



# Your 4 year old's development

**Four is when your child starts getting a 'big picture' view of the world.**

Your 4 year old is starting to see differences between people – relationships, sex, race. They'll explore these through play, dressing up and asking lots of questions.

The big world seems exciting, but it can be hard to work out where they fit. They may sometimes seem loud and confident, or babyish and frightened



## Talking and communication

Your 4 year old will probably love to have conversations and talk in detail about all sorts of things.

They need to find out about 'everything' – and talking is an important way of understanding how the world works.

### Your 4 year old:

- can make conversation about lots of different topics and take turns speaking
- loves silly jokes and 'rude' words
- generally speaks clearly, but may still not make some sounds correctly – 'th' for 's', or 'w' for 'r'
- asks 'Why', 'When' and 'How' questions, and asks what words mean

- uses connecting words like 'and', 'when' and 'but', abstract terms like 'remember', and place words like 'between'
- tells long stories which may be partly true and partly made up
- is interested in questions, and can argue and give their own ideas about things
- talks about what might happen or what they'd like to have happen
- knows, and can repeat or sing a few nursery rhymes.

### ★ Contact your child health nurse or doctor if your child:

- speaks in a way other people find hard to understand
- can't understand two-part instructions like 'Put down the ball and come here'
- has stopped using a language skill they once had.

## Books and reading

Telling stories, talking and singing are really important for many areas of your child's development.

Your child is learning about sounds, words, language and reading, and books. This not only helps with the important skill of learning to read and to enjoy reading, but helps your child learn to focus.

Reading stimulates imagination and helps your child learn new things, including feelings and social skills, and about other cultures. It's also a lovely time to share and bond with your child.

- Have a routine that includes some reading time every day. Have a bookshelf and special reading spot if you can.
- Turn off any screens (including your phone) and other distractions.
- Sit together so your child can see the pages of the book.
- Join your local library, and let your child choose at least some of the books.

### Reading is all about having fun with books.

- Talk about a book before you read it – why your child chose the book and what the story might be about.
- Use your finger to follow the words, or get your child to do this.
  - Point out things like capital letters and full stops, and sound out some of the words.
  - See if your child can see any letters that are in their own name.
- Talk about:
  - what might happen next
  - how the character might be feeling
  - how your child might feel if something similar happened to them.
  - if they liked the book and why.

Find out more about choosing books and learning to read at [better-beginnings.com.au](http://better-beginnings.com.au)

## Social and emotional

Your 4 year old is moving out into the world. They can usually play happily with other children, and enjoy lots of physical games as well as stories.

- Your child is learning to understand about other people's feelings and needs.
- They can feel empathy for others, and can share toys and take turns – at least some of the time.
- They may sometimes feel jealous of your relationships with other people, such as your partner.
- They may have favourite games like 'mummies and daddies' and 'superman'. These games allow them to try out various adult roles.

### The world can sometimes seem scary to a 4 year old.

Your child needs you to provide a daily routine that gives them a safe base to explore from.

For example, they need to know what happens every day at breakfast, what they'll be doing during the day, and what special things happen at bedtime.

Sometimes, their behaviour may be 'over the top' – noisy, boasting, excited.

Your child needs you to set limits and help them calm down without making them feel bad when they can't manage their behaviour and emotions is.

- Your 4 year old will begin to organise games and make friends.
- They can be quite bossy with other children and may still have a few tantrums when they don't get what they want.
- They can usually be away from you without getting upset, although not if there have been upsetting separations in the past.
- They're developing a sense of humour and will laugh at funny situations.
- They'll play quite complicated make-believe and pretend games – 'daddy and mummy'.
- They might have imaginary playmates, particularly if they don't have other children to play with. This is nothing to worry about.
- They still haven't worked out what is real and what is fantasy, so may tell stories (lies) in order to please you.

## Developing understanding

Your 4 year old may take a long time to make up their mind because so many things are going on in their heads.

They'll ask lots of questions about the world and why it is the way it is.

Sometimes the questions can be embarrassing or difficult to answer, such as questions about death or sex. Your child may be interested in where babies come from and may experiment by looking at their own and other children's bodies.

