

Developmental Milestones

Ages Three, Four & Five

Gross-Motor Development Widely Held Expectations

For 3-year-olds...

- ☉ walks without watching feet; walks backward; runs at an even pace; turns and stops well
- ☉ climbs stairs with alternating feet, using hand rail for balance
- ☉ jumps off low steps or objects; does not judge well in jumping over objects
- ☉ shows improved coordination; begins to move legs and arms to pump a swing or ride a trike, sometimes forgetting to watch the direction of these actions and crashing into objects
- ☉ perceives height and speed of objects (like a thrown ball) but may be overly bold or fearful, lacking a realistic sense of own ability
- ☉ stands on one foot unsteadily; balances with difficulty on the low balance beam (four-inch width) and watches feet
- ☉ plays actively (trying to keep up with older children) and then needs rest; fatigues suddenly and becomes cranky if overly tired

For 4-year-olds...

- ☉ walks heel-to-toe; skips unevenly; runs well
- ☉ stands on one foot for five seconds or more; masters the low balance beam (four-inch-width) but has difficulty on the two-inch-wide beam without watching feet
- ☉ walks down steps, alternating feet; judges well in placing feet on climbing structures
- ☉ develops sufficient timing to jump rope or play games requiring quick reactions
- ☉ begins to coordinate movements to climb on a jungle gym or jump on a small trampoline
- ☉ shows greater perceptual judgment and awareness of own limitations and/or the consequences of unsafe behaviors; still needs supervision crossing a street or protecting self in certain activities
- ☉ exhibits increased endurance, with long periods of high energy (needing increased intakes of liquids and calories); sometimes becomes overexcited and less self-regulated in group activities

For 5-year-olds...

- ☉ walks backward quickly; skips and runs with agility and speed; can incorporate motor skills into a game
- ☉ walks a two-inch balance beam well; jumps over objects
- ☉ hops well; maintains an even gate in stepping
- ☉ jumps down several steps; jumps rope
- ☉ climbs well; coordinates movements for swimming or bike riding
- ☉ shows uneven perceptual judgment; acts overly confident at times but accepts limit setting and follows rules
- ☉ displays high energy levels; rarely shows fatigue; finds inactivity difficult and seeks active games and environments

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Fine-Motor Development Widely Held Expectations

For 3-year-olds...

- ☉ places large pegs into pegboards; strings large beads; pours liquids with some spills
- ☉ builds block towers; easily does puzzles with whole objects represented as a piece
- ☉ fatigues easily if much hand coordination is required
- ☉ draws shapes, such as the circle; begins to design objects, such as a house or figure, draws objects in some relation to each other
- ☉ holds crayons or markers with fingers instead of the fist
- ☉ undresses without assistance but needs help getting dressed; unbuttons skillfully but buttons slowly

For 4-year-olds...

- ☉ uses small pegs and board; strings small beads (and may do so in a pattern); pours sand or liquid into small containers
- ☉ builds complex block structures that extend vertically; shows limited spatial judgment and tends to knock things over
- ☉ enjoys manipulating play objects that have fine parts; likes to use scissors; practices an activity many times to gain mastery
- ☉ draws combinations of simple shapes; draws persons with at least four parts and objects that are recognizable to adults
- ☉ dresses and undresses without assistance; brushes teeth and combs hair; spills rarely with cup or spoon; laces shoes or clothing but cannot yet tie

For 5-year-olds...

- ☉ hits nails with hammer head; uses scissors and screwdrivers unassisted
- ☉ uses computer keyboard
- ☉ builds three-dimensional block structures; does 10-15-piece puzzles with ease
- ☉ likes to disassemble and reassemble objects and dress and undress dolls
- ☉ has basic grasp of right and left but mixes them up at times
- ☉ copies shapes; combines more than two geometric forms in drawing and construction
- ☉ draws persons; prints letters crudely but most are recognizable by an adult; includes a context or scene in drawings; prints first name
- ☉ zips coat; buttons well; ties shoes with adult coaching; dresses quickly

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Language and Communication Development Widely Held Expectations

For 3-year-olds...

- ☉ shows a steady increase in vocabulary, ranging from 2,000 to 4,000 words; tends to overgeneralize meaning and make up words to fit needs
- ☉ uses simple sentences of at least three or four words to express needs
- ☉ may have difficulty taking turns in conversation; changes topics quickly
- ☉ pronounces words with difficulty; often mistakes one word for another
- ☉ likes simple finger plays and rhymes and learns words to songs that have much repetition
- ☉ adapts speech and style of nonverbal communication to listeners in culturally accepted ways but still needs to be reminded of context
- ☉ asks many who, what, where, and why questions but shows confusion in responding to some questions (especially why, how, and when)
- ☉ uses language to organize thought, linking two ideas by sentence combining; overuses such words as but, because, and when; rarely makes appropriate use of such temporal words as before, until, or after
- ☉ can tell a simple story but must redo the sequence to put an idea into the order of events; often forgets the point of a story and is more likely to focus on favorite parts

For 4-year-olds...

