



THE BOOK I MADE

PRESCHOOLERS

A guide to preschooler care, including information on top foods for good health, common health issues and how to encourage good behaviour.

SUITABLE FOR **3-5** YEARS



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Preschooler behaviour

Your preschooler is working out that other people have feelings too and, when he remembers, he will want to be considerate of them.

At this age, children can really benefit from going to preschool. It's here that they can start learning about other people's rules and how to get along with other children in a formal setting.

Your preschooler needs boundaries that guide his natural enthusiasm but that don't dampen his passion for life. Boundaries and a routine offer him security. They protect him from getting overwhelmed by too much responsibility before he's ready.

Preschool children are still trying to learn the everyday things that we take for granted, like how we talk to each other. For example, you might think he is not listening to you but maybe he is still trying to figure out what someone said five minutes ago!

In trying to understand the world around them, we have to forgive preschoolers for being a bit distracted. A good rule is to always budget for another 30 minutes when doing things with your preschooler.

Here are some extra things to keep in mind about preschooler behaviour:

- Reminders. Preschoolers have short memories and are easily distracted. You may need to remind them about things several times. (Test this. Try saying, 'I will give you a piece of chocolate tomorrow morning' and see if he remembers.)
- Show him how you feel. If you can tell him honestly how his behaviour affects you, he recognises his own emotions in yours, like a mirror, and is able to feel for you. So you might say, 'I'm getting upset because there is so much noise I can't talk on the phone.' When you start the sentence with 'I', it gives your child the chance to change things for your sake.
- Change the environment. When he is getting frustrated because his baby sister keeps crawling over his jigsaw puzzle, try to find a quiet spot where he can play undisturbed.
- Explain the consequences of his behaviour so he can figure out why something is wrong. This helps give him a better understanding of the world around him.
- Remember, it is the behaviour that is unacceptable, not your child.
- Time-out is one discipline tool that parents can use to discourage undesirable behaviour. Find out how to [make time-out work](#).



Encouraging good behaviour: 12 tips

These 12 tips encourage good behaviour in children of all ages.

1. Children do as you do. Your child watches you to get her clues on how to behave in the world, so, as a role model, use your own behaviour to guide her. What you do is often much more important than what you say. If you want your child to say 'please', say it yourself. If you don't want your child to raise her voice, keep your voice at a reasonable level too.
2. Keep promises. When you follow through on your promises, good or bad, your child learns to trust and respect you. So when you promise to go for a walk after she picks up her toys, make sure you have your walking shoes handy. When you say you will leave the library if she doesn't stop running around, be prepared to leave straight away if she continues. No need to make a fuss about it – the more matter of fact, the better.
3. Get down onto their level. Kneeling or squatting down next to children is a very powerful tool for communicating positively with them. Getting close allows you to tune in to what they might be feeling or thinking. It also helps them focus on what you are saying or asking for. If you are close to her and have her attention, there is no need to make her look at you.
4. 'I hear you.' [Active listening](#) is another tool for helping young children cope with their emotions. They tend to get frustrated a lot, especially if they can't express themselves well enough verbally, so when you repeat back to them what you think they might be feeling, it helps to relieve some of their tension and makes them feel respected and comforted. It can diffuse many potential [temper tantrums](#).
5. Catch her being 'good'. This simply means that when your child is behaving in a way that you like, you can give her some great positive feedback, for example, 'Wow, you are playing so nicely. I really like it when you keep all the blocks on the table'. That works better than 'waiting' for the blocks to come crashing to the floor before you take notice and bark, 'Hey, stop that!'. This positive feedback is sometimes called '[descriptive praise](#)'. Try to say six positive comments (praise and encouragement) for every negative comment (criticisms and reprimands). It also pays to remember that children will seek out negative attention if the only alternative is no attention at all.
6. Choose your battles wisely. Before you intervene in anything your child is doing, ask yourself if it really matters. By keeping instructions, requests and negative feedback to a minimum, you create less opportunity for conflict and bad feelings. [Rules](#) are important, but reserve them for the most important things.
7. Keep it simple. If you can give [clear instructions](#) in simple terms, your child will know what is expected of her. ('Please hold my hand when we cross the road.')
8. Responsibility and [consequences](#). As children get older, you can increasingly give them responsibility for their own behaviour and the chance to experience the natural consequences of that behaviour. You don't have to be the bad guy all the time. For example, if she forgot to put her lunch box in her bag, she will go hungry at lunch time. It is her hunger and her consequence and it won't hurt her to go hungry just that one time. Sometimes, with the best intentions, we do so much for our children that we don't allow

them to learn for themselves. At other times you need to provide consequences for unacceptable behaviour. For these times, it is best to ensure that you have explained the consequences and that your children have agreed to them in advance.

