

Red flags vs. give-it-time

A plain-language guide for parents of children 18 months to 5, from a pediatric OT

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Almost every parent I meet is holding the same question: **is this something to worry about, or something my child will grow out of?** Most of the time it really is the second one. But "wait and see" isn't a great plan when your gut keeps tugging at you. Here's how I sort it, area by area, in the same words I'd use if we were sitting together.

If your child is a toddler (18 months to 3), start with the toddler line in each column. Almost everything on the right-hand side is written for older preschoolers, and reading it against a 2-year-old will scare you for no reason — tantrums, grabbing, mouthing and crashing are the stage, not a warning. At this age I am really asking four questions: **can an adult settle them, do they come to you when they're upset, do they point at and show you things, and is pretend play starting to appear?**

Please read this as education, not a diagnosis. This handout is general guidance, not an evaluation of your child, and it doesn't replace screening by your pediatrician or a formal OT assessment. Kids develop on their own timelines. Milestones describe what *most* children (75% or more) do by an age, not a pass/fail test.

Handwriting & fine motor

USUALLY GIVE IT TIME

18 months–3

- A whole-fist grip and big scribbles – that is the grip for this age
- More interested in dumping, filling and posting things than in drawing
- No interest in scissors yet; snipping starts closer to 3

3–5

- Messy, uneven letters in preschool and early kindergarten
- Still switching hands here and there around age 3-4
- Coloring outside the lines, or a grip that isn't picture-perfect yet at 3
- Scissor cuts that are jagged at 3-4 – snipping comes first, smooth curves come later

WORTH A CLOSER LOOK

18 months–3

- Not scribbling at all by 2½–3, even after you show them
- Not trying a spoon or an open cup by around 2

3–5

- By 4, still holding a crayon in a fist rather than between fingers and thumb
- Avoids or melts down at coloring, cutting, and puzzles other kids enjoy
- Hand tires or aches after a few minutes of writing
- By 5, can't manage buttons or write any letters of their name

Rough guide: scribbles by 18 months; most 3-year-olds copy a circle and start snipping paper; most 4-5s use a tripod grasp and cut simple shapes. [1][2]

Coordination & gross motor

USUALLY GIVE IT TIME

18 months–3

- Tumbles and bumps while they learn to run, climb and carry things at the same time
- Stiff, wide-legged running at 2; jumping with two feet appears around 2–2½
- Wanting to be carried when they are tired, even though they can walk

3–5

- Clumsy stretches, especially during growth spurts
- Not catching well at 3 – most kids catch a large ball around 4
- Hopping on one foot that's wobbly before 5
- Being the cautious one on the playground

WORTH A CLOSER LOOK

18 months–3

- Not walking on their own by 18 months
- Not running by 2, or not climbing on and off a couch or chair
- Loses a skill they used to have – always worth a call

3–5

- Falls, trips, or bumps into things far more than same-age friends
- By 5, can't hop on one foot or manage stairs with alternating feet
- Tires much faster than peers, or avoids playgrounds and PE
- Loses a skill they used to have – always worth a call

Reference points: walks alone by 18 months; runs by 2; catches a large ball most of the time by 4; hops on one foot by 5. [1]

Attention & regulation

USUALLY GIVE IT TIME

18 months-3

- Tantrums with no coping strategies of their own – that is the stage doing its job
- A couple of minutes of attention, and mostly on something they chose
- Grabbing, blurting and walking off in the middle of an activity
- Needing you to be the calm – at this age there is co-regulation and not much else

3-5

- A 4-year-old who can't sit still through a long dinner
- Big feelings, tears, and the occasional meltdown when tired or hungry
- Short focus on things they don't enjoy but long focus on things they love
- Wiggly, loud days after a schedule change

WORTH A CLOSER LOOK

18 months-3

- No adult can settle them, most days – not you, not anyone
- Doesn't come to you for comfort at all when they are hurt or upset
- Doesn't point at or show you things by 2
- Can't settle even one-to-one, in a quiet room, with a familiar adult

3-5

- By 5, can't stay with a story or craft for even 5-10 minutes (screens don't count)
- The same difficulties show up everywhere – home, school, grandma's
- They keep going for months and get in the way of learning or friendships
- Meltdowns are long, frequent, and hard to recover from

Every child has off days. What I watch is how long it lasts, how much it takes to end it, and whether it is getting easier over the months. [1][3]

Sensory

USUALLY GIVE IT TIME

18 months-3

- Mouthing, spinning, crashing and climbing – this is ordinary toddler play, not a warning sign
- Hating nappy changes, haircuts or the bath on some days
- Covering ears at a hand dryer or a vacuum

3-5

- Hating tags, seams, or a specific pair of socks
- Covering ears at fireworks or a hand dryer
- Loving spinning, jumping, and crashing into cushions
- Disliking messy hands at first, then warming up with practice

WORTH A CLOSER LOOK

18 months-3

- Crashing, spinning or mouthing is the only play you see, all day
- Doesn't seem to notice bumps, falls or cuts
- Haircuts, baths, teeth and dressing are a battle every single time

3-5

- Sensory reactions shrink daily life – haircuts, baths, teeth, or getting dressed are a battle
- Can't stay at birthday parties, gyms, or the cafeteria
- Seeks so much movement that safety is a concern
- You are planning your days around avoiding triggers

The question isn't whether a preference exists – it's whether it's blocking everyday participation. That's exactly what OTs look at. [4]