### Your 4 year old can probably:

- understand 2 or 3 simple things to do at once – 'Get a cup of water, take it to Daddy and then put the cup back on the table'
- understand what '3' means – 'There are 3 motor bikes'
- sort objects by size, colour or shape and type (animal, car)
- compare 2 things to work out which is heavier
- understand taller and smaller, but not arrange things in order of smallest to biggest
- may be able to copy their name
- draw a person with a head, body, legs and arms
- tell the difference between morning and afternoon
- say numbers up to 20, and is beginning to count a few objects by touching them
- hold a pencil well, and cut on a line
- name and match 4 colours
- recognise some words they see a lot – 'STOP' on stop signs.

### By the time they're 5, your child can:

- tell you their name, age and address (if you've taught them these)
- copy a square, a cross and a triangle.

## Children's sexual behaviour

Try to answer questions as simply and honestly as you can, without telling your child much more than they've asked.

While telling them simply about your family's beliefs, help your child to understand that life has different stages – children and adults may behave differently.

Explain that people live differently and have different values, and this is all normal and part of life's richness.

## Physical skills

Your 4 year old is developing confidence in their physical ability. But, like their emotions, they can be over-confident or too timid, so you always need to support them while making sure they're safe.

### Your child can:

- walk easily up and down steps, one foot to a step
- throw, catch, bounce and kick a ball, and use a bat
- climb ladders and trees
- stand on tiptoe, walk and run on tiptoe, and run quite fast
- jump over small objects
- walk along a line for a short distance
- ride a tricycle very well and may try a bicycle with trainer wheels
- stand on one foot for a few seconds, and probably hop
- thread beads to make a necklace
- swing themselves on a swing
- dress themselves if the fastenings are not too difficult
- go to the toilet, use toilet paper properly and flush the toilet – but still may not always be dry at night.





## Active play

Active play gets your child moving, and should raise their heart rate.

**Young children need to be active every single day because it helps:**

- build strong bones and muscles, and
- maintain a healthy weight
- improve balance and coordination
- improve learning and thinking
- keep them healthy – physically, mentally and emotionally.

**Your child should get a daily total of at least 3 hours of physical activity spread across the day, including an hour of energetic play such as:**

- walking, running, climbing and jumping
- kicking and throwing
- dancing.

Try to make the activities fun to encourage your child to keep doing them, and to explore and discover new things about the world and themselves.

Active play doesn't have to be organised, or have rules or special equipment. Young children need lots of time and space to just run around and play.

Backyards, school and park playgrounds, parks, and the beach are all great places for active play.

**Active play can be:**

- inside your home, such as dancing to music
- at the beach, in the bush, your garden or at the park – such as running and climbing, or ball play
- outdoors or in a shopping centre, such as walking – instead of sitting in the stroller – or playing on play equipment.

The more things you let your child try, the more they'll learn. Enjoy their achievements with them.



## Screen time

Screen time is the amount of time spent looking at all screens including TVs, computers, smartphones, tablets and video consoles.

For children aged between 2 and 5, limit screen time to 1 hour or less each day.

### Why limit screen time?

For healthy development, your child needs:

- face-to-face contact and social interaction with adults and other children to develop social skills
- to learn to entertain themselves without screens. This helps them learn how to experiment, think, learn and solve problems.
- to be active for at least 3 hours throughout the day. Children usually don't move during screen time.

#### Screen time can affect sleep:

- Screen time just before bed can delay how quickly your child falls asleep or the quality of sleep they get.
- Sharing a book or story together is a healthy way to calm down and prepare for sleep.

#### How you can help:

- Set an example. Avoid using your phone when you're with your child – during meals, bath time, story time and play time.
- Turn off TVs and other screens when not in use, or when you're playing, reading and talking with your child.
- Set limits around screen time and stick to them. When your child does use technology, choose content that helps them learn skills like problem solving.
- Balance screen time with physical and creative activities and other types of play.
- When your child can't be physically active, like a rainy day, choose other activities that help build skills such as reading, singing, puzzles and storytelling.
- Don't feel you need to introduce technology at this age. Your child will learn how to use technology when they are older.
- Learn about staying safe on line, and talk with your child about using technology, staying safe and making good choices. (Find out more at [eSafety.gov.au/parents](http://eSafety.gov.au/parents))

## How to help your child develop

The main thing your child needs is to have fun while playing with you.

