
BACK TO BASICS

What it's like to be a preschooler

The preschool years are marked by increasing competence across all developmental domains. Steadily, brain function, language, motor skills, perceptions, interpersonal relationships, and a sense of self reflect the ever-increasing self-regulation and decision-making skills that contribute to a child's autonomy and independence.

Preschoolers continue to construct knowledge through hands-on experiences with materials and responsive interactions with people. Consider these characteristics and developmental milestones of a child's preschool years.

At 3 years

- I ask lots of questions; a favorite word is *why*.
- I like to make decisions when offered simple choices.
- I can identify relationships between objects (balls have rounded sides while blocks have flat sides, for instance) and people (like family members, classmates, and friends).
- I recognize differences and sometimes ask blunt question about another person's color, shape, or ability in order to better understand the ways in which all people are unique.
- I can understand and follow simple, one-step directions like, "Put the green cubes into this bucket."
- I can feed myself with a fork or a spoon but sometimes don't think I'll like the food I'm offered. Give me time to discover new tastes, textures, and food preferences.
- I think about things, even when I can't see them.
- I can grasp, hold, and effectively use writing tools like pencils, markers, crayons, and paintbrushes.
- I have a vocabulary of a few hundred words but sometimes get stuck finding the right one. I need you to be patient as I find the right way to express myself.
- I make marks on paper—sometimes with meaning and sometimes just to enjoy the process. I'll tell you if I want help labeling my artwork.



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- I don't have a good concept of time so it's frustrating and confusing when you tell me to "Wait a minute" or that I'll go home in an hour.
 - I can run across the playground without tripping and like to test my muscle strength and balance by climbing. Make sure the environment is safe so that I can test my own skills, in my own way, at my own pace. Comparing me to what another child can do isn't helpful to me.
 - I need to know you're standing by to offer assistance when I'm unable to solve a problem or negotiate a conflict by myself.
 - When I'm afraid or upset, I sometimes go back to sucking my thumb, wetting my pants, or whining instead of talking.
 - I like to collect things and often have my pockets filled with interesting things like feathers, coins, or rocks.
 - I like to know what's happening next. Changes in routine and schedule—like when there's a fire drill or field trip— can upset and frighten me.
 - I can use the toilet independently and reliably—and usually remember to wash my hands without a reminder. When I do have an accident, please help me get cleaned up without shaming or embarrassing me.
 - I can share detailed information about things I know and like. I'm keen to retell stories, to act them out, and to sometimes direct the action.
 - I'm usually able to regulate my own behavior and generally recognize and heed the differences in behaviors that are acceptable at school and those for home. ■

At 4 years

- I need (and sometimes demand) lots of opportunities to express my ideas and feelings.
- I like to practice writing my own name—and trying to copy other words too.
- I can relate cause to effect, interpret actions, use many symbols, and generalize information. I need lots of time to experiment with objects in the physical world to build knowledge through experience.
- I like to identify my best friends for daily play but these friends can change frequently.
- I get upset or sad when I'm teased or ignored.
- I need you to help me consider different solutions to everyday problems.
- I have the muscle coordination and strength to serve myself at mealtime. I like having a friend hold my cup so that I can pour without spilling.
- I can listen and respond to stories, songs, poems, and books.
- I'm beginning to recognize and understand that other people have needs and feelings—that may or may not be the same as mine.
- I can skip, pump a swing, and catch a ball. I like to practice standing on one leg, walking backward, and hopping.
- I like to help, especially when I'm doing a grown-up task like setting the table, sweeping the floor, or folding clothes.
- I can respond to clear two- or three-step directions like, "Wash the paint off the brush before you put it back in the brush tray."
- I sometimes need quiet time to think, look at a book, rest, or just watch others.