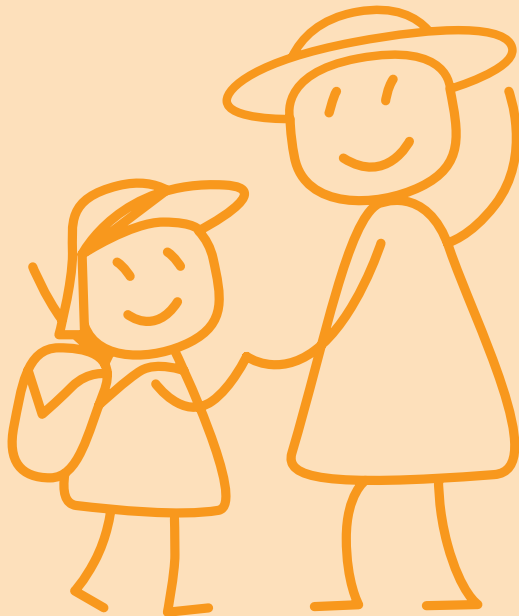


# child development 4-5 years



This topic is about your four year old. You can always get a view from a hill and being four is like the first developmental hill from which your child can get a view of a bigger world.

Relationships, sex, different people of different race; all these big social issues become visible to your four year old. They are questions they explore through their play, dressing up and through asking lots of questions.

To glimpse a big world is exciting, but from such a small hill, it is impossible to see where you might fit. So getting it wrong, being either too big and bold, or too small and frightened, are not uncommon extremes for your four year old.

### Important note

*The information in this topic is a guide only. Children develop at different rates and in different ways. If you are worried about your child's development or if your child's development is very different from other children of the same age, have a talk with a health professional. If there is a problem, getting in early will help. If there isn't a problem the reassurance will save you some worry.*

## Social and emotional development

Four year olds are moving out into the world and can usually play happily with other children and enjoy lots of physical games as well as stories.

- They are learning to understand about the feelings and needs of others, and their behaviour shows that they can feel sympathy for others and can share their toys and take turns, at least some of the time.
- They may sometimes feel jealous of their parents' relationship.

*Parents can help by letting them know that their relationship is important to them, and that each child will also have the opportunity to find their own special partner when they grow up.*

- They often develop favourite games like ‘mummies and daddies’ and ‘superman’. These games allow them to try out various adult roles for a while.

*Sometimes the roles they take may conflict with your values as a parent, but if you allow them to play without making them feel that it is wrong, they usually let go of that role once they have worked through what it means.*

- The world can seem like a scary place to four year olds. They need their parents to provide a pattern of daily living that gives them a safe basis from which to explore.

*For example, children need to know what happens at breakfast, what they will be doing during the day and what special things happen at bedtime.*

- They also need to know that their parents will set safe limits to their behaviour.

*Even though they may seem confident, it is very scary for young children to feel that their parents cannot manage them.*

- Four year olds begin to organise games and make friends.
- Four year olds 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 separate from parents/carers without distress. This may not happen if there have been upsetting separations in the past.
- Their sense of humour is developing and they are likely to laugh at funny situations.
- Some of their behaviour is ‘over the top’ - noisy, boasting, exuberant.
- They play quite complicated make believe and pretend games, e.g. fathers and mothers.



- Some have imaginary playmates. This is more likely if they don't have other children to play with. This is not a sign of developmental problems.
- They have not yet worked out what is real and what is fantasy and may tell stories (lies) in order to please parents.
- Four to five year olds can go to the toilet by themselves, use toilet paper properly and flush the toilet.

## Developing understanding

Four year olds often ask lots of questions about the world and why it is the way it is. Sometimes their questions can be embarrassing or difficult to answer, for example, questions about death or sex. They are interested in where babies come from and may experiment by looking at other children's bodies.

### Children's sexual behaviour

Try to answer their questions as simply and honestly as you can without telling them too much more than they ask.

While telling them simply of the beliefs your family holds, help them to understand that life has different stages. People live differently and have different values, and this is all normal and part of life's richness.

Four year olds can usually:

- understand two or three simple things to do at once, e.g. 'Get a cup of water, take it to Daddy and then put the cup back on the table'
- understand what 'three' means, e.g. 'There are three motor bikes'
- sort objects by size, and by what sort of thing they are, e.g. animals, or by colour or shape

- compare two weights to work out which is heavier
- understand taller, smaller and shorter but will not be able to arrange a group of things in order of smallest to biggest
- probably copy their names
- draw a person with a head, body, legs and arms
- tell the difference between morning and afternoon
- say numbers up to 20 and are beginning to count a few objects by touching them
- hold a pencil well
- cut on a line
- name and match four colours
- recognise some words they see a lot, e.g. 'STOP' on stop signs
- by the time they are five, tell you their name, age and address if asked (provided they have been taught these)
- copy a square, a cross and a triangle by the time they are five.

## Physical development

Four year olds are developing confidence in their physical ability but, as in their emotional life, they can be too bold or too timid and need to be supervised in physical play.

Four year olds can:

- walk easily up and down steps, one foot to a step
- throw and catch, bounce and kick a ball and use a bat
- climb ladders and trees
- stand on tiptoe, and walk and run on tip toe
- run quite fast



- jump over small objects
- walk along a line for a short distance
- ride their tricycles very well and may try bicycles with trainer wheels
- stand on one foot for a few seconds and most can hop
- thread beads to make necklaces
- swing themselves on a swing
- dress themselves providing the fastenings are not too difficult
- manage their own toilet needs during the day, but still may not be dry at night.

