

AVENUES EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

What's Normal Now

The age-by-age guide to hard moments, newborn to 5

Pregnancy–6 mo | 6–18 mo | 18 mo–3 yrs | 3–5 yrs

A free guide from Avenues

START HERE

How to use this guide

Most hard parenting moments are not a sign that something is wrong. They are a sign of what your child is learning right now. This guide shows you what is often normal at each stage, the moments parents find hardest, and when it is time to ask for help.

1

Find your stage

Jump to your child's age. Read the stage before and after too. Every child moves at their own pace.

2

Try one moment

Each moment has words to **say**, one thing to **do**, and a way to **repair** if it didn't go well.

3

Know when to ask

Every stage ends with signs that it's time to call your pediatrician or another professional.

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Please read: This guide is general education, not medical, developmental, or clinical advice, and it is not a screening tool. Every child develops on their own timeline. If you have concerns about your child's health, development, or safety, contact your pediatrician or another qualified professional. In an emergency, call 911.



STAGE 1

Pregnancy to 6 months

The first months are mostly about feeding, sleep and recovery, for your baby and for you. Very little of it runs on a schedule yet, and that is expected.

What's often normal right now

- Feeding often, sometimes in clusters close together, especially in the evening.
- Crying that builds over the first weeks, often peaking around 6 to 8 weeks, then slowly easing.
- Short, uneven sleep, with days and nights mixed up at first.
- Wanting to be held for much of the day.
- For you: weepy, up-and-down days in the first two weeks after birth (the "baby blues") are common.

When to ask for help

- Your baby is under 3 months and has a temperature of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher: call your pediatrician right away.
- Crying sounds unusual, or you are worried about feeding, wet diapers, or weight.
- Low mood, worry, or not feeling like yourself lasts past two weeks. Call or text the National Maternal Mental Health Hotline, 24/7: 1-833-TLC-MAMA (1-833-852-6262).
- If you feel close to your limit, put your baby down on their back in a safe crib and step away for a few minutes. Then call someone.

> **Safe sleep, every sleep: baby alone, on their back, on a flat surface in a crib or bassinet, with no pillows, blankets, or soft toys.**

STAGE 1 · PREGNANCY TO 6 MONTHS

The three moments parents find hardest

People keep saying “let me know if you need anything,” but I don’t know what to ask for.

Help is easier to accept when you do not have to invent a task while tired. A prepared list lets supportive people contribute without creating more management work.

PREPARE List five useful tasks someone else could fully own.

SAY *Thank you. The most useful thing would be groceries, a meal, or this errand.*

DO Keep the list in your phone.

REPAIR If the help was not done exactly your way, decide whether it was still good enough to reduce your load.

NEXT Update the list before birth so your support person can use it too.

The baby wants to feed again and I feel like I just finished.

Newborn feeding can feel repetitive and unpredictable. When you are exhausted, repeated feeding cues can quickly turn into self-doubt.

PREPARE Keep water, a snack, and basic supplies within reach.

SAY *I can respond to this moment without deciding what the whole day means.*

DO Check the immediate basics and respond to the baby in front of you.

REPAIR If you felt impatient, reconnect with calm touch or voice when you can.

NEXT Protect one small recovery routine for yourself between feeds.

I’ve tried everything and the crying still isn’t stopping.

When nothing works quickly, adults often speed up and cycle through more techniques. Slowing down can help you think clearly about basic needs, safety, and whether professional guidance is needed.

PREPARE Check the basic care needs you can reasonably assess.

SAY *I don’t have to solve this in thirty seconds. I need to stay safe and steady.*

DO Use one calm approach for a short period instead of switching every few seconds.

REPAIR If you reached your limit, getting help was the repair. You do not need to prove endurance.

NEXT Call your pediatrician when crying or other symptoms worry you.

These are 3 of 80 moments in the New Beginnings Edition. Each one has the full plan: prepare, say, do, repair, and what to try next, plus checklists and a 60-second reset.

See the printable edition, $19



STAGE 2

6 to 18 months

Your baby is learning to move, to eat, and to tell people apart. New skills are exciting, and they often shake up the routines you just got working.

What's often normal right now

- Sleep that suddenly gets worse while they learn a new skill, like rolling, crawling, or pulling up.
- Wariness of new people, and protest when you leave, often starting in the second half of the first year.
- Spitting out, gagging, and mess while learning solids. For most of the first year, milk or formula is still the main food.
- A strong preference for one favorite person.
- Putting everything in their mouth, and dropping things again and again to see what happens.

