



GROWING FORWARD

A Guide to Developmental Progression



Model only. Child not autistic.

Created to Support the ACHIEVE Parent Training Curriculum

Growing Forward

A Guide to Developmental Progression

Understanding Developmental Growth

Every child develops on their own timeline—and every skill your child builds is part of a bigger story. This guide is designed to help you understand how different areas of development often build over time. It isn't a checklist or a set of expectations. Instead, it's a flexible tool to help you notice what your child is already doing and what might come next.

You'll find progressions across multiple domains—like communication, motor skills, emotional growth, and more. These progressions are based on research and observation, but they're written in everyday language so they feel useful, not overwhelming.

Whether your child is building early skills or developing independence, this guide is here to support you.

 *Use this tool to celebrate progress, explore possibilities, and guide your next steps—at your child's pace.*

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Developmental Skill Progression Overview

Domain	Early Skills	Emerging Skills	Developing Skills	Advanced Skills	Fluent/Independent Skills
Communication	Responds to sound; coos and babbles	Gestures to communicate; babbles with consonants	Uses single words; follows simple directions	Uses 2-3 word phrases; asks questions	Carries conversations; tells stories
Social Interaction	Makes eye contact; smiles at caregivers	Plays simple games; imitates facial expressions	Shows interest in peers; initiates play	Takes turns; engages in pretend play	Builds friendships; navigates social conflict
Emotional Regulation	Cries to express needs; calms with caregiver	Seeks comfort; expresses basic emotions	Labels feelings; begins to self-soothe	Uses calming strategies with support	Regulates emotions in challenging situations
Cognitive Skills	Explores objects; responds to changes in environment	Matches objects; begins simple problem-solving	Completes simple puzzles; recalls recent events	Understands sequencing; solves simple problems	Thinks flexibly; solves problems in new ways
Executive Functioning	Begins to wait briefly; notices patterns	Follows 1-step directions; attempts short tasks	Follows 2-step directions; begins planning actions	Initiates tasks independently; adjusts behavior	Plans multi-step tasks; manages transitions
Sensory Processing	Shows strong reactions to textures or sounds	Tolerates certain textures and sounds with support	Seeks or avoids sensory input intentionally	Uses sensory strategies to focus or calm	Maintains attention despite stimulation
Gross Motor Skills	Lifts head during tummy time; kicks legs	Rolls over; sits with support; pushes up on hands	Sits independently; crawls; pulls to stand	Walks independently; runs; climbs stairs	Runs, jumps, pedals tricycle; balances briefly
Fine Motor Skills	Grasps objects; brings hands to mouth	Transfers objects between hands; scribbles	Stacks blocks; turns knobs; uses utensils with help	Uses scissors; draws shapes; strings beads	Buttons clothing; cuts with precision
Daily Living Skills	Brings hands to mouth; shows interest in feeding	Feeds self with fingers; removes socks/shoes	Feeds with spoon; brushes teeth with help	Uses toilet with help; helps dress self	Manages daily routine; dresses/toilets independently

Domain	Early Skills	Emerging Skills	Developing Skills	Advanced Skills	Fluent/Independent Skills
Early Learning / Academic Readiness	Looks at books; turns pages with help	Names common objects; recognizes basic shapes	Counts items; names colors; recites alphabet	Identifies letters/ numbers; writes name	Reads sight words; writes short sentences

