

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Child development: Preschoolers (3–5 years old)

Emerging Minds acknowledges that families come in many forms. For the purposes of easy reading, the term 'parent' encompasses the biological, adoptive, foster and kinship carers of a child, as well as individuals who have chosen to take up primary or shared responsibility in raising that child.

We also appreciate that every child is unique and has different strengths, vulnerabilities and experiences that shape their health and development.

Understanding how a child's reactions, thoughts, behaviours and sense of control are influenced by their development can help you imagine what life is like for your child right now. Knowing what children are (and aren't) likely to be able to do and understand at their current age helps you respond in ways that support their positive development and mental health.

This fact sheet describes the main developmental experiences and capabilities of preschoolers around three to five years old, and offers ways parents, family members and other adults can support children's healthy development and wellbeing.

Key things to remember about children's development

- Every child grows and develops at their own pace, and so their developmental journey is unique. Some children master certain skills earlier than others and some take longer or need a bit more help and direction.



- A child's development is shaped by their unique genes as well as their relationships and experiences at home and in the other places they learn and play.
- Neurodivergent children and children with a physical or intellectual disability may think, move, communicate and/or process senses differently, which can influence their developmental pathway.
- The best way to support your child's development and wellbeing is to provide a safe and secure environment and respond warmly, consistently and appropriately to their needs.

A note about developmental 'stages' and 'milestones'

Health professionals and other resources may refer to 'stages' of development or lists of developmental 'milestones' to check whether a child's development is 'on track' or if there are any areas of concern. Milestones are specific skills or capabilities children typically develop by certain ages. Milestones are based on neurotypical processes and can't reflect the unique characteristics and experiences of each child. For this reason, we've chosen not to refer to specific 'stages' or 'milestones' in this resource.

Children’s development from three to five years old

In their preschool years (from around 3–5 years old), children are becoming more independent and curious about their world and learning lots of new skills. They’re often also completely egocentric (focused only on what they need or want).

During these years, children’s worlds often expand as they spend time in new environments, like daycare or kindergarten. They typically develop everyday skills, like being able to dress themselves, and greater independence – wanting to choose what they wear or eat, for example. As they get older, they become more imaginative in their play and usually become interested in making friends with other children around the same age.

That said, parent/s and family members are still preschool children’s most important relationships. Warm and consistent relationships with nurturing adults will help them to grow and thrive.

Developmental experiences for preschoolers (3–5 years old)

As a parent of a preschooler, it can be difficult to understand how your child is experiencing the world and why they’re behaving the way they are. This table shows the main developmental experiences and capabilities of children aged around 3–5 years old, along with ways parents, family members and other adults can support their healthy development.

Before you read this list, take a moment to think about what you’ve been noticing about your child.

Have you noticed any changes in:

- what your child can do, or is trying to do, by themselves?
- their physical abilities?
- how they like to play?
- the ways they’re expressing their feelings?

As you read the suggestions for ways to support healthy development, consider:

- What are you already doing that is supporting your preschooler’s development?
- Are there any ideas here that you might try?

Common developmental experiences for children aged around 3–5 years	How you can support your child’s healthy development
<p>Most children around this age have big imaginations. Their thinking is ‘magical’ rather than logical, and they often believe they have the power to make things happen. This can sometimes feel frightening for children or lead them to feel guilt or self-blame. If something bad happens, they may think it’s because of something they did, wished or imagined.</p>	<p>Accept and enjoy their imagination. Preschoolers love it when you join in their imaginative play (for example, making up a character or dressing up with them). If you need inspiration, the Raising Children Network has great play ideas to encourage development.</p> <p>Children can become very distressed if adults dismiss their magical thoughts or ‘powers’. Of course, sometimes you’ll need to help them understand that what they are imagining is not true, and reassure them that something ‘bad’ that has happened – such as parents separating, or a pet dying – is not their fault.</p>
<p>Young children are ‘egocentric’. This means they think the world revolves around them, and they’re completely focused on their own needs.</p>	<p>Preschoolers are not yet able to understand another person’s point of view, so they need you to help them understand what another child (or adult) might be feeling and why. When you read books or watch TV programs together, talk about how a character might feel and why. For example, ‘Do you think X might be sad because their friend didn’t want to play with them today?’</p>
<p>Children are developing new skills in self-care, like dressing themselves and going to the toilet without help.</p> <p>Sometimes they can be great at these skills; and sometimes – when they’re tired or unwell or coping with lots of change, for example – these things can be hard to do, and children can become frustrated.</p>	<p>Try to remember that sometimes preschoolers want and need to be independent, and sometimes they will want you to help or take care of them – and knowing which one they want at any moment can be tricky! Don’t jump in to help or ‘fix’ the problem. Instead, allow your child to try to do things by themselves, but be available if they need a little encouragement or help to problem solve.</p> <p>Tune in to how they’re feeling and if they might be in need of some extra support or nurturing. For example, they might be extra tired when they start going to preschool or daycare.</p>

