Growing and learning together

Your child’s development starts with you

What are developmental milestones?

Milestones are skills children usually develop as they grow: communicating, moving, playing with others and becoming more independent. These skills help children take their next steps in learning.

The checkpoints in this booklet show what we are helping children work towards. Children develop at different rates and may need different support. These are guides, not tests or Nursery entry requirements.



Why the early years matter

By age five, a child’s brain is around **90% of its adult size**. This does not mean that 90% of learning is complete: learning and brain development continue throughout life. Early relationships, conversation and play build strong foundations for later learning.

Helping your child practise new skills builds confidence, communication and independence. Noticing difficulties early means we can work together to arrange support promptly.

You are your child’s first and foremost educator

Children spend only part of their week with Nursery teachers. Most of their time is outside Nursery, with parents, carers and family playing the central role. Your child learns from what you say, what you do and how you respond to them every day.

Please take an active role in your child’s learning every day. You do not need to be a trained teacher or buy special equipment. Small, repeated moments of attention and encouragement make a difference.

Make everyday moments learning moments

• **Talk and listen:** follow their interests, give time to answer and use your strongest home language.

• **Read, sing and play:** share a book, enjoy rhymes and join in their play every day.

• **Let them try:** support dressing, tidying and toileting at their stage; praise effort and practise patiently.

• **Work with Nursery:** use these checkpoints to choose a small next step and share progress or worries with us.

If a skill is difficult, speak to your child’s key person. Together we can agree the right support. Developmental differences are not a sign that a parent or child has failed.

Sources: DfE, Development Matters (2023); Head Start, Supporting Children’s Early Brain Development.

Communication and language

Feeling understood and beginning to share ideas

Starting points we can build on

- Use around 300 different spoken words by their third birthday. This is a guide, not a test or entry requirement.
- Begin linking 4 or 5 words, such as “I want my car”.
- Use words for things, actions and descriptions: dog, jump, big.
- Follow familiar instructions and enjoy a short picture story.
- Take turns in a simple conversation, with their usual support.



How you can help at home

1 Build words through everyday play

Follow your child’s interests. Name things, actions and feelings. Repeat useful words in play, meals and routines. Pause and give time to respond.

2 Add a little to what they say

If your child says “car”, try “red car” or “the car is going”. Model a short sentence without asking them to repeat it. Share books and songs every day.

3 Value every language your child uses

Talk, sing and read in the language you know best. Share words and phrases used in all home languages with Nursery; English alone does not show the whole picture.

Join their play → **Pause and listen** → **Add a few words**

The 300-word guide means different words used across daily life, not in one conversation. No word-count test is needed. If your child uses few words, is not combining words, or you have concerns in any language, speak to Nursery or your health visitor.

Children start Nursery with different strengths and needs. These are conversation prompts, not entry requirements. Share what your child enjoys and any support they need with their key person.

Sources: Development Matters (DfE), p.28; Speech and Language UK: Help your child learn new words.

Personal, social and emotional development

Settling in, feeling safe and joining new routines

Starting points we can build on

- Turn to a familiar adult for comfort and help.
- Begin exploring a new place with a trusted adult nearby.
- Show interest in other children, including playing alongside them.
- Make a simple choice between two activities.
- Begin helping with familiar routines, such as washing hands or putting toys away.



How you can help at home

1 **Practise a reassuring goodbye**

Visit Nursery together where possible. Talk about who will care for your child and when you will return. Agree a short, predictable goodbye with staff.

2 **Build independence one step at a time**

Offer two choices, practise washing hands and let your child help with a coat. Give enough help for success. Adults will still support sharing and big feelings.

3 **Share toileting needs with Nursery**

Practise noticing when a wee or poo is needed, using a potty or toilet, managing clothes and washing hands. Use calm encouragement. Tell staff about nappies, accidents or extra support needs.

Feel safe → **Try together** → **Build a routine**

Children start Nursery with different self-care skills. Toilet training is a shared learning process, not a pass-or-fail checkpoint. Agree a practical care plan with staff and share any additional needs.

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Informed by Development Matters. These are suggested early checkpoints, not official age cut-offs.

Physical development

Exploring movement and learning everyday skills

Starting points we can build on

- Explore walking, running and climbing with suitable support.
- Use hands to stack, push, pull and handle toys.
- Try using a spoon or cup, with help when needed.
- Enjoy making marks with a crayon, brush or fingers.
- Begin helping with clothes, such as pushing an arm into a sleeve.



How you can help at home

1 **Move and play together**

Walk, dance, roll a ball or try a suitable climbing activity. Stay close and offer the support your child needs. Follow their interests and energy.

2 **Let hands do useful jobs**

Build a small tower, squash dough or put toys into a container. Let your child help with a spoon, a cup or easy clothing, with your support.

3 **Enjoy making marks**

Offer chunky crayons, chalk or a brush with water. Let your child explore without copying letters. Say what you notice: “You made a long line!”

Move and play → **Use both hands** → **Make some marks**

Provide comfortable tools and positions, and adapt activities to your child’s needs. A particular pencil grip is not required to start Nursery. Share any concerns about movement, discomfort or using hands with staff.

