

Developmental Milestones: 3–5 Years



You and Your Foster Child

Children go through many changes from ages 3 to 5 years. These changes unfold in stages over time and are marked by generally accepted developmental milestones.

But no two children develop at the same pace, and there are age ranges for all behaviors. One child may reach a milestone early in the acceptable range—another, later. Also, all children can have a difficult day or week. So, observe your child for at least a few weeks before suspecting a possible delay. Children born prematurely tend to reach milestones a little later. And it is not unusual for a child to regress in one skill or another from time to time. For example, a new sibling or other big change at home can cause anxiety, disrupt a child's sleep, and lead to crankiness and disobedience.

Use these milestones as a general guide. What matters most is that your child progresses from one stage to another at a fairly steady pace. Reaching a milestone earlier or later does not mean a child will achieve other milestones earlier or later. It is not until age 4 or 5 years that developmental success or delay are strong indications of what a child will be able to do later.

Milestones during ages 3–5 years

The following is a general guide to some basic milestones for physical, cognitive, language, and social and emotional development reached during ages 3–5 years.

3 years

Physical development milestones:

- All of a child's baby teeth are in.
- Children are able to climb stairs one foot at a time.
- They have greater gross motor skills. For example, they can stand briefly on one foot, kick a large ball, throw overhand, and play catch with a large ball.
- They like activities such as peddling a tricycle and swinging on a swing set.

- They have improved fine motor skills. For example, they are better able to hold crayons and markers and can stack eight or more blocks.
- They may use the potty all of the time by this age.

Cognitive development milestones:

- Children pay close attention to stories and make remarks related to the story.
- They know and can identify basic shapes—square, circle, triangle.
- They are able to sort things by color, size, or shape.
- They understand the concept of size, such as which is smallest or largest.
- They at least know the primary colors red, yellow, and blue.

- They enjoy counting and can do it out loud.
- They begin to understand dangerous situations, such as a hot stove or cars driving along the street.

Language development milestones:

- Children have better conversational skills. They respond properly to questions, continue a conversation with an appropriate comment, and ask questions that lead to conversations. For example, “Why did he do that?”
- Their attention span is about three minutes.
- They can speak 300 to 1,000 words.
- They can sing songs, recite nursery rhymes, and label many common objects.
- They are understood most of the time.

Social and emotional development milestones:

- Children understand the idea of taking turns, but they do not always do it.
- They may develop fears, especially at night.
- They may have conversations with themselves.
- They play alongside other children and may join in other children’s play.
- They begin to play make believe, both with themselves and others.

4 years

Physical development milestones:

- Children can hop using only one foot.
- Running is easier. They can stop and start more easily and sidestep obstacles.
- They enjoy climbing on playground equipment.
- They can feed themselves with a spoon and fork.
- Improved fine motor skills enable them to make shapes out of play dough, hold a pencil and write letters, use round-tipped scissors, and thread beads onto a string.
- They can use the bathroom by themselves.

Cognitive development milestones:

- Children know whether words sound alike or not, such as “sat” and “pat.”
- Some may be able to start reading basic books with a few words on each page.
- They like to create nonsense words and sayings.
- They know concepts such as largest, highest, and alike. They are able to respond correctly when asked to point to the picture of the highest building.
- They can count up to 20.
- Near the end of their fourth year, children can name 18–20 capital letters and write them. They also can print their name and identify a few printed words.

Language development milestones:

- Children are able to respond to questions such as, “Whose?” and “Why?”
- They use more complex sentences. For example: “The doggie took the ball and ran upstairs after I threw the ball.”
- They start to use verbs properly in the past tense: “Mommy went upstairs.”
- They can talk about things, people, and activities not currently happening.
- They respond appropriately with solutions when asked about what to do if they are sleepy, thirsty, or chilly.
- A child can give his or her name, gender, and, possibly, telephone number.

Social and emotional development milestones:

- Children’s emotions can quickly swing—from laughing to crying, for example.
- They may boast a lot and stretch the truth about their abilities.
- They become more cooperative with peers, especially in group activities. But they also may show increased self-centeredness and fail to wait their turn.
- They have a strong desire to do things independently.
- They like to pretend they are other people and to play dress-up.
- Peer groups are closer, and children this age may develop a favorite friend.

5 years

Physical development milestones:

- Children can walk backwards easily.
- They can climb up and down stairs interchanging their feet without help.
- Their gross motor skills advance; they can tumble, skip changing their feet, and easily catch a ball.
- Better coordination enables them to jump or hop forward 10 paces and keep their balance while standing on one foot for at least 10 seconds.
- Advanced fine motor skills enable them to copy shapes and letters, cut with scissors better, and start to color within the boundaries of a coloring book picture.
- By this age, a child has a dominant hand.

Cognitive development milestones:

- Children can count from at least 1 to 20 and identify numerals 1–10.
- They begin to understand volume and can identify the container that holds the most.
- They understand night and day and their relation to time.
- They begin to understand the concept of time, and some begin to tell time.
- They understand what a calendar is.
- Children understand and can label the value of different coins.
- They may be able to identify all of the letters in the alphabet.
- They know what it means to divide something in half.

Language development milestones:

- Children this age know about 1,500 words.
- They can retell a story while following along with pictures in a book.
- They can explain what things do according to their purpose. A bike is to ride, for example, or play dough is for making shapes.
- They know the names of four to eight colors and can point them out.
- They can identify their city, birth date, and the names of their parents.
- They are able to answer the telephone properly.
- They can use irregular verbs in the past tense, such as went, caught, and swam.

Social and emotional development milestones:

- Children are able to share, take turns, and play in groups.
- Their play is more involved and includes roles, props, and costumes.
- They show a great deal of affection toward others, especially smaller children, animals, or a child who is hurt.
- They usually comply with requests and follow instructions.
- Children this age are better at controlling their emotions.
- They enjoy entertaining their caregivers and other children. They also like to make them laugh.
- They are very proud of their achievements and are not shy about talking about them.

When to seek professional help

Remember, these milestones are a general guide. Some children reach them early, some later, and not all children will show all of the behaviors on the lists. However, consult with your child's pediatrician or other health professional if you observe the following:

- Your child does not achieve a majority of the milestones within a reasonable period of time after the end of a stage.
- Your child does not appear to be making consistent progress.

Pediatricians and other health care professionals can diagnose developmental delays if present and suggest the appropriate steps to take. It is very important to intervene early to improve the outcomes of children who do have developmental delays.



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