



# Late Bloomers

Worried that your toddler isn't hitting her milestones as fast as you expected? There are perfectly normal reasons why she may be taking her time. BY RACHEL RABKIN PECHMAN

**A**round my daughter's first birthday, I started to get anxious about her motor skills. Lena had just gotten the hang of crawling and cruising, and I was thrilled about it—until I noticed that my friend's 1-year-old was walking and even climbing stairs like a pro. Rationally, I knew it was a bad idea to compare them, but the fact that Lena hadn't figured out how to do something her peer had already mastered made me worry. "There's a wide age range for hitting many milestones, and it's completely normal for children to have differences in abilities, motivation, and pace," says Anatoly Belilovsky, M.D., a pediatrician in Brooklyn, New York. "Parents should remind themselves that raising kids isn't a competitive sport."

Still, even the most laid-back moms and dads will find it hard not to stress when it comes to milestones as major as walking and talking. We asked the experts to highlight the developmental skills that send parents into panic mode—and what you can do to help if you think your toddler is lagging behind.

## Waiting to Walk

Kids may attempt their first step as early as 8 months, but they're not considered "late walkers" until after 15 months. And even then, it doesn't mean your child has a serious delay. He might be getting around just fine by crawling—and not be in a hurry to walk—or he could be focusing all his energy on mastering another skill, such as talking. "Development often comes in spurts," explains Geoffrey Putt, Psy.D., a pediatric psychologist and director of parenting and family support services at Akron Children's Hospital, in Ohio. "Kids may develop quickly in one area while holding back in another."

**WHAT YOU CAN DO** Start off by making sure your child has enough floor time and room to practice. Check childproofing (put up gates to guard stairs and secure bookshelves) so you can let him cruise around furniture without safety concerns. You can also encourage him to take steps by playing movement games such as "Come to Mommy," walking with him

while holding his hands, or giving him sturdy push-toys (not baby walkers, which can hinder development).

## Taking Time to Talk

As eager as you are to hear your child's first word, she might be fine with babbling until closer to 16 months. "In many cases, kids' language skills may seem to lag behind, and then you see a sudden explosion of words all at once," says Dr. Putt. "So if your 1-year-old isn't really talking yet, that shouldn't be cause for concern." You might just be so good at reading her nonverbal cues (grunts, pointing, and other gestures) that she may not feel the need to talk.

**WHAT YOU CAN DO** Even if your child isn't speaking much, it doesn't mean she can't understand you or isn't about to make a breakthrough. The best thing you can do is talk to her throughout the day. "Make eye contact and narrate what you're doing, whether it's putting on her shoes or preparing lunch," recommends Patricia Beach, M.D., director of general academic pediatrics at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston.

It's also a good idea to label objects for her. At the grocery store, you can say, "Red apple," and point it out to her. Doing this and other verbal activities, such as reading books and singing songs like "The Hokey-Pokey," exposes her to new words and teaches her that things have names. If all else fails, pretend not to get what her gestures mean at first, suggests Dr. Belilovsky. Say, "I don't understand. Do you want the bottle?"

## Holding Off on Hand Play

Parenting books often point to pat-a-cake as the go-to hand game by 11 or 12 months, but your kid might have missed that memo. "Children do what's fun," says Dr. Putt. "If they don't think the game is amusing, they won't play."

**WHAT YOU CAN DO** Since hand play helps build coordination, fine motor skills, and spatial awareness, keep at it even if your child doesn't get involved right away. Try other interactive gesture games and songs with him to find one he likes the best. He might turn his nose up at pat-a-cake, but peekaboo, "Itsy-Bitsy Spider," or high-fiving might be more his speed. Make sure you practice the activities that engage him the most.

## Avoiding Utensils

While most kids can hold a fork before 15 months, they lack the dexterity and hand-eye coordination to use it well. If your child shows no interest in trying, she may think using her fingers to pick up food is a perfectly okay way to go—or maybe she just doesn't like your hovering. "A lot of parents are afraid to introduce utensils because they don't want to have a big cleanup," says Dr. Putt. "However, your child needs to practice—and make messes—to improve her skills."

**WHAT YOU CAN DO** Give your toddler a spoon or a fork at every meal, even if it sits there unused or ends up tossed on the floor, and place a splat mat under her chair—this way, you won't feel the need to

## When to Worry

There's usually not much to be concerned about if a child is slow in reaching a motor or language milestone. But if he's having trouble with a variety of developmental skills or you feel uneasy, talk to your pediatrician about having him evaluated. Ask yourself these questions about your child after his first birthday:

Can he follow simple directions, such as "Bring me the block"?

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Is he attempting to walk (by 15 months)?

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Can he feed himself finger foods?

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Did he say his first word (by 16 months)?

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Does he make eye contact when you speak to him?

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Can he imitate basic tasks, like holding a phone to his ear?

jump up every time she spills food. You can model how to use a spoon or fork for her and even gently guide her hand to show her how it's done. But don't force it. It's better to let her switch back to her fingers than to cause her to get frustrated and turned off about using utensils. □



**"I think my 13-month-old recognizes *Goodnight Moon*, but my husband disagrees. Who's right?"**

Both of you, actually. Long before 12 months, babies are fully capable of remembering voices, faces, tasks, and visual patterns such as those found in *Goodnight Moon* and other books, explains Mary L. Courage, Ph.D.,

professor of child psychology at Memorial University in Newfoundland, Canada. "However, the context—or where the experience occurs—is extremely important to babies," says Dr. Courage. "If they learn something in one situation (snuggled in your arms and being read to right before bedtime, for example), they may not be able to remember it as well in another one. But this dependency on context diminishes as they grow older." The bottom line: Toddlers can learn and remember at this stage, but they can also forget easily.