

# Milestones for 3-5 year olds



**Your child is moving from being a toddler to childhood. Children know more words, are able to express some ideas and have a rich imagination. They love to play, enjoy physical activity and are learning how to get along with others. There are many things you can do to help them grow and develop. Children do best in loving and caring environments.**

**Developmental milestones are things most children can do by a certain age, eg using a pencil or dressing themselves for the first time. All children are different, some do things faster and some slower.**

At least three quarters of all children will meet their developmental milestones at each age below. If you are worried your child is not meeting their milestones talk to a child health nurse or other health professional.

## What most children do by 3 years

### Social/Emotional Milestones

- Calm down within 10 minutes after you leave, eg at a childcare drop off.
- Notice other children and join them to play.

### Language/Communication Milestones

- Talk with you in conversation using at least two back-and-forth exchanges.
- Ask "who," "what", "where" or "why" questions, eg 'Where is mummy/daddy?'
- Say what action is happening in a picture or book when asked, eg "running", "eating", "playing".



- Say their first name when asked.
- Talk well enough for others to understand most of the time.

### Cognitive Milestones (learning, thinking, problem-solving)

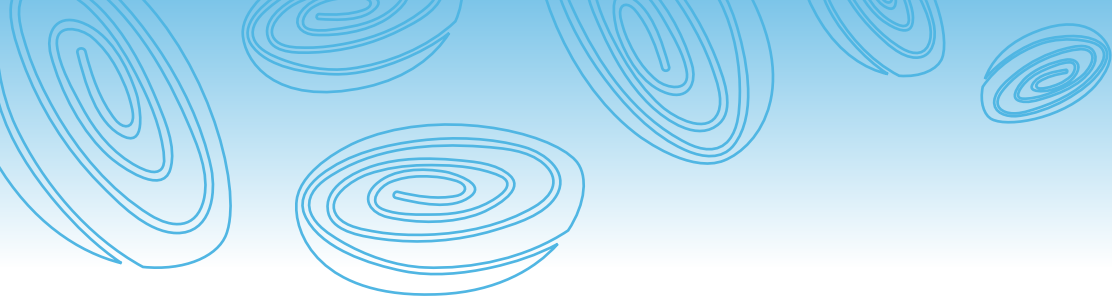
- Draw a circle when you show them how.
- Avoid touching hot objects when you warn them, eg a stove.

### Movement/Physical Development Milestones

- String items together, eg large beads or macaroni.
- Put on some clothes by themselves, eg loose pants or a jacket.
- Use a fork.

### Help your child grow and learn

- Give your child an "activity box" with paper and crayons. Draw lines and shapes with them.
- Look closely at things around you and try drawing them together, eg ask 'What shape is mummy's face? Can you draw it? How many eyes does she have? What colour are they?'



- Read with your child. Ask questions, eg ‘What is happening in the picture?’, ‘What do you think will happen next?’ When they answer ask for more details.
- Help them be ready for new places and meeting new people. You could read stories about this or “pretend play” to help them feel more comfortable.
- Talk about your child’s emotions and give them words to help explain how they are feeling. Teach some ways to help them manage hard feelings, eg taking deep breaths, hugging a favourite toy, going to a quiet, safe place when upset.
- Encourage your child to play with other children. This helps them learn the value of friendship and how to get along with others.
- If English isn’t your first language use your heritage language with your child. Being able to speak more than one language will help develop their problem-solving, creative and flexible thinking skills.

## What most children do by 4 years

### Social/Emotional Milestones

- Pretend to be someone or something else during play, eg a teacher, superhero or dog.
- Ask to go play with children if none are around, eg ‘Can I play with Alex?’.
- Comfort others who are hurt or sad, eg hugging a crying friend.
- Avoid danger, eg not jumping from tall heights at the playground.
- Like to be a “helper”.
- Change behaviour based on where they are, eg library or playground.

### Language/Communication Milestones

- Say sentences with four or more words.
- Say some words from a song, story or nursery rhyme.
- Talk about at least one thing that happened during the day, eg ‘I played soccer’.
- Answer simple questions like ‘What is a coat for?’ or ‘What is a crayon for?’.

### Cognitive Milestones (learning, thinking, problem-solving)

- Name a few colours.
- Tell you what comes next in a well-known story.
- Draw a person with three or more body parts.

### Movement/Physical Development Milestones

- Catch a large ball most of the time.
- Serve themselves food or pour water with adult supervision.
- Undo some buttons.
- Hold a crayon or pencil between fingers and thumb (not a fist).

