

The Growing Years

Child Development Fact Sheet

Bulletin #4247

4 Years

I Did It Myself!

By the age of 4, many children can dress themselves. It is still easier to pull a zipper down than up. Shirts sometimes end up on backwards or inside out. With your encouragement, your child will keep trying. You can help by choosing simple, loose clothing. Fasteners like snaps, buttons, zippers and laces are tricky. Look for shirts, pants and shoes without fasteners.

Most 4-year-olds can also brush their teeth and wash their hands. These self-help skills are important to a child's independence. When you tell your child, "It's time to wash hands for supper," he can run to the bathroom, pull out the stool, turn on the water, wash, dry and run to the table. It makes him feel good to say, "I did it all by myself."

What Are 4-Year-Olds Like?

How I Move:

- ♦ I have a longer, leaner body.
- ♦ I am lively and active until exhausted.

- ♦ I am a "worker." I have drive.
- ♦ I am accurate, but impulsive in my body.
- ♦ I can jump my own height, land on my feet and am acrobatic.
- ♦ I throw a large ball and kick with some accuracy.
- ♦ I dress myself.
- ♦ I have sureness and control in finger-hand activities.

How I Think:

- ♦ I like a variety of materials; I am driven to learn.
- ♦ I accept changes as long as you prepare me for them.
- ♦ I confuse facts and fantasy.
- ♦ I understand simple reasons for things.
- ♦ I recognize today and tomorrow.
- ♦ I can do two things at once.

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- ♦ I understand the concept of “three” and can name more objects.
- ♦ I am dramatic in play and like to use simple props.
- ♦ My attention span is eight to 12 minutes long.
- ♦ I call people names and swear.
- ♦ I enjoy silly words and rhyming without meaning.
- ♦ I comment, criticize and compare.
- ♦ My vocabulary is 1,500 words.
- ♦ I tell tall tales.
- ♦ I am able to talk to solve conflicts.

How I Get Along:

- ♦ I dominate, am bossy and boastful.
- ♦ I hit and grab for what I want.
- ♦ I play cooperatively with two or three children, but am impatient in large groups.
- ♦ I am assertive, a show-off, cocky and noisy.
- ♦ I love to tease and outwit you.
- ♦ I have a terrific sense of humor. I am nonsense-loving and silly.
- ♦ I can resist your rules, argue and test limits.
- ♦ I am easily over-stimulated and often go “out-of-bounds.”



Watch Out: Iron Can Be Deadly

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) warns that iron medications (sometimes identified as ferrous sulfate, ferrous gluconate or ferrous fumarate) can be deadly to a young child. Many adults may not realize the hazard of iron preparations. The Commission recommends that parents keep medicine with iron out of the reach of young children.

Iron is available in combination with vitamins or alone. According to Poison Control Center data, iron supplements are responsible for 30 percent of pediatric poisoning deaths from medications. A small number of iron pills consumed by a child can cause death. Poisonings happen when children swallow their parents' iron pills. The CPSC recommends that obstetricians and gynecologists tell their maternity patients that prenatal medicine with iron is poisonous to children.

The CPSC requires that iron-containing medicines and vitamins with iron be packaged in child-resistant closures. Parents should always properly re-secure safety closures. In addition, parents should keep medicines with iron out of the reach of children and should properly discard iron pills after use so children cannot reach them. Medicines should be discarded by flushing them down the toilet, not in a wastebasket where children can find them.

Why Are Friendships Important?

The idea of a playmate to share toys and laughter, excitement and special times, is the bright side of friends and friendships. The downside is the arguing and hurt feelings, the tears and the jealousy. Parents of preschoolers might ask, “Why bother?”

When children play with other children their own age, they have great opportunities for learning fairness, sharing, taking turns, following the rules, negotiating, compromising and cooperating. They learn other children



also want the biggest piece and the first turn. They learn other children feel badly when they have to wait or when someone pinches them. Children who only play with adults or older children never have the chance to work out their friendships as equals.

