

## Preschoolers: 3 and 4 Year Olds



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Your preschooler lives life to the fullest and is becoming more independent every day. They are starting to develop their own identity. Your preschooler is getting better at thinking about what might happen when they do things. They still need your help to learn what is and is not okay for them to do and to keep them safe as they move about and explore the world around them.

In this chapter, you'll learn about your child's development and how to help them deal with new experiences, getting along with others and starting preschool. There is information on how you can help develop their reading skills as well as their skills for all types of play. You'll also learn what you can do to support your preschooler to develop a healthy self-esteem.

# Your Preschooler's Development

As your child enters their preschool years, you'll see remarkable changes. Preschoolers are now learning to play with and get along with others and becoming much more coordinated in their movements. By the time they're 4 years old, they'll have many interesting stories and adventures to share with you. This chart gives you information about the developmental milestones and tasks your child is working on in the preschool years. In this chapter, you'll learn what you can do to help your child as they grow and develop.

| 3 and 4 years: The 'thinking' stage   |   |
|---|---|
| Tasks   | Milestones  |
| <p>During this time your preschooler is continuing to practice earlier tasks and learning to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>manage emotions:</b> starting to cope with their feelings and emotions</li> <li>▪ <b>develop empathy:</b> understanding and caring about other people's feelings</li> <li>▪ <b>take initiative:</b> planning and acting on their own thoughts and ideas</li> <li>▪ <b>feel capable:</b> developing skills to do more and more on their own</li> </ul> | <p><b>Physical</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> eats with a spoon and fork</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> dresses and undresses themselves</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> balances and hops on one foot</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> throws a ball, underhand and overhand</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> walks in a straight line, forwards, backwards, and up and down the stairs</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> climbs on things like furniture and playground equipment</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> kicks a ball</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> uses paints, scissors, pencils and crayons to create shapes and faces</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> develops bladder and bowel control both day and night</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> does simple chores with some help and direction</li> </ul> <p><b>Emotional</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> gets better at being able to identify and name their own feelings</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> uses words more often to express their feelings</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> fears real and imaginary things such as the dark, thunderstorms and monsters</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> exaggerates the truth</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> likes to talk about body functions</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> develops a sense of humour</li> </ul> |

*(continued on following page)*

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| 3 and 4 years: The 'thinking' stage |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Tasks                               | Milestones   |
|                                     | <p><b>Social</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> begins to share and take turns</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> hits less, name-calls more</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> likes playing with other children</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> uses imagination and themes in pretend play</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> may have an imaginary friend</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> likes to talk</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> enjoys group activities and games</li></ul> <hr/> <p><b>Cognitive (thinking and communicating)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><input type="checkbox"/> asks "Why?"</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> uses longer sentences for more detailed stories</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> talks about the past and future</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> shows improvement in grammar and their words become clearer</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> starts to understand the difference between real and imaginary things</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> listens to and understands short stories</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> sings simple songs and recites rhymes from memory</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> has a very active imagination and tells short stories</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> by 3 years old, they can be understood by you 75–100% of the time</li><li><input type="checkbox"/> by 4 years old, they can be understood by you all of the time</li></ul> |



To use an interactive tool about your preschooler's development, visit the **Tools** section at [healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/resources](https://healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/resources)

If you have concerns about your child's development, call Health Link at **811** or talk with your health care provider. You can also go to a Parent Link Centre and ask about the *Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)*.

To learn more, visit the **Links** section at [healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/resources](https://healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/resources)



# Preschoolers

As children enter their preschool years, they know what they like and dislike. Their emotions tend to be more stable and predictable. As they understand their emotions better, they may start telling you their feelings and opinions.



Your preschooler may be taller or shorter, bigger or smaller than other children their age. They'll each have their own pattern of growth. Talk with your health care provider if you have questions or concerns about your child's growth.

Preschoolers want to play with other children. Over time, they'll learn how to share and play with others. They'll also:

- become more skilled and coordinated in their movements
- love to imitate, sing, recite rhymes and have fun with words
- have great imaginations and sometimes have trouble understanding the difference between what's real and what's pretend



During this stage, your child will start wanting to make their own plans and acting on their own thoughts and ideas. They feel happy with themselves when they can do things on their own. It will take time and practice for them to feel confident about what they can do. When you give your preschooler lots of chances to develop their skills, they'll learn that they're capable. This will help to develop their self-esteem.

# Feeding Your Preschooler

A healthy feeding relationship and eating together as a family continues to set healthy eating habits for life. You're still responsible for what, when and where food is offered. Your preschooler is responsible for choosing whether to eat and how much to eat (see page 49).

Preschoolers are busy all day long so they need to eat often. Yet, they have smaller appetites and stomachs than adults and find it hard to sit still for very long. Preschoolers do best when they eat 3 meals and 2–3 snacks spaced evenly throughout the day, whether they're at home or away.

To help keep your preschooler healthy, make sure to offer:

- regular meals and snacks throughout the day
- a variety of foods from *Canada's Food Guide* (see page 51)
- water throughout the day

## **Vitamin D for your preschooler**

Give your preschooler a supplement of 400 IU vitamin D, every day. Most children do not need multivitamins. If you have questions, check with your health care provider.

Preschoolers love to come up with and act on their own ideas and plans, in everything they do. In terms of eating, they may want to start helping to prepare or serve food. Cooking with your child teaches them many skills, they'll love spending time with you (see page 404) and it may help them be more interested in trying new foods.

