

The Fantastic Four-Year-Old¹

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Overview

Welcome to the world of a four-year-old! During this year, your child will be improving old skills while developing new ones. Everything new is of interest to her.* Her curiosity is abundant and energy is overflowing. Playtime outdoors is most enjoyable for her. Providing her with plenty of time for physical activity is a good way to avoid her getting bored and acting out.

A four-year-old has lost much of her shyness toward strangers. You may find her eager to go to parties and spend time in other's homes. At this age, boys tend to play with boys, and girls with girls. They love to dress up and play pretend. It is through play that children learn best. Pretending to be a firefighter, a teacher, police officer, an astronaut, etc, provides them with a chance to work out their fears and fantasies.

Developmental Milestones

Your four-year-old is experiencing many changes during this stage of development. Let's explore some of these milestones of development.

Physical Development

By the age of four, children are able to perform more and more tasks independently. Their use of both their large and small muscles has improved from when they were three. At three, it was more difficult for them to dress themselves and eating required greater assistance from you. At four, children are able (for the most part) to dress and undress themselves without help. They can also use a fork effectively to feed themselves. At four, the only help children need during eating is in cutting meat and similar foods into smaller pieces.

Your four-year-old is also able to use a pair of scissors quite well. She enjoys cutting straight lines, as well as cutting out shapes. Her ability to color and draw is improving but her short, chubby fingers can still make drawing within the lines a challenge. She can also manage to ride and steer a bike equipped with training wheels.

Social Development

At four, your child starts understanding the meaning of friendship. She is learning to be more cooperative in play with other children. Your child

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will like to listen to stories as well as tell her own. Your four-year-old loves to whisper and tell secrets. She will often put her arm around a friend, and understands when a friend is upset. However, she still lacks a sense of loyalty to friendships. For example, she might say Michelle is her best friend, but when Michelle gets on the swing set first, and your four-year-old declares that she "doesn't like Michelle anymore and we are not friends."



Your child is developing her social skills--therefore, it is important to acknowledge her feelings while encouraging the relationship. You could say something like, "Michelle really upset you because she took the swing ahead of you. It's okay for you to be angry. Maybe you and Michelle can be friends again soon."

Your child delights in anything new. She is enthusiastic about new people, new places, new playthings, and new activities. New activities satisfy part of her questioning nature. When possible, vary her activities in order to keep her interested.

Emotional Development

The four-year-old is temperamental. She has extreme mood changes. She can be happy one minute and sad the next. Remember, be as comforting as possible during periods of sadness, but don't fret too much about it. It will usually end as quickly as it began!

As time passes, your child will become more and more emotionally stable. Though at times it may seem as if you are riding an emotional roller coaster, be patient, your child will soon move toward emotional maturity.

Your child is developing an awareness of feelings. She is able to understand and appreciate the feelings of others, as well as express her own. She

will often try to provide comfort. She is beginning to be able to judge the reasons for many basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, and anger. Statements such as, "He is sad because he lost his toy," would be an example.

Intellectual Development

A four-year-old is also making great strides intellectually. She has a clearer understanding of words and can correctly use such words as "under," "on," "above," and "below." Her speech is well-formed for the most part; now people outside the family can understand her. She may be starting to show an interest in reading. It is important that you encourage her intellectual development without being demanding. Don't require that she learn how to read or complete other advanced tasks that require her to stay seated and attentive for extended periods of time. This will only cause frustration for both you and her. Your child will learn to read when the time is right for her. During this phase of development encourage a love of books by reading to her every night. Reading helps her language development, and provides her new material to think about.

Discipline

What is the most effective way to rear children? Research shows that parents who are loving, firm, and consistent are more likely to see positive results. It is important that you try not to use forms of discipline that are too harsh. Parents must work to avoid being unkind when disciplining children. Severe discipline provides children with a model of aggression. Harsh, aggressive discipline can cause a child to fear her parent and this, in turn, inhibits positive interactions the parent can have with her child.

Avoid hitting, yelling, and using cruel words as a way of discipline. If you feel yourself about to lose control, put your child in her bedroom and take five minutes to calm down before handling the situation. Taking this five minutes may save you and your child a lot of heartache in the future. Keep in mind the following positive guidance techniques that can be helpful as you try to shape your child's behavior:



*This document uses "she", "her", or "hers" to represent children of both genders.

- Reinforce and praise appropriate behavior, ignore inappropriate behavior whenever possible.
- Redirect your child to more acceptable behavior. Stay calm.
- Set clear limits and rules. Follow through with appropriate consequences.
- Be consistent.
- Don't use unkind words.

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