



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 006 | Developmental delays

Social-emotional developmental delay

What it means

Social-emotional developmental delay describes slower progress in skills such as shared enjoyment, responding to others, expressing feelings, and joining age-appropriate play. It is a developmental description rather than a diagnosis. A child's temperament, culture, health, and preferred communication methods all influence how these skills appear. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Possible contributors include autism or other developmental differences, hearing or vision difficulty, communication barriers, and emotional or medical stress. Limited access to comfortable interaction can also affect participation. Shyness alone is not a disorder, and caregivers should not be blamed for a child's developmental pattern. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

Concerns may include limited back-and-forth interaction, difficulty sharing interest, little response to familiar social invitations, trouble joining play, or persistent difficulty recovering from distress. Eye contact alone is not a reliable diagnosis. Compare patterns across comfortable settings and note the child's other ways of showing connection. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A developmental review examines communication, play, sensory access, relationships, emotional regulation, and health. Caregiver reports from home and childcare are important. Autism or infant and early childhood mental health assessment may be recommended when indicated. The team distinguishes a developmental delay from anxiety, sensory barriers, and ordinary variation. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Support may combine speech-language therapy, developmentally appropriate play-based intervention, caregiver coaching, and early childhood mental health care. Goals should support comfortable communication, relationships, and participation. Therapy should respect the child's signals rather than require forced eye contact, affection, or the suppression of harmless self-regulation. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Join activities the child enjoys. Offer predictable, low-pressure turns, describe feelings simply, and respond to gestures or other communication. Allow breaks and reduce sensory demands. Measure progress by meaningful shared participation rather than whether the child looks or plays exactly like peers.

When to seek help

Loss of social or communication skills needs prompt developmental and medical review. Severe withdrawal with poor intake, marked lethargy, or concern about the child's safety requires urgent assessment.

Questions for your care team

- What forms of connection and communication are already working?
- Could hearing, sensory demands, or anxiety be limiting participation?
- Which relationship-focused goals fit our family?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss social-emotional developmental delay. Social-emotional developmental delay describes slower progress in skills such as shared enjoyment, responding to others, expressing feelings, and joining age-appropriate play. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: A child can seek connection in ways that differ from familiar social expectations.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Reciprocity: back-and-forth interaction.
- Joint attention: sharing attention to something.
- Co-regulation: helping a child settle through supportive interaction.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Assessing Developmental Delays in Children

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/toddler/Pages/Assessing-Developmental-Delays.aspx>

[2] Signs and Symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder

<https://www.cdc.gov/autism/signs-symptoms/index.html>

[3] Children and Mental Health: Is This Just a Stage? - National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/children-and-mental-health>