It's normal for your preschooler to want to eat only certain foods, or to enjoy something one day and dislike it the next. You may worry that your child is fussy about what they'll eat. They may just be making their own choices (see page 336).

A few simple table manners can make meals more enjoyable at home and when eating out. Decide which table manners are important for your family. When you use these manners all the time, your preschooler will learn to use them too. For more information about eating out, see page 55.

# Everyday Care

Your preschooler is learning how to help care for themselves by doing things like feeding, dressing and brushing their teeth. They're starting to take more initiative and feel proud of themselves and their new abilities.

## Sleeping

When children get the sleep they need, they're happier and healthier. Preschoolers need about 10–13 hours of sleep, including naps. Many children continue to nap for about 1 hour a day until they're over 4 years old, but some children may stop napping before that.

Your preschooler is probably not getting enough sleep if they:

- regularly fall asleep during the day such as in the car, watching TV or while looking at books
- need you to wake them up every morning
- seem cranky during the day
- nap more than once a day

A regular sleep routine will help your child shift from their active, busy day to getting ready for sleep. For more information about sleep routines and helping your child stay in bed, see page 342. If you're concerned about your child's sleep patterns, call Health Link at **811** or talk with your health care provider.



## Toilet teaching

Your preschooler may just be starting to learn how to use the toilet or they may already be comfortable using it. Girls tend to be ready for toilet teaching before boys. Some boys are not ready until they're 3½ or 4 years old. Here are some things to think about when you're toilet teaching your preschooler:

- Have them wear clothing that's easy to pull up or down will make toilet time easier.
- You may need to help your child with wiping after they have a bowel movement.
- Be patient, toileting accidents are common when your child is learning to use the toilet.

For more information on toilet teaching, see page 343.

“**Don't push toileting. If your child can't get on the toilet, doesn't have the words or doesn't show interest, then they're not ready. Watch for readiness, be patient, and remind yourself that they're just learning.**”

~ Anna, mom of three children

## Bedwetting

Urinating during sleep (bedwetting) is common in preschoolers—they don't do it on purpose. Your child may be a deep sleeper and unable to recognize the signal that tells them their bladder is full. It may also be that they are just not yet developmentally ready to be able to hold it in all night long. It's very common for bedwetting to run in families and often times a mom or dad may have had this problem as a child as well. Bedwetting can be upsetting and your child may feel bad or embarrassed. They need your understanding, love and support.

Try taking your child to the bathroom right before they go to bed. You can also try taking them a second time before you're ready for bed. Use a waterproof cover to protect your child's mattress and be calm and reassuring if you have to clean up in the morning. Show your child that you have confidence that they'll soon be able to stay dry all night.

While most children outgrow bedwetting by the time they're 5 or 6 years old, some may take longer. If you have questions or concerns, call Health Link at **811** or with your health care provider.

## Teeth and mouth

By now your preschooler may feel that they're big enough to brush their own teeth. Encourage this by letting them brush at the start, then help them finish brushing and flossing their teeth (see page 347). Talk about what you're doing as you're doing it and let them see you doing the same with your own teeth. Your child will continue to need your help until they have the coordination to brush and floss their own teeth, about the time when they're able to write their name. Regular dental care will give your child the best chance of having healthy teeth for life. Take them to see your dentist for regular checkups. For more information on dental health, see page 61 and for financial supports available, see page 79.



Many preschoolers are able to spit. Once your child is able to spit, increase the amount of fluoride toothpaste to a pea-sized amount on their toothbrush. Remind them to spit it all out after brushing.

During this age, preschoolers usually have:

- all 20 of their baby (primary) teeth
- spaces between their teeth to give the larger adult teeth room to grow in over the next few years

### Sucking thumb, finger or soother

It's a natural reflex for young children to suck their thumbs, their fingers or a soother. They suck for pleasure, comfort and security. Sucking can affect how your child's teeth bite together, as well as how the jaw and bones that support the teeth grow. The earlier your child stops sucking their thumbs, their fingers or a soother, the less likely that the sucking will affect their teeth. Most children stop on their own by the time they're 3 years old. After that, your child may need help from you and their dentist.

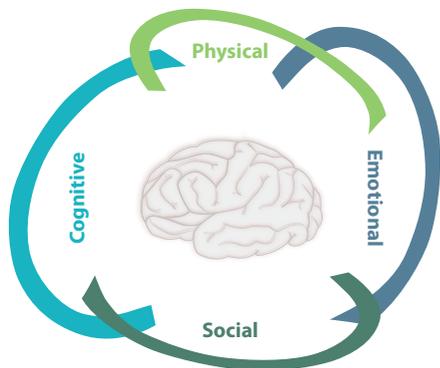
#### *Help your child stop sucking their thumb, finger or soother* ★

- **Limit sucking** to certain times or places.
- **Look for triggers** and distract your child or offer a substitute. If they suck their thumb while doing one activity, switch to another activity. They may suck their thumb when they feel stressed or afraid. Reassure them or give them a hug or their favourite toy to cuddle.
- **Offer gentle reminders.** Speak calmly about how sucking may affect their teeth. Do not punish or make fun of them.
- **Encourage and be patient.** Try not to draw attention to it.

If you have questions or concerns, call Health Link at **811** or talk with your dentist or health care provider.

# Growing and Learning Together

Your preschooler will go through many changes in just a few years. They are becoming their own person and their learning and playing are preparing them for school and classroom learning. All areas of your preschooler's development are interconnected. Development in one area affects development in all other areas. Your preschooler's development is guided by their brain.



