

Emerging Minds Families

FACT SHEET

Child development: Early school- aged children (5–8 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 children around five to eight 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 five to eight years old

In the early school years, children become more independent and are constantly learning new skills.

Once children start school, their relationships and experiences in their school environment – where they spend about a quarter of their time each week – greatly influence their development. Going to school brings a lot of new challenges – around learning, but also around social and emotional skills, as children learn to navigate relationships with other children and adults. How a child feels about themselves can be impacted by how they cope with those challenges.

Starting school also opens a whole new social world and children become increasingly interested in friendships with other children. But the most significant relationship for most children this age is still with their parent/s. It’s important for parents to maintain warmth and responsiveness while encouraging and supporting children’s increasing independence and need for clear rules and limits.

Developmental experiences of early school-aged children (5–8 years)

As a parent, it can be difficult to understand how your child is experiencing the world and why they’re behaving in certain ways. The following table shows the main developmental experiences and capabilities of children aged around 5–8 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:

- your child’s interests?
- their self-identity – what they see as their strengths or qualities?
- how they like to play?
- the ways they’re forming friendships?

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

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

Common developmental experiences for children aged around 5–8 years	How you can support your child’s healthy development
<p>From around five years of age, children start becoming much less egocentric (thinking the whole world revolves around them) and can usually see things from another’s perspective.</p> <p>They are developing better control over their emotions and the ability to see things from another person’s point of view.</p>	<p>You can help children develop empathy by continuing to notice and talk about how other people might feel. For example, if your child tells you about a classmate at school who’s crying every morning when they’re dropped off, ask if they have any ideas why that child feels so sad or what might help them feel better about school.</p> <p>By this age children are more often able to take turns and share. But under pressure they may lose those new abilities – so they may still need you to remind them sometimes.</p> <p>Make sure your child gets enough sleep, and has time to play and unwind after school. This will help them to deal with big emotions.</p>
<p>Young children are developing more interest in others and in the world around them.</p> <p>Children will use their increasing language skills to interact with others, ask questions (rather than demand things) of adults, and engage in imaginative play.</p>	<p>Make time and space for conversations with your child about whatever they want to talk or ask about. By the age of six, most children are able to have adult-like conversations. When you give them your full attention and show you’re actively listening – making eye contact (not looking at your phone), nodding, and asking questions about what they tell you – your child gets the message that they are important to you.</p>

Common developmental experiences for children aged around 5–8 years	How you can support your child’s healthy development
<p>Early school-aged children are more social and increasingly concerned with their friendship group and being like other children. They tend to develop friendships with peers of the same sex, and who have the same interests or like the same activities or type of play.</p>	<p>Support your child to develop new friendships by encouraging them to participate in activities they enjoy – like art or a sport – where they will meet other children with shared interests.</p> <p>Provide plenty of opportunities for structured and unstructured play with children around the same age. Organise play dates at home or a playground.</p>
<p>Most children around this age are developing a sense of what is right and wrong. But it’s not always ‘switched on’, especially if they’re dealing with a challenging situation or person.</p> <p>Children will normally follow the rules at home or school but might challenge what they think is ‘fair’ or the timing of when they’re expected to do a chore, for example.</p>	<p>Young children still need adults to model and remind them about what behaviour is OK and what is not.</p> <p>It’s important to maintain routines and family rules at home, especially when children first start school. They can often feel tired and overwhelmed, and get upset easily if things at home are not predictable or change too fast.</p> <p>Now is a good time to reinforce or set limits on screen time. Children need good sleep, plenty of time to be active and to be encouraged to play using their imagination (see below) – so less than two hours per day of screen time is recommended.¹</p>
<p>Self-identity (how children see themselves) is starting to develop for most children around this age. They will compare themselves to others and can begin to define themselves in terms of their interests and strengths (e.g. ‘I’m the best runner, but I’m not the best at drawing’).</p>	<p>You can support your child’s developing identity by encouraging them to try different things and find out what they’re good at and enjoy. Celebrate not only their ‘wins’ and successes, but also their persistence and effort.</p>
<p>Early school-aged children still enjoy imaginary (‘make believe’) play. They often like to allocate roles to themselves and their friends. For example, they might act out characters from books, TV or a movie. Play can be used as a way for children to ‘try out’ different roles and gender identities.</p>	<p>Provide your child with opportunities for different types of play, especially child-led play, where you allow your child to decide what and how they want to play. If you need inspiration, the Raising Children Network has great play ideas to encourage development.</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.

Our fact sheet has more information about how you can [support your child's development during tough times](#).

When to seek advice

This is an age when you might notice your child is having trouble with learning or regulating their emotions, as they're dealing with more challenges at school. To be able to learn and play with their peers, children need to have developed both fine motor skills, like being able to hold a crayon or pencil, and gross motor skills (big movements) like jumping and throwing a ball. Children can feel frustrated or embarrassed if they see that most children their age can do something that they can't do yet, or they're unable to join in an activity that others enjoy.

It is important to identify and address any early learning or social and emotional difficulties your child may be experiencing, so that they can feel engaged in and enjoy school. It can be helpful to talk with your child's teacher or another staff member at their school to find out if they have noticed any signs of developmental delays.

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 or another health professional. 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 website has more detailed information about:

- [school-aged children's 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 primary school-aged children](#) in our Emerging Minds Families resource.

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.