

Child Care from 4 to 5 Years

Your child is at a wonderful age. He is excited and energetic. This aged child is often a little chatterbox whose inquisitiveness and vocabulary expand daily. This is an age to enjoy. But you must occasionally temper your child's exuberance to keep him safe from unsafe consequences of this adventurousness and imagination.

Eating

Your child may use a fork now instead of a spoon but, will still need help cutting meat, etc. A four-year-old often requires three meals with two snacks a day. Teach him about foods. Of the major food groups, a preschooler needs: around 24 ounces of milk and milk products; 2-3 servings of the meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans, and nuts group; 2-4 fruit servings; 3-5 vegetable servings; and 5-7 bread, cereal, rice, pasta group servings per day. At least one serving of fruit per day should be a citrus fruit or juice. A yellow or dark green vegetable should be served at least 3 to 4 times a week. A bread serving is one slice or a cup of cereal. Remember the simple rule of thumb: to offer a teaspoon of each food group per year of life at a meal is adequate at this age. Food preferences remain but you may see his likes increasing. Try not to use food as a reward for good behavior; praise is preferable.

Sleeping

Four-year-olds are magical thinkers; that is they have and use their imaginations in all phases of their world. As a result, you may see an increase in nightmares for a short while, as this age has difficulty separating fantasy from reality. When this occurs, just help your child to awaken fully from the dream and reassure him.

The afternoon nap may be disappearing due to preschool and other activities. If possible, try to give your child a "quiet time" to allow you a break, especially if you have other younger children. Reading prior to this time is a good way to unwind, and then your child could look at books in bed.

Elimination

Your child will probably be pretty independent in his toileting routine now. He may still require help in getting clean after a bowel movement but will express this need. It is not uncommon for children to have accidents at this age and wet their clothes or their beds. Try and be as understanding as possible and don't make a big issue of it. If it does become a regular occurrence, you might want to discuss this with your doctor and ask for, or read additional references.

Development/Play

Your child is adding new vocabulary words every day, some of which you may not be happy about. It is not uncommon for this age child to "pick up" mild profanity from other children or older siblings. Four-year-olds are using pronouns (I, you, me), are able to understand some prepositions, count several objects, and can identify a few colors. Your child continues to ask questions constantly as well as tell "exaggerated" stories. Similarly this is the age for "inaccurate talk" a benign type of lie that is reflective of his immature development.

Your child is probably never still. He is able to run, skip, and hop on one foot. He may also throw a ball overhand as well as catch it. Fine motor skills are improving as well. Your child may use scissors to cut out a picture and can copy a square or trace a triangle, diamond, or cross.

As was stated earlier, your child is in a stage of “magical thinking,” and toys or props that encourage the imagination are very appropriate. These include play clothes for dress-up, paper products or articles from an office, or cans and things from the grocery store. Art supplies, musical instruments, doctor/nurse kits and child tool kits also enhance creativity. Help your child to learn the value of reading. Read to him. Read in his presence so that he can see your example. Make books available to him. Acknowledge his recognition of letters, sounds, or words. However, this is not an age that you have to push him to read. Acknowledge his recognition of letters, sounds, or words. However, this is not an age that you have to push him to read. Let him just enjoy his level of “reading.”

Sexual curiosity is common at this age and you may notice this being demonstrated through doctor and nurse play. Try not to let this upset you. It is very normal and will not become a problem unless you turn it into an issue.

Your child is in a phase of associative play. That is, they enjoy playing with other children and being dramatic and imitative. They can resolve minor conflicts but still need parental supervision. It is not uncommon for your child to have imaginary playmates or for you to find him talking to himself! This usually disappears as your child gets closer to school age.

Four-year-olds are emotional and can be temperamental. Your child may have mood swings and be physically and verbally loving and affectionate and may also be similarly aggressive. This is where preschool or a period of time in an organized child setting may help. Appropriate behavior and play interaction can be reinforced at school and at home as well. This is an important time for realistic discipline and limit-setting techniques to be evaluated. Children this age do not understand the reason behind right and wrong. Therefore, expect your child to test you and be aggressive. Your child may even go so far as to tell you he’s running away from home. Be patient. As your child heads toward five, life becomes easier.