When you know how the brain works, it's easier to understand what you can do to support your child.



## Your preschooler's developing brain

Your preschooler's brain is developing rapidly. In fact, a 3-year-old's brain is twice as active as an adult's brain. Brain cell connections are getting stronger and connections that are not often used are pruned away so the brain can work more efficiently. Your child's brain is now forming strong brain pathways that will help them develop the skills they need for life. This skill set includes all of the things that you've been supporting your child with since their birth, such as self-regulation, thinking, reasoning, remembering, taking turns, sharing and



focusing their attention. All these skills will help your child be ready for a more advanced type of learning once they reach school.

Your preschooler is now likely asking you lots of interesting questions. They are trying to figure out how things work, so you may need to be patient as you answer. They're getting better at being able to understand the information you share with them.

Brain cell connections become stronger when you and your preschooler engage in serve-and-return interactions. Here are some examples of what this might look like with your preschooler:

| Examples of serve-and-return interactions<br>3 and 4 year olds  |   |
|---|---|
| Your preschooler serves when they:  | You return their serve when you:  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ask "Why?"</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>talk to them about how things work and ask them what they think</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>recognize and read signs such as store names</li> </ul>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>play a game as you go for a walk or ride in the car together, such as looking for store names, signs and other things to read</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>enjoy rhymes and start to make their own, such as 'hat-cat'</li> </ul>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>have fun making rhymes together—say a word and see if they can find one that rhymes</li> </ul>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>name some of their feelings and notice how other people are feeling</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>talk about how the characters in a story or how the people in your child's life are feeling</li> </ul>                                   |

For more information, about how the brain develops, see page 19.



**Other things you can do to help your preschooler learn**




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# Communicating with your preschooler

Preschoolers show amazing changes in their language. They quickly learn many words that name and describe people, places, things, actions and experiences in their world. They move from short sentences that leave out some words like *"Big dog coming now,"* to simple complete sentences such as *"The big dog is coming to my house."*

Most people will understand your preschooler's speech and will be able to have conversations with them in person, on a tablet and on the phone. There may be a few sounds your preschooler still cannot say correctly.

During this stage, you'll see lots of changes in your preschooler's speech and language skills:

- Their **vocabulary** is growing rapidly.
  - As they learn new words, your preschooler may often ask, *"What's this?"* They may need to hear words many times before they use them. You may be surprised at the words your preschooler learns.
  - They'll have a word for almost everything they're interested in. This includes words to describe things like "big", "round", "red", "pretty" and "fast".
  - They'll start to tell stories that may include a lot of short sentences connected by *"And then."*
  - They may enjoy telling jokes, even if they don't make sense.



## Language development



By 3 years old, your preschooler will be able to:

- say short sentences like, *"I'm going now."*
- ask questions like, *"Where you go?"* and *"What's soap for?"*
- follow more complex directions such as, *"Please go to your room and bring me your teddy bear,"* or *"Pick up your coat, go to the door and get your shoes, please."*

**vocabulary:** the number and range of words a person knows

- Preschoolers are very curious. They may ask many 'who', 'where', 'why' and 'when' questions to learn more about their world.
  - They ask "Why?" because they want to know how things work. They need you to patiently show and tell them.
  - They ask "When?" because they're learning about time. Soon they'll understand that supper is 'later' and that you're going to the library 'tomorrow'.
- They're learning how things are the same and different such as two apples are both round and one is red and the other is green.
  - During play, your preschooler may line up or sort things into groups such as cars or animals. They may talk about how the items in the group are the same or different.
  - They may have a favourite colour and will learn to name it. They may like to find other things that are the same colour.
- They'll start to choose books about things that interest them.
  - They may enjoy silly stories and rhymes by the time they're 4 years old.
  - They may also start to add their own rhyming words during games and songs.
- They'll be able to follow longer instructions, such as "Please put your toys away, take this cup to the kitchen and then get a book for us to read." They may be able to find an object when you tell them it's 'in', 'on', 'under', 'behind' or 'in front' of something.



### Encourage your preschooler's speech and language development

- **Take time every day to talk** with your preschooler. They'll learn how to have longer conversations and take turns listening.
- **Start conversations.** Take turns telling each other about your day, such as "What was the best thing that happened today?" or "What did you learn?"
- **Give them time to answer** and try not to rush them.
- **Comment on what they say** and then wait for them to tell you more.
- **Try not to ask too many questions that get a one-word answer**, such as "Yes" or "No." Instead, ask questions that start with 'who,' 'where,' 'why' or 'when.'

## Early reading and writing

Ever since your child was born, they've been building skills that will help them to read and write. They learn these skills when they scribble, draw, talk about pictures and listen to or tell stories.

Promote your preschooler's reading and writing skills:

- **Go to libraries regularly.** Let your child pick out their own books.
- **Read every day and often.** Keep books handy so they can look at them and you can read together anytime and anywhere, even for a few minutes.
  - Read books with pictures, rhymes and repetition. Your child will love to hear their favourite stories over and over.
  - Try to find new ways to make familiar stories interesting for both of you. Start a sentence and let your child fill in the words like "*Jack and Jill went up the...*" Act out the story with their toys.
  - Run your finger along the words on the page so your child begins to connect the sounds you're saying to the printed words. This also shows them the direction of reading in your language.
- **Talk about signs and printed words in everyday life.** Point out the words on cereal boxes and signs.
- **Draw and write indoors and outdoors.** Use chalk on a sidewalk or a stick in the dirt or snow.
- **Let your child see you read.** Children who see others reading are more likely to want to read.



