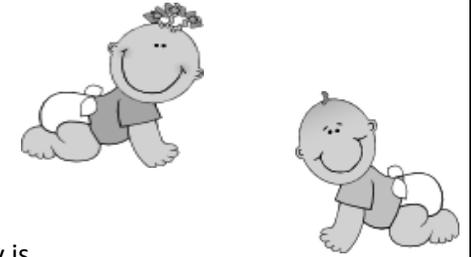




The premature infant: How old is my baby?



Babies who are born prematurely often have two “ages”:

- *Chronological age* is the age of the baby from the day of birth – the number of days, weeks or years old the baby is.
- *Adjusted age* is the age of the baby based on his due date. Health care providers may use this age when they evaluate the baby’s growth and development. So, if a baby is 6 months old, but was born two months early, his adjusted age is 4 months.

Calculating your baby’s adjusted age:

Example:

- Chronological age: 20 weeks
- The number of weeks your baby was premature: 6 weeks
- Subtract the number of weeks premature from the chronological age (this is your baby’s adjusted age): 20 weeks - 6 weeks = 14 weeks.
- Divide your baby’s adjusted age in weeks by 4 to determine your baby’s adjusted age in months: $14 \div 4 = 3.5$ months.

What to say when someone asks:

This is up to you. You can say:

- “He’s 6 months old, but he was born two months early, that’s why he looks like a 4 month old.”
- OR
- “He’s 6 months old” and leave it at that.

Remember: When people ask about your baby, they usually are being kind, not nosy.

Catching up:

Most premature babies “catch up” developmentally, in two to three years. After that, any differences in size or development are most likely due to individual differences, rather than to premature birth. Some very small babies take longer to catch up. You can stop adjusting your baby’s age when it feels most comfortable to you.

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Overview of Typical Premie Developmental Milestones

By understanding the common ages and stages of child development, you can monitor your preemie’s progress and identify the first signs of problems. It is important that developmental delays, even slight ones, are not overlooked. Some children with delays skip steps in learning (they will learn A, then C, and skip B). These “gaps” in learning may or may not affect later learning, but should be assessed. Think of your child’s early learning development like building a house – a solid foundation is essential. Use the following chart as a guide for monitoring your child’s development and discuss any concerns with your pediatrician or developmental specialist. (From *Primary Care of the Preterm Infant*)

Age	Gross Motor	Fine Motor	Cognitive (Thinking)	Communication	Social
1 month adjusted age	Lifts head for a few seconds when lying on stomach.	Hands usually fisted with random opening and closing; brings hands to mouth; stares at objects and lights.	Begins to handle different sensory inputs (however, most movement is random and a reflex to the environment).	Cries to make needs known; listens and soothes to voice; makes eye contact.	Regards face; enjoys being talked to and held.
3 months adjusted age	Fairly good head control on tummy and in supported position; lifts head and chest when lying on stomach; thrust arms and legs in play with both sides appearing the same.	Holds on to a rattle; follows slow-moving objects with eyes; brings hands together at mid-chest area.	Begins to realize body movements affect surroundings (bats at mobile, bounces in an infant seat); begins the effort to repeat movements that create a response.	Coos and laughs; has different cries for different needs (hungry, hurt, bored).	Smiles easily and spontaneously.
6 months adjusted age	Rolls and is beginning to sit well without support; supports self on one forearm while lying on side; pulls forward with arms while lying on stomach.	Reaches and grasps with both hands; moves toys from hand to hand.	Shakes rattle; starts to imitate gestures that self can see and engage in (smiling and frowning), has an increased interest in surroundings and the result of actions.	Babbles, laughs, coos; turns to look at new sounds.	Awareness of strangers; smiles at self in mirror.
9 months adjusted age	Gets into and out of sitting position on all fours independently; crawls on hands and knees.	Points with index finger.	Takes toys in and out of containers.	Begins to use 2 syllable sounds together (“ma-ma”, “dada”)	Anxious response to strangers; strong attachment to parents.

