

AVERAGE AGE VERSUS NORMAL RANGE

by

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A critically important concept about which mothers and fathers are routinely uniformed or misinformed is the difference between “average age” and “normal range” for major developmental milestones. Understanding and appreciating the significant difference may alleviate a lot of needless anxiety and lead to considerably healthier parental practices.

Let’s take the onset of crawling, for example. If you observe 1,000 babies and note how old they are in months when they begin moving around, add all those months together and then divide the sum by 1,000 to get a quotient, what you end up with is the average age at which babies start crawling - about eight months. However, this is merely a statistic that has absolutely no meaning when it comes to monitoring a young child’s developmental progress.

What you need to know is the normal range for this ability. That is the entire period during which the ability can appear and the child is still considered on course for healthy development. With respect to crawling, the normal range is roughly six months to 10 months of age.

Now let’s say one baby starts crawling at six-and-a-half months of age, and another baby doesn’t start crawling until nine-and-a-half months of age. Which child is likely to begin walking first? Most people would assume that the child who started crawling at six- and-a-half months will walk first. After all, he is a month-and-a-half ahead of the average, whereas the second child is a month-and-a-half past the average. Clearly, the first child is “advanced” and the second child is “slow” when it comes to physical development.

But the fact of the matter is that the second child is just as likely to begin walking first. As long as both children are within the normal range, developmentally speaking they are completely equal and there is absolutely no predictive value in the difference within the normal range. Neither child is advanced or slow. It is not even the case that one is early and the other is late. They are totally identical when it comes to assessing developmental progress.

Unfortunately, out of ignorance or for the sake of expediency, many books, magazine articles, and charts that appear in pediatric offices often focus exclusively on average ages. As a result, parents whose child is either ahead or behind the average age indicated are likely to get inaccurate and inappropriate ideas regarding how well their child is or is not doing developmentally.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that we live in a highly competitive society and parents have a tendency to compare their child’s progress to the progress of other children on a constant basis. Consequently, insignificant differences within normal ranges may produce judgments that can cause mothers and fathers some rather significant emotional distress.

Take the normal range for the onset of expressive language, that is, when children say their first words. The normal range for this ability is enormous, from six months all the way up to two years of age. Some children who are developing beautifully and who will eventually have superb

language skills do start talking as early as six or seven months of age. But many other children who are developing beautifully and who will eventually have superb language skills don't say much of anything until they reach their second birthday. Therefore, as long as a child starts saying his first words within this period, he has to be considered developmentally equal to any other child who says his first words within this period, regardless of precisely when those first words are spoken.

But how often have you witnessed this scene? One set of parents intones to another set of parents, "Your Johnny is 18 months old and hasn't started talking yet? Our Janie has been talking since she was eight months old!" The unmistakable implication of this comment is, "Our Janie is a genius, and your Johnny must be retarded!" And if you are Johnny's mother or father, once that notion gets into your head, it is virtually impossible not to take it to heart. It sure would be nice to know that any such ideas of inferiority are based on erroneous assumptions and are entirely unwarranted.

It also is unwise to get a sense of superiority. Let's say Janie does start talking long before all the other little children in the neighborhood. On the other hand, she doesn't start walking until all the other kids have been toddling around for a few months. Nevertheless, everyone is well within the normal range for both abilities. However, her parents subsequently say something like, "Well, Janie is very sociable but she's not very physical." Years down the road, Janie grows up to be a non-athletic blabbermouth. Was that her developmental destiny, or was she channeled into certain behavior patterns because her mother and father established expectations based on erroneous assumptions and shaped their parental practices accordingly?

By the way, focusing on average ages can be extraordinarily dangerous when it comes to safety considerations. Going back to crawling, if parents look at the average age of eight months for the onset of this ability, they may assume they can put off childproofing their house for another few months. And regrettably, they may learn about normal ranges from the staff at the hospital emergency room if their child begins moving about well within that period but well before the average age.

Therefore, mothers and fathers would be well advised to seek out books, articles, and charts that feature normal ranges instead of average ages. They also should know that just because a child goes beyond a normal range every now and then, that does not necessarily mean the child is in serious trouble. Of course, the more a child goes beyond the normal range or even the more often he seems to be approaching the upper end of the ranges for different abilities, the more parents should start to be concerned and should seek some professional advice.

But the bottom line is that rates and patterns of development during the early years are highly variable, and not all children who are doing well are doing the same thing at the same time. While it is extremely tempting - and even natural to a certain extent - to start applying adjectives like "early" and "late" or "advanced" and "slow" or "ahead" and "behind" when comparing one child's progress to that of other children, it is important for mothers and fathers to keep in mind that most differences detected during informal comparison sessions are totally meaningless and that giving them any sort of significance may have consequences that are both distressing and detrimental.

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