When to ask for help

- Your baby loses a skill they used to have, like babbling or sitting. Tell your pediatrician soon.
- Night waking is severe, lasts longer than 6 to 8 weeks, or comes with fever, pain, or feeding changes.
- You are worried about eating, weight, allergies, or how your baby connects with people.
- Want to check milestones? The CDC's free checklists and Milestone Tracker app are at cdc.gov/actearly. Bring what you notice to your pediatrician.

Learn the difference between gagging and choking, and take an infant CPR class if you can.

STAGE 2 · 6 TO 18 MONTHS

The three moments parents find hardest

My baby was sleeping well and now wakes up every 2 hours again.

Sleep often gets worse for a while when babies are learning big new skills like rolling, crawling, pulling up, or new sounds. Many families notice it around 4 months, 8 to 10 months, and 12 months. It is usually temporary.

PREPARE Keep the bedtime routine the same, even on rough nights. Predictable steps still help.

SAY *It's still nighttime. I'm here. Time to rest.*

DO Respond calmly and keep it short: low light, quiet voice, few words.

REPAIR If you're running on empty, trade nights where you can, and go back to your usual routine once the stretch passes.

NEXT Write down when the wake-ups started and any new skills. It helps you see the pattern pass.

My baby suddenly acts suspicious of people they used to like.

As babies notice people and situations differently, they may need more time before warming up. You do not have to hand your baby over just because someone is excited to see them.

PREPARE Tell visitors to give baby a minute before reaching in.

SAY *Give baby a minute. They'll come closer when they're ready.*

DO Let your baby observe.

REPAIR If someone pushed too fast and baby got upset, reconnect and reset the boundary.

NEXT Use the same visitor approach so family members know what to expect.

My baby spits out almost every bite of solid food.

Early solids are about learning new tastes and textures, not about how much gets eaten. Spitting out, making faces, and mess are normal. For most of the first year, milk or formula is still the main food.

PREPARE Offer solids when your baby is awake and a little hungry, not overtired or starving.

SAY *You can touch it and taste it. You don't have to eat it.*

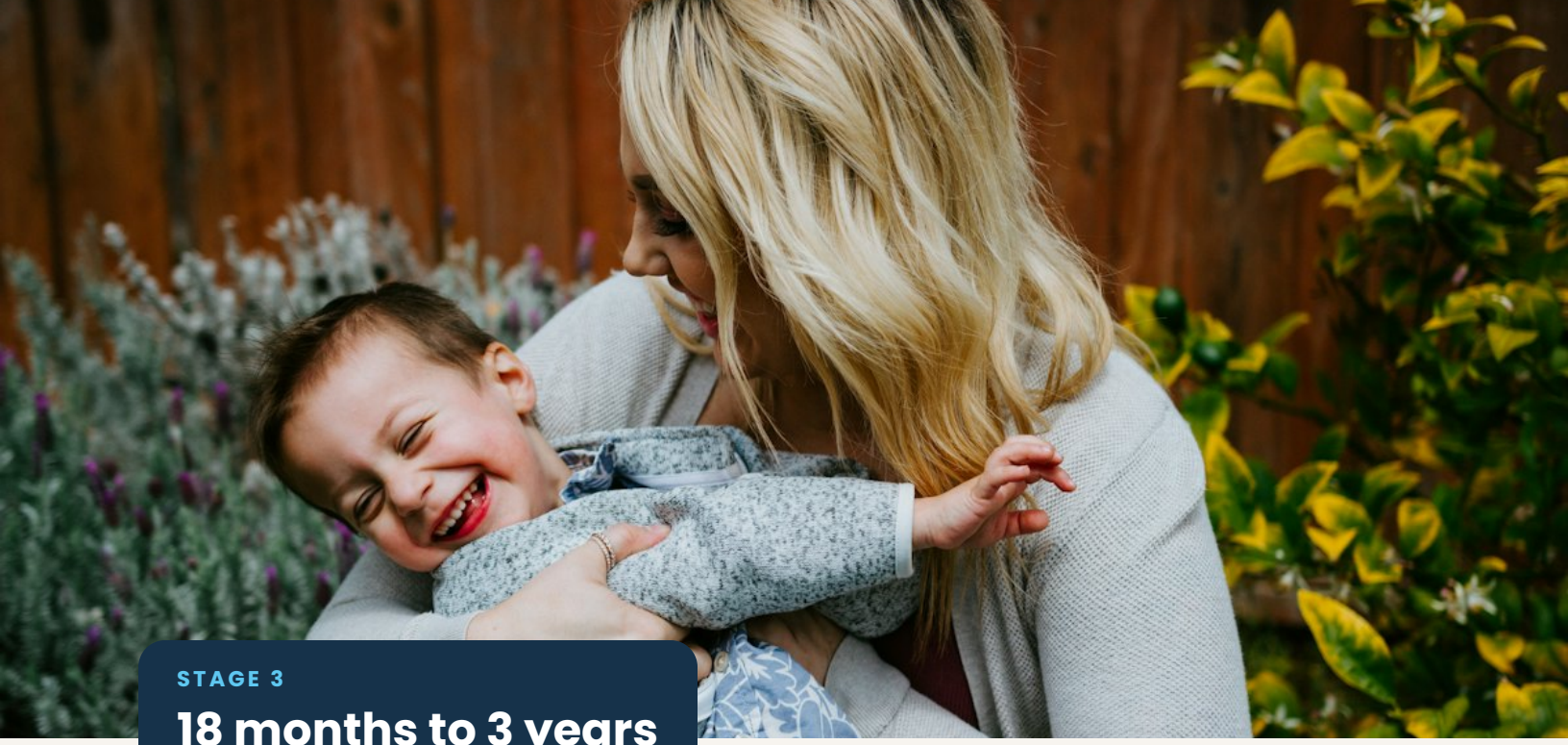
DO Offer one or two foods at a time, without pressure to finish.

