



Preschooler Development Stage

Understanding your child starts with knowing which behaviors are typical for his or her age.

Please note: Every child is different and may not follow exactly these milestones. This information is just a guide for “average development.” If you have any concerns about your child’s development, please talk to your doctor.

Physical Development

Many physical changes take place during the preschool years. Preschoolers blossom physically and develop new physical skills, such as being able to:

- Run, skip, gallop, and jump on one foot
- Throw a ball overhand and with some control
- Ride a tricycle and later a bike with training wheels
- Do more daily tasks on their own, such as getting dressed, brushing their teeth, and picking up their rooms (but they still need help from adults)

Preschoolers are also learning about the world and people in it. By interacting with your child and providing a healthy environment, you are helping him/her learn and develop important social skills. During this time, preschoolers tend to:

Emotions

- Become more independent and like to make their own decisions
- Have rapid and frequent mood swings from happy to sad, and back to happy again, sometimes over seemingly minor events
- Display and communicate a wide range of emotions, including pride, love, jealousy, shame, and doubt
- Get frustrated easily, but prefer to do things without help
- Want recognition for success and accomplishments
- Develop fears (especially as their imaginations develop)
- Respond well to praise and encouragement from parents and teachers (such as stickers, treats, special time together)
- Develop a sense of humor

Speech

- Learn many new words; children enter the preschool years knowing 900-1000 words, and this can increase to 4,000 - 5,000 words before they enter kindergarten
- Talk a lot!
- Speak in 4 to 6-word sentences, up to 9-word sentences by kindergarten
- Imitate sounds or words, and memorize short sayings, songs, and rhymes
- Talk to themselves when playing



Play

- Love to play, play, play
- Can play for short periods of time alone, but really enjoy playing with adults and other children
- Play next to children and begin to play with other children; sharing is a developing skill that improves with age
- May enjoy physical play with adults and other kids, such as chasing, wrestling, and climbing, and can show some aggression (while this is to be expected, do not allow violent or hurtful behaviors towards others)
- Engage in pretend play with simple themes
- Imitate adult activities through play, such as mowing the grass, putting on make-up, and repeating words or phrases said by adults
- Enjoy doing the same thing over and over again in play, like singing the same song and reading the same book
- Start to understand basic rules and directions; respond to simple rewards and consequences

Interacting with Parents/Adults

- Enjoy having thoughtful conversations
- Understand rules but follow the rules mainly because of consistent rewards and consequences
- Have a lot of questions; will often ask how, what, why questions
- Show independence by saying “NO!” or doing the opposite of what the parent asks
- Want to help and imitate adults; want to be part of household activities and can be very helpful with small tasks

Learning

- Can identify colors and shapes
- Can say ABCs and begin to identify letters and sounds
- Understand numbers, can count to 10, and understand concepts of quantity (more, less, etc.)
- Begin to understand distance, location, and time as they grow older
- Begin to write letters and their name, and draw simple shapes



A note about boys and girls: Although every child is unique, in general boys and girls develop at different rates. You may notice differences between your children, and understanding these gender differences can be useful. For example:

- Girls usually develop the skills and abilities described in this section slightly before/earlier than boys.
- Girls tend to develop verbal skills slightly faster than boys.
- Boys are generally more active, physical, and willing to risks and explore new things.
- At this age, girls and boys begin to recognize gender differences and may show preferences for common gender-related activities.
- Girls' play often involves imitating nurturing skills (such as playing with dolls), while boys' play can be more physical and aggressive (such as playing with trucks or cars). Even at this young age, children are starting to conform to gender roles. However, it is completely normal for boys to play with dolls and girls to play with trucks.
- Children tend to prefer to play with other kids of the same gender.

Citation: Sherman, M.D., Bowling, U., & Anderson, J., & Wyche, K. (2011). Veteran Parenting Toolkit. South Central Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC) and Oklahoma City VA Medical Center. Oklahoma City, OK. www.ouhsc.edu/VetParenting