

# Parenting

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*Preschoolers*  
*- 3 to 5 years*

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In this stage children become very aware of themselves and of the people and things around them. They play actively and are very imaginative. They are curious and constantly exploring their world. Their communication, social, and motor skills are developing rapidly.

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## Typical behaviours and how you can help

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### **May ‘test’ adult reactions by trying out different behaviours such as screaming or “silly talk”**

Have a low-key reaction to “silliness” – eg. roll your eyes and turn away. Have rules about particularly irritating or intrusive behaviours, and enforce them calmly and consistently. Talk to them about feelings and appropriate behaviours – in this stage they are learning to recognise, express, and control their emotions. Reward positive behaviours with notice and praise.

### **Learning to make friends and play with others, may struggle with appropriate ways of doing this – exhibit shyness, bossiness etc**

Talk about feelings and how others might feel, and encourage the child to express themselves verbally. Treat them in the respectful way that you expect them to treat others, and support them in their efforts to make friends.

## **May have separation anxieties when starting kindy, day-care, or school, or at the start of a new term**

Establish a routine and keep to it. Arrive a bit early if you can so that you can see them settled into a task or play. See that they are left with someone they are happy with – another child or a teacher. Talk to the teacher about ways they can help your child feel comfortable when you arrive – a task ‘helping’ the teacher can be effective. Reassure them that you’ll be back at the end of the day/session.

## **Exerting their own identity and preferences**

Let them make simple decisions for themselves – what they’re going to wear, for example – and give them choices about what to do, what snack they prefer etc. Talk about your decisions – why you are doing this now, for example – and enable them to participate – what would they like to do after this is finished? Choose your battles – do you need to make this decision, or can you let them have a say in it? Be clear and consistent with the rules and boundaries that you do make.

## **Keen to help**

Give them tasks they can manage, teach them age-appropriate skills, and praise their efforts. Help them if they get frustrated, but

leave them if they’re happy – even if they are not doing the task to your standard. They will pick up on your disapproval.

## **Asking lots of “why?” questions, might try out ‘shocking’ language such as toilet words at inappropriate times**

Explain “why”. Encourage them to think about “why” themselves. Talk to them in full sentences, and listen. Respond calmly to ‘shocking’ words but be clear and firm about them being unacceptable.

## **Starting to play ‘pretend’ and role-play games**

Let them dress up. Provide toys or objects such as plastic plates, cups, and bottles, boxes, blankets, dolls etc. Use different voices for different characters when you read to them.

## **Keen to climb, run, and explore**

Provide lots of opportunities for safe physical play. Recognise that undesirable behaviours such as jumping on the furniture can be caused by boredom or the need to let off some energy, and take them to the park to run around.

**Starting to draw recognisable figures, and learning to use scissors etc. May do these things inappropriately, eg drawing on walls, cutting hair or clothing**

Give clear boundaries and simple explanations of why something is unsafe or unacceptable. Encourage creativity in acceptable ways – painting, collage, drawing, play-dough. Drawing and modelling develop their fine motor skills, and this will help them later on when they are learning important skills like writing.

**Starting to follow simple instructions, starting to understand cause-and-effect**

Be consistent. Give very simple, clear directions – they do not yet have the ability to understand more. Help them if they need it. Encourage play with cause-and-effect, such as building blocks and pouring water between vessels. Talk with them about what is happening and the effect their actions are having. Read to them and talk about the stories. Talk about how things work – “the wheels go around and the car goes forward when you push it”, for example.

**Learning about time, space, shapes, relative size etc**

Read to them, and talk about the stories. Encourage them to tell their own stories – “and then...”. Talk about what you’ve done today, what you did yesterday, and what you’re going to do now/later. Look forward to tomorrow. Provide toys such as shape games, stacking cups, building blocks etc. Allow them to work out what fits where, and what sequence of actions is needed to carry out a particular task. Talk about colours and shapes, and the different ways things can be grouped together.

**Fussy and messy eating**

Keep providing a range of different foods, even if they have rejected them before. Cutting things into different shapes, and letting them help you prepare and present food can also make them more likely to try something. Let them feed themselves, and expect mess – they still do not have the coordination to do this tidily.