Safety

If you haven’t done so already, teach your child his full name and your full names, address and phone numbers. Teach him who are the appropriate people ask for help if he is injured, lost or afraid. Teach him never to get into a strange car. You must balance opportunities for healthy interaction with the need for protection especially with preschoolers. In over 85% of child sexual abuse cases the victim knows the offender, who is most often a male. Now is the time to teach your child about “safe touch” and resisting uncomfortable touch (read It’s MY body*3 or Touch Talk*2 with him). Begin teaching the names of all body parts including genitals (“penis” and “vagina”) and bottom. Children need a vocabulary to say “no” to an unwanted touch. Remember that these young children may legitimately need a caretaker’s touch to wipe after a messy bowel movement. This is difficult to teach so become involved in a school education program.

Begin educating your child about preventing accidents, especially outside. Swimming lessons should be started this year if your child has not already been taught. Check with the local recreation programs as to the availability.

Teach water safety. If bicycling, then teach safety rules and insist on helmet use.

Other safety measures need to be followed rigorously. Medicines and other poisons still need to be locked up out of reach as do objects like matches, sharp scissors, and knives. Never allow your child to handle firearms. **STORE ALL WEAPONS UNLOADED, IN LOCKED CABINETS. AMMUNITION SHOULD BE SIMILARLY LOCKED BUT IN A DIFFERENT LOCATION. THE KEYS SHOULD BE HIDDEN, OUT OF REACH, OR BETTER YET, LOCKED UP!** Most firearm injuries occur in and about the home. Consider asking questions about the presence of firearms at friends' homes. Teach your child or children the **NEW** rules of gun safety: **Never touch a gun; Every gun is loaded; When in doubt, get out.** Motor vehicle safety remains critical and still the greatest risk to your child's health (until age 40)! Use safety seats until your child graduates to seat belt size. Review and revise the emergency information you should be keeping by the telephone, fire escape plans, etc. the first Sunday of each month. Check the smoke detectors twice a year when daylight savings time changes are made.

Communication and Discipline

Your child's behavior will partially be guided by which expressions of your feelings he wants to obtain. Similarly, your child learns that having and expressing emotions is important for effective communication. Often the natural or logical outcome of an act provides enough reward for your child. When reality's pressure is not sufficient, then your positive reinforcement is the desirable behavioral guidance your child needs. Do not restrict praise just to a task's completion, but also give it during the performance. This encouragement shows your child that he is worthwhile. Don't reward misbehavior with increased attention or by giving in. Similarly, resist physical punishment and threatening inappropriate punishment. Threats and physical abuse only promote fear, guilt, and shame and teach the child that problems can be solved with violence.

Suggested Handouts, Readings, and Videos

Nutrition for Your Preschooler, Nightmares and Terrors (if needed), Speech Difficulties and Stuttering (if needed).

Additional Resources for Parents

General Child Care Caring for Your Baby and young Child by the American Academy of Pediatrics; Taking Care of Your Child by R. Pantell, J. Fries, and D. Vickery

Growth and Development Your Four-Year-Old by L. Ames and F. Ilg

Communication and Discipline Your Child's Self Esteem by D. Briggs; Positive Discipline by J. Nelsen; What Do You Really Want for Your Children by W. Dyer; Parent Effectiveness Training or P.E.T. in Action by T. Gordon; How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk by A. Faber and E. Mazlish; The Strong Willed Child by J. Dobson; When Your Child Drives You Crazy by E. LeShan; Without Spanking or Spoiling by E. Crary; Raising Your Spirited Child by M. Kurcinka

Other Pick Up Your Socks by E. Crary; Confessions of a Happily Organized Family by D. Schofield; Siblings without Rivalry by A. Faber and E. Mazlish; Parent's Guide to Raising Kids in a Changing World by D. Smith; Raising a Son or Raising a Daughter by D. & J. Elium

From Anticipatory Guidance Sheets for Parents by M. Cohen, D. Hansen, K. Skilling © 1994

May be reproduced for patient use carrying this notice by permission Sunbelt Medical Publishers,

Tallahassee Florida. THIS HEALTH EDUCATION MATERIAL HAS BEEN REVIEWED

FAVORABLY BY THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF FAMILY PHYSICIANS FOUNDATION.