9. Say it once and move on. Nagging and criticising is boring for you and doesn't work. Your child will just end up tuning you out. Try to avoid idle threats. Your child will very quickly work these out and ignore them. The best way is to let them know what you think once and then take action if you need to set limits or back up a rule.
10. Make her feel important. Children love it when they can contribute to the family. Start introducing some simple chores or things that she can do to play her own important part in helping the household. This will make her feel important and she'll take pride in helping out. If you can give your child lots of practise doing a chore, she will get better at it and will keep trying harder. [Safe chores](#) help them feel responsible, build their self-esteem and help you out too.
11. Prepare for challenging situations. There are times when looking after your child and doing things you need to do will be tricky. If you think about these challenging situations in advance, you can [plan](#) around her needs and talk to her about why you need her cooperation. Then she is prepared for what you expect.
12. Maintain a sense of humour. Another way of diffusing tension and possible conflict is to use [humour](#). You can pretend to become the menacing tickle monster or make animal noises. However, humour at her expense won't help; young children are easily hurt by parental 'teasing'. Humour that has you both laughing is great.

Discipline

The word '[discipline](#)' actually means 'to teach' and not necessarily to punish. The true goal is to teach children the rules of behaviour so that they can use them.

Children learn self-discipline by growing up in a loving family, with fair and predictable rules and expectations. Punishment may even interfere with their development of self-discipline.

[Physical punishment](#) does not help children learn proper behaviour. It doesn't give them the opportunity to learn how to solve their own problems. Instead, it can make them fearful, insecure and resentful. Some parents may hit their child because they are trying to relieve their own tension or stress in a situation. Children learn from example and hitting teaches them to get what they want by hitting. For more help with managing stress and angry feelings, try reading [Feeling stressed](#) and [When you feel you might hurt your child](#)

If you have concerns about your preschooler's behaviour, seek professional help. For more tips on guiding your child's behaviour, see [Practical advice about discipline](#)

Connecting and communicating

Connecting with preschoolers

Your preschooler has a job ahead of her, learning how to deal with her emotions and develop her social skills.

Love is what we all want most of the time, often without even realising it. Young children want love even more and, by connecting with them, we show them how much we love them. You can connect with your preschooler by spending time together and giving lots of cuddles.



How to connect and communicate with your preschooler

- Really tune in to what your child is trying to say. Notice the emotions behind the words.
- Make regular time to communicate with her in your own special way. Even two minutes every half hour makes a difference.
- Be available. When she comes to you, try to drop whatever you're doing to talk – it is likely she only really needs your undivided attention for a minute or two.
- Get down to her level. Kneeling or squatting down next to her is a very powerful tool for communicating positively with preschoolers. By looking her in the eye, you can avoid a lot of conflict. It allows you to tune in to what she might be feeling or thinking, and she is less likely to feel exasperated.
- Active listening helps preschoolers cope with their young emotions. They tend to get frustrated a lot, especially if they can't express themselves well enough verbally. When you repeat back to them what you think they are feeling, it helps to relieve some of their tension and makes them feel respected and comforted. It can diffuse many potential [temper tantrums](#).
- Be patient. Try to let her finish her sentences before interrupting, no matter how meandering they might be.
- Read to her and tell stories. Picture books help children learn about language.
- Always be honest. Children are brighter than many of us think. When we lie to them, we lose their trust.

Helping preschoolers communicate

Your preschooler is probably bursting with things to tell you. Her improved language skills mean she can describe what she feels and sees.

This is the age for incredible life observations that come out of the blue, like, 'Fish have scales so they can weigh themselves' and 'I had a bug in my tummy one time – it was a cockroach'. You can scribble your preschooler's gorgeous sayings into a special book – her words will amuse you both one day.

Read some more about [talking and listening](#) with your preschooler.

'But why?'

Preschoolers are trying hard to understand the world, people and how they fit in. They understand more and more complex concepts. They are curious about everything. This leads to a lot of 'why' questions. For example, 'Time for lunch' gets the response 'But why?' 'There's a lizard!' gets 'But why?' You may also get, 'Why is the sky blue?' 'Why am I four?' 'Why is this sand?'

