



The 3, 4 and 5-Year-Old Child: Language Skills

The preschool years are exciting times for children. Each day preschoolers discover more and more about themselves and their world. During these years children gain new skills, abilities and knowledge. This fact sheet will help you understand preschool children. It's important to remember that the information in this fact sheet is only a guide. Children grow and develop at their own rates.

If you're like most parents, you love to listen to your child talk. She's learning new words all the time. By the time she is 3 ½ years old, your preschooler's vocabulary may contain 1,000 to 1,500 words.

She may have some problems with plurals and tenses. For example, she'll say "feets" instead of "feet." Or she'll use the word "tooked" rather than "taken." Don't worry, she'll have it all smoothed out in a year or two. By age four, your child will probably speak in complete sentences. She may go back to phrases and baby talk when she's tired or frustrated, though.

Preschoolers often use words without being sure of their meanings. For example, your child may use and understand *more*, *big*, and *long* before their opposites *less*, *little* and *short*. A child may say the word *more* when she means *less* as well as when she actually does mean *more*.

Prepositions, like *in*, *on*, *over* or *under* may give your child trouble. He may not master them until he gets close to using adult speech. His day-to-day-life will teach him how to use prepositions. In addition, you may help him learn them by playing a game. Use a ball or small toy car and a shoe box. Place the toys around the box and ask your child a series of questions. For example: "Ryan, put the car in the box." "Put the ball next to the box." "Put the car underneath the box."

Continue the game using the related words, such as *on*, *on top of*, *over*, *in front of*, *in between*, *into*, *inside*, *beside*, *under*, *beneath*, *behind*, *in back of*, *through*, *out of*. Turn the game around and ask your child to tell you what to do. Or encourage your child to act out the instructions. Say, "Ryan, walk around the chair. Stand behind the table. Come and sit beside me." Remember, your preschooler's attention span is short! Stop the game when your child is bored or tired.

Four-letter words

Four-letter words have a magical quality to most children. At a very early age, they learn that these words are different. They have special power. They make adults react! Adults may react with alarm, anger, worry, embarrassment, disgust, hurt or feelings of failure. Your child doesn't know the meaning of the word he is using. Still, he knows that all eyes will turn to him when he says it. No other words have such power.



Children become fascinated with the use of a four-letter word. They may try it out in different settings. One mother was angry when her young daughter used such a word at a family reunion. "Where did she learn it?" That is a difficult question to answer. Her daughter may have overheard it. She may have listened to an older brother, sister or other children. Before becoming worried or frustrated, remember that children are constantly learning.

The best approach is to remain calm. In other words, don't react emotionally. This way, the word loses its emotional power. You can ignore your child when he uses a certain word or you can guide him to another activity. Many parents find that a casual response such as, "We don't use this word in our family. We say _____," works very well. Others will say, "I don't use that word. Listen to how I talk." In these examples, the adult helps the child learn appropriate social behavior.

When it comes to language, children are like expensive vacuum cleaners, they pick up just about everything! Help them learn how to use what they have picked up. Remember, remain calm and casual when you hear four-letter words. Chances are, the use of these words will stop.

Helping your child prepare for reading

Most people believe the process of learning to read begins at the age of 6 or 7 years, when children start school. Yet it actually starts at a much younger age. Infants as young as six months benefit when their parents read to them. Babies like the rhythm of words and the bright pictures in books for infants and toddlers. Toddlers enjoy books with pictures of familiar objects, such as toys, people and animals. They also like large books with cardboard pages that are easy to turn.

Preschool children like to be actively involved during reading time. They enjoy having the same book read to them over and over again. They ask questions and talk about the characters and the plot. They repeat words and lines they know by heart. They like to choose which book will be read. Books about children their own age and those about strange creatures are some of their favorites.



By reading to children, adults are showing the importance of learning to read. Parents who can't read can look at magazines and books with their children. Cuddling up with babies and young children during story time also lets children know they are special and loved. To help your preschooler get ready to read, remember to:

- read to your child
- ask your child to make up a story to go along with the pictures in a book
- ask your child questions, and talk about, the story
- turn off the T.V. and read a book. Show your child it's fun to read!

Sources:

Papalia, D.E. & Wendkos Olds, S. (1996). *A Child's World: Infancy Through Adolescence*. McGraw Hill Inc. Strengthen Your Family. Cooperative Extension Service, The Pennsylvania State University.

For other publications on child growth and development, or information on the parenting education program, *Family Focus: Parenting the Young Child*, call your county UNH Cooperative Extension office.

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