### Help your child grow and learn

- Try to make time for active play each day. Your child will have more fun if they can choose the activity, eg give choices such as dancing to music, playing outside or going for a walk together.
- Teach your child to stop and wait when excited by playing “red light, green light” or “freeze dance” (play music, turn it off and have everyone freeze).
- Count simple things, eg fingers, toys, bananas to help your child learn about numbers and counting.
- Let them help with simple chores, eg bringing in the mail, feeding a pet or wiping down the table. This helps build independence.
- Eat meals together when possible. Let your child see you enjoying healthy foods, eg fruits, vegetables, whole grains and drinking milk or water.

**Children learn by talking, playing and interacting with others. Limit screen time (TV, tablets, phones) to no more than 1 hour a day of a children’s program with an adult present. Don’t have any screens in your child’s bedroom.**



- Tell your child in a simple way why they can't do something you don't want them to do. Give them a choice of what they can do instead, eg 'You can't jump on the bed. Do you want to go outside and play or put on some music and dance?'
- Create a calm, quiet bedtime routine. Avoid any screen time (TV, tablets, phones) for 1 to 2 hours before bed and don't have any screens in your child's bedroom. Children this age need 10 to 13 hours sleep a day (including naps). Consistent sleep times make it easier!

## What most children do by 5 years

### Social/Emotional Milestones

- Follow rules or take turns when playing games with other children.
- Sing, dance or act for you.
- Do simple chores at home, eg matching socks or clearing the table after eating.

### Language/Communication Milestones

- Tell a story they heard or made up with at least two events, eg 'A cat was stuck in a tree and a firefighter saved it'.
- Answer simple questions about a book or story after you read or tell it to them.
- Keep a conversation going with more than three back-and-forth exchanges.
- Use or recognise simple rhymes, eg "bat-cat" or "ball-tall".

### Cognitive Milestones (learning, thinking, problem-solving)

- Count to 10.
- Name some numbers between 1 and 5 when you point to them.
- Use words about time, eg "yesterday", "tomorrow", "morning", "night".
- Pay attention for 5 to 10 minutes during activities, eg story time or arts and crafts (screen time does not count).
- Write some of the letters in their name.
- Name some letters when you point to them.

### Movement/Physical Development Milestones

- Do up some buttons.
- Hop on one foot.

### Help your child grow and learn

- Ask your child what they are playing. Help them expand their answers by asking "why?" and "how?" questions, eg 'That's a nice bridge you're building. Why did you put it there?'
- Play with toys that involve putting things together, eg puzzles, building blocks.
- Keep a box of crayons, paper, child scissors and glue for creative play. Encourage drawing and art projects.
- Explore things that interest your child, eg if they love animals get some library books, look out for birds/ animals on your walks, visit a zoo.
- Let them do things for themselves even if they aren't done perfectly, eg making their bed, buttoning a shirt, pouring water into a cup. Celebrate when they do them and try not to "fix" anything you don't have to.
- Talk about and name your child's and your own feelings. Read books and talk about the characters' feelings and why they have them.
- Help your child learn about safe touch, eg hugging when both people want to and touch that helps keep them healthy (from doctors or parents). Unsafe touches are those that can make a child feel hurt, scared, uncomfortable or confused. Teach them they are in charge of who touches them and help them practise saying 'No' to unwanted or unsafe touch. Let them know there are adults they can turn to for help.

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**Children will thrive in an environment which is interesting and where they feel safe and loved.**  
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## Seek help if your child:

- loses skills they once had
- doesn't respond to sound or light
- doesn't use eye contact or interact with other children or adults
- is very stiff or floppy or shows a difference in how much they use their right and left sides.

If you are worried for any other reason talk to a health professional.

### Getting help early can make a big difference.

You know your child best. Don't wait. Seek help early from the Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS) or your doctor or paediatrician. They can assure you all is well or get help for your child if they need it.

**Note:** The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.

## Want more information?

### Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100, 7 days, 7.15am–9.15pm  
Advice on child health and parenting  
After 9:15pm your call will go through to the national Healthdirect helpline

### Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am–4.30pm, Mon–Fri  
for an appointment  
Free service for children aged 0–5. Nurses can help with children's health, eating, sleeping and development [www.cafhs.sa.gov.au](http://www.cafhs.sa.gov.au)

### Early Years SA App

Information on child health, learning, development and wellbeing from birth to 5 years  
[www.education.sa.gov.au/early-years-app](http://www.education.sa.gov.au/early-years-app)

### US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

For further information on children's milestones  
[www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html)

### Raising Children Network

Information on raising children, including child development and play <https://raisingchildren.net.au/>

### Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including 'Learning to talk', 'Why stories are important', 'Developmental delay', 'Milestones for older babies', 'Milestones for toddlers', 'Living with toddlers' and 'Growing and learning in the family' [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

**Acknowledgement:** The developmental milestones outlined in this Guide are sourced from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
[www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html)



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### Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

### [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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