Their curly questions can sometimes take patience but preschoolers appreciate your answers. If you don't know the answer, it's OK to be honest. Also, playing dumb and asking, 'What do you think?' can help them develop their problem-solving skills.

They are also developing a sense of humour. This might show up as being a bit cheeky or repeating things that aren't funny. Gentle explanations of what is appropriate and what isn't will help them begin to understand.

Using words to help her manage emotions

Between three and five, your child is learning how to manage strong emotions and social skills. Developing these skills will be very important for school. They will help her cope with emotional changes and frustration. They will teach her to be hopeful, to control extreme emotions and to show compassion and empathy. They are important ingredients for success in life.

You can help guide her through this emotional time. Help her learn to express her emotions in a way that is socially acceptable. When she is angry, encourage her to translate her anger into words. Anger is an important human emotion and if she can learn how to express it, it helps her control it and develops her language.

When your child feels let down, you may help her to understand that people make mistakes, that things break, fall apart or don't work out. To make sure you understand her feelings, practise active listening (see above).

Your child will be no expert at controlling her angry feelings. For help in dealing with this, read about [talking through angry feelings](#).

Preschoolers are prone to strong fears of the dark, animals, monsters, robbers, storms, school and many other unexpected things. Take their fears seriously and it will be easier to convince them that monsters are not real. If you can teach them the difference between fact and fiction, videos and real life, this will help. It also helps if they don't watch scary cartoons or TV before bedtime. Explaining why things happen can ease fears. For example, you could explain why thunder and lightening happen (if you're up on your science!).

Building confidence

You can sometimes walk in your child's shoes and see the world from her point of view. To aid your preschooler's confidence and self-esteem, remember that she needs about six positive remarks to every one criticism.

To boost her self-esteem, you can:

- make her feel special (by spending time with her, really listening, answering questions)
- show her love and affection
- give her choices

- ask her to help the family with a regular task, like putting out the cutlery at mealtimes.

Offer her some control over her life. You could let her make some decisions about what to wear or making a gift for her preschool teacher. A child also feels loved and special when you get down to her level and pay attention to what she is saying. When you feel she is old enough, ask her how she feels and ask for her opinions. This helps build self-confidence and teaches her to think about how others feel.

Development

An overview of preschooler development

Your preschooler's world is expanding and so is his development – fast. His list of achievements now includes making friends, understanding feelings and climbing trees.

All children develop at different rates. However, at this age, some skills are especially important for your child's growth and self-esteem. For example, being able to speak clearly means he can be understood by friends and preschool staff.

If you are worried about your child's development, speak to your doctor or arrange an assessment with your local baby health centre.



What your 3-4 year-old is doing

- Starting to socialise. He likes having familiar adults nearby for security but has real friendships with other children. He understands the cause of feelings ('Sammy is sad because he can't find his blanket'). Three-year-olds are starting to manage their emotions but may still fall apart under stress. Read more about his [social and emotional development](#)
- Good with his hands. He is becoming more coordinated at running, climbing, and other large-muscle play. He may be able to ride a tricycle and catch a large ball using two hands and his body. He can use play tools, hold crayons with his fingers (not fists) and undress without much help. Read more about his [physical development](#)
- Speaking well. His language is really taking off and he understands about 1000 words. His pronunciation has really improved and he communicates in simple sentences. He likes to talk about his own interests. Read more about his [language development](#)

What your 4-5 year-old is doing

- Needs structure. Four- to five-year-olds are sometimes able to manage their intense emotions, maybe by talking it out or drawing a picture. When his behaviour is over the top, he needs you to set limits without making him feel bad. He needs structure and a routine to avoid feeling overwhelmed.

- Asking questions. He is learning about differences between people and may ask lots of questions, some difficult and embarrassing. He sometimes likes to take his time making up his mind.
- Getting physical. He is developing confidence in his physical feats but can easily misjudge his ability. He may be able to cut along the line with scissors (if given enough practice) and can draw people with at least four 'parts'. He shows a preference for being right-handed or left-handed. Read more about his [physical development](#)
- Making conversation. He now understands 2500 to 3000 words, and will pick up another 2000 during the year. He has good pronunciation and makes conversation about lots of different topics. He loves silly jokes and 'rude' words. Read more about his [language development](#)
- Sexual curiosity. Your preschooler is very curious about his body – and everyone else's. He may be role-playing at being a grown-up, playing doctor or getting married. This combination of natural curiosity and role-playing sometimes leads to [childhood sex play](#) which may include touching himself. This type of play stems from natural curiosity and is harmless.

