objects, or picking up objects with thumb and index finger.
- By age two, has difficulty walking without help, kicking a large ball, scribbling, or building a tower with two or three blocks.
- By age three, does not walk up or down stairs, run without falling frequently, or turn pages of a book.
- By age four, has difficulty with such activities as standing on one foot, jumping from a bottom step, pedaling a tricycle, catching a large bounced ball, closing a fist, or wiggling a thumb.
- By age five, has difficulty skipping using alternate feet, pumping self on a swing, or cutting with scissors.

Seeing

The child...

- Seems to have difficulty following objects or people with eyes.
- Rubs eyes frequently.
- Has reddened, watering, or crusty eyelids.
- Holds head in a strained or unusual position when trying to look at an object.
- Seems to have difficulty finding or picking up small objects dropped on the floor.
- Has difficulty focusing or making eye contact.
- Closes one eye when trying to look at distant objects.

Communicating

The child...

- By age 6 months, rarely makes sounds like cooing or gurgling.
- Is unusually quiet.
- Does not shake head *no*.
- By age one, does not understand first words, such as *milk*, *bottle*, or *bye-bye*.
- By age one, does not say *mama* or *dada*.
- By age two, rarely names family members and/or common objects.
- By age two, does not speak in two-word phrases.
- By age two, does not point to objects or people to express want or need.
- By age three, does not know last name, gender, or common rhymes.
- By age three, does not follow simple directions or speak in three- or four-word sentences.

- By age four, does not tell stories, either real or make-believe, or ask frequent questions.
- By age four, does not speak in four-or five-word sentences and has speech that is not understandable by adults.
- By age five, does not know age and cannot answer *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, or *why* questions or use various types of sentences.

Thinking

The child...

- By age one, has a hard time figuring out simple problems, such as finding an object after seeing it hidden.
- By age two, does not identify simple body parts by pointing, match similar objects, or recognize self in mirror.
- By age three, does not understand simple stories and ideas.
- By age three, does not understand simple mathematical concepts such as *one*, *more*, or *less* or count *1-2-3*.
- By age four, does not give correct answers to questions, such as *what do you do when you are sleepy or hungry?*
- By age four, cannot tell the difference between different shapes or colors.
- By age five, does not understand the concepts of *today*, *tomorrow*, or *yesterday*.

Playing

The child...

- By three months, does not coo or smile.
- By age one, does not play games like *peek-a-boo* or *pat-a-cake* or wave *bye-bye*.
- By age two, does not imitate parent or caregiver doing routine tasks such as washing dishes, cooking, or going to work.
- By age three, tends to play alone more than with other children.
- By age three, does not play purposefully.
- By age three, does not interact with adults and children outside the family.
- By age four, does not play make-believe games and group games such as *hide-and-seek* with other children.
- By age five, does not share and take turns.
- By age five, does not express concern or compassion, when appropriate.
- By age five, does not show off occasionally.

If you suspect that your child or a child in your care may have special needs, call or help the child's parents call the local school district or the special education program of the county office of education. Representatives of those agencies may schedule an assessment to see if the child qualifies for services. Parents must give written permission for the child to be tested and receive special education. All services are confidential and provided at no cost to the family.

For concerns regarding children birth to age three, call the California Department of Developmental Services at 1-800-515-BABY (2229). You will be provided with information on resources in your local community or your Family Resource Center for parent-to-parent support.