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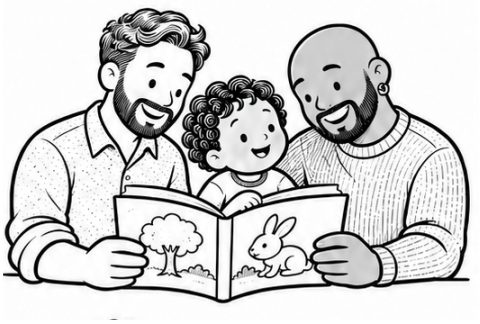
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Literacy

Enjoying books, songs and early marks

Starting points we can build on

- Enjoy looking at pictures and sharing a book with an adult.
- Have favourite stories, songs or rhymes.
- Join in an action, sound or familiar word.
- Explore drawing and making marks for enjoyment.
- Sometimes give a meaning to a picture or mark.



How you can help at home

1 **Make books a shared pleasure**

Let your child choose a book. Look at a few pictures together and name things they notice. It is fine to revisit the same page or stop after a short time.

2 **Repeat a favourite rhyme**

Sing with actions and leave a pause for your child to join in. Accept a movement, sound or word. Share favourite songs from your home language with Nursery.

3 **Draw and pretend to write**

Offer paper and crayons in play. Make a pretend list or a card together. Ask “Tell me about your picture” and listen to any meaning your child gives it.

Look and listen → **Join in** → **Make some marks**

Children do not need to read, know letter sounds or write their name before starting Nursery. Enjoying language, books and marks gives them a useful starting point. Keep activities playful.

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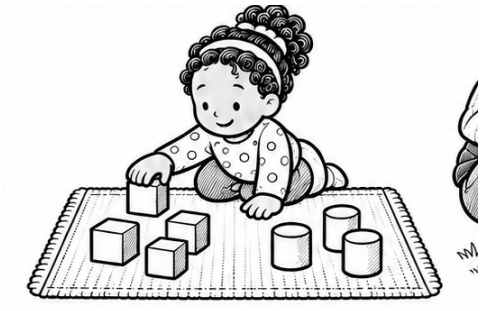
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Mathematics

Finding maths in everyday play

Starting points we can build on

- Notice small amounts in everyday play, such as one or two toys.
- Join in some number words in songs or games.
- Match familiar objects, such as two socks that look the same.
- Explore filling, emptying, stacking and fitting things together.
- Begin understanding everyday words such as big, small, in and on.



How you can help at home

1 **Notice one and two**

Talk about one cup, two shoes or two toy animals. Count them together if your child is interested. Keep amounts small and use objects they can handle.

2 **Match and sort together**

Find matching socks or put similar toys together. Describe what you see: “These are both red.” Accept different ways your child chooses to group things.

3 **Fill, build and hide**

Fill and empty containers, stack blocks and hide a teddy in or under a box. Use simple words such as full, empty, big, small, in and under.

Play with objects → **Notice together** → **Use simple words**

There is no counting target to pass before starting Nursery. Exploring objects and hearing number words in meaningful situations helps understanding grow. Written numbers and sums are not needed.

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Understanding the world

Exploring familiar people and the world nearby

Starting points we can build on

- Recognise familiar people, places and routines.
- Show interest in things they see, hear or touch.
- Explore natural objects with adult supervision.
- Begin naming or pointing to familiar animals or objects.
- Share something about family life through words, gestures, play or pictures.



How you can help at home

1 **Share familiar photographs**

Look at pictures of people your child knows. Name them, talk about something you did together and invite your child to point or add a word.

2 **Follow their curiosity**

On a short walk, stop to look at something that interests your child. Name a bird, leaf or puddle and describe it simply. Give time to explore safely.

3 **Help with an everyday job**

Water a plant, put washing in a basket or help prepare a simple snack together. Talk about what you are doing. Share familiar family routines with Nursery.

Look together → **Name what you see** → **Explore safely**

Tell Nursery about important people, home languages, traditions and routines. Familiar experiences help staff build a connection. Supervise exploring and support handwashing afterwards.

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Expressive arts and design

Trying materials, music and pretend play

Starting points we can build on

- Enjoy exploring paint, dough, crayons or other safe materials.
- Make sounds and move in response to music.
- Join in parts of a familiar action song.
- Begin simple pretend play, such as giving teddy a drink.
- Explore building or making something in their own way.



How you can help at home

1 **Explore a few materials**

Offer paper, crayons, dough or a safe box. Let your child touch, try and choose. Enjoy the process without expecting a finished picture or model.

2 **Copy and extend pretend play**

If your child gives teddy a drink, join in: “Teddy is thirsty!” Add a small action, such as putting teddy to bed. Follow your child’s lead.

3 **Sing, tap and move**

Sing a familiar action song, tap a gentle rhythm or dance together. Copy your child’s movements and let them copy yours. Short, happy moments are enough.

Explore together → **Try an idea** → **Enjoy and share**

Children do not need to make recognisable pictures or perform songs before starting Nursery. Offer every child a range of creative play and notice their individual interests.

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