

Developmental Milestones: Ages 3 Through 5

Knowing what to expect as your child grows can reassure you that your child is on track with his peers or alert you to potential concerns. Below are some milestones to watch for during the preschool years.

By *Alix L. Hall - MS Child Development*

Since birth, you've watched your child grow and develop. You've noted his height and weight, when he/she crawled, stood, and walked, even when the first words were spoken – and perhaps compared all of these milestones of his/her infant and toddler years to the "norms." The preschool and early school years are also full of changes. From three to five your child's motor skills, [language](#), thinking, and social development change dramatically.

Knowing what to expect as your child grows can reassure you that your child is on track with their peers or alert you to potential concerns. Below are some milestones to watch for during the preschool years.

Milestones: 3-Year-Olds Motor Development: Gross Motor Skills

- walks with an agile, almost adult style
- runs around obstacles
- catches large balls and throws overhead
- climbs ladders; uses slide independently
- rides a tricycle
- alternates feet when climbing stairs

Motor Development: Fine Motor Skills

- assembles simple puzzles
- manipulates clay; finger paints
- copies simple shapes, such as a cross or circle
- stacks blocks up to nine high

Language and Thinking Development

- understands most of what is said and 75 percent of speech is understandable
- speaks in complete sentences of three to five words
- matches pictures to objects
- learns by doing and through the senses

- understands concepts of "now," "soon," and "later"
- begins to recognize cause-and-effect relationships

Social and Emotional Development

- follows simple directions; enjoys helping with household tasks
- begins to recognize own limits – asks for help
- likes to play alone, but near other children
- does not cooperate or share well
- able to make choices between two things
- begins to notice other people's moods and feelings

Tips for Parenting 3-Year-Olds No longer a toddler, your 3-year-old takes in knowledge about himself and the world around him.

- Transitions are difficult at this age. Provide warning of changes so your child has time to shift gears: "We're leaving in 10 minutes."
- Rituals are important. Household routines and schedules give your 3-year-old a sense of security.
- Point out colors and numbers in the course of everyday conversation: "You're wearing your blue shirt" or "We made six cupcakes."
- Encourage independent activity to build self-reliance.
- Provide lots of sensory experiences for learning and developing coordination – sand, mud, finger paints, puzzles.

Milestones: 4-Year-Olds Motor Development: Gross Motor Skills

- running is more controlled; can start, stop, and turn
- turns somersaults; hops on one foot; gallops
- can easily catch, throw, and bounce a ball
- can brush teeth, comb hair, wash, and dress with little assistance

Motor Development: Fine Motor Skills

- copies crosses and squares
- prints some letters
- uses table utensils skillfully

- cuts on a line

Language and Thinking Development

- uses a 1,500-word vocabulary; speaks in relatively complex sentences ("Mommy opened the door and the dog ran out.")
- understands words that relate one idea to another – if, why, when
- continues to learn through experience and the senses
- understands, mostly, the difference between fantasy and reality
- understands number and space concepts – more, less, bigger, in, under, behind
- thinks literally; starting to develop logical thinking
- begins to grasp that pictures and symbols can represent real objects
- starts to recognize patterns among objects – round things, soft things, animals
- grasps the concepts of past, present, and future but does not understand the duration of time

Social and Emotional Development

- takes turns, shares, and cooperates
- expresses anger verbally rather than physically
- can feel jealousy
- may sometimes lie to protect herself, but understands the concept of lying
- enjoys pretending and has a vivid imagination

Tips for Parenting 4-Year-Olds Silly, imaginative, and energetic, your child loves to try new words and new activities.

- 4-year-olds crave adult approval. Provide lots of positive encouragement.
- Display calendars and analog clocks to help your child visualize the concept of time.
- Play word games to develop his growing vocabulary; overlook his fascination with bad words.
- Offer opportunities for sorting, matching, counting, and comparing.
- Provide lots of play space and occasions to play with other kids.