Children who are rejected by their peers or who have no friends are at risk for emotional and mental health problems later: dropping out of school, delinquency, lower grades, a harder time adjusting to school and a negative outlook about school.

How Can Parents Help?

Friends are important to a growing child. Parents provide nutritious foods, plenty of rest and exercise to help their children develop physically. Practice at being a friend is just as important to social and emotional growth.

Expect some difficulties. Children do not share until they are somewhere between 4 to 6 years old. Some don't share until much later if they haven't had practice at it. Parents can expect some arguments, perhaps threats, bribes and other unpleasant ways of dealing with people. Try not to get involved unless you are asked to or if someone is going to get hurt. Adults who get mixed up in preschoolers' problems frequently make

things worse. Help children talk about what they want and need. Teach ways to wait, and above all, ways to negotiate.

Adjust to children's activity level. Children can range from calm to very active. Be ready for differences and provide standard equipment that gives everyone a feeling of success. Sand, water, big balls, a lot of open space, dress-up clothes, play dough and an arts and scraps box are usually favorites at the preschool age.

Give opportunities for taking turns. The amount of practice children have at being friends can impact how they accept or reject the idea of playmates using their toys. Experiences with other friendly children will help them realize other children can add an element of fun that playing alone can't.

Monitor the amount of time together. Parents need to decide the length of time children will be playing together. However, if the children are having difficulty, separating and trying again another day might be the best answer.

Set up play environments. The space and toys available will determine the kind of play to expect. An arsenal of war toys will lend itself to running and shooting and loud sounds and words. A puzzle will be quieter and more cooperative in nature. Large, open spaces invite fast movement, while small, full spaces demand that people go slowly.

When Should Adults Step In?

When It's Going Well: When children are sharing, talking kindly to one another or showing other friendly behavior, encourage them with a statement such as, "I like the way you are working together on that castle," "I enjoy watching you two play together," or "That's what I call cooperation!" Children feel good about being noticed for positive reasons. The behaviors we pay attention to are the ones that often get repeated.

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When It's Not Going Well: Introduce a new game or snack time. Perhaps you could sit down together and review the rule that people are not for hurting. Next, talk about a different way the children might play to ensure nobody gets hurt.

Be prepared to hear 5-year-olds barter for friends:

"If you do this for me, I'll be your friend."

Three- and 4-year-olds will seem unkind when they say,

"I don't want to be your friend." Translated this means, *"I want to play alone right now."*

While another 3- or 4-year-old would not take this comment personally, parents find it rude and unacceptable. If this type of statement makes you uncomfortable, help the child restate what he has said without making an issue of it. A statement such as "You would like to play alone right now," will clarify the point for all concerned.

Skills for Children to Make and Keep Friends

- ♦ Make eye contact, use people's names and touch them gently on the shoulder to get their attention.
- ♦ Ask for what you need, then think of other things to do while you wait for your turn.
- ♦ Teach children to suggest alternatives to their friends' ideas when they don't want to play. Instead of simply saying, "No," they could say, "We played that this morning. Let's play blocks or draw now."
- ♦ Help children feel comfortable joining a group. This may make a difference in how the playing will go. Children who burst into play are often rejected. Children who hover around the edges are ignored. Encourage your children to welcome others into play.

Children who feel loved and accepted in their families and whose ideas and talents are valued feel confident in themselves and competent in forming successful relationships. They are better able to develop skills that attract friends and maintain successful friendships.

Ways to Listen

- ♦ When your child talks, be ready to listen.
- ♦ Take time to figure out what your child is saying.
- ♦ When your child speaks, make eye contact.
- ♦ Watch for signs that your child needs to talk.
- ♦ Ask questions.
- ♦ Find time to listen each day.
- ♦ Pay attention to your child's feelings.
- ♦ Think about what your child says.
- ♦ Act on what your child tells you.



