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Your 5-Year-Old

By Nia Heard-Garris, M.D. April 18, 2020

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Though she might be the baby of the family, you have a big kid now. Your child is like a curious scientist, exploring and questioning the world around her. She has likely been inundating you with questions about “why” and “how.” Their curious minds make 5-year-olds great problem solvers and typically ready to learn as they enter kindergarten. At 5 years old, children can create entire fantasy worlds through their imaginative and dramatic play.



Jing Wei

Kids all develop at their own pace, but at 5 years old, your child might be:

Playing leap frog. Your 5-year-old understands how his body works and is taking every opportunity to be active.

Doing it herself. At 5 years old, your child is becoming more

independent. She can likely eat with utensils, go to the bathroom, bathe and get dressed solo (though supervision is still necessary).

Storytelling. Your 5-year-old is becoming an amazing storyteller. His tales are getting longer with more vivid details.

Problem solving. Your child is likely the best sleuth in the house. Through using and hearing about everyday household items, she can explain why and how they are used.

People-pleasing. At 5, your child wants to fit in and be well-liked. Among adults, he can follow directions and at times is excited to do so.

The science of your 5-year-old

A child's brain grows the most during the first five years of life. By age 5, the brain has reached approximately 90 percent of its adult size. This means that much of the brain's structure and function has been established. Specifically, the brain develops important pathways that allow children to learn, move and establish memory, and many of these connections have been established by 5. The strength of these important connections is built on interaction, close attachment with caregivers and a child's environment. However, the

brain does continue to build new connections and to adapt.

At 5, your child's vocabulary is probably exploding, and he is making rich connections in the [language centers](#) (mainly the temporal and parietal lobes) of his brain. He speaks very clearly and in complete sentences (about 6-8 words). He has too many words for you to count (more than 2,000), uses future tense and generally has correct grammar. When he speaks, he may make some "smart" mistakes that show he's learning grammar rules: He may say, "I 'eated' tacos yesterday," instead of "I 'ate' tacos yesterday."

Your child's fine motor skills are solidifying. She can likely eat with utensils, go to the bathroom (though wiping may still be a challenge), bathe and get dressed solo. Keep in mind: Just because children can do these things by themselves does not mean you should leave them unsupervised. At 5, a child can zip zippers and button smaller buttons. She also may impress you with her ability to write her name and a few numbers, draw a triangle and draw a person with about eight but no fewer than [six body parts](#) (head, body, arms and legs). Also, you probably are starting to be able to tell if your child is right-handed, left-handed or uses both hands.

Her problem solving skills are improving by the day. She can

probably tell you that money is needed to buy things or gas is needed to help cars move. She can describe an object's position in space – she will say her ball is “under” the table. She is also starting to grasp the basics of addition and subtraction. She probably knows four colors or more and can distinguish uppercase letters and lowercase letters. She seeks creative solutions to problems and might approach solutions differently than you would.

Your child is following directions better than ever and is eager to do a good job. Now is the time to allow your child to be a happy helper. Ask him to help you sweep up, clean or wash the dishes. Among his friends, he wants to be like them and do things to please them. Previously, you might have been intimately involved in his play. Now, he probably prefers to play with other kids and has the stamina and attention span to play for longer periods of time. While play is incredibly imaginative, he knows the difference between “real life” and “make believe” or fantasy.

Physically, 5-year-olds may seem like budding gymnasts, as they develop improved balance and coordination. As a result, they may seek out physical activities boosting the motor, balance and coordination center (cerebellum) of their brains. Your 5-year-old is hopping and jumping well and can even balance on one foot for a

few seconds. He can probably also climb and swing on a swing. He is becoming more coordinated and can do more complex activities like riding a bike, dancing and playing basketball.

Check out this great [graphic](#) that explains how learning happens in the brain.

Frequently asked questions about 5-year-olds

Is my 5-year-old ready to start kindergarten?