REPAIR If a meal turned tense, keep the next one short and relaxed. Refusing food at this age is rarely personal.

NEXT Offer the same food again on other days. Many babies need many tries before they accept a new taste.

These are 3 of 80 moments in the Baby Edition. Each one has the full plan: prepare, say, do, repair, and what to try next, plus checklists and a 60-second reset.

See the printable edition, $19



STAGE 3

18 months to 3 years

Toddlers want to do everything themselves, and their feelings move faster than their words. A lot of what looks like defiance is a new skill in progress.

What's often normal right now

- Big, fast feelings: tantrums, and sometimes hitting or biting when words don't come quickly enough.
- "No!" and "Me do it!" many times a day.
- Pushback at bedtime, even with a good routine.
- Eating a lot one day and very little the next, and refusing foods they liked last week.
- Potty readiness showing up anywhere from about 18 months to 3 years.

When to ask for help

- Tantrums are very frequent, very long, or your child hurts themselves or others often.
- You have questions about how your child talks, understands, plays, or moves. Ask your pediatrician about a developmental screening.
- Your child loses words or skills they used to have.
- Your child is past 3 with no interest in the potty, or has pain when peeing or pooping. Or you notice loud snoring or pauses in breathing during sleep.

> **You know your child best. If something feels off, it is always okay to ask.**

STAGE 3 · 18 MONTHS TO 3 YEARS

The three moments parents find hardest

My toddler hits when they are angry.

When anger rises fast, a toddler's hands move before their words can. Hitting is very common at this age. It usually means "I'm overwhelmed," not "I want to hurt you."

PREPARE Watch for the build-up: clenched hands, louder voice, being tired or hungry.

SAY *I won't let you hit. You can be angry. I'll help you keep everyone safe.*

DO Calmly block or hold the hand. Move your body out of reach if you need to.

REPAIR When things are calm, keep it simple: "Your hands hurt. Next time you can stomp or squeeze." Show them how. Don't force an apology. Showing how you make things right teaches more.

NEXT Step in a little earlier next time you see the warning signs, before the hand goes up.

My toddler fights bedtime every night.

Bedtime asks a toddler to leave you and stop playing at the same time. Both are hard at this age, so some pushback is normal.

PREPARE Keep the routine short, the same each night, and in the same order.

SAY *Bedtime is here. You can choose the story or the song first.*

DO Offer small choices within the routine, like which book or which song.

REPAIR If bedtime was rough, keep tomorrow's routine the same. Changing tactics every night makes it harder to learn.

NEXT Give the routine two weeks before deciding whether it works.

How do I know if my toddler is ready to start using the potty?

There is no right age. Most children show readiness somewhere between 18 months and 3 years, and starting before they are ready usually makes it take longer, not shorter.