Ways to Help Your Child

- ♦ When you discipline, explain why.
- ♦ Tell children what they should do, not what they shouldn't do. "We will hold hands while we walk here," instead of, "Don't walk alone."
- ♦ Give more attention and praise for good behavior and less for naughty behavior. Don't make punishment a reward. Children who like attention may be naughty just to get attention. Protect and preserve children's feelings that they are lovable and capable.
- ♦ Plan ahead. Let your children know clearly and thoroughly how you want them to behave. Let them know the house rules. Tell them the consequences if they misbehave.
- ♦ Focus on the naughty action, not on the child. "That was a bad thing to do," not "You are a bad boy."
- ♦ Set things up to encourage good behavior. Have enough space so children can play alone, enough toys to reduce arguments, enough rest periods to minimize crankiness, enough planned activities to keep children from being bored. Put away breakable and dangerous things.
- ♦ Teach by example. If you hit children for hitting others, they won't understand why they can't hit.
- ♦ Follow through. Be consistent. If you have a rule, enforce it.
- ♦ When children are naughty, talk to them. Listen to find out why they did what they did. Did they just make a mistake? Are they angry at you? Are they trying to get attention? Are they upset about something else? Are they sick or tired?



- ♦ Offer choices to children only when you are willing to accept their decisions.
- ♦ Change the environment instead of the child's behavior.
- ♦ Work "with the grain" of the child instead of against it.
- ♦ Give child safe limits that they can understand.
- ♦ Be a good example.

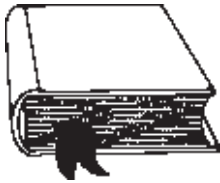
Feeling Frustrated? 12 Alternatives to Hitting Your Child

When the big and little problems of your everyday life pile up to the point where you feel like hitting, slapping or spanking your child — STOP. Take time out. Don't take your problems out on your child. Try any or all of these simple alternatives. Use whatever works for you.

1. Stop in your tracks. Step back. Sit down.
2. Take five deep breaths. Inhale. Exhale. Slowly, slowly.
3. Count to 10. Better yet, 20. Or say the alphabet out loud.
4. Phone a friend. A relative. Even the weather phone.

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5. Still mad? Punch a pillow. Or munch an apple.
6. Thumb through a magazine, book, newspaper or photo album.
7. Do some sit-ups.
8. Pick up a pencil and write down your thoughts.
9. Take a hot bath or a cold shower.
10. Lie down on the floor, or just put your feet up.
11. Put on your favorite music.
12. Water your plants.



Why Parents Get Angry

In her book, *Love and Anger: The Parental Dilemma*, Nancy Samalin writes, “the greater our love, the greater too our capacity for feeling a full range of troubling emotions, including anger, resentment and even rage. It is only natural that these strong emotions are sometimes expressed in our relationships with our children, for they are the people in whom we invest our greatest love, our most intense feelings, and our highest expectations.”

Even though parents get angry, they must control their behavior. Easier said than done? Yes! Here are some things to remember the next time your child “pushes your buttons.”

- ♦ The louder they get, the quieter you get.
- ♦ Take responsibility for your own emotions by saying “I’m mad,” instead of, “You’re bad.”
- ♦ Nothing is learned or gained at the point of crisis. To teach a lesson, you and your child must be calm and alert.
- ♦ When anger takes over, logic goes by the wayside.
- ♦ Anger can be a secondary emotion. The underlying cause may be fear or pain or guilt. Try to get to the cause.
- ♦ Anger can cause huge gaps in the best of relationships.
- ♦ Use the stoplight approach: Stop... Think... before you act. Proceed with caution... Consider what you want your child to learn from the situation. Go... Follow through with a respectful, helpful solution.

Separation: Ways to Ease Transitions

Separation is something we all deal with throughout life — from relatively minor losses, like friends moving away, to the ultimate separation, death. Children begin to develop separation skills at the “peek-a-boo” stage, when they watch someone they love disappear and reappear. How preschool children experience separation is closely tied to their stage of development. Children at the preschool age are usually able to create a mental picture of their absent parents.