Self-care (dressing, feeding, toileting)

USUALLY GIVE IT TIME

18 months-3

- Helping rather than doing – an arm into the sleeve, one thing carried to the table
- Taking clothes off comes long before putting them on
- Toilet learning usually starts somewhere around 2½-3, and later is still normal
- Wanting to do it themselves and then wanting you to do it, ten minutes apart

3-5

- Needing help with buttons, snaps, and zippers at 3-4
- Shoes on the wrong feet, shirt on backwards
- Wanting you to do it even though they can – that's often about connection, not skill
- Not tying laces before 5-6

WORTH A CLOSER LOOK

18 months-3

- No interest in feeding themselves at 2 – fingers or spoon
- Not taking off loose clothes, like open jackets or elastic-waist pants, by around 3
- Not helping at all when you dress them – no arm out, no foot up

3-5

- By 3-4, can't take off simple clothes or pull on pants without fasteners
- By 4, still can't unbutton any buttons; by 5, can't button any
- Not showing daytime toilet awareness by around 3-4
- By 5-6, still fully dependent for dressing

General guides: helps with dressing by 18 months; takes off loose clothes by around 2½; dresses self with help on fasteners by 3-4; shoe tying by 5-6. [1][5]

Play & connecting with you

USUALLY GIVE IT TIME

18 months-3

- Playing next to other children rather than with them – that is the norm until about 3
- Not sharing, and short-lived turn-taking, at 2-3
- Pretend play arriving in flashes: feeding a doll, a block that becomes a phone

3-5

- Parallel play at 3 – playing beside friends, narrating their own game
- Needing an adult to help them join a group
- One favorite game on repeat for weeks

WORTH A CLOSER LOOK

18 months-3

- No pretend play by 2½-3
- Doesn't bring things over or show you what they are doing
- You can't get any back-and-forth going – no peekaboo, no rolling a ball, no copying you

3-5

- No pretend play at 4
- Plays alone every day at 4-5, with no interest in other children
- Can't follow a simple group game with rules at 5

Play is how the rest of it shows up. Pointing, showing, pretending and joining in are the pieces I look for before I look at anything else. [1]

Letter reversals (b, d, p, q)

USUALLY GIVE IT TIME

18 months-3

- Nothing here applies yet. Letters and writing are a 4-plus conversation – a toddler who scribbles is doing exactly the right thing.

4 and up

- Flipped letters and numbers in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade
- Writing whole words backwards now and then, or mixing up 2 and s
- Reversals that come and go depending on how fast they're writing

WORTH A CLOSER LOOK

4 and up

- Still reversing b/d regularly by third grade
- Reversals come with real struggle in reading, spelling, or sounding out words
- Their teacher is also seeing it and raising it with you

Reversing letters is part of how kids learn to write. If the b/d habit hasn't faded by third grade, it's worth finding out why. [6]

W-sitting

USUALLY GIVE IT TIME

18 months-3

- Very common as toddlers get up into sitting and turn to play – nothing to correct
- In and out of lots of positions across a play session is what I want to see

3 and up

- W-sitting on its own. It's a common, comfortable position for flexible kids, especially ages 3-6
- Sitting that way sometimes while playing, then moving in and out of other positions
- Slightly pigeon-toed walking that goes along with it – this usually resolves on its own with growth

WORTH A CLOSER LOOK

18 months-3

- Not walking by 18 months, or a body that looks floppy and slumped when they sit
- W-sitting is the only way they get down to play, and they can't shift out of it

3 and up

- It's the only way they can sit, and they can't get in or out of other positions
- Pain, limping, or one leg that looks or works differently from the other
- W-sitting alongside other motor delays or very low muscle tone

I want to be clear, because W-sitting gets a lot of scary internet attention: the current evidence does not show that W-sitting harms hips or causes hip dysplasia, and a 2024 systematic review found no scientific basis for advising against it. You don't need to police it. What I do watch is flexibility – whether your child has other comfortable ways to sit too. [7][8]

Picky eating

USUALLY GIVE IT TIME

18 months-3

- Wariness of new food peaks between about 18 months and 3 – it is a stage, not a habit you caused
- Eating a lot one day and almost nothing the next
- Wanting the same three meals for weeks

3-5

- Refusing vegetables, or living on a short list of favorites for a stretch
- Wanting foods separated, or rejecting a food and accepting it months later
- Appetite that swings a lot week to week
- Growing steadily and generally healthy

WORTH A CLOSER LOOK

18 months-3

- The list of foods keeps shrinking rather than slowly growing
- Gagging, vomiting or real fear at the table, not just refusal
- Not gaining weight as expected, or dropping off their growth curve

3-5

- The list of accepted foods keeps shrinking rather than slowly growing
- Falling off their growth curve or not gaining weight as expected
- Real fear or distress around food, choking, or vomiting – not just preference
- Eating limits school, birthday parties, and family meals

Most selective eating is a normal phase. When avoidance affects growth, nutrition, or daily life, it may be ARFID – which is treatable, and earlier help works better. [9]

If something still feels off, say it out loud

You know your child better than any checklist does. Asking a question early costs you very little, and waiting because you didn't want to seem like "that parent" is the thing I'd hate for you to do. If you're unsure whether what you're seeing belongs in the left column or the right one, message me — I'm always happy to talk it through with you.

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Where this comes from

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