PREPARE Watch for signs over a week or two: staying dry for an hour or two, hiding to poop, telling you their diaper is wet, or showing interest when others use the toilet.

SAY *Your body is learning a new job. We'll practice together, one try at a time.*

DO Start with a few relaxed sits a day, like after waking up and after meals.

REPAIR If you started and it turned into a fight, it is fine to put diapers back on and try again in a few weeks. Pausing is not failing.

NEXT Tell your childcare provider when you start, so you both use the same words and the same routine.

These are 3 of 80 moments in the Toddler Edition. Each one has the full plan: prepare, say, do, repair, and what to try next, plus checklists and a 60-second reset.

See the printable edition, $19



STAGE 4

3 to 5 years

Preschoolers have more words, more friends, and more opinions. They are practicing how to handle big feelings in a bigger world.

What's often normal right now

- Holding it together at school, then falling apart at home with the person they feel safest with.
- Using the biggest words they know when angry, like "I hate you."
- Testing rules, negotiating, and asking "why?" about everything.
- New fears, like the dark, monsters, or starting somewhere new.
- Pretend play, imaginary friends, and stories that mix real and made-up.

When to ask for help

- Your child seems upset or overwhelmed at school most days. Start with their teacher.
- Angry moments often turn into hurting other people.
- Fears or worries keep your child from everyday things like sleeping, eating, or going to school.
- You or their teacher have questions about speech, play, or learning. Ask your pediatrician about a developmental screening.

> **Big feelings at this age are normal. Ongoing distress that disrupts daily life deserves a conversation.**

STAGE 4 · 3 TO 5 YEARS

The three moments parents find hardest

My preschooler holds feelings together at school then melts down at home.

Many preschoolers hold it together all day at school, then let it all out with the person they feel safest with. A meltdown after school often means they trust you.

PREPARE Expect them to have little patience left right after pickup.

SAY *You held it all together today. You're home now, and it's safe to let it out.*

DO Skip the questions about their day for now.

REPAIR Reassure them: "No matter how big the feelings get, you're always loved here."

NEXT Plan a quiet 20-minute wind-down after you get home, before anything else.

My preschooler says 'I hate you!' or 'You're the worst!' when mad.

Preschoolers use the biggest words they know to show how strong their feelings are. "I hate you" usually means "I'm really, really angry."

PREPARE Remember that these words show feelings, not facts.

SAY *You're really mad at me right now. You're upset about the rule, and I love you no matter what.*

DO Name the real feeling: "You're furious that screen time is over."

REPAIR Once calm, reconnect: "Even when you're super angry, I still love you."

NEXT Teach other words to use: "You can say, I'm so angry right now!"

My preschooler gets anxious about transitioning to big-school kindergarten.

Moving to big school means new teachers, a bigger building, and new routines. Feeling nervous about the unknown is natural.

PREPARE Read picture books about starting kindergarten.

SAY *Big school has lots of new things, and your teachers are there to help you every step of the way.*

DO Talk about familiar things they'll still have, like lunch, playground, and stories.

REPAIR Celebrate their growth: "Look how much you've learned this year!"

NEXT Count down to kindergarten with a fun calendar.

These are 3 of 80 moments in the Preschool Edition. Each one has the full plan: prepare, say, do, repair, and what to try next, plus checklists and a 60-second reset.

See the printable edition, $19

NEXT STEPS

You don’t have to figure this out alone

Free support from Avenues

Avenues Home Visiting and SEED (Social & Emotional Early Development) consultation are free for eligible families in New Mexico. A real person can help with the moments that need more than a guide.

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Everyday Moments, the printable editions

320 one-page moments from pregnancy to age 5, across four color-coded editions. Print the pages you need, or keep the PDF on your phone, and get words to say right away.

- ✓ Each edition: $19 launch price (regular $29), yours to keep
- ✓ All four editions: the Complete Collection, $49
- ✓ Three bonus printable packs with every edition

Get the Complete Collection

About Avenues Early Childhood Services. Avenues supports the adults around young children, including parents, caregivers, and educators, through real, everyday moments from pregnancy through age five.

This guide is general education, not medical, developmental, or clinical advice. Sources for health guidance: your pediatrician; CDC “Learn the Signs. Act Early.” (cdc.gov/actearly); HRSA National Maternal Mental Health Hotline (1-833-TLC-MAMA). © 2026 Avenues Early Childhood Services.