Common developmental experiences for children aged around 3–5 years	How you can support your child's healthy development
<p>Preschool-aged children are learning about big emotions. They may not have the words to explain their feelings and need adults to help them to understand what they're experiencing, and to show them healthy ways of managing big emotions.</p> <p>Preschoolers often express their feelings through play.</p>	<p>Help your child to name their emotions and understand how they feel in their body. It's important to validate their feelings – let your child know that whatever they're feeling is OK – but also help them learn how to express them safely and appropriately. For example: 'It looks like you're feeling angry. I'd be cross too if someone took away what I was playing with. But it's never OK to hit.'</p> <p>Make time to play with your child, allowing them to choose what they want to do – or just sit near them if they're playing alone and tune in to what they're doing and saying.</p> <p>Reading books together, and talking about whether the people or animals in them look 'happy' or 'scared' or 'angry' can help children understand and talk about different feelings, too.</p>
<p>Young children often have LOTS of questions about how the world works and why things happen. They may be curious about how babies are made, why people die, and what different adults do and why. They might also ask the same question over and over and over again...</p>	<p>When your child asks big questions, give them simple, truthful explanations that they can understand.</p> <p>If your child keeps repeating a question, they need you to be patient and follow their curiosity. Make time to chat with them about whatever they're interested in. You might suggest that you go to the library together and find a book about the topic, or look it up on the internet together.</p>
<p>Preschoolers are learning to interact socially, and to use language to connect with others, including adults. Most children at this age can put together simple sentences that are mostly understandable.</p>	<p>Spend time with family and friends so your child can see how you interact with other people. Organise play dates with other preschoolers so they can develop their own social skills.</p> <p>Keep reading to your child every day or night. This builds their knowledge, vocabulary, and your connection.</p> <p>Try to limit screen time to one hour or less a day.¹ At this age talking, reading and outdoor play are really important for building your child's communication, social and physical skills, ready for school.</p>
<p>Around this age, children are becoming more imaginative and creative in their play.</p> <p>They have a growing sense of fairness, and generally can share and take turns.</p>	<p>Encourage and support your child to play – with you, by themselves, and with other children. The Raising Children Network has great play ideas to encourage development.</p> <p>Even if you have a busy schedule, try to regularly find a little time to connect with your child. Playing or doing whatever your child wants to do with you, even for just five minutes, reminds them that they are important to you.</p> <p>During this play time, give your child your full attention. Often when they're playing, or colouring, young children will tell stories about what's happening in their world, and you can tune in to what they're interested in or maybe worried about.</p> <p>Sometimes your preschooler will still need you to remind them about important social and friendship skills like sharing, waiting and taking turns.</p>

If your family is navigating tough times

When a family is facing difficulties – such as financial or housing stress, health issues or relationship breakdown – it affects everyone, even very young children. It's normal for a child's developmental process to be interrupted and different to what's described above if they, you or the whole family is dealing with tough times.

Find out more about how you can [support your child's development during tough times](#) in our fact sheet.

When to seek advice

As a parent, you know your child best. If you have any concerns about the way your child moves, speaks, learns or interacts with other people, talk to your doctor/GP.

Please make an appointment to see your GP, child health nurse or another health professional if your child:

- shows no interest in pretend play or playing with other children
- can't have a conversation with familiar adults, or answer simple questions like, 'What did you do at the park?' or 'What did you watch on TV?'
- is not able to be understood by others when they talk
- isn't trying to feed and dress themselves (at around four years), or is not able to go to the toilet and dress without help (usually by age five)
- is not able to walk, run, climb, jump and confidently go up and down stairs; or
- isn't able to draw lines and circles (by age four), or simple pictures like stick people (by five years).^{2,3,4}

Identifying a cause or a developmental delay and getting help early can make a big difference to your child's development and long-term wellbeing.

More information

This fact sheet is part of our series on key developmental experiences for children from birth to age 12. This collection of resources looks at what parents and other adults can do to support healthy development at different points in a child's developmental journey.

AVAILABLE HERE

More resources on child development



The Raising Children Network has more detailed information about:

- [preschoolers' development](#) (including language, social and emotional, creative and sexual development)
- [developmental delay](#) in children (0–8 years old); and
- [development of children with autism](#).

Find out more about [anxiety in preschoolers](#) in our Emerging Minds Families resource.

Listen to this Emerging Minds podcast episode to learn more about [supporting your child's emotions](#).

By learning and staying curious about what your child is experiencing, thinking and feeling, you can support their healthy development and their mental health and wellbeing, now and into the future.

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References

1. Department of Health and Aged Care. (2021). [Physical activity and exercise guidelines for all Australians: For children and young people \(5 to 17 years\)](#) [Web page]. Australian Government.
2. Queensland Health Child Development Program and Brisbane North Primary Health Network. (2016). [Red Flags Early Identification Guide \(for children aged birth to five years\)](#). Queensland Government.
3. Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority. (n.d.). [Your child's development](#) [Web page]. ACECQA.
4. Healthdirect. (2021). [Developmental milestones in babies and children](#) [Web page]. Australian Government.