Health and daily care

Keeping preschoolers healthy

With lots of contact with other children at preschool, playgroup and parties, your child is prone to pick up the latest bug. Usually it's nothing to worry about. But illness can get worse very quickly in small children so be aware of signs of sickness.

Signs of serious illness

If your child shows any of these signs, see your doctor. The more of these signs she has, the more serious it is likely to be.

- drowsiness (she is less alert than usual)
- decreased activity or lethargy (she is less active and just wants to lie around)
- breathing difficulty
- poor circulation (she looks paler than usual, maybe cold hands and feet)



Always seek urgent medical attention if your preschooler:

- vomits green fluid
- has a convulsion (a fit)
- stops breathing for more than 15 seconds.



You know your child best. If you have any worries about her health, seek medical advice.

Immunisation

Immunisation is considered essential protection for your preschooler against diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough, measles, mumps and German measles. Her next immunisation is at four years old. Many preschools require your child to be up-to-date with immunisations.

Common health problems

Preschoolers are prone to:

- Lice. These tiny parasites attach themselves to children's hair, lay eggs and cause lots of itching. They are most common when children start socialising in groups at preschool or school. The best way to [remove lice](#) is with a fine-toothed lice comb and lots of cheap conditioner.
- Abrasions. [Cuts, grazes and scratches](#) are common in preschoolers and can usually be treated at home. However, you should see a doctor if:
 - The cut is deep and doesn't stop bleeding with firm pressure, or is large with rough or jagged edges.
 - There is a lot of dirt, gravel or splinters of wood, metal or glass in there.
 - You are not sure if your child is up-to-date with their tetanus immunisation.
- Warts. A [wart](#) is a small, flesh-coloured, raised growth, mainly appearing on the hands. Although warts are usually painless, they are infectious and can spread so explain to your child that she shouldn't pick or chew it. See your doctor if the wart is on her face, feet or genitals, or if the wart looks infected or very red.

For information on other health issues affecting preschoolers, see the [A-Z Health Reference](#).

Daily care

Teeth

By the time she is three, all 20 of your preschooler's baby teeth have come through. The first permanent teeth start appearing when she is about six. This is the time for wobbly teeth, cheeky toothless grins and, of course, the tooth fairy!

- Your child may need your help to [clean her teeth](#) properly. Use a small smear of toothpaste on a soft bristle toothbrush, twice a day, in the morning and before bed at night.
- The best way to prevent tooth decay is to go easy on sugary food and drink. Sugar (even the sugar in fruit juice) rots teeth and can actually spoil the appetite for [healthy, nutritious food](#). Solid fruit is better for them and water is the best thirst quencher.

Dressing herself

Your clever three-year-old can probably put on her pants and T-shirt. It's not until she's four or five that she can handle the trickier jobs, like doing up zippers and buttoning a shirt. Learning to dress herself makes your preschooler very proud. While she is mastering the art, allow plenty of time to get out the door to avoid getting frustrated. Choosing her own outfits gives her lots of confidence so try to live with her clashing combinations for now if you can.

Sun care

For vitamin D, children need a small burst of sun, as little as 15 minutes, each day. In Australia, the sun's burning UV radiation is strongest from September to April, between 10 am and 3 pm. So try to plan outdoor activities for early morning and late afternoon.

Australia has the highest rate of skin cancer in the world. Sunscreen, a wide brimmed hat, protective clothing and shade are the best ways to stop [sunburn](#), especially between 10 am and 3 pm. It's a good idea to apply sunscreen before you drop your child at preschool so you know she is protected. Most preschools and schools have an outdoors policy of 'no hat, no play' so make sure she takes her hat each day.

Nutrition and fitness

Nutrition basics

If you eat healthy food and get plenty of exercise, your child will have a great role model for developing good health, physical skills and self-esteem.

Nutrition can be an anxious subject for some parents. You may worry about whether your child is eating enough good food. You may wonder whether he is overeating or becoming unhealthy. The following guidelines and tools may help you understand how to best help your child.

Appetite

Children go through growth and activity spurts, so sometimes they are really hungry and sometimes they eat like birds. As long as you offer nutritious food, you can trust your child's appetite to get the balance right. Forcing children to eat (even strongly encouraging them to eat more) can often backfire. It also helps to remember that sweets, chips and biscuits can interfere with their natural appetite for nutritious food. Let their appetite be the guide.