Communication Skills

Domain	Pre-Verbal / Foundational	Emerging Skills	Developing Skills	Advanced Skills	Fluent / Independent
Receptive Language	Turns to name, startles to sound	Understands familiar words (e.g., "no", "bye")	Follows 1-step directions (e.g., "get your shoes")	Understands wh-questions; short stories	Follows multi-step instructions; understands time, humor
Expressive Language	Cooing, vowel sounds (e.g., "ah")	Babbles with consonants (e.g., "ba", "da")	Uses single words meaningfully	Combines 2–4 words (e.g., "I want more juice")	Uses full sentences; retells events and shares ideas
Social Communication	Smiles, makes eye contact	Takes turns in play or vocalizing	Initiates interaction to request or protest	Maintains simple back-and-forth conversation	Adjusts communication to listener; uses humor, persuasion
Nonverbal Communication	Reaches, looks toward sounds	Points to request or show	Uses gestures + eye gaze for communication	Uses facial expressions consistently	Uses body language, facial cues, gestures appropriately
Pragmatic Language	Cries or coos to indicate need	Uses words/gestures for needs	Uses greetings, requests, refusals	Begins to tell stories, ask for clarification	Follows conversational rules (e.g., topic maintenance, turn-taking)
Imitation / Vocal Play	Vocal play (e.g., squeals, laughs)	Copies simple sounds or actions	Imitates words/phrases	Copies longer sentences or routines	Uses imitation in social play and language learning
Joint Attention	Follows gaze, shared focus briefly	Points to share interest	Alternates gaze between object and person	Initiates shared attention (e.g., "look!")	Maintains attention and shares ideas in conversations

Social Interaction

Domain	Early Skills	Emerging Skills	Developing Skills	Advanced Skills	Fluent/Independent Skills
Engagement with Others	Looks toward people; enjoys being held	Initiates interaction with familiar people	Initiates and maintains simple social interactions	Joins group activities with minimal prompting	Initiates group play and includes others
Joint Attention	Follows gaze or gestures to objects	Points to share interest (e.g., 'look at that!')	Shares experiences by pointing or showing objects	Uses gestures and eye contact to share experiences	Uses gestures, words, and context for shared understanding
Turn-Taking	Smiles in response to others' smiles	Takes simple turns in games like rolling a ball	Takes turns in conversation or structured games	Handles turn-taking and sharing with minimal support	Negotiates turn-taking and resolves simple conflicts
Understanding Social Rules	Notices when routines are disrupted	Responds to "no" or simple social rules	Understands and follows basic social expectations	Adapts behavior based on setting (e.g., quiet at library)	Understands perspective-taking and fairness
Friendship & Peer Interaction	Plays alongside others without interaction	Watches peers; shows interest in play	Plays cooperatively with 1–2 peers with adult support	Builds peer relationships through shared play	Builds and maintains friendships over time

Emotional Regulation

Domain	Early Skills	Emerging Skills	Developing Skills	Advanced Skills	Fluent/Independent Skills
Awareness of Emotions	Reacts physically to discomfort or overstimulation	Begins to show different emotions (e.g., happy, sad)	Labels simple feelings (e.g., 'mad', 'scared')	Identifies causes of emotions in self and others	Recognizes complex feelings (e.g., jealousy, embarrassment)
Expressing Emotions	Cries or vocalizes when distressed	Uses gestures or basic words to express feelings	Expresses emotions with words and gestures	Uses words to explain how they feel and why	Expresses emotions clearly and respectfully
Seeking Support	Calms with caregiver's presence or touch	Looks to caregiver when upset or uncertain	Asks for help when upset or frustrated	Chooses appropriate people to go to for help	Balances seeking help with self-regulation
Coping Strategies	Stops crying when picked up or comforted	Engages in soothing behaviors (e.g., sucking thumb)	Tries learned strategies (e.g., deep breaths, sensory tools)	Applies strategies independently in some situations	Selects and adapts strategies to manage emotions
Recovery & Resilience	Resumes activity after brief upset with help	Recovers from disappointment with adult help	Returns to calm after frustration with minimal prompting	Regains composure and re-engages in activity	Stays regulated through challenges and adapts to change

