

Statements in Response to Media and Public Inquiries Related to Recent Developmental Milestone Checklist Revisions

Formal Reactive Statement

- CDC's *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* materials for tracking developmental milestones are not developmental screening tools, nor are they standards or guidelines; they are communication tools that aim to promote developmental monitoring and to encourage conversations between parents, doctors, and early childhood providers about child development. CDC has not lowered the standards of early childhood development.
- The updates to the milestones included in the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* materials do not reflect any observed changes in child development over time. The updates reflect the use of a different method for identifying which milestones to include at certain ages to improve identification of potential developmental concerns. CDC has not lowered the standards of early childhood development.
- Previously, milestones were included on a list if at least half of children would be expected to reach it by that age. This meant that for some milestones, only half of children (50% or more) would be expected to meet them by the specified age. As a result, it wasn't clear whether any action should be taken if a child was not meeting the milestone. By improving the milestones, our aim was to make it clearer to parents and other care providers that missing a milestone was something to take action on. The updated milestones were chosen to reflect what most children (75% or more) would be expected to be able to do by specified ages to better identify potential concerns.
- In the process for review and revision, data were not available to support inclusion of all previous milestones. It doesn't mean those milestones were necessarily wrong to have been included previously, just that they didn't meet the new criteria established for this revision. Data also supported that some milestones be kept where they were, and some milestones be moved to a different age.
- The changes to the milestones were not related to or influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic. The review of evidence and revisions were completed in 2019 and parent testing for understanding and reliability was done in the summer of 2020.
- The changes to the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestones materials were released in conjunction with a peer-reviewed article detailing the revision process in the journal *Pediatrics*. Information was sent out to partners, and social media posts announcing the news were posted on CDC's Twitter handles. *Pediatrics* also promoted the release with a video abstract on their website and social media handles.
- The *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestones materials were revised for three reasons:
 1. CDC wanted to be able to offer a *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklist for every age at which there is an American Academy of Pediatrics recommended well-child/health supervision visit between 2 months and 5 years, to best facilitate conversations between parents and care providers at each of those visits. CDC therefore needed to add the 15- and 30-month checklists.

2. CDC wanted to assign milestones to ages when most children (75% or more) would be expected to exhibit them, to promote discussion and potentially action when a milestone is missed (rather than taking a “wait and see” approach).
3. Parents and early childhood professionals provided feedback over the years that having very similar milestones across checklist ages was confusing, especially in terms of knowing when to take action on possible developmental concerns. CDC therefore removed duplicate milestones and made sure that milestones were only included on the one list that was most appropriate.

Of note, *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* checklist revisions also include

- Expanded tips and activities for supporting children’s development
 - Additional open-ended questions to help facilitate conversations between parents, healthcare providers, and others
- For information about the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestones checklists, please visit [“Learn the Signs. Act Early.” | CDC](#). To learn more about the process for making these revisions, refer to the peer-reviewed article, [Evidence-Informed Milestones for Developmental Surveillance Tools | Pediatrics | American Academy of Pediatrics \(aap.org\)](#)

Key Facts:

1. **The review of evidence and revisions were completed in 2019** and parent testing for understanding and relatability was done in summer 2020.
2. **Changes to the milestone checklists were based on available evidence and to address feedback from families, healthcare providers, and other early childhood professionals that clarification was needed on when steps should be taken to see if there is a developmental delay or disability.**
3. **The *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists are health communication tools** to engage families and support conversations about children’s development during well-child visits. They are NOT developmental guidelines or standards, nor are they meant to be used as a screening tool.
4. **CDC’s *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* developmental milestones are provided to give families information on what MOST children (75% or more) would be expected to do by each specified age, and to help spark discussion** with their child’s healthcare provider or other early childhood professionals.
5. The *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists
 - a. Inform parents that routine developmental screening is recommended at specific ages and any time there are concerns
 - b. Support and complement, but do NOT replace, developmental screening as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics
 - c. Inform families about how to access early intervention programs in their state
 - d. Support families with tips and activities for how to encourage their child’s development
6. **The *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* materials, including the milestone checklists, encourage parents to share any concerns they may have about their child’s development regardless of whether they are meeting the milestones.**