Five basic nutritional needs

If you have the following five areas covered, you can't really go wrong. The key is that you decide what to offer your children, and they decide how much of that they will eat. (This technique is called division of responsibility.)

1. Protein builds bodies and keeps children strong and healthy. Try peas and beans (any

kind, including frozen baby peas and canned baked beans), eggs, fish, chicken, meat, milk, yoghurt and low-fat cheese.

2. Vegetables and fruit contain nutrients and fibre important for a healthy body inside and out. The more colourful, the better. Offer vegies like broccoli, green beans, carrots, sweet potato, tomatoes, spinach, and cucumber (with skin). Also try colourful fruits such as peaches, apricots, pears and apples. (Wash fruit and leave the skin on.)
3. Starchy carbohydrates provide energy. The more fibre they contain, the slower they burn. Try fibre-enriched bread, wholegrain rice, couscous, pasta, corn bread, pancakes and low-sugar cereal.
4. Good fats with long-chain polyunsaturated fatty acids build brain and nerve cells. These good fats are found in fish (tinned or fresh), avocado, and vegetable oils such as those made from olives or canola (but try to avoid deep frying in these delicate unsaturated oils).
5. Tap water is the cheapest and best source of fluids. It is also fortified with fluoride for strong teeth. (If you do give juice, always mix it half and half with water.)

Foods to avoid

It's fine to offer dessert at the end of a meal, and sliced fruit is the healthiest option. If you want to serve something special, go for vanilla ice-cream or banana bread. Save the seriously sweet stuff, like chocolate, for special occasions like birthdays.

1. A child's system can't handle foods high in salt, sugar or caffeine (found in cola drinks). Soft drinks and fruit juice are expensive, high in sugar and bad for teeth. If you want to offer juice, mix it half and half with water.
2. Fast-fix foods. These foods are low in fibre and nutrients and high in sugar and/or fat. They include hot chips, potato chips, doughnuts, biscuits and cookies, cakes, chocolate and sugary sweets. The fat in most of these foods is the less-healthy type, including trans fat. Just say 'no' and, instead, let your child get hooked on good snacks, like grated or thinly sliced carrot and sweet baby peas served frozen in a cup.

Worried - too much or not enough?

Knowing the way your tummy 'talks to' your brain can help you deal with concerns about undereating or overeating.

1. Delayed reaction. Our brains only realise we are full about 20 minutes after the food hits our stomachs.
2. Tummy clock. Feeling hungry is partly determined by your child's 'stomach clock' – how much he ate yesterday at the same time. Big meals at regular times actually encourage a big appetite next dinnertime, so you can use that to your advantage either way. You can encourage children who undereat at mealtimes to eat more by limiting 'grazing' (or random snacking). On the other hand, regular healthy snacks can be a great way to reduce overeating at mealtimes.

Overeating?

If you are concerned that your child has a tendency to overeat, you can try slowing it down.

- Offer half a normal portion of food and then, if he finishes it, offer the second half of his meal 10 minutes later (sometimes this will give his brain a chance to catch up with his stomach).

- Offer the most nutritious stuff (lean protein and vegetables) first (this is called 'food sequencing'). He doesn't need to eat everything on his plate but only offer him a normal portion of starchy carbohydrates (like pasta, bread or potatoes) *after* he has finished the more nutritious foods. (Given the choice, children tend to go for the bread and pasta first, which can fill them up before they get to the more nutritious foods.)

Undereating?

You may feel your child is consistently not eating enough at mealtimes. If he tends to sit happily for about five minutes and then starts fidgeting and loses his appetite, there are some strategies you can try.

- Use food sequencing to get the good stuff into him first (during that precious window of opportunity).
- Let him wolf down the food as fast as he wants (to let his stomach outrun his brain so he'll fill up a bit more). His stomach clock can help too. If you can make mealtimes the same every day, he is more likely to be hungry at that time of day.

Healthy eating habits

A [healthy breakfast](#) wakes up your preschooler's body by starting his metabolism. Breakfast provides the energy your child needs for the day. Research has found that children who skip breakfast tend to weigh more. This may be because these hungry children eat more during the day.

Mornings can be a mad rush for many families. Thankfully, breakfast can be quick and easy to prepare, like yoghurt and fruit, cereal and milk, or toast.

They want to do what you want to do

Children watch what you are eating. So you can help them adopt good eating habits by eating well yourself. Now is a good time to try giving up at least one or two items of junk food. If you can keep packaged biscuits and chips out of your house, it could make a very big difference for your child.