### Understand by 3 years old



You should be able to understand what your child is saying most of the time by 3 years old.

To learn more about speech and language development and when to get help to support your child:

- Visit your local Parent Link Centre to pick up a copy of the *Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ)* for your child's age.
- Check out the Talk Box in the *Links* section at [healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/resources](https://healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/resources)
- Call Health Link at **811** or talk with your health care provider to find information about speech and language services in your area or if you have any questions.



If you're concerned about your child's speech and language development, it's important to act early. Your child can receive speech and language services at any age at no cost.

## Let's play

Play builds healthy bodies and minds and is important for your preschooler's growth and development. Everyday experiences and play are still the main ways that your preschooler learns. When they're interested in an activity, they'll want to learn and try new things.

At this age, your preschooler needs many opportunities to play. When they take the lead, they'll show more imagination and find new ways to play. A couch cushion may become a river raft or a doormat may become a magic carpet. When you join in the play, you can explore new ideas together.

It becomes even more interesting when children start to play together and do things such as building a fort with boxes. Your preschooler may enjoy a music or an active play group in your community—ask friends, other parents, your local library or recreation centre to find out what is available in your area.



## Active play

Preschoolers are becoming more adventurous. Your preschooler is using many of the skills they've been building since they were a toddler. They're now running, jumping and hopping with confidence. Your preschooler needs time and space to play to burn off energy and develop their muscles and coordination. Playgrounds give them the chance to swing, slide, climb and jump.



Your preschooler needs you to supervise them while they play, even on equipment that fits their age and stage of development. Preschool-aged children need different types of equipment than older children.

The more they move, whether they're dancing to music or playing a game of tag, the better their coordination gets. They are getting better at keeping their balance while running and kicking a ball.

Your preschooler may:

- ride a tricycle or a balance bike
- walk down stairs by alternating their feet, like an adult does
- start to use their legs to help them move on a swing



Preschoolers need to be active for at least 180 minutes (3 hours) every day. This can be done by providing your child with chances to play throughout the day.

## Creative play

Your preschooler's hands are growing and getting more coordinated. At first, your preschooler will pinch and poke the treasures they find on their adventures such as sticks, leaves and bugs. Then, they'll be able to stick on or peel off stickers and turn knobs. Later, they'll be more comfortable using one hand to cut or colour, while the other hand holds the paper.



Your preschooler can:

- use crayons or finger paints to colour a picture or draw simple shapes or pictures
- make objects out of clay, such as snakes and balls
- try to button up a coat, pull apart a snap, or pull a zipper up and down with more ease
- help plant seeds or dig with a small shovel



“ My 3 year old daughter loves playing with other children, but I noticed that whenever we were in large groups with a lot of noise, she would just play on her own. She had a lot more fun and social interaction when we set up playdates with one or two other children her age. ”

~ Ellen, mom of two children

## Pretend play

Pretend play is more complex for your preschooler than it was when they were a toddler. They often like to:

- pretend together with you or their friends
- take on different roles, such as being a bus driver or a baby, playing house or creating stories using puppets and toys
- sing, dance and act out short plays
- tell stories to each other

Pretend play helps preschoolers learn to understand other's feelings and roles. Your child may like to pretend they're a dad with a baby, a construction worker, a bus driver or a nurse. They may pretend that a row of chairs is a bus. They may want paper and pencils to make a shopping list, menus or a sign for their restaurant.

As you watch your child play with others, you'll see that they are also learning to negotiate—they're figuring out who will be who and who will do what. Who will be the driver and who will be the baby? Who will come on the bus? What will they do at the zoo? Resist your need to jump in to solve their problems for them. Watch and see if they can



work it out on their own. If they are not able to, offer your help if they need it. What you see and hear when your child is playing with their friends can be valuable. You're then able to talk with them and praise them for their ability to get along with others as well as teach them when they need some help.



## Learning about emotions

Preschoolers can now recognize and name their emotions, such as happy, sad, mad or frustrated. You may notice that they are starting to draw these feelings in pictures. A preschooler's emotions are just as strong as they were in the toddler years, however they're now learning how to use their words, instead of their actions, to tell you how they feel. They're starting to learn to self-regulate when they find ways to calm themselves and cope when they feel emotions, such as frustration.



Your preschooler's brain has better connections now between the areas responsible for thinking and feeling. With your help, they can now learn to:

- get along with others and show empathy (see page 74)
- focus, learn and solve problems
- use their thoughts to help manage their emotions and self-regulate
- be more comfortable being away from you, because they can now keep an image of you in their mind and know that you'll come back
- wait for short periods of time

As your preschooler gets older, they'll start to:

- be less impulsive and better able to watch and think before they act
- use words to talk themselves through tough situations
- understand that other people have feelings that might be different from their own
- realize their actions have an effect on others
- remember events from the past

Preschoolers are getting better at managing their emotions. They can also have more than one emotion at a time. For example, at a birthday party, they may feel excited, but also upset that they don't get the presents. They can still easily get overwhelmed, especially when they're tired. At times, preschoolers will still have tantrums and show their anger and frustration with loud, physical outbursts. Tantrums are much less common by the time they are 4 years old. For more information on tantrums, see page 363.