**Starting to develop bowel and bladder control, interested in toilet behaviours**

Praise dry nappies and offer the potty/toilet. Ask if they need to ‘go’ when you see the ‘signs’, and encourage both trying and their

interest in toilet rituals – washing hands, flushing etc. Take off the nappy together with sticker charts, praise, and incentives for performance when your child is ready for toilet training. They will usually be ‘dry’ by 3 or 4 during the day, but may take much longer until they are at night. Sometimes removing the night-nappy (make sure you have a water-proof mattress cover) can result in dry nights after a few nights or a week, but don’t worry if it doesn’t. *Never punish the child for bed-wetting.* If it continues after the age of 6 and concerns you, see your doctor.

### **Interested in bodies and the differences between boys and girls**

May start masturbating, or play ‘show’ games: Stay calm – curiosity is normal! Respond matter-of-factly about sex differences. Talk about boundaries for touching and looking at bodies, including their own. Explain that their body is theirs and though touching it feels nice this is something they do in private, not in the middle of the living room floor! Explain the difference between private and secret, and ensure they understand that it is not ok for anyone to tell them to keep something that they are uncomfortable about secret.

### **May tell ‘lies’, have difficulty distinguishing ‘real’ from ‘unreal’, become afraid of the dark, or have an imaginary friend**

This is their imagination developing. Don’t punish ‘lying’ – their ability to distinguish truth from fantasy is not developed yet. What they *want* to have happened can seem to them what *did* happen. Use books, stories, and humour to help them distinguish between fantasy and reality. Talk about fears. Drawing what they are afraid of, and themselves dealing with it, can help. Read them gentle or funny stories at bedtime, have a special toy, get a night-light, and be understanding and patient.

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## General parenting strategies

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- Provide lots of opportunity for play and exploration, and recognise that ‘bad’ behaviour can be caused by a range of things including boredom, hunger, over-tiredness, and high energy. Address the problem rather than punishing the child.
- Help the child to express feelings, and to connect thinking, feeling, and appropriate behaviour. Acknowledge their feelings and help them to deal with negative experiences (such as disappointment) and behaviours (such as anger). Model appropriate behaviour in your treatment of them and in your relationships with others, and take time out to calm down yourself if you are angry.
- Develop a clear and authoritative “NO” voice for behaviours that are not acceptable. Do not negotiate around these, and be consistent. Children need to know where the boundaries are, and unacceptable behaviours often come from uncertainty about what is and isn’t allowed. Remember: testing boundaries is normal for this age, and it is confusing if they move or are unclear.
- Answer questions matter-of-factly. If you find a subject difficult, talk to your local librarian to see what books or other

resources are available to help you focus your conversation.

- Use humour whenever possible, but always laughing with, not at. Follow your child’s lead, and encourage their imagination.
- Continue to encourage understanding of cause-and-effect. Allow the child to safely experience these, remembering that they need to “fall over” occasionally to learn.
- Have routines, especially around mornings and meal and bedtimes. Children feel safe with predictability.
- Avoid conflict over eating. Children will eat adequately as long as food is offered. Make sure there is a variety of healthy food available when they are hungry, and remember that it can take many re-presentations of a food before a child will accept it. This is normal.
- Keep reading to them, and talk about the stories and pictures. Listen to their stories.
- Allow plenty of time for free-play. This is where they learn about themselves and how to relate to others.
- **Look after yourself.** To parent well, you need to be well. Don’t be afraid to ask for help, and don’t feel guilty about taking time for yourself when they are elsewhere or asleep.

## Strategies for normal but negative behaviour

### Aggression

- Have a clear rule that aggressive or violent behaviour is not acceptable. Have a clear consequence for it – loss of screen time, removal of toys etc – and ensure the child is not exposed to aggressive behaviour – including your own or on-screen. Model anger control, negotiation, and respect for others – including your child. Encourage using appropriate words to express feelings, and help your child to find these. Reward positive behaviours with praise and encouragement, and help your child to deal with ‘big’ emotions such as disappointment and frustration. Remember: they do not yet have full control of their emotions, and how you respond to them will affect how they learn this. They need to learn consequences, but they need to be supported lovingly through this learning, and to know that it is the behaviour, not them, that you disapprove of. Use Time In rather than Time Out as a method of calming a child down, and not as punishment. Help the child to self-soothe. Enforce consequences for problem behaviour after the child has calmed down and is able to understand what is happening and why. See TIME IN.

