

MEMORY

What is this developmental skill?

Memory is the ability to encode, store, and retrieve information over time. It allows children to recognize people, remember experiences, learn new information, recall facts, and apply what they have learned to new situations. Memory is essential for nearly every aspect of development, from learning language and academic skills to forming relationships and developing a sense of identity.

How does this normally develop?

Memory begins developing in infancy as babies recognize familiar faces, voices, and routines. During early childhood, children become increasingly able to remember events, follow routines, and retain new vocabulary and concepts. As they grow, improvements in brain development and experience allow them to remember larger amounts of information, connect new learning with prior knowledge, and retrieve information more efficiently. Supportive relationships, repeated practice, meaningful experiences, and adequate sleep all contribute to healthy memory development.

How can neglect interfere with its development?

Neglect can interfere with memory because chronic stress affects brain regions involved in learning and memory, particularly the hippocampus. When children are focused on meeting basic needs or monitoring their environment for safety, fewer cognitive resources remain available for encoding and storing new information. Limited language exposure, inconsistent routines, and reduced opportunities for meaningful learning also decrease the experiences that strengthen memory. As a result, children may have difficulty retaining information even when they appear to understand it in the moment.

What might this look like?

A child with memory difficulties may:

- Forget instructions shortly after hearing them.
- Need repeated practice to learn new information.
- Have difficulty recalling previously learned academic material.
- Forget names, routines, or important details.
- Struggle to remember what happened earlier in the day.
- Require frequent reminders about expectations.
- Learn a skill one day but seem to have forgotten it the next.

Parenting Implications

Children strengthen memory when learning is meaningful, organized, and repeated over time. Establish consistent routines, connect new information to familiar experiences, and provide opportunities for practice without pressure. Break information into smaller parts, use visual supports when appropriate, and encourage children to explain what they have learned in their own words. Repetition should be patient and supportive rather than critical, recognizing that children with developmental delays may simply need more opportunities to encode and retrieve information successfully.

From Understanding to Attunement

Instead of thinking, *"I just told them that,"* consider, *"They may not have been able to store or retrieve that information yet."* This perspective shifts the focus from assuming the child is careless or not trying to recognizing that memory is a developmental skill. By providing repetition, consistency, and emotionally safe learning experiences, caregivers help strengthen the brain systems that allow children to remember, learn, and build confidence over time.