Talk to your health care provider if your child's tantrums are happening more often, if the tantrums are lasting longer or if your child is getting more aggressive.

## Learning to get calm and problem-solve

Your preschooler may be ready to begin solving their own small problems with your help. The more they can practice solving their small problems now, the better they'll be at solving them in the future.

Disagreements and problems can bring out strong emotions. The most important first step to solving these problems is to get everyone involved to a calmer state. Your child can learn to do this, however, they cannot do it on their own. They'll learn best by seeing you calm yourself first and then by having lots of chances to practice themselves.



### Getting calm

When you're having a conflict with your child or when your child is upset:

1. Calm yourself first.
2. Limit any behaviours that could harm your child or others (e.g., physically removing your child away from another child if they're hitting them).
3. Help your child get calm.

These steps are important before you try to solve the problem. Your preschooler will have an easier time getting to a calmer state if you're not upset. For information on helping your child stay calm during a tantrum, see page 365.

Your preschooler may want to calm down with you, near you, or away from you. Every child is different so find what works best for your child. If your child finds it easier to calm themselves on their own, help them find a place where they feel comfortable. Ask them what kinds of things or places help them feel calmer and create a cozy, comfortable space at home that they can go to whenever they feel they need to take a break. If they need to calm down away from you, help your preschooler think of a safe and comfortable place to go. It needs to be a place that is okay for both of you.

Once you're both calm you can work together to solve the problem.

## Solving problems

Your preschooler is still learning. They're just starting to be able to predict what will happen if they act in a certain way. Try to understand what they might be feeling and thinking. Then talk about how to solve the problem. Give your preschooler a chance to think of their own solutions.

### Steps for problem-solving

1. Describe the problem without blaming or judging anyone. *"You're disappointed because you wanted to wear your green socks, but they're at grandma's house."*
2. Think of different solutions together. Start by asking *"How do you think we could solve this problem?"* or *"What do you think we could do about that?"*
3. Accept all ideas, even ideas that sound silly and add some of your own.
4. Decide together on the best solution that works for both of you. Try it out.
5. Talk about how well it worked. If it didn't work well and the problem is still there, try another solution from your list.
6. When a similar problem happens again:
  - Notice and comment if your child comes up with their own solution.
  - Remind your child of how you solved the problem together in the past if they can't think of any ideas.

## Fears and anxieties

Preschoolers have usually overcome some of their earlier fears. However, as they begin to think and reason in new ways, they may develop new fears. Many preschoolers may become anxious or afraid of:

- real things, such as the dark, dogs and storms
- imaginary things, such as monsters and ghosts
- new experiences, such as going to preschool, flying in an airplane or moving to a new home
- things they hear about, such as being in a fire or a car crash

New experiences can sometimes bring back feelings of fear and anxiety, including separation anxiety (see page 321). For most children this usually lasts for only a few weeks.

You can help your child learn to manage their fear and anxiety by providing warmth and structure. Here are some examples:

| Provide warmth   | Provide structure   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Give your child time. They may cling to you until they're comfortable. They may want to hold their favourite toy. Once they feel secure, encourage them to try on their own.</li><li>■ Accept their fear—do not make fun of them. If your child thinks a monster is under the bed, understand that they're scared.</li><li>■ Reassure them. Calmly assure them that they're safe and you're close by.</li><li>■ Listen. Encourage them to talk about their fears. Let them know that everyone is afraid sometimes. Remind them of how they got over an earlier fear. <i>"Remember when you were nervous about staying at grandma's, but then you two had so much fun."</i></li><li>■ Do not force your child into a situation they fear.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Introduce your child to new places and people ahead of time, like before they start preschool.</li><li>■ Talk with them about how well they handled a fearful situation. <i>"You were really worried when you went to the clinic. It can be scary when you don't know what's going to happen. Now that you know about the clinic, next time it won't be so scary."</i> Try to get them to talk about the experience in their own words.</li><li>■ Give them information. For example, if they're afraid of falling down the toilet, tell them they're safe and that this cannot happen. Although information won't always make the fear go away, it may help them begin to understand.</li><li>■ Show your confidence. Sometimes you may be afraid of things too—try to model confidence, even if you don't always feel it.</li></ul> |

If you're concerned that your child is not adjusting to being somewhere without you, talk with your friends or other support people who may have ideas or your health care provider.

## Understanding limits

Preschoolers are beginning to understand that everyone has limits about what they can and cannot do. It will take several years for them to fully understand the idea of limits.

Setting limits in your family is all about finding balance. If there are too many rules, your child may stop trying to do things for themselves. If they have no limits, they may have trouble learning what behaviour is okay and what is not. The limits you set will also need to change as your child grows.



### *Use a balanced approach*



It's a new experience for you to watch your child move out into a world of possible dangers. Being too protective can make your child more afraid to try new things. If you ignore or make fun of their fears, they will not feel safe or secure. Try a balanced approach:

- Think ahead about how to make new experiences as safe as possible.
- Let your child feel the joy of being successful trying something new.

## Living in a social world

Preschoolers are often very social. They're moving from thinking about 'me' to thinking about 'we'. They're learning how to get along with others.

