

Developmental Pace

Pace is ordinary variation, and it is uneven within one person. School treats it as fixed, sorts by birth date, and records the gap against the child.

Reach for it when “working below age-related expectations” is being used as the reason to withhold something.

The Short Version

Developmental pace is the rate at which a person arrives — at a skill, a concept, a capacity.

It varies enormously between people, and within one person across different domains. School treats it as a fixed background condition and sorts children by birth date instead. The distance between where a child is and where the timetable says they should be gets recorded against the child.

"Behind" is information about the ruler, not about the learner.

The assumption underneath the timetable is not a finding. It has been checked against the research, and the evidence does not support it.

Why This Sheet Exists

Somewhere in a meeting, someone says a version of this sentence:

Your child is working below age-related expectations.

It sounds like a measurement of the child. It is a measurement of the gap between one child and a cohort assembled from everyone born inside the same twelve months. Nothing in that sorting ever asked where any of them had reached.

This sheet is for the meeting where that gap is doing work it cannot do.

Where it is the reason to withhold something: a support, a placement, a presumption of competence. Or the reason to hold a child back until they catch up with a schedule nobody has justified.

The Machinery Assumes a Shared Pace

Ironically, however, the current machinery of schooling and the judgements that underpin it are often deeply inconsistent with research evidence and detrimental to some students' learning.

The curriculum assumption that all students in a grade are about equally ready for the same learning is not supported by evidence. Assessing all students against the same learning expectations regardless of where they are in their learning and assigning A to E grades flies in the face of what is known from research about how to engage and motivate students and build self-confidence as learners. There is an urgent need for evidence-based reform of the machinery of schooling.

— Geoff Masters, *The Children We Leave Behind: How School Could Be Done Differently* (www.routledge.com/The-Children-We-Leave-Behind-How-School-Could-Be-Done-Differently/...) (Routledge, 2026), p. 194

In many ways, what this book calls for is a paradigm shift: a change in how we think about learning at school. Currently, all students of the same age are taught the same body of content at the same time and are assessed on how much of it they can demonstrate. **The alternative involves seeing learning as long-term growth, recognising that students are at widely different stages in this growth, and meeting individuals where they are.**

— Geoff Masters, *The Children We Leave Behind*, p. 194

The Same Age Is Not the Same Stage

The principle is already written into statutory guidance. It just is not allowed to reach very far.

The EYFS principle states, 'that children are unique and "constantly learning...capable, confident and self-assured"' and that they 'develop and learn at different rates' (DfE 2021). **This is not restricted to Early Years, we need these main principles rolling out further across primary and into secondary settings.**

— Helen Edgar, *Education Crisis – Neurodiversity Affirming Teacher Training Needed* (<https://autisticrealms.com/education-crisis-neurodiversity-affirming-teacher-training-needed/>), Autistic Realms

When children's development deviates from what is considered normal, they are often viewed through a deficit lens of problems, impairments, and delays.

— Helen Edgar, *Education Crisis – Neurodiversity Affirming Teacher Training Needed* (<https://autisticrealms.com/education-crisis-neurodiversity-affirming-teacher-training-needed/>), Autistic Realms

A system can hold *children develop at different rates* as a founding principle and still run entirely on age. Both things are true at once, and the gap between them is where children fall.

Pace Is Not One Number

Developmental pace is not a single dial set slow or fast for a whole person. It is uneven by domain — which is what a spiky profile (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/spiky-profile/>) describes.

One of the primary things I wish people knew about autism is that autistic people tend to have 'spiky skills profiles:' we are good at some things, bad at other things, and **the difference between the two tends to be much greater than it is for most other people.**

— Autistic Skill Sets: A Spiky Profile of Peaks and Troughs (<https://neuroclastic.com/autistic-skill-sets/>), NeuroClastic

A single label — ahead, behind, at grade level — is a summary of a shape it cannot represent. It averages the peaks and the troughs into one number, and then treats that number as the child.

Keep the related ideas distinct. Processing time (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/processing-time/>) is the time a bodymind needs to take something in and respond. Monotropic time (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/monotropic-time/>) is what happens to time inside a flow state. **Developmental pace is the longer arc: when a capacity arrives at all.**

"They Will Have to Cope Later" Has to Ignore This

The most common argument for holding everyone to one timetable is that the world will hold them to one later. Alfie Kohn named that argument BGUTI — *Better Get Used To It* — and named what it costs:

Almost by definition, the BGUTI defense ignores developmental differences.

— Alfie Kohn, Getting Hit on the Head Lessons (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/getting-hit-head-lessons/>), *Education Week*, 2005

It has to ignore them. The argument treats the timetable as fixed and the child as the variable, so it cannot survive noticing that children arrive at different rates.

The premise underneath it does not hold either:

But people don't really get better at coping with unhappiness because they were deliberately made unhappy when they were young. In fact, **it is experience with success and unconditional acceptance that help one to deal constructively with later deprivation.**

— Alfie Kohn, Getting Hit on the Head Lessons (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/getting-hit-head-lessons/>)

This does its worst work under behaviorism (<https://stimpunks.org/why/behaviorism/>), because a model that watches only compliance cannot represent a child who needs longer — so needing longer reads as refusing.

Bend the Clock, Not the Child

Crip time (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/crip-time/>) is the Disability-community answer to the same question, and it is not simply *more time*.