The way parents help the preschooler handle separation is of primary importance and is truly life-shaping. Each day, parents, children and caregivers have opportunities to learn better ways to cope with their feelings about separation.



From birth, you and your child grow closer together and more independent at the same time. Separation is one of the many growing experiences you will share. How you handle the situation can set the stage for how well your child adapts to other challenges in life. Be sure your words and actions are good examples.

The overall goal for the parent/child relationship is to focus on successful separations that strengthen basic trust.

Handling Separation

1. Be honest. Separation is painful, and we all wish we could avoid dealing with it. Separation seems to lend itself especially well to lying. For example, many parents do not tell their child when they are going out at night, justifying it with “They won’t wake up anyway,” or “What they don’t know won’t hurt them.” Unfortunately, what the child doesn’t know is precisely what does hurt if the child wakes up to find no parents and a stranger in the house.

Parents may knowingly use scare tactics to threaten children into compliance that will undermine the child’s sense of security. “If you don’t stop playing and come right this minute, I’ll leave you alone in the park,” is an instance of a parent knowing what will hurt enough to get compliance, but it is not being honest.

Children who are beginning preschool or kindergarten may be told that mother will stay as long as the child wants her, then mother disappears while the child is engaged in an activity without saying good-bye.

Many parents carefully prepare a child for the birth of a new baby, but may fail to handle what may be the most difficult part of all: mother’s disappearance for several days. Plus, she almost always leaves in a hurry and

in a state in which she is less-than-normally responsive to the preschooler’s needs and fears.

Death, a permanent separation, causes denial reactions among adults throughout our culture. Children who experience this separation mostly need help to cope. Instead, they learn to deny and avoid the pain of permanent loss. Often, adults do not deal with separation issues adequately because no one ever helped them confront it honestly. Rather than say someone has died, the adult prefers to say the person went away.

Almost without exception, children should be given the simple truth in language or other ways they can understand. Feelings of both adults and children need to be dealt with openly and honestly, whether it is a momentary good-bye or death.

2. Be positive. Good feelings are contagious! If you are genuinely enthusiastic about any upcoming change, your child will look forward to it, too. Parents who feel satisfied about their work, and about their child care arrangements, are more comfortable about parenting. Children from ages 2 to 6 generally pick up on those positive feelings and adapt quite well as a result.
3. Know what to expect. Prepare yourself by knowing how children usually react to separation. A 3-year-old may still scream, cry or cling when you say good-bye. This behavior, called separation anxiety, can be difficult for both parents and providers. Most children will quit crying very soon after the parent leaves.

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The bright side, however, is that separation anxiety marks a big step in a child's development. Your child has already learned to care about you and is aware she/he is separate from you. Children at this stage still need more experience to be sure they can trust you to come back.

If the behavior persists, take a look at the environment. Is the child/caregiver arrangement meeting the child's needs? Is the child over- or under-stimulated? Does the child feel secure and loved or neglected, teased and disliked? Trust your feelings to guide you, since you as a parent know your child best.

4. **Take Time.** Whenever it is humanly possible, allow enough time for children to become active masters of their own fates. With adequate time and support from those they leave and those they go to, most children can make a positive decision to separate rather than be forced to accommodate. This does not mean that children can have the power to call the shots as to whether or not they will enter child care or school. However, the enforced separation, which is going to occur regardless of the child's say, can be experienced by children as a positive move toward growing up. Even when there is inadequate time for a slow, careful, sensitive separation process, whatever advance preparations are made can help considerably.

5. **Offer Support.** In addition to letting children know that you understand their feelings, parents and caregivers can offer support in other ways.

- ♦ Give the child care provider information about the child's home life — brothers and sisters, pets, likes and dislikes, habits and daily routines, so that caregivers can talk about home during the day.