At this stage, your preschooler:

- likes to be with you and do things together
- likes to have you take notice of what they're doing
- needs to spend time with other children
- can understand and feel other people's emotions and may try to help them
- can understand that what they do can affect other people and things
- may be more willing to try new things



## Helping out at home

Your preschooler learns they're an important part of the family when they help at home. They'll be able to:

- take dishes to the sink
- help make the bed
- help wipe up spills
- sort laundry into colours
- pick up toys and books



As your child's skills develop, they may enjoy helping you to prepare food. Cooking with your child teaches them many skills and they'll love spending time with you. At this age, your preschooler can do things like pouring from measuring cups, mixing ingredients or making a simple sandwich or pizza. Children who help with growing, preparing or cooking food are much more likely to enjoy eating a wide variety of foods. To learn more about cooking with your child, visit the *Links* section at [healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/resources](https://healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/resources)



### *Help your preschooler develop confidence and healthy self-esteem*



- **Let them know they're an important part of your family.** Try to find some time each day when you can give your preschooler your full attention. Even just a short amount of time each day can make a big difference.
- **Encourage their capability.** Encourage your preschooler to do what they can and thank them for the little things they do to help.
- **Have patience.** Children don't always learn things right away. You may have to repeat your words and actions many times, for weeks or even months. When you're calm and consistent, they'll learn.
- **Talk about what you expect.** Let your preschooler know how to behave and why. For example:
  - Tell them before you get to the store that you're only going to buy the food on your grocery list.
  - Remind them that grandma doesn't allow running in the house before you get there. Talk about what they can enjoy doing together.
- **Help them feel successful.**
  - Have them pick out some items like carrots and cereal when you go shopping.
  - Keep shopping trips short or make sure your child is well rested so they can help you.
- **Be a good role model.** Children learn by seeing, listening and doing. If you want them to clear their dishes from the table after eating, let them see you take your own dishes away.
- **Talk about values** that are important to you. Some examples of values are respect, honesty, having fun, learning and politeness. Explain why your values are important to your family and culture. Let your child see how your family values guide the way you live.
- **Help them learn from mistakes.** Help your child see mistakes as a chance to learn. Together, you can decide how a problem can be solved and what can be done differently next time. When you make a mistake, talk about how you handled it.



Your preschooler's self-esteem gets stronger when you help them feel that they're loved, capable, helpful and they belong.

## Playing with others

Preschoolers like to be with other children. Although they often have fun together, at times they may have trouble getting along. With more experience, your preschooler's social skills will improve.

At this stage, preschoolers:

- think everyone else sees and thinks about things the same way they do
- are learning to share and take turns with other children
- are learning to understand and follow the rules of simple games, but they often change the rules as they play



### *Encourage your child to play with other children*



- **Make time.** Try to have play times with other children as often as you can.
- **Make space.** Your child needs space to play with other children—indoors and outdoors. Move furniture to create space and visit local parks or green spaces.
- **Be ready.** Keep things that help children play pretend handy, such as dress-up clothes, boxes and craft supplies.
- **Find safe ways for rough and tumble play.** Rough and tumble play (e.g., wrestling or chasing for play) is how children learn what their bodies can do. They are starting to learn how to tell others whether an activity is fun or too rough and how to ask others to stop or be gentler. Your child may need an adult's help to learn how to do this.
- **Help them join in.** Give them the time they need to be comfortable. If they seem unsure, it may help to suggest ways to be part of the group. For example, you could say something like, *"It looks like you want to play firefighter with the others?"* If they do, you can encourage your child to go up and ask the group, *"Can I be a firefighter too?"* If your child is still unsure, walk over to the group with your child to give them support as they join in.

## Solving conflicts

All children will have some conflict. When preschoolers play together, they may think that their way is the only right way. They may argue with a sibling or want something that someone else has.

When there's a disagreement, use the situation to build your child's problem-solving skills:



1. **Describe the situation.** *"Omar thinks the toy gorilla goes in the cage. Sarah thinks it goes in the forest."*
2. **Ask for their suggestions.** *"I wonder what might work best for both of you."*
3. **Wait for them to think of possible solutions.** This may take a few minutes.
4. **Offer a few of your own solutions if they are not able to offer any.** *"Maybe the gorilla could go in the cage for a while and then move to the forest in a few minutes?" or "Maybe the gorilla could be in a cage in the forest?"*
5. **Stay close to see if the conflict has settled.** Let them sort it out if they can.

### *Your child learns by watching you*



- If you react to problems with anger, yelling or hitting, your child may do the same.
- When you're very frustrated with your child or someone else, take time to calm down before trying to solve the problem.
- High emotions and stress can lead to physical or emotional punishment and angry, hurtful words. For more information about positive discipline, see page 29.
- You'll have a more peaceful home if you practice and teach your child how to solve problems in conflict situations.

## Getting along with siblings

Brothers and sisters often have times when they don't agree. Use these times to help your children learn to get along with each other.

If your preschooler and their sibling or friend cannot settle their differences and start to argue or fight, here are some things you can do to help them:

1. Stay calm.
2. Let them sort it out if they can. Be ready to step in.
3. Separate the children if anyone is being hurt with actions or words. Give them a chance to calm down. Offer comfort and reassure them that you won't let them hurt each other.
4. After they're calm, help them problem-solve to find a solution that works for all of you. They may need your help (see page 400).
5. Notice and comment when they start to talk and get along.



### *Encourage your children to co-operate*



- **Make family rules or expectations** that everyone in the family follows, such as helping each other, being gentle and kind, not hitting or making fun of each other.
- **Treat them fairly.** Avoid favouring or labelling your children by saying things such as, *"She's always getting into trouble,"* or *"He's just an angel!"*
- **Recognize children have their own temperaments**—what works for one child may not work for another (see page 24).
- **Respect different opinions.** Learning to talk about and respond to different opinions is an important social skill for children to learn.
- **Teach them problem-solving skills.** When they practice at home, your child will learn how to solve problems when conflict happens outside the home (see page 401).