Crip time is flex time not just expanded but exploded; it requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time, or recognizing how expectations of "how long things take" are based on very particular minds and bodies. **Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.**

— Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (<https://iupress.org/9780253009340/feminist-queer-crip/>) (Indiana University Press, 2013)

Slow pedagogy (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/slow-pedagogy/>) arrives at the same place from early years practice:

'A key advantage of the wayfaring metaphor is that it allows for children to take other roads on their developmental journeys, and to follow **their own (emergent rather than inbuilt) timetable**' (Gallacher In Press).

— Gallacher, quoted in Alison Clark, *Slow Knowledge and the Unhurried Child* (https://openlibrary.org/works/OL28345817W/Slow_Knowledge_and_the_Unhurried_Child?edition=)

Emergent rather than inbuilt. A pace is not a property a child was issued at birth and can be measured against. It emerges from a person meeting an environment — which means the environment is half of it, and the half we can actually change.

What to Measure Instead

The reform is not lower standards or a softer mood. It is a change in what assessment is *for*.

Reform involves changing the purpose of assessment. Rather than being designed to determine how well students meet grade expectations, **assessments are designed to establish and understand the stages that individuals have reached in an area of learning to support their further learning and monitor their growth over time.** This changed purpose begins with, and responds to, recognition that students in the same grade are at very different points in their development.

— Geoff Masters, *The Children We Leave Behind*, p. 153

...consider the idea introduced in Chapter 9 of a **sequence of curriculum levels not tied to age or grade but through which every student advances at their own pace.** Because there is no requirement that every student be taught the same grade curriculum at the same time, the primary purpose of assessment is no longer to compare every student's performance with grade-level expectations.

— Geoff Masters, *The Children We Leave Behind*, p. 153

- **The stage, not the gap.** Find where the learner has actually reached in a sequence of learning, and teach from there. That is a different question from how far they are from a benchmark, and it has a different answer.
- **Levels not tied to age or grade,** through which every learner advances at their own pace, with no requirement that a whole cohort be taught the same thing at once.
- **Growth over time,** each learner measured against their own earlier work rather than against the people born in the same year.
- **Individual assessment.** Teaching from where a learner is isn't a concession for the children who need it most. It is what assessment is *for*, for everyone.

Multiage (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/multiage/>) grouping is one long-standing way of building this into a room rather than bolting it on:

Children are not labeled according to their ability, and **children learn at their own rate.**

— Association for Childhood Education International, quoted in [Why do we group students by manufacture date?](http://usergeneratededucation.wordpress.com/2018/...) (usergeneratededucation.wordpress.com/2018/...), User Generated Education

We lose so much when we divide students by age... We lose peer mentoring, we lose the aspirations to be "like the big kids," we lose the ability of younger kids to become leaders, and **we lose the ability to let kids grow at their own rate.**

— Ira Socol, [The Multiage Magic](http://speedchange.blogspot.com/2012/05/multiage-magic.html?m=1) (<http://speedchange.blogspot.com/2012/05/multiage-magic.html?m=1>)

What to Ask For in the Room

- **"What can they do now, and what comes next?"** Ask it before anyone reaches for a grade level. If nobody present can answer it, that is itself the finding.
 - **Ask what the mark is being used for.** A grade reporting distance from a year-level expectation cannot also tell you what to teach on Monday. Those are two different instruments.
 - **Ask to see growth against their own earlier work** — dated, specific, and put in front of you.
 - **Ask that support not wait for a missed benchmark.** Needing longer is not a finding a child has to earn by failing first.
 - **Ask about mixed-age and flexible grouping.** Children learn at their own rate; sorting them by year of manufacture is a scheduling convenience, not a pedagogy.
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What This Sheet Is Not

An argument against age-graded expectations sits one careless line away from reading as an argument for lower ones. It is not that. To be explicit:

- **Not "slower is better."** Pace is not a virtue and speed is not a vice. A pace is survivable or it isn't, and the environment decides.
 - **Not lower expectations.** Presume competence, then teach from where a person actually is. Those are the same move, not opposite ones.
 - **Not a claim that age tells you nothing.** It tells you a birth date. It is being asked to report a stage, and it cannot.
 - **Not a reason to withhold or delay support.** "They'll get there" is how a child waits years for help that was available on day one.
 - **Not an argument against assessment** — an argument about what assessment is for, and who it is answerable to.
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The Principle

Support is owed when the cost is discovered, not when a child can no longer pay it.

A timetable is a scheduling convenience. A child is not late for it.

Further Reading

- Developmental Pace (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/developmental-pace/>) — the full argument, with every source
 - Developmental Pace broadside (<https://whysheet.press/broadsides/developmental-pace/>) — one sheet, two sides, for the room
 - Spiky Profile (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/spiky-profile/>) · Crip Time (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/crip-time/>) · Slow Pedagogy (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/slow-pedagogy/>) · Multiage (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/multiage/>) · Processing Time (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/processing-time/>) · Monotropic Time (<https://stimpunks.org/glossary/monotropic-time/>)
 - Behaviorism (<https://stimpunks.org/why/behaviorism/>) — why a model that watches only compliance cannot see a child who needs longer
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Where this sheet comes from. It is written and revised as Markdown in the open: Developmental Pace.md. That file is the source this page and its PDF are both generated from, so the three cannot say different things.

This sheet is also published as a page on stimpunks.org.

There is a one-sheet broadside of this argument — the version you pin up.