Cognitive Skills

Cognitive Skills	Early	Emerging	Developing	Advanced
Object Permanence	Notices objects disappear	Searches for hidden object	Understands object is hidden but still exists	Tracks hidden object through multiple steps
Cause and Effect	Responds to actions (e.g., shakes rattle to hear sound)	Pushes button to activate toy	Experiments to create new effects	Predicts outcomes from actions
Problem Solving	Reaches for desired object	Uses trial and error with puzzles	Plans actions to solve problems	Solves complex or multi-step problems
Imitation	Copies simple gestures or sounds	Imitates actions with new objects	Imitates pretend play scenarios	Incorporates new elements into play themes
Attention and Focus	Briefly looks at faces or toys	Shifts focus between people and tasks	Focuses for several minutes on a task	Sustains attention in group activities
Memory	Recognizes familiar faces or routines	Recalls familiar activities	Remembers short sequences	Uses memory to plan future actions
Symbolic Thinking	Pretends with a single item (e.g., drinks from cup)	Uses one item to represent another (e.g., block as phone)	Engages in role play with multiple props	Creates detailed pretend scenarios
Categorization	Sorts by basic feature (e.g., color)	Sorts by two features (e.g., shape and color)	Groups and labels items by category	Explains categories and abstract groupings
Sequencing	Follows 1-step directions	Follows 2-step directions	Retells simple events in order	Organizes events with beginning, middle, end
Perspective Taking	Shows awareness of others' emotions	Describes how someone else might feel	Understands others can think differently	Considers others' thoughts and intentions

Executive Functioning Skills

Skill Domain	Emerging Awareness	Early Development	Expanding Skills	Increased Independence	Advanced Use
Attention & Focus	Notices and looks at interesting objects briefly	Can stay focused on a simple task for a few minutes	Shifts attention between tasks with adult support	Completes short tasks without reminders	Sustains attention across longer, multi-step tasks
Impulse Control	Stops when name is called or when redirected	Begins to wait for turn with reminders	Can stop self from interrupting or grabbing	Delays gratification (e.g., waits for snack time)	Uses coping strategies to manage urges (e.g., counting, breathing)
Working Memory	Remembers simple routines like “get shoes”	Follows 1–2 step directions consistently	Holds multiple pieces of information in mind (e.g., instructions + task steps)	Remembers daily expectations without prompts	Plans activities using multi-step thinking (e.g., “What do I need for school tomorrow?”)
Cognitive Flexibility	Accepts small changes with adult support	Tries new ways when first strategy doesn’t work	Adjusts behavior based on feedback	Transitions between tasks with reduced difficulty	Adapts to unexpected changes with minimal stress
Emotional Self-Regulation	Begins to calm down with co-regulation	Uses simple tools to self-soothe (e.g., fidget, deep breath)	Recognizes emotions and chooses a strategy to cope	Regulates emotional responses during minor challenges	Manages stress proactively and uses flexible thinking in emotional situations
Planning & Organization	Carries out basic routines with adult guidance	Gathers needed items for a single task with support	Organizes items into categories or routines (e.g., toys, clothes)	Prepares materials for an activity independently	Plans out multistep projects (e.g., pack for trip, complete school assignment)
Goal-Directed Persistence	Starts tasks with prompting	Completes preferred activities without quitting	Attempts non-preferred tasks when supported	Stays with challenging tasks with occasional reminders	Breaks larger tasks into manageable steps and persists even when motivation is low
Self-Monitoring	Notices when adult reacts positively or negatively to behavior	Recognizes when something is not right (e.g., “Oops!”)	Begins to correct mistakes with reminders	Evaluates how they did and makes simple adjustments	Reflects on outcomes, identifies what worked/ didn’t, and adapts plan accordingly

