



Developmental Delay

About developmental delay

Young children with developmental delay (or global developmental delay/intellectual disability) experience delays in thinking and everyday skills. They may have delays in several areas such as their motor, language and social skills. They find it harder to learn, which means they need extra time and help to learn new skills. They may find instructions with several steps hard to follow. They can find it challenging to manage their emotions and behaviour. Young children will vary considerably in their development. Some children will seem to show delays but then 'catch up', and early intervention can often result in improvement in thinking and everyday skills.

Strengths

What might be some strengths?

- Many children with developmental delay enjoy play and learning through play.
- Children may show lots of interest in activities that involve play.
- They may have good fine and gross motor skill development through play.

Where you might provide support?

- Children with developmental delay may have trouble with how quickly they can think and their ability to understand. They might not understand instructions if they are given a lot of information at once.
- They may take longer to learn new skills. Structure and routine may help them.
- They can be very social and friendly, and like talking and spending time with other people. However, sometimes, they might stand too close or be overfamiliar with people.



Evidence-based strategies

Consider adjustments to communication style

- **Get child's attention before communicating.** When giving instructions or talking with children check that you have their full attention before beginning. This can be done out loud or with a gesture.
- **Be clear and specific.** It can be helpful to give clear and specific instructions about the task and the behaviour expected.
- **Use visual instructions.** Visual instructions about a task or behavior may be needed for some children. Consider demonstrating the task or asking another child to demonstrate. You can also use a visual schedule, poster or video to outline or model the task.
- **Some children may find it easier if they can use gestures.** Some children may need to point to an answer instead of talking.

Integrate learning with fun

- **Combine learning social skills with adult-led learning.** Consider demonstrating a social skill which can be used during child play. It may help to pair a child with a child who can demonstrate and prompt.

Work collaboratively

- **Provide lots of opportunities for children to work or play together.** Children with and without developmental delay can get to know each other and build friendships through playing and working together. This also helps children learn through watching others.
- **Music can encourage friendships.** Consider pairing children with different partners for musical activities each week so that all children have a chance to get to know each other.

Provide positive feedback

- **Praise and reward.** Children may learn well when there is immediate praise and reward for positive behaviour or correct performance of a skill. Consider offering rewards that link to a child's interests.



Best practice tips

Have a consistent routine

- Routines help a child understand how to behave. Children often feel more secure when they know what to expect.

Provide a supportive environment

- Some children might lack confidence. Praise efforts and encourage participation.

Reduce background noise when giving instructions

- Avoid background noise and distractions while giving instructions to help all children hear and focus on you. You might need to face the children away from distractions behind you.

Simplify instructions

- Some children might need simple instructions which may need to be repeated lots of times. Use simple words and repeat.

Break skills into smaller parts

- Learning a skill might require educators to break it down into smaller parts at first.

Ask parents how to help

- Talk to parents and the child's support team to find out the best way to work with and support the child. Parents can help you understand a child's unique strengths and areas they need more help.



Early Years Learning and Development Outcomes

Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

- Early childhood educators can teach children to treat others with care, empathy and respect. Consider playing games where children work in pairs or small groups to practice a social skill such as asking or offering to share and asking for or offering help.
- Respond to children in a warm and positive way. For example, you could ask them to help you with activities. This creates a safe and secure environment for children.

Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world

- Music sessions where children cooperate or play with each other can foster a sense of belonging in children. Consider asking children to have a different partner each music session so that they play with different children each time.
- To build social skills that are important for social connection, play games where children work in pairs or small groups to practice a social skill. This could be asking or offering to share or asking for or offering help.

Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing

- Strategies outlined in other sections that increase social engagement, identity or communication are likely to impact child wellbeing.

Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

- Strategies outlined in other sections may be helpful.

Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators

- Planned activities such as organised play activities or music sessions where children cooperate and play together can help children become effective communicators.



Other considerations

First aid

- Some children with developmental delay may have difficulty communicating that they are in pain or unwell. Watch for signs of pain such as grimacing. Encourage gestures or other methods of communication to work out what may be happening.

Safety drills

- Some children with developmental delay may not know how to tell an adult if there is an emergency, or what to do in an emergency or emergency drill. Consider making time for demonstrating and practising what to do.

Behaviour

- Giving children choices in their work may make them more motivated.
- It may be helpful to show them a positive behaviour, give them clear instructions so that they know what is expected, and provide reward and praise.
- Picture cards or stories about social situations can teach children social skills.
- Refer to the [ABC approach](#) for more information on how to reduce challenging behaviour by supporting the child and promoting more helpful behaviour, and our [emotions page](#) for more information about supporting a child with managing their emotions.

Toileting

- Some children with developmental delay may need extra help with toileting.
- Discuss with parents how best to support them.

Transitions

- A child with developmental delay may need extra support to move from the early childhood education and care setting to another setting (i.e. another early childhood education and care setting or primary school).
- For more information about supporting children with disabilities when transitioning to a different education setting, access AllPlay Learn's [transition page](#).



Peer mediation

- Read more about how [peer mediation](#) can support peers with learning social and communication skills that facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities.

Other co-occurring conditions

- Children with developmental delay can experience higher rates of [anxiety](#), [autism](#) and [cerebral palsy](#).

Relevant resources

Visit our [resources page](#) for a range of resources that can help to create inclusive education environments for children with disabilities and developmental challenges. AllPlay Learn's AllPlay Learn's [stories](#) can help children with developmental delay become familiar with the early childhood education and care setting and some of the skills they need to participate in these settings. Other relevant resources for children with developmental delay are:

- Strengths and abilities communication checklist
- Emotion cards (A4)
- Stay play talk poster (simple)
- Stay play talk poster
- Character strengths poster (A3)