

THE SPECTRUM OF NORMAL

“None of my other kids ever did that.” I hear this every day. For parents with more than one child, it can be confusing, or even worrisome, when they see something unexpected that their older kids did differently. There is often the assumption that parents should be able to handle most things when the second or third child comes along, because after all, they have been there before. Many parents are surprised to find that they have been pitched a curve ball when they expected something nice and slow that they could easily hit out of the park.

First-time parents usually have no idea what “normal” for a baby is, and they know it! They eventually figure out “normal” for their child, based entirely on their personal experiences with their own baby. Their definition of normal will eventually include anything that one might think of: developmental patterns, how much or how often babies are supposed to eat, how much or how often they are supposed to cry, how much they are supposed to spit up, how often they are supposed to have bowel movements, how much they are supposed to sleep...you get the idea. When the second child comes along, these parents may have their idea of what normal is, but things are rarely the same the second time around!

Whenever I see a newborn with an older sibling, one of the first things I usually tell the parents is that the range of normal is extremely broad. It is a spectrum, with normal kids at both ends. In other words, there is more than one way of being normal, and it is hard to get a good appreciation of this if you are not around babies all the time. I can almost guarantee them that their experience the second time around will be entirely different from their first experience. Even a parent with ten children will only know ten variations of normal, not the entire range of possibilities.

Physical development and cognitive development also follow the rule of the broad spectrum of normal. It is only natural to compare babies, but this can cause a lot of worrying and sleepless nights. Everything from the age when teeth erupt to the age when a child learns to walk has a range of normal. Some children get their first teeth at 2 months and others are almost 15 months old. Some children walk at 10 months and others walk at 15 months. Some children are potty-trained at 2 years and others are closer to 4 years old. Some children know six words at 18 months of age, and others know dozens. Many parenting books talk about a specific age for certain milestones as if that is the only normal time to do it, but these “normal” are usually average ages, rather absolute times.

There are some fairly significant differences between boys and girls that we cannot forget about, especially when it comes to language development and gross motor development. In general, girls talk before boys, and boys walk before girls. That does not mean that a child who does not follow this pattern is abnormal – within the broader spectrum, there is

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a spectrum for boys and a spectrum for girls. A boy does not have to follow a typical “boy” pattern, just as a girl does not have to follow a typical “girl” pattern, in order to be normal.

Birth order can also affect development. This can add to parental worries, since first-born children tend to do a lot of things quicker than their younger siblings. This is especially true with spoken language. Of course, this makes sense when you think about the amount of time a parent spends with a first-born child compared to their subsequent children. Parenthood involves continuous juggling of time and energy, and there is absolutely no way a parent with more than one child can devote the same one-on-one time to the second or third child that they did to the first child. Fortunately, study after study has shown that even when older sibling seem “advanced”, the developmental differences that are attributed to birth order are gone before long.

I could go on and on with examples, but the point of this is not to give you every possible scenario. Rather, the take-home message is that there are many different ways of being normal, and siblings are often as different as unrelated children. One of my jobs as a pediatrician is to be on the lookout for problems with development, and a parent’s concern is something that I always pay attention to. If you are worried about any aspect of your child’s development, please talk to your pediatrician. Chances are you are not the only one who has had the same concerns!