

Growth and Development, Ages Four to Five

What Parents Need to Know

Human development is a lifelong process of physical, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional growth and change. In the early stages of life—from babyhood to childhood, childhood to adolescence, and adolescence to adulthood—enormous changes take place. Throughout the process, each person develops attitudes and values that guide choices, relationships, and understanding.

Sexuality is also a lifelong process. Infants, children, teens, and adults are sexual beings. Just as it is important to enhance a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, so it is important to lay foundations for a child's sexual growth. Adults have a responsibility to help children understand and accept their evolving sexuality.

Each stage of development encompasses specific markers. The following developmental guidelines apply to most children in this age group. However, each child is an individual and may reach these stages of development earlier or later than other children the same age. When concerns arise about a specific child's development, parents or other caregivers should consult a doctor or other child development professional.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Most children aged four to five will:

- Continue to grow, but at a slower rate than during infancy and the toddler years [Some parts grow faster or sooner than others. For example, organs grow faster than the body, giving preschoolers a rounded tummy.]
- Reach at least 50 percent of their adult height and about 20 percent of their adult weight by age five
- Develop more coordinated large motor skills, enabling them to skip, run, and climb up and down stairs
- Develop fine motor skills, enabling them to tie shoelaces, button shirts, use scissors, and draw recognizable figures

- Continue significant brain development, completing 90 percent of such development by age five
- Develop increased lung capacity and the ability to breathe more deeply
- Lose their “baby look” as their limbs grow longer
- Appear about the same size, regardless of gender
- Increase in overall health and gain resistance to germs

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Most children aged four to five will:

- Interact with and learn about the world through play activities
- Begin to experience the world through exploration and feel inquisitive about self and surroundings
- Begin separation from family as they experience less proximity to caregivers and more independence
- Understand what is good and bad (though they may not understand why) and be able to follow the rules
- Be able to understand and accomplish simple activities to be healthy, such as brushing teeth or washing hands
- Understand the concept of privacy

EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Most children aged four to five will:

- Still rely on caregivers, while no longer needing or wanting as much physical contact with caregivers as they received in infancy and as toddlers
- Continue to express emotions physically and to seek hugs and kisses

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- Socialize with peers, begin to develop relationships, and learn to recognize some peers as friends and others as people they don't like
- Have more opportunities to interact with peers, either through school or recreational activities, and will play with other children

SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT

Most children aged four to five will:

- Experience vaginal lubrication or erection
- Touch their genitals for pleasure
- Feel curiosity about everything, and ask about where babies come from and how they were born
- Feel curiosity about bodies and may play games like doctor
- Feel sure of their own gender and have the ability to recognize males and females
- Begin to recognize traditional male and female gender roles and to distinguish these roles by gender
- Become conscious of their own body, how it appears to others, and how it functions

WHAT FAMILIES NEED TO DO TO RAISE SEXUALLY HEALTHY CHILDREN

To help four- to five-year-old children develop a healthy sexuality, families should:

- Help children understand the concept of privacy and that talk about sexuality is private and occurs at home.
- Teach correct names of the major body parts (internal and external) and their basic functions.
- Explain how babies “get into” the mother’s uterus.
- Encourage children to come to them or other trusted adults for information about sexuality.

Compiled by Barbara Huberman, RN, MEd, Director of Education and Outreach

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10 TIPS ON INITIATING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GROWTH:

Initiating conversations about growth, development, and sexuality may be difficult for some parents because they did not grow up in an environment where the subject was discussed. Some parents may be afraid they do not know the right answers or feel confused about the proper amount of information to offer. To help, here are 10 tips to:

1. First, encourage communication by reassuring your children that they can talk to you about anything.
2. Take advantage of teachable moments. A friend’s pregnancy, news article, or a TV show can help start a conversation.
3. Listen more than you talk. Think about what you’re being asked. Confirm with your child that what you heard is in fact what he or she meant to ask.
4. Don’t jump to conclusions. The fact that a teen asks about sex does not mean they are having or thinking about having sex.
5. Answer questions simply and directly. Give factual, honest, short, and simple answers.
6. Respect your child’s views. Share your thoughts and values and help your child express theirs.
7. Reassure young people that they are normal—as are their questions and thoughts.
8. Teach your children ways to make good decisions about sex and coach them on how to get out of risky situations.
9. Admit when you don’t know the answer to a question. Suggest the two of you find the answer together on the Internet or in the library.
10. Discuss that at times your teen may feel more comfortable talking with someone other than you. Together, think of other trusted adults with whom they can talk.