

Developmental Milestones: Implications for Children Adopted from China

By Andrea S Ettingoff, Ph.D.

Question: What are “Developmental Milestones?”

Doctors, educators, psychologists and other health professionals estimate whether a child is developing at the expected rate for his or her age based on some type of assessment of when the child met specific “developmental milestones.” The milestones are identifiable skills in specific areas, such as speech and language, which can serve as a guide to normal development. There is a general range of ages and time when most children master these specific skills. These milestones help to determine when a child may need extra support to attain his or her full potential in language, motor, social/emotional, and/or cognitive functioning. Typical milestones are when a child started to crawl, walk, put two words together, and so on.

Question: What are the specific concerns of children adopted from China?

One of the main problems in assessing whether a child adopted from China is making the expected gains for his or her age, is not knowing precisely what the child’s date of birth might be. Our daughter came to us with the given age of 15 months, weighing only 16 pounds but walking and appearing to be quite alert and healthy. Her remarkably small size and disparate information we received between the verbal reports of a closely involved caretaker and the paperwork from the orphanage led us to question our daughter’s age. Our pediatrician used a general screening checklist to assess “developmental milestones,” along with other physical indicators, to determine whether or not our daughter was functioning at the expected level for her given age.

Like many of the children adopted internationally, our daughter made rapid gains in height and weight over the first two months of being in the United States. She gained 6 pounds in the first two months and was no longer so small that she was “off the chart” in terms of height and weight comparisons to children in the United States (and moving from the 10th percentile on charts for Southern Chinese girls to the 50th percentile). The main concern for us was how quiet she was in those first few months and even during the first year here. It seemed like the Chinese baby-talk we heard at first was being extinguished, but there was nothing there to replace it initially as our daughter adjusted to learning a whole new language.

Many of us adopting from China have heard that this group of mainly girls have less developmental and medical problems than children adopted from other countries. They often have spent less time in orphanages and some are even in foster care. Initial studies, however, are finding that developmental delays and growth patterns are similar to children adopted from other countries. Some researchers have found an approximate one month delay in specific growth patterns for every three months spent in an orphanage (Miller and Hendrie, 2000).

Question: When is it appropriate to seek help?

Every child and situation is unique. Parents also have preferences and lifestyle constraints that are involved in this decision-making process of whether or not to pursue therapy for their child. It is important to realize that most children adopted internationally, who are assessed within a few months after arrival in this country, will qualify for Early Intervention based on the cultural biases of

the tests used and the change of languages. This does not imply that the child has a delay that will only be helped through therapy. A child qualifies for Early Intervention when the child exhibits a delay in any specific area of development, including social areas. Often a delay is calculated as 25% below the expected level in a specific skill area, and those skill areas are usually given in a range of ages. This is not an exact science and the determination of whether a child would benefit from the support is generally based on clinical judgment and influenced by parental preferences. The county Early Intervention program may also have limitations in staff and resources that would influence the decision if the delay is on the borderline.

We decided one year post-adoption to have our daughter’s language development evaluated privately (\$15 co-payment with our insurance) rather than use the over-burdened Early Intervention services in our area. The therapist found a slight delay in expressive language skills but over one year advancement in understanding of her new language. The speech therapist thought it was 50/50 whether our child would benefit from weekly therapy, and we decided together to monitor her progress over time. This monitoring every 4 months showed that our daughter was making significant gains over time in her language development and speech therapy has not been necessary.

Other parents may feel more comfortable with an immediate evaluation for any concerns in language, motor, or social areas, and certainly I have known families who have done so and attribute remarkable advances due to physical or occupational or speech therapies. There are a number of possible physical and medical problems for which your pediatrician may recommend immediate evaluation. To assist in making these decisions, there are many easily accessible charts that show approximately what skills are expected at a certain age. A great help to us has been the book What to Expect: The Toddler Years by Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway (1996). Details are given of what is expected beginning at age 1 year, along with advice on handling medical problems and behavioral issues (sleeping, eating, toilet-training, fears) which I found invaluable. The detail they give on developmental milestones can not be replaced by a simple chart, but a chart such as the one below can point you in the right direction as long as you give allowance for skills the child from China may not have acquired due to cultural differences or may be temporarily suppressed. A typical checklist might look like this.

6 - 11 months	Yes	No
Understands "no-no."	___	___
Babbles (says "ba-ba-ba" or "ma-ma-ma")...(or in Hunan Province “ga-ga,” or “ba-ba”).	___	___
Tries to communicate by actions or gestures.	___	___
Tries to repeat your sounds.	___	___
Sit, crawl and creep	___	___
12 - 17 months	Yes	No
Attends to a book or toy for about two minutes.	___	___
Follows simple directions accompanied by gestures.	___	___
Drinks from a cup.	___	___

- Points to objects, pictures, and family members. _____
- Says two to three words to label a person or object (pronunciation may not be clear). _____
- Tries to imitate simple words. _____
- Stands alone and begins to walk. _____

Internet websites dealing with this subject include:

http://professional.asha.org/news/011023_3a.cfm

<http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/parents/speechandlanguage.htm#my child>

Related Reading:

Eisenberg, A., Murkoff, H. E., & Hathaway, S. E. (1996). What to Expect: The Toddler Years. New York: Workman Publishing.

Miller, L. C, & Hendrie, N. W. (2000, June). Health of Children Adopted from China. Pediatrics, Vol. 105, No. 6.

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