## Making sense of social expectations

Preschoolers are learning a lot about which behaviours are okay as they spend more time with others. Their social world can be very confusing because adults may want them to:

- tell an adult when they see a big problem, such as when someone is hurting someone else, but not when the problem is small. What is a small problem to an adult may be a big problem to a child.
- use words rather than actions when they're angry at someone, but not call them names
- use new words, but not certain new words (e.g., swear words)

### *Help your child understand social rules*



- Listen to their concerns.
- Explain the rules that confuse them.
- Help them problem-solve when they have concerns.
- Talk about how their words affect other people. Say things such as, *"It's not okay to call someone a hurtful name,"* and suggest other words they could use instead to express their feelings.
- When they use words that are not okay, tell them not to and explain why.
- Set a good example for them (e.g., by not using these words yourself).

## Fantasy and reality

Your preschooler is using their imagination more than ever. They're starting to understand the difference between what is and is not real. They won't fully know the difference until they're 6 or 7 years old.

Your preschooler may tell you things that are not true (e.g., a green dinosaur took their truck), because it's part of their fantasy and they want you to join in their game. They might also tell you something that's not true because they're afraid of getting into trouble. Your child needs to know that it's safe to tell you what happened.



If you have questions or concerns about your child's emotional or social development, call Health Link at **811** or talk with your health care provider.

When your child comes to you with something they're worried about or that you may find upsetting:

1. Listen carefully without interrupting them.
2. Thank them for sharing something difficult and for telling you the truth.
3. Ask non-judgemental questions to find out more information.
4. Find a solution to the problem together (see page 401).

When your child tells you something that's not true, play along with the fantasy if it's not a serious situation. Let them know that it's okay to tell you what happened and you'll calmly help them problem-solve. For example, if they spilled milk and say that the dog did it:

- Help them clean it up.
- Talk about what happened.
- Work together to find a way they can pour milk without spilling it.

## Children and media

**Media** has a strong impact on your child. It affects how they form images and ideas about people and how they relate to each other. Decide what media you want your child to see, hear and use. It's easier to set family guidelines while your child is young. As they get older, it will become harder to set limits and influence their choices.



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**media:** computers, TVs, magazines, video games, tablets and smart phones

### Things to think about when using media



- **Spend time together when using media.** To help your child relate to what they see to the real world, ask questions and talk about what they see and understand. “*What do you think they’re going to do?*” or “*What would you do if that happened?*”
- **Limit screen time** to no more than 1 hour a day. The less the better.
- **Look for educational media** that is suitable for your child’s age.
- **Do not show your child any media that isn’t suitable for children**, such as shows with sex, violence, swearing, gambling, alcohol, tobacco, cannabis or other drug use. Your child may not understand everything, however they may copy things they see or hear.
- **Choose the shows you want to watch with your child.** Turn off the TV when you’re not watching a program.
- **Set limits on media devices using parental controls.** Read the device’s manufacturer’s instructions to learn more about these features.

For more information about sedentary behaviour, play and screen time, see page 72.

### Keep the volume down



To help protect your child’s hearing, keep the volume down when they’re listening to music.

## Preschool, playschool or nursery school

Preschoolers are often ready for preschool, playschool or nursery school. You may want to go on outings in your community or to a parent-child group first. This might help your child get used to being with other children when you’re with them.

Going to preschool, playschool or nursery school can have many benefits for your child. They’ll have fun practicing new skills while learning how to be with and get along with other children and adults.

Many playschools and preschools are licensed and inspected by public health inspectors. For more information or if you have concerns about your child’s preschool, see page 34.



### *Help your child get used to preschool*



- Visit the preschool.
- Read stories about going to preschool.
- Meet the teacher with your child.
- Pretend play about being at preschool.
- Go with your child on the first day.
- Volunteer at their school when you can.



## Health Checkups

See your child's health care providers as scheduled and based on your family's needs. This will help keep your preschooler as healthy as possible. Public health nurses and other health care providers can help if you have questions or concerns about your preschooler's health, growth and development or other family issues.

For more information about keeping children healthy and safe at any age, see page 76.

### Well child clinic visit

Immunizations that are up to date protect everyone from many communicable diseases (see page 82). Your preschooler is due for immunizations at their well child clinic when they're 4 years old. If their immunizations are not up to date, talk to your public health nurse about how to get back on schedule. During your visit, your public health nurse will also check things such as your child's growth, ask about their health, as well as about how you're doing and answer any questions you may have (see page 78).

### Vision

Have your child's vision checked by an optometrist by the time they're 3–5 years old or sooner if they:

- often blink or rub their eyes
- avoid doing 'close' work, such as looking at books or making crafts
- don't notice things that are far away

You don't need a doctor's referral to have an optometrist check your child's vision. There is no cost to you to have your child's vision tested in Alberta for children who are 17 years old and younger. To learn more, call Health Link at **811** or talk with your health care provider.