Sometimes children need to be offered a new food 6-10 times before they taste it and, eventually, eat it. It helps if they see you eating it too! If you still have no luck, try again in 3-6 months.

Healthy food ideas for preschoolers

- For good food made easy, try these [meals in minutes](#).
- Pack a goodness punch by including lots of your child's nutritional needs in one dish. Try [Everything fried rice](#), an omelette with the lot, shepherd's pie, baked beans on wholegrain toast or pasta bolognese with a meat and veggie sauce.

Water: the best drink

The following tips may get your preschooler drinking more water:

- Offer water with all meals and snacks.
- Keep chilled water in the fridge for hot days. Add slices of lemon or orange, or a sprig of mint, for interest.
- In summer, freeze chopped fruit in ice blocks and pop into a cup of water.
- Carry filled water bottles when you go out.

Fussy eaters

Erratic appetites (starving one day, not hungry the next) are common in preschoolers. Your child's body goes through growth spurts and it can tell how much food is needed each day. Forcing children to eat when they are not hungry overrides this natural ability. This may lead to overeating in later life if they can't tell how much food they need.

Division of responsibility

As long as you offer her healthy food, let her appetite be the guide. Most children get plenty to eat even if it seems like they are barely eating at all.

Seven tips for happy mealtimes

1. Be relaxed about it, even if your child is not eating.
2. Mix it up a bit. Sitting at the same table for every meal can be hard going. Try a picnic in the backyard or take dinner down to the beach or park occasionally.
3. Try not to give in to whingeing for alternatives to the meal you have prepared.
4. Offer nothing until the next scheduled mealtime or regular snack time (they'll get the hang of it).
5. Schedule snacking to leave a good space before mealtimes (at least ½-1 hour).
6. At dinner, try offering the protein and the colourful vegies first, when they are most hungry.
7. Be calm, firm and consistent.

Exercise

Exercise gives your preschooler strong bones and muscles, a healthy heart, lungs and arteries, and improved coordination, balance, posture and flexibility. It reduces their risk of getting overweight. It helps ward off heart disease, cancer and diabetes later in life.

When a child spends lots of time in front of the TV and computer, they miss out on the physical activity and play that keeps them healthy. [Being overweight](#) is unhealthy and uncomfortable – and very unpleasant for a young child.

Preschoolers don't need much encouragement to run around in the fresh air. If you play with them, they'll love it even more. Preschoolers (and you) will enjoy:

- playing at the park
- flying a kite
- dancing
- silly walks (pretend to walk like an elephant)
- chasing bubbles

- swimming
- bushwalking.

A special note about television

Eating salty chips while watching TV is a recipe for child obesity. Try limiting TV time to 30 minutes, followed by an outdoor activity (like a walk to the park). Keep snacks healthy – a banana, a handful of healthy crackers, thinly sliced carrot or celery sticks are all good options.

Play and learning

Why play is important

By the time he is four or five, your preschooler may have one or two special friends (besides you, of course!). Playing with him starts to unlock the social skills that he will use throughout life. [Play teaches him](#) how to get along with friends. It also helps him learn about himself and how he fits into the world.

Research suggests that the building blocks for lifelong self-esteem are set in place during preschool years. This is when your child is growing socially and personally, and is probably going to preschool or [playgroup](#). Play promotes:

- Creativity: when you encourage your child to play, it exercises his imagination and helps him release the bundle of emotions he is feeling.
- Role play: dressing-up gives him a chance to act out scenarios which scare or confuse him. Messy play (with paints, water or in the sandpit) is a good outlet for emotions.
- Coordination: clambering over playground equipment teaches coordination, balance and physical limits.
- Cooperation: board games teach him about taking turns, following the rules, counting and being a gracious loser. These are tough lessons for any preschooler.
- Laughs: songs, books, riddles and rhymes tickle his funny bone and teach him new words.



[TV and videos](#) are a part of most children's lives. Watching a lot of TV (four or more hours a day) is not recommended because it can interfere with an active imagination, as kids love to invent their own games and activities. It can also lead to obesity.

Playtime or learning?

When you play with your child, he is watching what you do. So you can use your own behaviour as a role model to guide him. What you do is often much more important than what you say. You are showing him how to play cooperatively, take turns and share. As you play, you can encourage him by asking questions and exploring different ways of doing things. And while you may think you're just spending a lovely afternoon together, he really

is learning many different skills.

Your child's creativity will best develop when he is given lots of room to do his own thing. He may even bend the rules a bit as he plays. At this age, try to step back and let him make his own fun. You can be on hand to help, comment and join in when invited.