Sensory Processing

Skill Domain	Emerging Awareness	Early Development	Expanding Skills	Increased Independence	Advanced Use
Sensory Registration	Reacts strongly or not at all to light, sound, or touch	Begins to notice sensory input (e.g., loud sounds, textures)	Identifies when something feels “too much” or “just right”	Verbalizes sensory needs (e.g., “Too loud” or “I need quiet”)	Chooses activities/ environments based on awareness of sensory preferences
Body Awareness (Proprioception)	Bumps into things, unsure where body is in space	Uses walls or furniture for support during movement	Engages in heavy work (e.g., pushing, jumping) for regulation	Adjusts pressure or force appropriately (e.g., hugging, writing, playing)	Uses movement proactively to stay calm and focused
Movement & Balance (Vestibular)	Seeks or avoids swinging, spinning, climbing	Enjoys rough play or cautious with movement	Tries new movement activities with support	Navigates playgrounds, stairs, or uneven ground with confidence	Chooses physical activity based on energy level and self-awareness
Touch (Tactile)	Avoids or seeks textures (e.g., food, clothing, messy play)	Tolerates a wider range of textures with support	Expresses when something feels uncomfortable or enjoyable	Selects preferred textures for clothing or food intentionally	Participates in diverse tactile experiences comfortably (e.g., art, grooming, cooking)
Sound (Auditory)	Reacts strongly to certain sounds or seems unaware of them	Covers ears or becomes distressed with loud or sudden noise	Learns to use tools like headphones or quiet spaces	Tells others when sounds are too much and uses strategies	Self-advocates for accommodations in noisy environments (e.g., stores, classrooms)
Sight (Visual)	Stares at lights or avoids bright environments	Notices visual clutter or distraction	Focuses on tasks even in busy environments	Organizes workspace to reduce visual overload	Adjusts lighting or surroundings to support focus or calm
Taste/Smell (Oral/Olfactory)	Refuses or craves certain flavors, textures, or smells	Tries new foods with support or seeks strong flavors	Describes preferences and tolerates small changes	Tries new foods or experiences with mild sensory differences	Navigates meals and social settings with a range of sensory options confidently
Regulation Through Sensory Input	Calms with rocking, sucking, or fidgeting behaviors	Begins to use simple sensory tools (e.g., chew toy, blanket)	Chooses sensory activities to feel better (e.g., jumping, brushing, listening to music)	Uses sensory strategies before challenges arise	Builds personalized sensory routines to support attention, mood, and behavior throughout the day

Gross Motor Skills

Skill Domain	Emerging Awareness	Early Development	Expanding Skills	Increased Independence	Advanced Use
Head & Neck Control	Lifts and turns head briefly when on tummy	Holds head up steadily during supported sitting	Maintains head position during movement and play	Controls head in all positions and during transitions	Maintains posture during complex tasks (e.g., looking while moving)
Trunk Strength & Control	Pushes up while on tummy	Sits with support, then without support	Moves from lying to sitting and sitting to crawling	Sits and moves with core strength and balance	Maintains balance during dynamic movements
Rolling	Rolls from tummy to back or vice versa	Rolls purposefully to reach toys	Uses rolling to transition between positions	Rolls fluidly and intentionally in play	Incorporates rolling into play and obstacle courses
Sitting	Briefly holds sitting position with support	Sits independently for longer periods	Moves between sitting and other positions easily	Sits with balance during play and meals	Sits comfortably during varied tasks for extended time
Crawling/Climbing	Pushes up on hands and knees	Rocks or crawls short distances	Crawls to reach items or climb low surfaces	Climbs stairs or structures with supervision	Climbs with planning and confidence on uneven surfaces
Standing	Pulls to stand using furniture	Stands holding on, then stands briefly without support	Cruises along furniture, stands independently	Stands from floor without using hands	Stands still during activities requiring balance
Walking	Takes first steps with support	Walks independently with wide stance	Walks with increasing speed and confidence	Walks on uneven surfaces, while carrying items	Walks backwards, sideways, tiptoes, or while changing directions
Running	Attempts to run but unsteady	Runs short distances with occasional falls	Runs with control and changes direction	Runs smoothly and stops/starts on cue	Uses running in games and group play with speed variation
Jumping	Bounces in place while holding support	Jumps up with both feet leaving ground	Jumps forward and off low surfaces	Jumps over small objects and in place repeatedly	Jumps with rhythm (e.g., jump rope) or in active games
Balancing	Stands with wide base for balance	Balances briefly on one foot with support	Walks on a line or narrow path with assistance	Balances on one foot, uses stepping stones	Balances during play (e.g., hopping, dance, sports drills)

