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# The 3, 4 and 5 Year-Old Child: Changes in Social Behavior

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 factsheet will help you understand preschool children. It's important to remember that the information in this factsheet is only a guide. Children grow and develop at their own rates.

## Friendships

Preschoolers are becoming more “adult-like” in their physical appearance. This may be why adults often expect grown-up behavior from their children. Still, preschoolers aren't adults, and their behavior shows it. For instance, preschoolers play with friends, but they can't play very long together without conflicts. Playtime often ends with tears or fights.



Young preschoolers may become involved in associative play. Two or three children use the same toys and equipment. They join in the same games, but they do their own thing. At other times, they may be involved in more advanced cooperative play. Children share toys, organize games and make friends. At this age, friendships often don't last long. Friendships are based on toys, children's physical characteristics and where children live. The answer to “Why is Johnny your friend?” may be, “He lives next door and has a new swing set.”

Four and five-year-olds begin to develop best friends. Good friends are often the same sex and similar in age. Preschoolers also like children who share common interests. Even among older children, however, friendships change over time.

## Children's play

Parents and other adults want children to play “nicely” with other children. They're pleased when children share their toys and help others. But it's hard for preschool children to play cooperatively, share and help. Children can't always act in positive social ways because they're egocentric. They're not able to see things from the viewpoint of an adult or another child. They can't imagine how a person may feel or think. They haven't had enough social experiences. They haven't matured enough to “put themselves in the shoes” of another person. They're only aware of their own feelings or thoughts.

For example, your preschooler grabs a toy from his 18-month-old sister. When she starts to cry, he looks at her with surprise! He's happy because he wanted the toy and now he has it. He can't put himself in the place of his little sister. He doesn't understand her sadness or anger. He doesn't realize that his behavior has caused her to feel sad or angry.

Here is another example of children's egocentrism. Maria, who is four years old, wants to help mix the cookie batter. She runs to the table, climbs on a chair and begins to stir. On her way to the table, she knocks over her 19-month-old brother, Nicholas. Nicholas begins to cry. Maria continues to stir, not noticing her brother's tears. Maria's dad says, "Maria, you knocked Nick down. How would you feel if he knocked you down?" Maria looks at her dad briefly. Then she continues to stir the cookie batter.

Many adults would be angry or astonished by Maria's behavior. But Maria is acting normally for her age. Maria has little or no understanding of how her brother is feeling. She only knows that she's happy, and she's only thinking about stirring the cookie batter.



Maria doesn't understand the difference between right and wrong. Parents may spend time teaching their children to cooperate, help, share, and be good, but children can't always behave in those ways until they're developmentally old enough. Here are some ways adults can help children to learn these behaviors.

- Ask your child to talk about her feelings concerning other children's acts. For example, "How did you feel when Jimmy knocked over your blocks? Were you angry or sad?"
- Tell your child how his behavior affected another child. For instance, "When you knocked your brother down, he felt angry. He also hurt his arm. He was feeling pain."
- Talk about the similarities and differences between your child's feelings and the feelings of others. For example, "You were excited and happy about playing in the sand box, but Kathy was sad. She wanted to play with her dolls" or "Both of you feel angry because you can't have ice cream cones. If you eat ice cream now, you won't have room for your lunch. You can have ice cream for dessert. What flavor would you like then?"
- Tell your child how her behavior has affected you. "Hitting hurts. It might hurt me or your brother or your friend. I can't allow you to hit me or anyone. When you're angry at me, you need to say, 'Daddy, I'm angry at you.' Then we can talk about your feelings."
- Encourage your child to change a situation. Let's take the example of Maria and her brother described above. Talk to both children about their feelings. Then say, "Maria, let's make some room on the chair for Nick. Nick, you can help Maria stir the cookie batter. I'll hold you so you won't fall. I can help you stir if you need help." You're teaching both children how to solve a problem between two people.
- You're showing children that it's important to help others and share in an activity. Children who share, cooperate and help others tend to have parents who are warm, affectionate and nurturing.

**Sources:**

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