It's important not to turn play into 'lessons'. Try and provide an interesting environment and enough time to play – and let child lead.

- Talk to your child about what they're doing and where they've been. What did they do and see? Show you're really interested when they talk to you, and join in the conversation.
- Read books to your child. Talk about what's happening in the pictures – let them act out the story.
- Tell stories about when you were a child.
- Your 4 year old is learning to sort things into groups, so play sorting games – spare buttons into shapes and colours, play animal lotto.
- Help them learn to ride a tricycle, or a bicycle with trainer wheels.
- Make time for outdoor physical activity such as walks in the bush or the park, ball games or visiting playgrounds.
- Provide painting and drawing materials.
- Praise and encourage them when they've played well with other children or considered their feelings, and help them to think about how others feel.

Children have their own unique personalities and things they enjoy – it's important to support them in their own interests.

#### Your 4 year old may enjoy:

- jokes (especially toilet jokes). They will laugh at, and say, nonsense or silly words.
- books and stories with interesting rhymes and words. They may make up rhymes.
- playing with other children
- physical activities
- simple computer games.

Ignoring toilet jokes, or giving them an alternative if they keep using words you don't like, is often the best way to get through this stage.

For example, If your child says 'You're a poo' to everyone they meet, suggest an alternative word – 'I know another good word. Why not say "You're a banana?"'



## Keeping your child safe

Supervise your child closely all the time, especially around water, play equipment, or when they're using things like scissors, pencils, glue or paint.

- Babies, toddlers and young children can choke on small toys and objects. Keep older children's toys away from younger brothers and sisters.
- Do regular safety checks to make sure your home is safe for your child to explore.

### SAFETY!

Toddlers and young children do NOT understand about danger.

You need to watch your child now they are exploring, moving faster and farther, and reaching many more places and things – even climbing on things to reach higher.

## When to be concerned about your child's development

All 4 year olds are different and develop at different rates.

If you are worried about your child's development, or if they can't do things they used to do, it's important to see your doctor or child health nurse.

Sometimes children need a little help with their development and getting in early will help – and if nothing's wrong, it's good to know that they're developing normally.

### ★ Contact your child health nurse or doctor if your child:

- your child's understanding and skills go backward for more than a short time
- they can't hear a whisper or keep asking people to repeat things – says 'What?'
- they're not interested in other children and what is happening around them
- they're behind other children of the same age in some areas
- they screw up their eyes to see some things, or have trouble seeing things, or their eyes are looking in different directions.



## Starting Kindy

Your child may start Kindy (kindergarten) this year.

It may just be like an extension of child care for both of you or it may be the first time you've been separated.

How they react to separation will depend on your child's personality and if they're used to being away from you.

If you have a new baby or other younger children at home, your 4 year old may feel they're 'missing out' by going to Kindy. They need to know that they will still have 'special time' with you.

### It may help your child if you:

- celebrate the start of 'school' in some small way
- visit the Kindy together at least twice before they start
- stay a while if you have time
- buy them a new bag or lunch box (even if they don't need one)
- actively listen to their stories about the experience.



## Your child is unique

Every child is different and may develop at different rates.

So, if your child does not do some of these things, they may be 'working' on a different area of learning and development. However, children usually follow the same pattern of development, and it's good to feel that your child is developing normally, in their own unique way.

If you are worried about your child's development, or if they are very different from other children, talk with your doctor or child health nurse. If there is a problem, it's better to get help early.

### **i** Need more information or help?

- Child health nurse
- Bright Tomorrows App ([brighttomorrows.org.au](http://brighttomorrows.org.au))
- Better Beginnings ([better-beginnings.com.au](http://better-beginnings.com.au))
- Nature Play WA ([natureplaywa.org.au](http://natureplaywa.org.au))
- Ngala Parenting Helpline ([ngala.com.au](http://ngala.com.au))
- Playgroup WA ([playgroupwa.com.au](http://playgroupwa.com.au))
- Raising Children Network ([raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au))

This publication is provided for general education and information purposes. Contact a qualified healthcare professional for any medical advice needed.

Based on CAH-003425 Child Development 4-5 years .

Produced by Child and Adolescent Health Service – Community Health ©State of Western Australia 2024