Skill Domain	Emerging Awareness	Early Development	Expanding Skills	Increased Independence	Advanced Use
Throwing	Flings object with little control	Throws ball with two hands	Throws ball toward target or person	Throws with one hand using shoulder rotation	Adjusts force and direction for accuracy and purpose
Catching	Reacts to moving object	Catches large ball by trapping against body	Catches smaller balls with two hands	Anticipates and catches with one or two hands	Catches objects during games with timing and control
Kicking	Walks into ball to move it	Kicks stationary ball forward	Steps before kicking and aims at target	Kicks with force and adjusts for different sizes	Kicks while moving or during games like soccer
Coordination in Play	Explores movement by crawling/climbing	Uses body to engage in simple movement games	Combines movements in active play (e.g., run and kick)	Participates in group games requiring timing and direction	Demonstrates full-body coordination in sports, dance, or martial arts

Fine Motor Skills

Skill Domain	Emerging Awareness	Early Development	Expanding Skills	Increased Independence	Advanced Use
Grasping & Reaching	Reaches for toys or people with open hand	Grasps toys using whole hand (palmar grasp)	Transfers objects between hands; uses two hands together	Picks up small objects with thumb and finger (pincer grasp)	Manipulates small objects with control (e.g., beads, coins)
Hand Strength & Control	Holds items briefly before dropping	Holds toys while moving or exploring	Applies pressure to squeeze or pinch soft items	Uses controlled pressure to open containers, press buttons	Maintains hand strength through varied fine motor tasks
Isolated Finger Use	Explores with whole hand	Uses index finger to point or push buttons	Begins poking, tapping, or pushing with individual fingers	Uses fingers independently for activities like peeling or pinching	Uses multiple fingers precisely (e.g., typing, buttoning)
Object Manipulation	Brings objects to mouth; bangs toys together	Turns pages in board book; rotates wrist to explore	Builds small towers; inserts pegs into holes	Uses both hands together for tasks like stringing beads or folding paper	Uses tools (e.g., scissors, tape dispenser) effectively in varied tasks
Tool Use	Holds crayon with fist	Scribbles randomly on paper	Draws lines and circles; uses spoon with minimal spilling	Uses utensils, scissors, or markers with correct grip	Writes legibly; cuts along lines; uses a ruler or small tools appropriately
Hand-Eye Coordination	Swats at hanging objects	Reaches and grasps for toys intentionally	Stacks blocks; places shapes in sorter	Threads beads; completes inset puzzles	Performs detailed tasks requiring visual-motor coordination (e.g., drawing inside shapes)
Bilateral Coordination	Holds bottle or toy with both hands	Stabilizes paper with one hand while coloring with the other	Uses one hand to do task while the other supports	Zips, buttons, and stabilizes objects during cutting or writing	Coordinates both hands in tasks like tying shoes or using utensils efficiently
Dexterity in Play	Explores toys by mouthing and shaking	Pushes buttons, spins wheels on toys	Turns knobs, fits puzzle pieces	Builds with small blocks; twists lids and opens containers	Constructs or creates with precision (e.g., LEGO, clay modeling, folding origami)

