HEALTH BASICS

Developmental milestones record - 4 years

A four-year developmental milestones record documents skills a child shows in play, communication, learning, movement, and daily activities.

WHAT IT IS
A snapshot of skills many children show by age four

WHERE IT COMES UP
Four-year health visits, preschool reviews, and parent records

WHY IT MATTERS
Helps identify children who may benefit from closer assessment

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease, diagnosis, or pass-fail test

WHO TO ASK
Pediatric clinician, family clinician, health visitor, or school nurse

HOW IT IS CHECKED
Parent report, observation, and sometimes standardized developmental screening

Overview

A developmental milestones record describes what a child can usually do around age four. It covers areas such as communication, play, learning, movement, behavior, and everyday tasks.

The record is not a disease or diagnosis. It is also not a test that a child passes or fails. Children develop at different rates, and they may show a skill in one setting but not another.

Milestone lists can differ slightly. For example, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists skills that most children-at least 75%-can do by a certain age. Other records may use different evidence or divide skills into different age ranges.

Examples of four-year milestones include:

These are examples, not a complete checklist for every child.

- Using sentences with four or more words
- Talking about something that happened during the day
- Naming some colors and answering simple questions
- Taking part in pretend play and asking to play with other children

- Comforting someone who is hurt or sad
- Drawing a person with several body parts
- Catching a large ball most of the time
- Holding a pencil or crayon with fingers and thumb rather than a fist
- Managing tasks such as unbuttoning some buttons or serving food with supervision

How it works

A parent or caregiver may complete the record before or during a health visit. Preschool staff may also share observations, with the family's agreement. A clinician may ask for examples, watch the child play or talk, and review any concerns.

Observation during one appointment has limits. A child may be tired, anxious, shy, unwell, or unfamiliar with the setting. Information about what the child usually does at home, preschool, and in the community is therefore important.

Developmental surveillance means tracking development over time. It includes listening to concerns, reviewing the child's history, observing skills, and discussing progress at routine visits.

Developmental screening is more structured. It uses a validated questionnaire or set of tasks to identify children who may need closer assessment. A screening result does not establish a diagnosis.

A developmental evaluation is a more detailed assessment. Depending on the concern, it may involve a pediatric clinician, psychologist, speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, hearing specialist, or education service.

Hearing and vision checks are separate from a milestone record, although they may be offered around the same time. Hearing or vision difficulties can affect how a child communicates, learns, moves, or responds to instructions.

Why it matters for your health

The record helps build a picture of a child's development over time. It can show areas of strength as well as skills that may need another look.

Recognizing a concern can lead to a hearing or vision test, a standardized developmental screen, or an assessment of a specific skill. Some children may be offered support through

healthcare, speech and language services, or their preschool or local education system.

Support does not always require a diagnosis. For example, a child may be assessed for communication support while the reason for a language difficulty is still being explored.

A single missing milestone usually cannot explain why a child is developing differently. Patterns matter more. These include how many areas are affected, whether skills are continuing to develop, and whether a child has lost abilities they previously used.

The family's concerns also matter. A checklist should not override a clear concern about communication, movement, behavior, hearing, vision, or loss of skills.

What can go wrong

The record itself does not cause medical problems. However, missed milestones or loss of skills can sometimes relate to a condition that needs assessment.

Possible explanations include hearing loss, a vision problem, a speech sound disorder, developmental language disorder, autism, intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, or another movement or neurological condition. No milestone checklist can distinguish between these possibilities.

Development may also be affected by a child's opportunities and circumstances. A skill may not have been practised, or the child may not show it around unfamiliar people. Stress, illness, poor sleep, and major changes at home can affect behavior during an assessment.

Learning more than one language does not cause a developmental language disorder. A multilingual child's communication should be considered across all the languages they use, rather than judging one language alone.

An isolated concern without any loss of skills can usually be discussed at a routine appointment. You do not need to wait for the next scheduled visit if you remain worried or if several areas seem affected.

Contact a healthcare or developmental service promptly if a child loses skills they previously used, such as words, social interaction, walking, or hand control. Gradual loss of skills needs timely assessment even when the child otherwise seems well.

Seek emergency help if a sudden loss of ability occurs with a seizure, difficulty breathing, unresponsiveness, new one-sided weakness, or another abrupt serious change. These are emergency warning signs, not ordinary milestone differences.

What you can do

A milestone record is most useful when it includes real examples rather than only checked boxes.

You can support development through conversation, shared reading, active play, drawing, pretend play, and simple supervised tasks. These activities provide practice, but they are not a treatment for an unidentified condition and cannot guarantee a particular developmental outcome.

There is no home checklist that can diagnose a developmental condition. If the record raises a concern, the practical next step is to request an assessment rather than repeatedly testing the child at home.

In many places, families can also ask their local preschool or education authority about developmental or special education assessment. Access routes differ by location.

- Note what the child does, where it happened, and approximately when it began
- Record skills seen at home, preschool, and in other familiar settings
- Include words and sentences used across all the child's languages
- Write down any skills the child once had but no longer uses
- Ask whether a standardized developmental screen is appropriate
- Ask whether hearing or vision testing could help explain the concern
- Bring preschool reports or videos of everyday skills if the service accepts them
- Ask what follow-up is planned and when progress should be reviewed

Common questions

Does a child need to meet every listed milestone at exactly four years?

No. Milestones describe a broad developmental pattern, not a deadline. A clinician considers the whole picture, including progress over time and the child's opportunities, health, and daily environment.

Is a milestone record the same as a developmental screening test?

No. A record may be used during developmental surveillance. A screening test is a validated questionnaire or structured assessment with specific scoring rules.

Does an abnormal screening result mean a child has a condition?

No. It means that further assessment may be useful. Screening can identify possible concerns,

but it does not provide a diagnosis by itself.

Should I compare the child with siblings or preschool classmates?

Comparisons may draw attention to a concern, but they are not a reliable assessment. Children have different temperaments, experiences, strengths, and health histories. Use specific observations instead.

How are milestones considered for a child with a physical or sensory disability?

The record should be interpreted in the context of the child's abilities and access needs. An assessment can focus on how the child communicates, learns, moves, and participates, including the use of adaptive equipment or alternative communication.

What if there are no concerns?

Keep the record for routine health and preschool reviews. No extra testing is needed solely because the child has turned four, unless a local service recommends it or a new concern appears.

Sources