- ☉ expands vocabulary from 4,000 to 6,000 words; shows more attention to abstract uses
- ☉ usually speaks in five- to six-word sentences
- ☉ likes to sing simple songs; knows many rhymes and finger plays
- ☉ will talk in front of the group with some reticence; likes to tell others about family and experiences
- ☉ uses verbal commands to claim many things; begins teasing others
- ☉ expresses emotions through facial gestures and reads others for body cues; copies behaviors (such as hand gestures) of older children or adults
- ☉ can control volume of voice for periods of time if reminded; begins to read context for social cues
- ☉ uses more advanced sentence structures, such as relative clauses and tag questions (“She’s nice, isn’t she?”) and experiments with new constructions, creating some comprehension difficulties for the listener
- ☉ tries to communicate more than his or her vocabulary allows; borrows and extends words to create meaning
- ☉ learns new vocabulary quickly if related to own experience (“We walk our dog on a belt. Oh yeah, it’s a leash—we walk our dog on a leash”)
- ☉ can retell a four- or five-step directive or the sequence in a story

For 5-year-olds...

- ☉ employs a vocabulary of 5,000 to 8,000 words, with frequent plays on words; pronounces words with little difficulty, except for particular sounds, such as “I” and “th”
- ☉ uses fuller, more complex sentences (“His turn is over, and it’s my turn now”)
- ☉ takes turns in conversation, interrupts others less frequently; listens to another speaker if information is new and of interest; shows vestiges of egocentrism in speech, for instance, in assuming listener will understand what is meant (saying “He told me to do it” without any referents for the pronouns)
- ☉ shares experiences verbally; knows the words to many songs
- ☉ likes to act out others’ roles, shows off in front of new people or becomes unpredictably very shy
- ☉ remembers lines of simple poems and repeats full sentences and expressions from others, including television shows and commercials
- ☉ shows skill at using conventional modes of communication complete with pitch and inflection
- ☉ uses nonverbal gestures, such as certain facial expressions in teasing peers
- ☉ can tell and retell stories with practice; enjoys repeating stories, poems, and songs; enjoys acting out plays or stories
- ☉ shows growing speech fluency in expressing ideas

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Social and Emotional Development Widely Held Expectations

For 3-year-olds...

- ☉ depending in part on previous experience with peers, may look on from the sidelines or engage in parallel play until becoming more familiar with the other children, or may engage in associative play patterns (playing next to a peer, chatting, and using toys but having separate individual intentions for behaviors)
- ☉ shows difficulty taking turns and sharing objects, activity changing form often during a play period; lacks ability to solve problems well among peers; usually needs help to resolve a social situation if conflict occurs
- ☉ plays well with others and responds positively if there are favorable conditions in terms of materials, space, and supervision (less likely to engage in prosocial behavior when any of these elements are lacking)
- ☉ acts more cooperatively than does toddler and wants to please adults (may revert to toddler behavior of thumb sucking, pushing, hitting, crying if unhappy with the outcome of a social situation)
- ☉ can follow simple requests; likes to be treated as an older child at times but may still put objects in mouth that can be dangerous or wander off if not carefully supervised
- ☉ expresses intense feelings, such as fear and affection; shows delightful, silly sense of humor

For 4-year-olds...

- ☉ still engages in associative play but begins true give-and-take, cooperative play
- ☉ shows difficulty sharing (some children more than others) but begins to understand turn taking and plays simple games in small groups
- ☉ becomes angry easily if things don't go her or his way at times; now prefers to play with others most often; seeks to resolve negative interactions although lacking verbal skills to resolve all conflicts
- ☉ begins to spontaneously offer things to others; wants to please friends; compliments others on new clothing or shoes; shows pleasure in having and being with friends
- ☉ exhibits occasional outbursts of anger but is learning that negative acts bring negative sanctions; quickly begins to justify an aggressive act ("He hit me first")
- ☉ knows increasingly what self-regulation behaviors are expected but shows difficulty following through on a task or becomes easily sidetracked, forgetting what was asked unless reminded; likes to dress him- or herself; gets own juice or snack; cleans up without constant supervision; unable to wait very long regardless of the promised outcome
- ☉ shows greater ability to control intense feelings like fear or anger (no more temper tantrums); still needs adults to help him or her express or control feelings at times

For 5-year-olds...

- ☉ enjoys dramatic play with other children
- ☉ cooperates well; forms small groups that may choose to exclude a peer
- ☉ understands the power of rejecting others; verbally threatens to end friendships or select others ("You can't come to my birthday party!"); tends to be bossy with others, resulting in too many leaders and not enough followers at times
- ☉ enjoys others and can behave in a warm and empathetic manner; jokes and teases to gain attention
- ☉ shows less physical aggression; more often uses verbal insult or threatens to hit someone
- ☉ can follow requests; may lie rather than admit to not following procedures or rules; may be easily discouraged or encouraged
- ☉ dresses and eats with minor supervision; reverts easily to younger behaviors when group norms are less than appropriate