Daily Living Skills

Skill Domain	Emerging Awareness	Early Development	Expanding Skills	Increased Independence	Fluent/Independent Skills
Feeding	Sucks or drinks from breast/bottle with support	Brings hand to mouth; starts holding bottle or cup	Uses fingers to self-feed; brings spoon to mouth with help	Uses spoon and cup with minimal spillage; tries using a fork	Uses utensils independently; eats meals with minimal adult support
Dressing	Lifts arms or legs to assist with dressing	Pulls off socks or hat; places arm through sleeve with help	Puts on loose clothing with guidance (e.g., shirt over head)	Dresses with prompts; fastens large buttons or zippers with help	Dresses independently, including managing closures like zippers, snaps, and buttons
Toileting	Shows signs of discomfort when wet/soiled	Sits on potty with support or modeling	Signals need to go; stays dry for longer periods	Initiates toileting with reminders; wipes and flushes with some help	Toilets independently, including hygiene and managing clothing
Hygiene	Tolerates hands/face being wiped; reacts to grooming routines	Washes hands with help; brushes teeth with assistance	Washes hands with some prompts; brushes teeth with increased accuracy	Completes hygiene routines with prompts or supervision	Manages hygiene independently, including hair brushing, face washing, and oral care
Bathing	Enjoys or resists water sensory experience	Sits in bath with support; tolerates water over head	Helps wash body with assistance	Washes body parts independently; rinses with support	Bathes independently with safety awareness
Sleep Routines	Responds to soothing; calms with caregiver	Recognizes bedtime routine cues	Transitions to sleep with consistent routine	Prepares for bed (e.g., pajamas, brushing teeth) with minimal prompting	Manages full bedtime routine independently, including self-soothing as needed
Personal Responsibility	Responds to adult's directions about safety and care	Follows basic safety instructions (e.g., "hot," "stop")	Carries backpack or belongings with reminders	Packs necessary items for outings with support	Independently organizes personal belongings (e.g., school bag, clothing, hygiene items)
Household Participation	Watches others perform simple tasks (e.g., cleaning, cooking)	Imitates cleaning (e.g., wiping table); helps put away toys	Completes simple chores with adult guidance (e.g., feeding pet)	Takes responsibility for daily task with reminders	Manages age-appropriate chores and routines independently

Early Learning/Academic Readiness

Skill Domain	Emerging Awareness	Early Development	Expanding Skills	Increased Independence	Fluent/Independent Skills
Print Awareness	Looks at books and turns pages	Points to pictures or words in books	Recognizes own name in print; pretends to read	Tracks words left to right; understands book structure	Reads short sentences or books independently
Alphabet Knowledge	Shows interest in letters or alphabet songs	Names some letters, especially in own name	Identifies most uppercase and some lowercase letters	Matches letters to sounds; begins decoding simple words	Recognizes all letters and sounds; blends sounds to read unknown words
Phonological Awareness	Reacts to rhymes or songs with rhythm	Identifies when words rhyme or start the same	Claps out syllables; segments simple words	Blends sounds to form words; identifies beginning sounds	Manipulates sounds (e.g., changes “cat” to “hat”); supports spelling and fluency
Writing Skills	Scribbles or draws with crayons	Makes intentional marks or shapes	Writes some letters; imitates writing	Writes name and short words; starts writing simple sentences	Writes sentences with structure; uses punctuation and spacing
Number Sense	Notices when quantities change	Counts 1–5 objects with support	Counts to 10+; understands “more” and “less”	Recognizes numerals; matches numerals to quantities	Performs simple addition/subtraction with manipulatives or visuals
Sorting & Categorizing	Puts similar objects together	Sorts by one feature (e.g., color)	Sorts by two features (e.g., shape and color)	Labels groups (e.g., animals, foods)	Classifies by category; explains sorting rules
Fine Motor for Learning	Explores with writing tools and art supplies	Draws lines and circles; grasps writing tools with help	Traces letters or numbers; colors with intention	Uses correct pencil grasp; writes legibly	Writes clearly for extended time; uses tools like scissors, glue, rulers with precision
Learning Behaviors	Attends briefly to books or activities	Follows adult direction for short tasks	Completes familiar activities with support	Works independently for short periods; begins managing materials	Follows classroom routines; persists with tasks; self-monitors work
Listening & Comprehension	Responds to name and familiar words	Understands basic directions or story prompts	Answers questions about stories or conversations	Retells main ideas or details from a story	Draws inferences and makes predictions from stories or instructions

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