### Tantrums

- Stay calm. While they are having the tantrum, do not try to reason with them. Often, a tantrum is a response to a situation that the child is unable to cope with, such as disappointment or frustration, and they need your help to calm down. Stay near them, cuddle them if they will let you, and speak simply and soothingly to them until they are calm.
- Don’t give in to tantrums. If you reward the behaviour, it will happen more often. Remember that cuddling and calming is NOT a reward – it is the way you help the child to learn how to self-soothe. Giving in to the demand that may have sparked the tantrum IS a reward. When they are calm, stay firm on your decision but help them to cope with their disappointment. Name their feelings – “I know you are very disappointed / angry / upset” – and acknowledge that this is difficult for them to deal with. With children under 5 or 6, distract them with something else. With older children, talk about ways they could cope with such feelings in the future – taking some time out to calm down, finding their favourite toy to cuddle, etc – and how you might be able to help. See AGES AND STAGES 3-6 Years and 6-12 Years, and TIME IN.
- Try and work out what is triggering the tantrums. If they are happening when the

child is tired or hungry, make sure they are getting enough sleep or that you have more snacks available. Are they getting enough attention from you? Try and make special time to spend with them alone – reading stories together at bedtime, for example – and stop at other times to cuddle and give them undivided attention, even if it can only be for a few minutes. Children need to feel loved and valued, and tantrums can be a cry for attention.

- Children are very sensitive to your stress, and learn from your behaviours. Ask yourself if there is stress in the home or in your relationship that could be affecting them, or if you or other family members are responding to stress with such behaviour as shouting or slamming doors. Seek help to address these problems if you need to. Call our Helpline – our support workers can talk your problems through with you, suggest strategies that may help, and refer you to local services if there is other support that you need.

### **Lying**

- Children this age do not have the same view of truth as adults, or the ability to understand logic. Sometimes ‘lies’ are fantasies, and sometimes they are what the child wishes were true. Children will also lie to escape consequences, so avoid

cornering them. Do not punish ‘lies’, but help the child to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Talk to them when they are calm, and not in the moment when they are emotionally involved in their story. Encourage their imagination in positive, creative directions. Model truthfulness, and remember that children are quick to pick up when adults tell ‘white’ lies. Do not lie to the child to protect them. Reward them for telling the truth, even when the truth is something you would rather not hear.

### **Not cooperating**

- Tell rather than ask: “Come inside, it is teatime”, “It is time to get dressed now”. Be specific, and say exactly what you mean – “Put the toys in the toy box” rather than “Tidy up”. Give just one task at a time to start with. Once they are in the habit of cooperating, then other tasks can be added – “Now put your shoes in the cupboard”. Don’t persuade, coax, or discuss your command. If you do, the child gets attention for not doing the task.
- Observe cooperation: Wait for a short time (20-30 seconds) after you’ve given them the instruction. Depending on what they do:
- Child cooperates – give positive attention. Be specific and enthusiastic at first. Once



the child cooperates regularly then a simple “thank you” is enough.

- Child doesn’t cooperate – repeat your command in a firmer voice. Tell them in simple terms the consequences of not cooperating – “Or there will be no television today”. Resist the urge to add or explain anything else.
- Child cooperates on second command – give positive attention, a little less enthusiastically than if they had cooperated the first time.
- Child still doesn’t cooperate – Don’t give another command. They are not going to do it. Apply the stated consequence, without discussion.

### **Ways to encourage cooperation**

Give a preferred activity after the less preferred one – “Put your pyjamas on, and then I’ll read a story”. Give limited choices until they are in the habit of cooperating – “What will you put away, the blocks or the books?” – and do the other task yourself.

### **Parent Helpline**

If you have found this information useful and would like to talk with one of our trained telephone support workers, give our free Nationwide Parent Helpline a call on **0800 568 856**.

**Parent Help is a non-profit organisation supporting parents to build strong and resilient families/whānau free from abuse and neglect.**