Parents often expect that all 5-year-olds will be ready to start kindergarten, but that's not always the case. Children who start school when they are developmentally ready have better academic outcomes (higher graduation rates and less grade repetition). Talking to your child's physician or preschool teacher, if applicable, may help provide clarity about when to start school. Parents often focus more on academic skills, such as reading and writing, but these skills are teachable once a child is within the school setting. However, if your child struggles to follow directions, play with others or communicate his needs, he may have a hard time learning in a formal school setting.

How much screen time is O.K. for my 5-year-old?

Many parents of 5-year-olds allow their children to have screen time. However, the majority of their time should be spent playing without screens. Parents often use screens to allow themselves to get other things done; however, whenever possible, it is best to watch TV with your child. This allows you to explain what he's watching and to discuss what he learned after the program. When you do allow your 5-year-old to use screens, try to limit use to 1 hour per day of [educational or interactive](#) programming that will encourage him to use his critical thinking skills.

My 5-year-old is potty-trained during the day but still wetting the bed at night. Is this normal?

Bedwetting is a very common problem among 5-year-olds, even those who are not having accidents during the day. Generally, bedwetting in young children is not due to medical conditions, but the exact cause is unclear. Bedwetting tends to run in families, and most kids stop by adolescence. Also, very deep sleepers and boys tend to have more problems with bedwetting. Since bedwetting is normal at this age, try not to punish or yell at children after bedwetting. Reassurance and emotional support help to maintain the child's self-esteem. Families also use a variety of methods to help increase dry nights: Reward systems (prizes, sticker charts), restricting liquids before bed and bedwetting alarms have been

shown to be helpful.

My 5-year is lying? What do I do?

My 5-year-old once told all his friends that his uncle played football for the N.F.L.'s Oakland Raiders. He's never even been to Oakland. He had both kids and adults alike believing this fib. Your child is becoming such an amazing storyteller that sometimes he tells stories that are not true. In our family's case, we told him that while it would be cool if his uncle played for the Raiders, it was not true and led to many awkward questions from classmates' parents. We told him we understood that he wanted to impress his friends, but lies make it hard for others to believe what we say. We told him that being honest helps build trust and bring friends closer to us. We reminded him about the stories "A Bad Case of Stripes" and "The Boy Who Cried Wolf." Both stories illustrate for kids the consequences of lying.

How you can support your child's development

- Help get your child ready to learn. Kids learn best through interaction. Offer opportunities for your child to play with you as well as other children. Allow your kids to "get their hands dirty"

when trying to understand a new concept. If children are learning to recognize words by sight, you can put the words in a bingo format, so the words become more memorable and fun. If your child is learning about the concept of time, you may help by drawing the face and hands of a clock to illustrate the time.

- Support your child's language development and school readiness by reading together. Visit your local library and allow your child to pick books that look interesting. As you go through the books, point out different letters, numbers, colors and shapes. Books are especially important when a kid might be experiencing something new. For example, before a child starts school, you may want to read a book about starting school to ease the anxiety and foster a discussion about what to expect at school.
- Screens can be used as a supplement to the interactive learning they are doing with you and the world around them. Visit [Common Sense Media](#) to find appropriate movies, games, apps, websites, TV shows and more for your child.
- Challenge your child's problem-solving skills. Puzzles are incredibly fun at this age and a great way to spend time together. Try to put electronics away and challenge yourself to an age-

appropriate puzzle with your child. Another way to put these skills to the test is asking children to come up with their own solutions to problems. If they can't find their favorite toy, you can ask them to create solutions to this problem.

When to worry

Children develop at different rates; however, if your 5-year-old is displaying any of the following concerning behaviors or is not where you think he should be developmentally, contact your child's pediatrician:

- Behavioral issues: aggression, anxiety, exaggerated fear responses
- Emotional concerns: inability to express a wide range of emotion, persistently unhappy
- Social concerns: doesn't want to play with other kids, doesn't want to separate from a caregiver
- Too few words: you are able to count all their words
- Health concerns: difficulty sleeping, eating or using the bathroom alone

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Kindly,

Frank Trovato

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