Reading and play ideas

Books open up amazing new worlds and experiences. Stories help him improve speech, imagination and even counting skills. Reading books together can become a much loved ritual.

- As you read the story, talk about what's happening in the pictures and try to guess what might happen next.
- Ask him to identify things that he knows in the picture and talk about how they relate to the story; for example, 'Can you see the moon in this picture? Why is the boy looking at the moon?'
- Count objects in the pictures.
- Or just lose yourselves in the story.

The best picture books are those that stand up to reading over and over, night after night. Books with imaginative illustrations are great at this age as you can weave new stories around the pictures. As they are developing their sense of humour, preschoolers love books with a ridiculous story, even if they're not sure the story is actually true. Pop-up books are still full of fun surprises at this age. Your local library or bookshop may be able to recommend some classic picture books.

Play ideas for preschoolers

To release emotions and express feelings

- Act out feelings by role-playing with puppets or toys.
- Give him a safe space to run wild! Tumbling, rolling and giggling loudly help release emotions.
- Many children can express their feelings through painting and drawing.

Explore some more great ['feeling' play ideas](#).

To enhance imagination and creativity

- Read books and share silly rhymes.
- Play dress-ups with a box of old cast-offs (don't forget to throw in some crazy hats).
- Try something he's never done before, like a bushwalk or museum visit.

Discover other [imagination games](#).

To encourage thinking

- Play board games together.

- Read books and tell riddles.
- Play memory card games.

Find some other [great thinking games](#).

To help with reading and identifying numbers

- Read together often. You may want to make it a bedtime ritual.
- Cook simple recipes together, like a cake. Talk about the quantities you're using.
- Set up a 'shop' at home and let your child 'buy' items from you.

Safety

Keeping preschoolers safe

A whole new world has opened up, most of it outside the safe confines of your home. Your preschooler needs to be kept safe while he experiments with his boundless new abilities.

Preschoolers are spring-loaded with energy. At this age, they love to run around outdoors, climb things, crawl under things, ride on things and muck around with water.

Thankfully, you can now start teaching him some simple safety rules. Even with his impressive new learning, he still relies on you to keep him safe at all times. Read more about [how to keep your preschooler safe](#).



Outdoor safety

Playgrounds

- The chance of a playground injury is greater for preschool and primary school children, as they are developing body strength and judgement skills.
- Falls are the most common injury. The safest equipment for children three to five years is less than 1.5 metres high (no taller than the average woman).
- Try to watch your child at all times and stand nearby if he is trying a daring new feat.

Read more about [playground safety](#).

Things with wheels

- Wheels can be tricky to master. Lots of practise in a safe area will build up his confidence.
- Falls are part of the wheels deal. Without well-fitting protective gear for bikes, skateboards and rollerblades (helmet, kneepads, elbow guards), your preschooler can badly injure himself.

- Teach your child how to stay [safe on wheels](#).

Water

To help your child stay [safe around pools](#):

- Always stay with your child when he is in or near the water, even if he can swim.
- Remember that drowning can take less than a minute and is silent. Keep an eye on him at all times around water.
- Swim between the flags when at the beach.
- You may want to learn [resuscitation techniques](#) such as CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) so that you can help if your child gets into trouble.

Cars and road safety

- Buckle up. In the car, preschoolers should sit in a child restraint or a booster seat. Use a [car restraint](#) that meets Australian standards.
- Consider a booster seat for children over four. Studies show that older children still get much more protection from their seatbelt if they use a booster seat.
- Don't leave him unattended. Your car is an oven on wheels and children can overheat very quickly if left inside. Because this happens from time to time, the police take it very seriously. If you have to duck into the shop, take your child with you. Get some more tips on [car safety](#).
- Take his hand. Until the age of about 10, children are not able to keep themselves safe around traffic. Always hold your preschooler's hand in carparks and when walking on footpaths or crossing a road.
- Kids do as you do. Children learn by example, so you can teach him about [road safety](#) by always crossing at the lights or zebra crossing.

Stranger danger

As your preschooler's world expands, there will be times when you will not be there to keep him safe, like when he is at preschool or at a friend's birthday party. Let him know that if you are running late to pick him up, he should stay in a safe area, such as the preschool playground, until you arrive. It is important that he understands 'stranger danger' so that he can stay safe even when you are not around.