7. **Developmental screening is recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics for all children during well-child visits at 9, 18, and 30 months, along with autism screening at 18 and 24 months.** These CDC *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists can help prepare families for these developmental screenings and to discuss concerns.
8. CDC and AAP wanted to make sure that the process for updating the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestones was transparent, and therefore waited to implement changes until a peer-reviewed article describing the process was published in *Pediatrics*. This publication also
 - a. Raises awareness of the gaps in the literature around developmental milestones and other developmental issues;
 - b. Helps those using the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists to know the purpose, as well as strengths and limitations, of developmental monitoring in general and of the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestones specifically; and
 - c. Invites dialogue and future research not only on developmental milestones, but also developmental monitoring/surveillance, early identification, and intervention for developmental delays and disabilities.
9. The subject matter experts engaged by the American Academy of Pediatrics to review the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone evidence were
 - Developmental-behavioral pediatricians
 - Neurodevelopmental pediatrician
 - General pediatrician
 - Speech language pathologist
 - Child and developmental psychologists
 - Professor of special education and early intervention
 - Developer of developmental screening tools
 - Editor of *Bright Futures: Guidelines for Health Supervision of Infants, Children, and Adolescents*, 4th Edition
 - Authors of AAP's 2020 clinical report *Promoting Optimal Development: Identifying Infants and Young Children with Developmental Disorders Through Developmental Surveillance and Screening*

Questions and Answers

Can I request access to the *Pediatrics* article?

The online publication on February 8 was an early release, initially available only to *Pediatrics* journal subscribers. Given the interest in this paper, the journal has agreed to allow open access at: [Evidence-Informed Milestones for Developmental Surveillance Tools | Pediatrics | American Academy of Pediatrics \(aap.org\)](#).

Are these new guidelines/standards for development?

No. CDC's *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists are not "guidelines" nor "standards" for child development, nor are they to be used as a developmental screening tool. Instead, the milestone checklists were developed to promote developmental monitoring/surveillance—ongoing developmental observation—and encourage conversations between parents, healthcare providers, and early childhood providers about child development. We hope that the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists will support universal developmental screening at health supervision visits (and any time there is a concern) as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) by informing parents of when screening is due, empowering families to discuss any concerns, and encourage families to ask about screening if they have concerns.

Has the average child developmental trajectory changed? Is that why these updates were made?

No, the changes made to the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists do not reflect an observed change in developmental trajectories of children in the population. CDC did not lower any standards for early childhood development or propose any changes to how children are evaluated for developmental delays or disabilities.

What CDC has revised—for the purposes of parent and provider education and to facilitate communication—is that the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists now present the milestones at the ages by which MOST children (75% or more) are expected to have met them, not just half of children. Again, this was done to make it clearer that a missing milestone should prompt parent-provider discussion and next steps.

Why was it important to update these milestones now?

The work to revise the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestones has been underway for many years. The review of evidence and revisions was completed in 2019 and parent testing for understanding and reliability was done in the summer of 2020. With the revisions, the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* program aimed to address feedback received over the years from parents and early childhood professionals. Specifically,

- Recommending more clarity about when to take action on a possible developmental concern, which resulted in assigning milestones to ages when most children (75% or more) would be expected to achieve them;
- Offering a free milestone checklist for every age at which there is an American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommended well-child health supervision visit between 2 months and 5 years, which meant adding checklists for ages 15- and 30-months; and
- Addressing feedback that having very similar milestones across checklist ages was confusing, especially in terms of when to take action on a potential developmental concern, resulting in duplicate milestones being removed and a milestone only being included on a single list for which it was most appropriate.

Other helpful revisions to the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* communication materials include

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- Expanded tips and activities for supporting children’s development; and
- Additional open-ended questions to help facilitate conversations between parents, healthcare providers, and others.

When were the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestones updated?

The review and revisions were completed in 2019; this was followed by time to get feedback from parents (summer 2020) and then another year or so to draft the report that was published in the journal *Pediatrics* in early February ([Evidence-Informed Milestones for Developmental Surveillance Tools | Pediatrics | American Academy of Pediatrics \(aap.org\)](#)).

