



How Can I Assess the Development of My Preschooler?

In the course of development, ups and downs are inevitable, even for children whose physical and mental endowments are normal. Occasionally children require intervention to get them successfully through a "down" period. Parents can observe behaviors in the 11 categories listed below during periods when they suspect a bit of a downturn. Keep in mind that difficulties in any single category are no cause for alarm. Indeed, difficulties in several categories do not imply irreversible problems; rather, they help us notice those periods when the child's life situation, for many possible reasons, is a bit out of adjustment with his or her emerging needs.

For 3-year-olds, a look at their behavior on the following criteria for a period of about 3 weeks is desirable. For 4-year-olds, 4 weeks should give a reliable picture of the quality of the child's life. At 5 years, add another week, and so forth. Be careful not to judge permanent behavior based on 1 day's observation. All of us, children and adults, have an occasional really bad day.

- **Sleeping Habits:** Does your child usually fall asleep easily and wake up rested, ready to get on with life? Occasional restless nights, nightmares, or grouchy mornings are all right. The average pattern of deep sleep resulting in morning eagerness is a good sign that the child experiences life as satisfying. Frequent insomnia or morning grouchiness for 3 or 4 weeks may indicate that a child is trying to cope with excessive stress, and a modification in lifestyle may be tried.
- **Eating Habits:** Does your child usually eat with appetite? Occasional skipping of meals or refusal of food is to be expected. Sometimes, a child is too busy with absorbing activities to bother with food at mealtimes. Also, remember that children may eat a lot at one meal and hardly anything at the next. However, a preschooler who for several weeks eats as though famine were around the corner or who constantly fusses about the menu or picks at the food may be asking for comfort.
- **Toilet Habits:** Does your child have, on the average over several weeks, bowel and bladder control, especially during the day? Occasional "accidents" are all right, particularly under special circumstances such as excessive intake of liquids, intestinal upset, or an intense concentration with ongoing activity, so that the child is too absorbed to attend to such "irrelevancies." Children who sleep well often take longer to stay continent at night.
- **Range of Emotions:** Does your child show the capacity for a range of emotions such as joy, anger, sorrow, grief, enthusiasm, excitement, frustration, love, and affection? These need not be exhibited all in 1 day, of course, but should be seen over several weeks. A child whose emotions don't vary -- who is always angry or sour or enthusiastic -- may be in trouble. Note that expressions of sadness are not necessarily problematical; in appropriate situations, they can indicate the ability to really care about others.

- **Friendship:** Can the child initiate and maintain satisfying relationships with one or more peers? A child who often plays alone is not experiencing a developmental problem as long as the cause is not insufficient social competence. A child who is fearful of peers or who frequently claims superiority over others may be seeking reassurance or may doubt his or her ability to meet parents' lofty expectations.
- **Variations in Play:** Does your child's play vary, and does your child add elements to the play, even though the play is with the same toys or materials? A child who ritualistically and repetitively goes through the same sequence of play, with the same elements and in the same way, may be emotionally "stuck in neutral," indicating perhaps that the child has insufficient inner security to "play with the environment."
- **Responses to Authority:** Does your child usually accept adult authority? Occasional resistance, self-assertion, protest, and objections, when followed by ultimate yielding to the adult, indicate healthy socialization processes. Unfailing acceptance of adult demands and restrictions without a peep suggest excessive anxiety.
- **Curiosity:** Does the child occasionally exhibit curiosity, adventure, and even mischief? A child who never pries or snoops where forbidden may not be pushing against perceived boundaries enough for healthy development or may fear punishment excessively. On the other hand, frequent manifestation of these behaviors may indicate a search for boundaries.
- **Interest:** Does the child occasionally become involved, absorbed, and interested in something outside of himself or herself? The emphasis here is on sustained involvement in "activities" rather than in "passivities" such as television. A preschooler who cannot become absorbed in an activity or who rarely stays with a project until completion may need help.
- **Spontaneous Affection:** Does your child express spontaneous affection for one or more of those responsible for his or her care? Note that this criterion refers to spontaneous declarations of love, not such displays as the required goodnight kiss. Also, demonstrations of affection vary among families and cultures and must be taken into account on this criterion. Nevertheless, in culturally appropriate ways, a child who is thriving is likely on occasion to express affection toward caretakers and deep pleasure in being with them. Excessive expressions of this kind, however, may signal doubts about the feelings caretakers have toward the child.
- **Enjoyment of the "Good Things of Life":** Does the child enjoy the good things of life? For young children, playing with others; going to picnics, parties, festivals, and new places; and exploring new toys are parts of the good life. If a child has a problem such as shyness, fear of dogs, or food dislikes, but the problem is not so severe that it prevents him or her from enjoying childhood pleasures, then assume that the child will outgrow the problem. If, however, problems do prevent enjoyment of the good things of childhood, help is necessary.

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