## Speech and language development

Four year olds are often great conversationalists and love to talk about the details of all sorts of scientific and important subjects. Your child needs to find out about all aspects of life and talking about things is a very important way of understanding how the world works.

Four year olds:

- speak clearly on the whole, but they may still not use some sounds correctly, e.g. say 'th' for 's' or 'w' for 'r'
- ask 'Why', 'When', 'How' questions and ask what words mean
- tell long stories which may be partly true and partly made up
- are interested in questions and can argue and give their own ideas about things
- talk about what might happen or what they would like to have happen
- know a few nursery rhymes which they can say, repeat or sing.

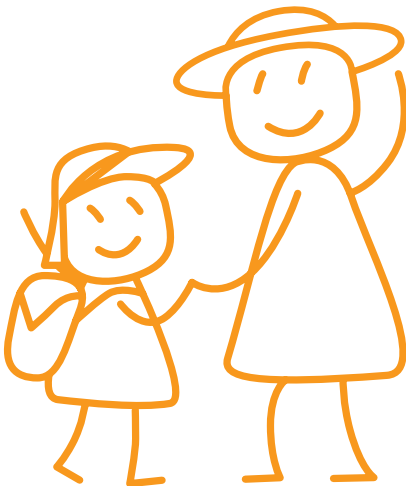
## What they enjoy

Your children have their own unique personalities and things they enjoy and it is important to support them in their own interests.

The following are some things that many four year olds 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 word if they are using words that you don't like is often the best way to help them through this stage. E.g. if the child says to everyone he meets 'You're a poo' you could try saying something like, 'I know another good word'. You could say 'You're a banana!' If you suggest another interesting word your child is quite likely to enjoy that just as much.



## What you can do

The main thing children need from play with parents is to have fun with them. It is important not to turn play into 'lessons'. The best way to play with children is to provide an interesting environment, have time to play and follow your child's lead.

- Talk to your children about what they do and where they have been. Ask them what they did and what they saw. Listen with interest when they talk to you and join in conversations.
- Read books to your children. Talk about what's happening in the pictures, let them act out the story.
- Tell stories about when you were a child.
- Four to five year olds are learning to sort things into groups, so you can play games for sorting objects, e.g. sort your spare buttons into shapes and colours, play animal lotto.
- Give opportunities to learn to ride a three wheeled bike, or two wheeled bike with trainer wheels.
- Make opportunities for out-door physical activity such as walks in the park, ball games, visiting playgrounds.
- Provide materials for painting and drawing.
- Praise and encourage your children when they consider others and play well with others and help them to think about how others feel.

## Starting kindergarten

Your child may well be starting kindergarten in this year. It may just be like an extension of childcare for both of you or it may be the first time you have been separated. Different personalities respond very differently to separation and it also depends on what separations you have had in the past and how well they have gone. If you have a new baby at home your four year old may feel that he is 'missing out' by going to kindy and he needs to know that he can still have some 'special time' with you.



It will help him if you:

- celebrate his entry into the formal education system in some small way
- go with him to the kindergarten on at least two occasions before he starts (if it is not where he has been going for child care)
- stay for a while if you have the time
- buy him a new bag or lunch box even if he doesn't need one
- listen to his stories about the experience.

## Alert

You should have your children checked by a health professional when:

- your children's understanding and skills go backward for more than a brief time
- your four year old:
  - does not speak clearly enough to be understood by other people
  - cannot hear a whisper or constantly asks for things to be repeated (says 'What?')
  - does not take an interest in other children and what is happening around her
  - is very much behind other children of the same age in some areas
  - screws up her eyes to see some things or has trouble seeing some things, or the pupils in her eyes do not always seem to be looking the same way
- you have any worries or concerns about your children's development.

## Summary

### Social and emotional development

Your four year old:

- learns lots about the world and how it works, and about people and relationships
- makes friends (often short term) and plays group games
- needs structure and a routine to feel safe
- when his behaviour is 'over the top', he needs you to set limits and bring him back to earth without making him feel bad.

### Developing understanding

Your four year old:

- asks lots of questions, some difficult and embarrassing
- learns about differences between people
- can remember more than a single thought at one time
- still cannot always tell the difference between what happened in his head and what happened in reality
- likes to make up his mind very slowly sometimes.

### Physical development

Your four year old:

- loves to throw and catch a ball
- loves to ride his trike
- is developing confidence in his physical ability
- easily misjudges his physical capacities.

## Speech and language development

Your four year old:

- can make conversation about lots of different topics
- loves silly jokes and 'rude' words.

### For more information contact:

- Local Community Child Health Nurse
- Local Family Doctor
- Ngala Family Resource Centre Helpline  
8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. 7 days a week  
Telephone (08) 9368 9368  
Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 111 546  
[www.ngala.com.au](http://www.ngala.com.au)
- Parent Help Centre/Parenting Line  
Telephone (08) 9272 1466 (24hr service)  
Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 654 432



© Children, Youth and Women's Health Service, reproduced with permission. The South Australian Government does not accept responsibility for the accuracy of this reproduction. The original version is published at <http://www.cyh.com>

## **Warning**

This document is published as general information only. You should always consult a healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment of any health condition or symptoms.



## **Disclaimer**

The advice and information contained herein is provided in good faith as a public service. However the accuracy of any statements made is not guaranteed and it is the responsibility of readers to make their own enquiries as to the accuracy, currency and appropriateness of any information or advice provided. Liability for any act or omission occurring in reliance on this document or for any loss, damage or injury occurring as a consequence of such act or omission is expressly disclaimed.