Milestones: 5-Year-Olds Motor Development: Gross Motor Skills

- runs in an adult manner
- walks on tiptoe, broad jumps
- walks on a balance beam
- skates and jumps rope

Motor Development: Fine Motor Skills

- hand preference is established
- laces (but cannot tie) shoes
- grasps pencil like an adult
- colors within lines
- cuts and pastes simple shapes

Language and Thinking Development

- speaks fluently; correctly uses plurals, pronouns, tenses
- very interested in words and language; seeks knowledge
- understands and names opposites
- uses complex language
- still confuses fantasy and reality at times
- thinking is still naïve; doesn't use adult logic

Social and Emotional Development

- distinguishes right from wrong, honest from dishonest, but does not recognize intent
- plays make-believe and dresses up
- mimics adults and seeks praise
- seeks to play rather than be alone; friends are important
- plays with both boys and girls but prefers the same sex
- wants to conform; may criticize those who do not

Tips for Parenting 5-Year-Olds Your cooperative, easy-going 5-year-old loves to play and that's how he learns.

- Join in activities that develop coordination and balance – skipping and hopping, walking on the curb or crack in the sidewalk, or climbing trees.
- Encourage fine motor skills by letting your child cut pictures out of magazines, string beads, or play with take-apart, put-together toys.
- Take advantage of his interest in numbers by counting anything and everything; teach simple addition and subtraction by using objects, not numerals.
- Let your child know what to expect from an upcoming event or activity so he can prepare. Avoid springing things on him.
- Help him recognize his emotions by using words to describe them: "I see you're angry at me right now."

A "Snapshot" of Two 5-Year-Olds This story of Zak and Kami illustrates the range of skills, interests, and abilities considered typical development for this age.

Zak pressed his forehead against the window as he watched his neighbor Kami leave with her mother on their way to her first day of kindergarten. He sighed and waved. He hoped Kami would see him, yet he didn't want to go outside to make sure.

Zak felt sad and disappointed that he wasn't going, too. At the same time he was glad that he could stay home.

Motor Activity Zak had asked his mother why he wasn't going to school. He was going to be five soon, just like Kami. And he could do all kinds of things. He was good at running, jumping, and climbing. He could roller skate and ride a tricycle. Kami could do some of those things, too, but not as well as Zak.

Kami couldn't really climb a tree, but Zak was the best tree climber ever. He didn't tell his mom, but he had climbed the tall tree in Kami's back yard. She didn't even try to climb it. She just yelled at him to come down. She thought he was going to hurt himself.

"Girls! Maybe it's a good thing that Kami is going to school," Zak thought. "It's better to play with boys anyway. Boys do more fun things. Girls like to sit and color and write and play house and cut out paper dolls and all those boring things." But Zak had to admit that Kami liked to play ball and chase and run, too.

If only Billy lived closer! But mom said he's too young to walk all the way over to Billy's by himself.

Readiness Skills "Young, heck! That's what Mom told me about school – I'm too young to go to kindergarten. I'm going to be five in two weeks! That's not too young," Zak had told his mother. She replied that she wasn't talking about being just five years old. She said that he was a "young five."

"Whatever that is!" thought Zak.

Mom explained that there were things he still needed to learn before he went to school.

"What things?" asked Zak.

"Like sit and listen," said Mom.

"I can sit and listen when I want to. Why do you have to sit and listen to something you don't like anyway?" Zak wondered.

Mom had said it was OK to stay home and just go to preschool until kindergarten. She told him that not all five-year olds do everything at the same time. Maria can draw and write numbers and letters and cut with scissors, but Zak was just beginning to do those things.

He told her that he could run, jump, and stand on his head better than Kami could. Mom said that was great, but in school they want you to sit in a chair and write and cut and paste. That made him very, very sad, and he cried a little. Mom hugged him and told him that he was just fine and soon he'd be able to do all the things that Maria could do.

"Look at all the wonderful things you can do," she said. "You build great castles in the sand and amazing objects with Legos. You tell wonderful stories, and you listen very carefully when I read books to you. And you're a super joke teller." Mom always laughs and laughs at Zak's funny jokes. She told him that next year would be a fun year, and he would grow and learn a lot. In preschool, she called it pre-kindergarten to make him feel better, he'd learn all those things that he'll need to know for kindergarten. She said she would help him with the alphabet and numbers and writing at home. She said he already knew his colors and shapes and that he uses grown-up words when he talks.

"Mom is always telling me all the things I can do. That makes me feel good. I know she really loves me!"

And Finally... Remember that these milestones represent averages, not rigid developmental deadlines. Children move through these changes at varying rates, some sooner, others later. You're the best judge of your child's development and what is "normal" for him, but if you have any concerns, discuss them with your child's pediatrician. Just when you think you've figured out your child, something changes. Today he demands constant attention; six months from now he may be pushing you away. You may find strategies that once worked no longer have any impact on him. Don't worry, this is normal!

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