



Developmental assessment: Why bother?

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Developmental assessment is part of a wider assessment process that seeks to understand each child's strengths and weaknesses. Because autism is a developmental disorder, we expect autism symptoms to vary with age and vary over time. We also expect that children with autism will have an uneven profile of skills and abilities. Their development is often delayed and disordered.

“Developmental assessment is a process designed to deepen understanding of a child’s competencies and resources and of the care-giving and learning environments most likely to help a child make fullest use of his or her developmental potential”.

Normally, when children are developing skills they do so at a fairly even rate. So for example, we would expect a child who is 2 years of age to be able to:

- walk well
- say several words that we can understand
- recognize him/herself in a mirror
- drink from a cup
- play with an adult
- show body parts (eyes, nose, foot) when asked
- carry a toy while walking
- refer to him/herself by name
- feed him/herself with spoon (may spill)
- occupy him/herself in play
- build a tower of blocks

By four years of age we expect to see more skills developing across areas such as gross and fine motor, communication, thinking and problem solving, self care, socialisation and play. The typically developing 4 year old can:

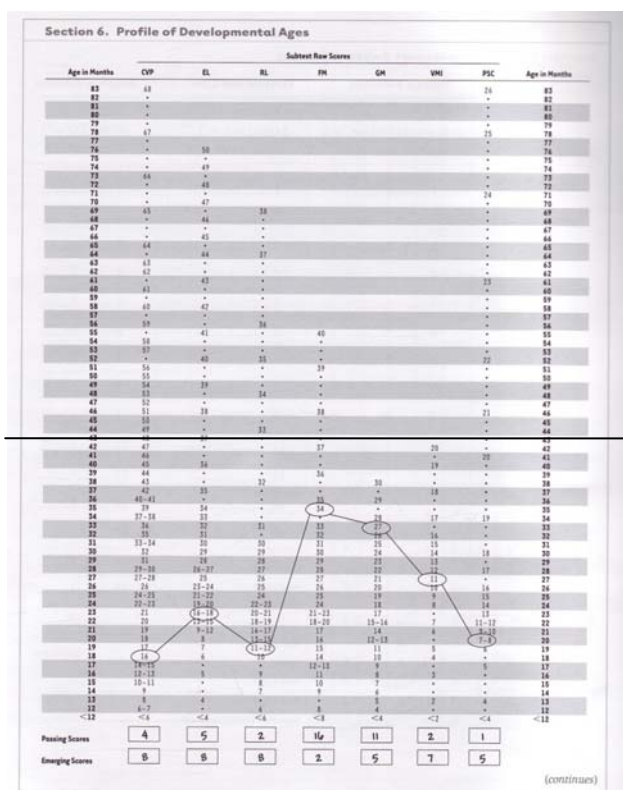
- walk up steps, one foot on each step
- unbutton buttons
- speak in complete sentences
- feed self without spilling
- use toilet
- imitate adults doing simple tasks
- copy a circle
- have a sense of time and know his/her own daily routine
- pick up small objects easily
- tell a short story or relate an experience
- dress self
- wash face and hands
- get along with other children
- build a tower of 10 blocks
- match objects and colours

How do we assess development in young children with autism?

It can be difficult to assess young children. They may be anxious and wary of strangers and new situations, distractible, and have a short attention to task. Some very young children may be unfamiliar with table top activities and sitting in a chair. Assessment can be done in a number of ways, including informal observations, using checklists and standardised developmental assessments. The Psychoeducational Profile: Third Edition (PEP-3) (Schopler, Lansing, Reichler and Marcus) is often used to assess the skills and behaviours of children with autism. It is particularly useful for children with language and learning difficulties, those who have limited attention skills and poor concentration, and children who are not used to a formal testing situation. Children need to feel comfortable in the testing situation and it helps when parents are there with them in the same room so there is no need to separate.

The profile resulting from the PEP-3 charts uneven and idiosyncratic development and emerging skills. When children with autism have a developmental assessment we usually see an uneven profile of abilities that is very different to the flat profile of children who are typically developing and have skills appropriate to their chronological age. Similarly, children with global developmental delay (and who do not have autism) will have a flat profile but it will be below their chronological age. The results from a developmental assessment can be used to assist in educational programming.

Below is a profile of a preschool child with autism and developmental delay.



← Left to right developmental areas are:
CVP: Cognitive verbal performance; **EL:** Expressive Language; **RL:** Receptive Language; **FM:** Fine Motor; **GM:** Gross Motor; **VMI:** Visual Motor Imitation; **PSC:** Personal Self care

← This line shows chronological age: 43 months

This profile shows that skills are not even across developmental areas. At a chronological age of 43 months (line drawn across chart at 43 months) skills range from 33 – 34 months for fine and gross motor skills down to a low of 18 -19 months for cognitive verbal performance and receptive language skills. So although this child is motorically like a three year old, he is more like a younger child of about 18 months to two years with regard to his thinking, learning and communication.

Why is assessment important?

- To establish a baseline of developmental skills.
- To contribute to an individualised programme - profile of emerging skills, strengths and weaknesses and behavioural profile information.
- To track developmental changes in response to teaching and therapy

An uneven profile of abilities like this is usual for children with autism. Even children with autism who are higher functioning will have a scattered profile of abilities with some developmental areas at or above chronological age and others well below chronological age.

A clear understanding of *normal* social, behavioural and language development is required among parents, carers and professionals. Careful assessment of symptoms of autism as well as assessment of strengths and weaknesses is essential before an early intervention plan can be put in place. Reassessment is necessary to track changes and follow progress every 12 months or so. Developmental assessment provides an opportunity for professionals and parents to work together to better understand the child's developmental profile.

Some tips for parents:

- Make sure you are included in the assessment process. You have valuable information to offer and you know your child best.
 - If possible, it is helpful to have both parents present at the assessment to watch what is happening and to contribute information. Mothers and fathers can have different points of view. Afterwards you will have an opportunity to discuss the assessment and check in with each other about what happened.
- Your child should be observed in a number of settings. Gather reports from places your child attends such as the child care centre or kindergarten as these can provide valuable extra information about your child in different settings and with his/her peers.
 - Your child needs to be as comfortable as possible during the assessment. You should be able to stay in the room when your child is being assessed so that he/she does not have to separate from you. Bring along a drink and a snack for break time during the assessment.
 - Ask for a written report. It is best to discuss the report in person with the assessor so that you can check about anything that you don't understand.
 - Remember, above all, you should feel that having a developmental assessment has been helpful in understanding your child and informing decisions about what to do next.

Useful websites:

1. General information about child development and useful play suggestions and activity sheets
www.kidspot.com.au/section+14+Preschool.htm
2. Northern Territory Government site with information about developmental stages
www.families.nt.gov.au/asp/index.asp?pgid=7299
3. “Health Insite”. Australian Government Initiative. Useful information about babies, toddlers, preschool and adolescent children.
www.healthinsite.gov.au/topics/Developmental_Milestones
4. “Parenting and Child Health.” Govt. of South Australia website. Definitions and explanation of terms such as intellectual disability, global developmental delay and developmental delay.
www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=1114&np=306id=1876