

Emotional Development in Preschoolers

From [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org)

Your three-year-old's vivid fantasy life will help her explore and come to terms with a wide range of emotions, from love and dependency to anger, protest, and fear. She'll not only take on various identities herself, but also she'll often assign living qualities and emotions to inanimate objects, such as a tree, a clock, a truck, or the moon. Ask her why the moon comes out at night, for example, and she might reply, "To say hello to me."

From time to time, expect your preschooler to introduce you to one of her imaginary friends. Some children have a single make-believe companion for as long as six months; some change pretend playmates every day, while still others never have one at all or prefer imaginary animals instead. Don't be concerned that these phantom friends may signal loneliness or emotional upset; they're actually a very creative way for your child to sample different activities, lines of conversation, behavior, and emotions.

You'll also notice that, throughout the day, your preschooler will move back and forth freely between fantasy and reality. At times she may become so involved in her make-believe world that she can't tell where it ends and reality begins. Her play experience may even spill over into real life. One night she'll come to the dinner table convinced she's Cinderella; another day she may come to you sobbing after hearing a ghost story that she believes is true.

While it's important to reassure your child when she's frightened or upset by an imaginary incident, be careful not to belittle or make fun of her. This stage in emotional development is normal and necessary and should not be discouraged. Above all, never joke with her about "locking her up if she doesn't eat her dinner" or "leaving her behind if she doesn't hurry up." She's liable to believe you and feel terrified the rest of the day—or longer.

From time to time, try to join your child in her fantasy play. By doing so, you can help her find new ways to express her emotions and even work through some problems. For example, you might suggest "sending her doll to school" to see how she feels about going to preschool. Don't insist on participating in these fantasies, however. Part of the joy of fantasy for her is being able to control these imaginary dramas, so if you plant an idea for make-believe, stand back and let her make of it what she will. If she then asks you to play a part, keep your performance low-key. Let the world of pretend be the one place where she runs the show.

Back in real life; let your preschooler know that you're proud of her new independence and creativity. Talk with her, listen to what she says, and show her that her opinions matter. Give her choices whenever possible—in the foods she eats, the clothes she wears, and the games you play together. Doing this will give her a sense of importance and help her learn to make decisions. Keep her options simple, however. When you go to a restaurant, for example, narrow her choices down to two or three items. Otherwise she may be overwhelmed and unable to decide. (A trip to an ice-cream store or frozen yogurt shop that sells several flavors can be agonizing if you don't limit her choices.)

What's the best approach? Despite what we've already said, one of the best ways to nurture her independence is to maintain fairly firm control over all parts of her life, while at the same time giving her some freedom. Let her know that you're still in charge and that you don't expect her to make the big decisions. When her friend is daring her to climb a tree, and she's afraid, it will be comforting to have you say no, so that she doesn't have to admit her fears. As she conquers many of her early anxieties and becomes more responsible in making her own decisions, you'll naturally give her more control. In the meantime, it's important that she feels safe and secure.

Just as it was when he was three, your four-year-old's fantasy life will remain very active. However, he's now learning to distinguish between reality and make-believe, and he'll be able to move back and forth between the two without confusing them as much.

As games of pretend become more advanced, don't be surprised if children experiment with make-believe games involving some form of violence. War games, dragon-slaying, and even games like tag all fall into this category. Some parents forbid their children to play with store-bought toy guns, only to find them cutting, pasting, and creating cardboard guns or simply pointing a finger and shouting "bang, bang." Parents shouldn't panic over these activities. This is no evidence that these children are "violent." A child has no idea what it is to kill or die. For him, toy guns are an innocent and entertaining way to be competitive and boost his self-esteem.

If you want a gauge of your child's developing self-confidence, listen to the way he talks to adults. Instead of hanging back, as he may have done at two or three, he now probably is friendly, talkative, and curious. He also is likely to be especially sensitive to the feelings of others—adults and children alike—and to enjoy making people happy. When he sees they're hurt or sad, he'll show sympathy and concern. This probably will come out as a desire to hug or "kiss the hurt," because this is what he most wants when he's in pain or unhappy.

At about the age of four and five, your preschooler also may begin to show an avid interest in basic sexuality, both his own and that of the opposite sex. He may ask where babies come from and about the organs involved in reproduction and elimination. He may want to know how boys' and girls' bodies are different. When confronted with these kinds of questions, answer in simple but correct terminology. A four-year-old, for example, doesn't need to know the details about intercourse, but he should feel free to ask questions, knowing he'll receive direct and accurate answers.

Along with this increased interest in sexuality, he'll probably also play with his own genitals and may even demonstrate an interest in the genitals of other children. These are not adult sexual activities but signs of normal curiosity and don't warrant scolding or punishment.

At what point should parents set limits on such exploration? This really is a family matter. It's probably best not to overreact to it at this age, since it's normal if done in moderation. However, children need to learn what's socially appropriate and what's not. So, for example, you may decide to tell your child:

- Interest in genital organs is healthy and natural.
- Nudity and sexual play in public are not acceptable.
- No other person, including even close friends and relatives, may touch his "private parts." The exceptions to this rule are doctors and nurses during physical examinations and his own parents when they are trying to find the cause of any pain or discomfort he's feeling in the genital area.

At about this same time, your child also may become fascinated with the parent of the opposite sex. A four-year-old girl can be expected to compete with her mother for her father's attention, just as a boy may be vying for his mother's attention. This so-called oedipal behavior is a normal part of personality development at this age and will disappear in time by itself if the parents take it in stride. There's no need to feel either threatened or jealous because of it.