### Financial support



You may qualify for financial support for health costs for your child through the Alberta Child Health Benefit plan. You may be able to get eyeglasses, prescriptions and dental visits for your children at no cost to you. To learn more, call toll-free at **1-877-469-5437** or visit the **Links** section at [healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/resources](http://healthyparentshealthychildren.ca/resources)



## Recommended checkups

|  | Birth-2 months   | 2 months  | 4 months | 6 months  | 12 months  | 18 months  | 2 years  | 3-4 years                                       | 5 years and beyond                              |
|--|--|---|----------|---|--|--|--|---|---|
| <b>Doctor</b>                                | √  | Check with your doctor to find out the checkup schedule at their office |          |   |  |  |  | √   |   |
| <b>Immunization with public health nurse</b> |  | √   | √        | √   | √  | √  |  | √<br>(at 4 years old)                           |   |
| <b>Dental</b>                                |  |   |          |   | √  | √<br>Regular checkups as recommended by your dentist |  | Regular checkups as recommended by your dentist | Regular checkups as recommended by your dentist |
| <b>Vision</b>                                | Early vision checkups with your optometrist, as needed |   |          | √<br>Eye exam with your optometrist at 6-9 months old | Early vision checkups with your optometrist, as needed |  | √<br>Eye exam with your optometrist at 2-5 years old |   |   |
| <b>Other health care providers</b>           | As needed  |   |          |   |  |  |  | As needed                                       | As needed                                       |

## Hearing

It can be difficult to notice if your child has signs of hearing loss, as children can often adapt to a hearing loss until it's quite bad. You can arrange to have your child's hearing checked if you notice any concerns, such as if your child:

- often asks you to repeat things
- speaks loudly
- often turns up the TV, tablet or phone volume
- starts talking later than expected, or if it's difficult for you to understand what they're saying
- has trouble following simple commands, such as *"Go get your pyjamas, please."*

Hearing tests are available at no cost in Alberta for children 17 years and younger. To learn more, call Health Link at **811** or talk with your health care provider.

## Preventing Injuries

Your preschooler's adventures can put them in risky situations. They're too young to understand danger because they're still developing the physical and thinking skills they need to protect themselves. Supervise them at all times and be consistent with them about safety rules so they can learn to follow these rules all the time. Children should not be given choices in situations that have to do with their safety.





### *Water safety* ★

Never leave your child alone near water, like a wading pool, dugout, pond or lake—even if they know how to swim.

### *Get trained* ★

Keep your child safe by making sure they wear protective gear and get appropriate training for whatever sport or recreational activity they are doing.

For their age and stage of development, here are some areas that need attention to keep your preschooler safe from injuries.

- **Playing outdoors**, see page 114
- **Helmets and bike safety**, see page 118
- **Pedestrian safety**, see page 120
- **Poisoning**, see page 107
- **Playground safety**, see page 121
- **Trampolines**, see page 122
- **Car seats**, see page 123

### *Helmets save lives* ★

Make helmets a habit for your whole family. They reduce the risk of head injury in a crash by 80%.

For more information about how to prevent injuries in the early years, see page 104.



# Taking Care of Yourself

You'll get a different view on life when you see the world through your child's eyes. Being a parent gives you the chance to learn more about yourself as you look back and learn from your own childhood. You can choose to keep the positive things you learned from being parented as a child—the things that helped you learn and grow. You can also choose to let go of things that you now realize might not have been very helpful for you.



As a parent, you can discover or re-discover your patience, humour and creativity when you look at the world through the eyes of your child. You have a chance to develop a deep bond with your child that will help prepare them for a lifetime of healthy relationships with you and other important people in their lives. Your parenting is making a lasting and valuable contribution to society both now and in the future. You cannot measure just how valuable and important a parent's role is!

## ***Practice self-regulation*** ★

Be aware of how stress affects your body and thoughts (see page 26) and what you can do to self-regulate (see page 27). Practice self-regulation throughout your day so that you can be in a calmer state when you're with your children. Continue to make notes about the things that trigger your stress response and add to the list of things that you can do about it. Your children need you to be calm, alert and caring when you're together.

Parenting can take a lot of your time and energy, so be sure to make time for yourself and others as well. If you parent with someone else, make sure you each have time to follow your own interests, even if it's only for an hour or so every week. If you're parenting on your own, see if family or friends can help or look for programs in the community where child care is provided. When you spend time with your child and your family, you show them that they're important. When you also take time for yourself, you'll have the energy to enjoy being with your family and having fun.

Make the most of your time:

- **Focus on what's most important to you.**  
Take time to do things you enjoy.
- **Set your priorities.** Notice when you're starting to do too much. You may need to say "No" to some activities in the community.
- **Let others know your values and priorities.**  
This will help them understand your needs.
- **Have fun with your family.** Family nights, board games, walking the dog, kicking a soccer ball, riding bikes, swimming or skating are activities you can do together.
- **Try to keep your work at your workplace.** Put your work and media away during your family time. Explore flexible work arrangements, if and when you can.

**Outings don't need to be expensive** ★

Try to do things together. It can be as simple as going for a nature walk or going to the library.

Check out community facilities such as swimming pools and museums. Many have reduced or no cost admissions at different times in the year.

Everyone has the occasional bad day. Try not to be too hard on yourself. If you yell or lose your temper, apologize when you're calm. You're modelling to your child that everyone makes mistakes and can take steps to make things right. However, if you notice this happening frequently, get help to identify what is bothering you and what you can do about it.



“ I love having a preschooler. I feel so comfortable as a parent now. I feel like I totally understand my child. He can talk to me and usually co-operates with our day-to-day routines. There are tough days, but I feel really confident that we can work things out together. ”

~ Ben, dad of one child