Were the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestones updated because of the COVID-19 pandemic or in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

No. The review and revisions of the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestones were completed in 2019 and parent testing for understanding and reliability was done in the summer of 2020. The milestone revisions are not related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why have the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestones not been updated since 2004?

CDC has continually gathered parent and professional feedback on the developmental milestones since 2004. In 2019, the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* program had the opportunity to support the review and revision process to address the feedback it had collected over the years.

Do the updated *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists replace developmental screening or assessment for developmental concerns?

It is very important to make clear that the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists do NOT replace formal developmental screening or assessments for developmental concerns. The purpose of the *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists is to educate and engage families and other early care providers about the skills and abilities MOST children (75% or more) would be expected to do by specific ages. These checklists may support, BUT DO NOT REPLACE, universal developmental screening recommended at well child/health supervision visits and any time there is a concern, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). The checklists and other *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* materials help inform parents of when screening is due, and support families in discussing concerns and asking about screening and other assessments if they have concerns. CDC’s *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists also provide parents with information on how to access early intervention programs in their state.

Developmental screening is recommended for all children by the AAP at the 9-, 18-, and 30-month well-child visits or any time there is a developmental concern, along with autism screening at the 18- and 24-month well visits using validated developmental screening tools. CDC’s *Learn the Signs. Act Early.*

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milestone checklists can help prepare families for developmental screening and to discuss concerns at those visits. Screening tools (not the CDC's *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestone checklists) can assess a child's risk for developmental delays. Appropriate further evaluation is recommended if screening shows risks or if parents or providers still have concerns. Providers can refer with or without concerning screening results.

Have all the *Learn the Signs. Act Early* milestones shifted to new ages?

No. More than two thirds of the retained CDC *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* milestones were kept at the ages at which they were placed in the previous milestone checklists, although the wording used to describe the milestone may have changed, primarily to make it easier to understand. For instance, the old milestone "Says several single words" is now "Tries to say three or more words besides mama or dada." The use of the word "several" was eliminated, and "besides mama and dada" was added to improve clarity for parents.

Additionally, milestones regarding verbal and nonverbal communication were added across checklists along with parent tips to support language development. Efforts were made to show the progression of communication and other skills across checklists, and the addition of 15- and 30-month checklists provides more opportunities to discuss child development. Open-ended questions were added to encourage discussion of concerns that milestones may not capture, such as concerns about a child's clarity of speech.

Why was a particular milestone removed from a checklist or moved to another age?

The updated *Learn the Signs. Act Early* milestones were chosen to reflect what most children (75% or more) would be expected to do by a specific age based on available data to better identify potential concerns. In the process of review and revision, data were not available to support inclusion of all previous milestones. Milestones with available data to support them were kept; some at the same age as they had been previously and some at different ages, as described in the *Pediatrics* article ([Evidence-Informed Milestones for Developmental Surveillance Tools | Pediatrics | American Academy of Pediatrics \(aap.org\)](#)).

I am concerned about the age at which some *Learn the Signs. Act Early* milestones are placed, what can I do?

Normative data and additional resources, such as commonly used developmental screening tools, along with clinical experience, were used to determine if the milestone should be included and at what age. If the age that 75% or more of children would be expected to achieve a milestone fell between well-child visit ages, it was placed on the older age checklist.

This process is described in the peer-reviewed article published in *Pediatrics* ([Evidence-Informed Milestones for Developmental Surveillance Tools | Pediatrics | American Academy of Pediatrics \(aap.org\)](#)). As discussed in the article, there were only a few published reports available that provided

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information on how many children should achieve a milestone by a specific age. This finding highlights the need to conduct more research on the emergence of individual milestones and when most children achieve these milestones.

CDC's *Learn the Signs. Act Early.* team would be glad to review any additional normative data that exists for individual milestones at specific ages (evaluation tools do not publish their normative data for individual milestones).

CDC encourages continued research and dialogue around best practices for developmental monitoring and supporting conversations between families and early childhood professionals. It is our hope that these conversations will result in discussion of concerns and appropriate next steps, including screening and further evaluation, when needed.

Just as in the past, feedback on these revisions will be collected and reviewed for potential revisions in the future.