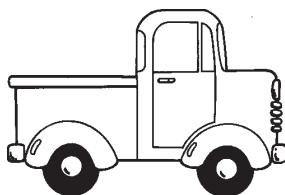
- ♦ Allow the child to bring something from home — a favorite toy, a pillow or blanket — to remind the child of home during the day. This gives a sense of security and continuity and allows the child to retain a sense of control.
- ♦ Give the child pictures of family members to hang in their cubby or their space; a child sometimes finds it reassuring to be able to look at the pictures during the day.
- ♦ It often helps to not just reassure children that you will be back, but to build your return into their life structure. "When I get back, I want you to have your things packed in this bag."
- ♦ A telephone call may be reassuring, but check with the provider as to when would be the best time.
- ♦ Exchange information with caregivers at the end of the day so that you can talk about what has happened during the day and be aware of any special experiences the child may have had.
- ♦ Caregivers can ease separations by helping children wave hello or good-bye and by encouraging the child to talk about home.
- ♦ Caregivers can help children build skills and competencies. When children feel more in control and less helpless, they are better able to cope with stress.
- ♦ Caregivers can help children cope with feelings of separation by encouraging games of coming and going, hiding and rediscovering, losing and finding. Even though these games have nothing to do with the parents, the theme of separation and reunion helps deal with feelings. For many children, the use of art materials, toys and puppets is more useful than conversation.
- ♦ Read books such as *The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown or *Ira Sleeps Over* by E. Waber. These are favorites that deal with separation.

By giving children the clear message that we share their concerns, we build the child's self esteem and confidence. The ultimate goal for children should be for them to be the ones who leave their parents, not the other way around.

Toys for Growing

For Active Play and Physical Development

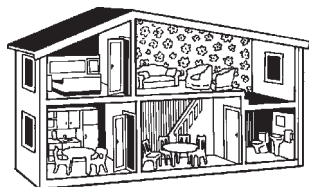
- Assorted blocks
- Push and pull toys
- Balls and bean bags
- Dump trucks
- Hollow blocks
- Workbench and tools
- Balls



- Junior indoor gym sets
- Wheelbarrow
- Trikes
- Big boxes or crates

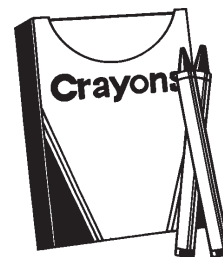
For Dramatic and Imaginative Play

- Doll corner materials
- Children's house play materials: small suitcases, laundry, toys
- Animals and farmyards (collections of small toys)
- Costumes
- Telephones
- Puppets and stage
- Tents or "caves"



For Creative and Constructive Play

- Clay
- Painting materials
- Blunt scissors
- Crayons
- Colored cubes
- Simple puzzles
- Toy hammer and nails
- Easel, paints and brushes
- Paper, newspaper, wrapping paper
- Musical instruments



Games for Growing

Magic Pictures

Draw a pattern on a piece of paper with an unlit wax candle. Have your child paint the entire paper with watercolor paint to expose the "magic picture" that will appear.

Questions Parents Ask: My Child Seems to Be Left-Handed. Should I Try to Change Her to Her Right?

By the age of 4 years, a child is generally showing a preference for using either her right or her left hand. Approximately 90 percent of all children are right-handed. If a child is left-handed, it is not recommended that you force her to use her right hand. She will have fewer emotional upsets and perform better at drawing, cutting, writing and other fine motor activities if she is allowed to use the hand she prefers.

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Remember, this fact sheet describes a typical child at each age. Each child is special, and each child develops at his or her own pace. Perfectly normal children may do things earlier or later than those described in this fact sheet. If you are concerned about your child's development, see your doctor.

He or She? Him or Her?

This fact sheet gives equal time and space to both sexes. That's why we take turns referring to children as "he" or "she." Please note: when we use he or she, we include all children.

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