Safety at home

The world is your preschooler's playground, including the inside of your house! Make sure your furniture is secure enough to withstand his weight and consider these other tips:

- Attach wobbly furniture to the wall (so that it can't fall on top of him) or remove it.
- Sharp corners can cause a nasty accident. Use corner protectors or clear your sharp furniture from areas where children run.
- Athletic and curious preschoolers love to climb. Keep second storey windows locked or shield them with secure screens so children can't fall out. Remove chairs and pot plants that can be used to climb on. Block off access to balcony areas.

- Store medicines, chemical sprays and household cleaners in child-resistant containers. Keep them in locked cupboards high out of reach. Preschoolers love gadgets that squirt (like water pistols), so be sure to keep pump-action bottles out of reach when you are cleaning.
- Avoid storing detergents, paint thinners and other hazardous liquids in empty soft drink or juice bottles. Your child may think he's found something nice to drink.
- A child doesn't know that a shiny exhaust pipe, hot water or an iron can burn. The best way to prevent burns is to keep children away from fire and hot surfaces. Also, if you keep sending the message that the oven is hot, the iron is hot, and so on, he may be inclined to stay away. Find out how to [prevent burns](#).

Sleep

Night terrors and nightmares

A preschooler's rapidly expanding imagination can sometimes get in the way of a good night's sleep. By listening to her fears and helping her overcome them, you can keep the bedtime monsters away.

Children aged from three to five need around 11-13 hours of sleep a night. Some may also have a day nap of about an hour. [Sleep is important](#) for their health, growth and development. If your child sleeps well, she will be more settled and happy during the day. Getting the right amount of sleep also strengthens her immune system and reduces the risk of infection and illness.

Night terrors and nightmares

As your preschooler's imagination takes flight, she may start having [nightmares](#) or [night terrors](#). Night terrors tend to happen in the first few hours of sleep when your child is sleeping deeply; nightmares usually happen between midnight and 4 am.

Here are some tips for dealing with nightmares:

- Explain that she had a bad dream and reassure her. A kiss and a cuddle might help her settle again. If she wants to come into your bed, that's fine. Once she is comforted, you may want to return her to her own bed so that she does not get into the habit of sleeping with you.
- If she has dreamed about monsters, you could try explaining that monsters are only make-believe and can't really hurt her.
- If you notice a recurrent nightmare, explore what may be causing it. Gently ask her about encounters with other children, television shows or other daytime experiences. If you find the culprit, you can reduce her exposure to it.



Bedtime routines and calling out at night

Some children fall deeply asleep very quickly. Others sleep lightly, fidgeting and muttering for up to 20 minutes, before getting into deep sleep. As your preschooler becomes more aware of the world, she may find it harder to settle to sleep. A bedtime routine can help. Most preschoolers are ready for bed around 7 pm, especially if they've had a big day at preschool.

A bedtime routine might look something like this:

Time	Activity
6.30 pm	Brush teeth, go to toilet, night nappy if needed
6.45 pm	Quiet time (read a book or tell a story)
7 pm	Into bed and kiss goodnight

Some preschoolers can demand more and more bedtime stories as a delaying tactic. You may want to establish a three-book rule for bedtime, with the promise to read more during the day.

If your child takes a dummy to bed, you may consider losing it (literally) when she is about three, if you think she is ready. Read about how you can help her [let go of the dummy](#).

Night-time pull-ups

Even if your child uses the toilet or potty during the day, it's not time to throw away the nappies just yet. Often, children are between three and four years of age before they are dry at night. Some children don't have dry nights until six or seven.

Putting a night-light on and a potty in her room may prompt her to wee there during the night. Let her know that you will help her if she needs it. If not, there's no worry. Most children grow out of night wetting all by themselves.

Getting up after bedtime

Your preschooler may go through a stage of calling out from her bed or getting up after you have said goodnight. Try these tips:

- Avoid boisterous play before bedtime, as it may make it harder for her to settle.
- Establish a consistent, calming bedtime routine.
- Make sure her room is cool, quiet and dark.
- Before leaving the room, check your child has everything she needs and remind her to stay quietly in bed.
- Try not to respond to her calls after you have turned the light out. If you respond, she may try the same thing again next bedtime.
- If she gets out of bed, calmly ask her to go back to bed and remind her that you are just in the other room. Repeat this firmly and quietly over and over until she doesn't get up again.

Your child may actually need something if she is calling out. If she is scared of a monster under her bed, a quick check by you (with the light off) can confirm the room is monster-free and your preschooler may then settle. If she is scared of the dark, think about using a night-light.