Age	Gross Motor	Fine Motor	Cognitive (Thinking)	Communication	Social
12 months adjusted age	Walks alone (may take up to 15 months)	Uses thumb and pointer finger to grasp small finger foods; drops objects into a small container.	Begins to use objects for specific functions (comb to comb hair); begins to anticipate behavior will have a consequence.	Says at least 2 words in addition to "mama" and "dada"; recognizes own name, imitates familiar words.	Shy, but enjoys attention and play; gives affection and cuddles.
18 months adjusted age	Walks up steps while holding on to support; "runs"	Builds tower with 3-4 blocks	Begins trial and error thinking; begins to understand reasoning	Points to three basic body parts; follow simple requests; knows and names 2-5 familiar objects; combines 2 words ("all gone", "bye-bye").	Helps with simple tasks, imitates others' actions spontaneously.
24 months adjusted age	Alternates feet while going up stairs; kicks ball.	Stacks 6 cubes; turns individual book pages.	Matches circle, square, triangle; understands the use of many objects; understands self is separate from environment.	Uses 2-word phrases; understands simple questions and commands; asks for a drink.	Washes and dries hands; helps get dressed.
30 months adjusted age	Jumps with both feet.	Strings beads; holds pencil in hand, not fist.	Knows simple songs with hand gestures; completes simple puzzles; begins to understand basic instructions.	Uses pronouns, "I", "you", and "me" correctly; states full name, may say "no" when means "yes".	Plays tag; asserts personality.
36 months adjusted age	Balances on one foot for 5 seconds; rides tricycle.	Imitates building a block bridge.	Knows big and little; understands basic instructions; believes all objects are related to her somehow.	Can match primary colors; can sing songs; asks "what" questions.	Plays with children; takes turns with hand gestures.



Warning Signs

Consult your pediatrician or developmental specialist if your child exhibits any of the signs listed below at the ages indicated.

At 6 months adjusted age:

- Difficulty lifting her hand and pushing up on her arms while lying on her stomach;
- Cannot stay lying on her side to play with toys;
- Is not sitting, even with support;
- Is not rolling or is rolling by arching her neck and back ;
- Makes no effort to reach or bat at objects;
- Does not move her head toward a sound or search for objects with her eyes;
- Grasps an object weakly or holds only for a moment;
- Keeps her hands fisted and/or keeps her thumb inside her fist;
- Is not able to get her hands to her mouth or together;
- Continues to have trouble taking a bottle or first solids;
- Does not coo or babble.

At 12 months adjusted age:

- Is sitting but not able to sit independently;
- Is crawling or “bunny hopping” by moving both legs forward at the same time;
- Is not easily able to pick up small objects, such as finger foods;
- Does not search for a hidden object;
- Does not vocalize consonant and vowel combinations (“ba”);
- Does not look at books for short periods of time. (Keep in mind that if she is busy learning to crawl and walk, she may not have much interest in sitting down activities. Encourage her to spend some time doing “quiet” activities, such as looking at books);
- Does not respond to simple familiar speech routines, such as pat-a-cake;
- Uses one side of her body much more often than the other.

At 18 months adjusted age:

- Does not walk, or constantly walks on her toes;
- Does not imitate sounds or produce any sound combinations that represent a word (“doodie” for “cookie”)
- Cannot build a town with blocks
- Is most interested in putting toys in her mouth during play, rather than more purposeful play using her hands;

- Understands fewer than eight words.

At 24 months adjusted age:

- Does not put two words together in speech;
- Does not identify basic objects or pictures of basic objects (“ball”);
- Has large motor skills that are lacking in balance and control (falls or trips a lot more than other children her age);
- Cannot complete a simple puzzle or shape sorter;
- Does not follow simple commands, such as “give me”;
- Cannot identify basic body parts.

At 36 months adjusted age:

- Does not use prepositions (“in”, “on”, “under”);
- Cannot copy a circle (or attempt to);
- Has such poor speech that it is impossible for others to understand;
- Does not follow commands that use “in”, “on”, “under”;
- Does not answer simple “yes” or “no” questions correctly;
- Does not jump with both feet off the ground;
- Cannot feed herself with a spoon.

Keeping Track of Your Premie’s Progress

Using a baby book created for term children and their families for your premie can be discouraging. Weeks or months may pass before you can actually record a developmental milestone. Many of the items listed may not even apply to your preterm baby.

You can create an individualized preemie baby book by using a blank scrapbook or inserting heavy blank pages into a binder. Write celebrations and past photos and keepsakes onto pages (do not forget to include that tiny disposable diaper or blood pressure cuff). You can keep track of firsts (first smiles, first crawl, first word) by adjusted age and actual age.

Recording your preemie’s developmental achievements can help you see how your child develops over time (rather than just focusing on day-to-day progress, which can sometimes be disappointing). Your homemade “premie book” will also help you tell your child someday about her special birth.