

Understanding Physical Development in Preschoolers

By Kristin Stanberry

As part of your regular visits to the pediatrician with your child, it's a sure bet that you have been tracking your preschooler's physical growth by measuring his or her height and weight. But how can you tell if she is learning and mastering **age-appropriate fine motor and gross motor skills**?

From moving game pieces to running around in the yard, climbing and balancing in the playground, and even jumping on the bed, children demonstrate to parents the range of motor skills they are learning and how well they are using these skills to interact with the world around them. The questions and tips that follow will help you understand what physical skills your 3- to 4-year-old child should be learning – and how you can support her continued development.

Is your child developing age-appropriate physical skills?

It's helpful to know what physical skills your child should be developing by age 3 or 4. Abilities in this area include both **gross (large) motor skills** and **fine (small) motor skills**. Review the following checklists about physical development expected in a child this age, and note how your child is doing in each area.

Large motor skills — My child can:

- Walks with agility, good balance, and steady gait.
- Run at a comfortable speed in one direction and around obstacles; she can also stop, re-start, and turn while running.
- Aim and throw a large ball or beanbag, or catch one thrown to her.
- Hop several times on each foot.
- Walk along and jump over a low object, such as a line, string, or balance beam.

- Bounce a large ball several times.
- Kick a stationary ball.
- Pedal and steer a tricycle.

Small motor skills — My child can:

- Brush teeth, comb hair, and get dressed with little help.
- Skillfully use eating utensils.
- Use (child-sized) scissors to cut along a line.
- Pick up small items such as coins, toothpicks, and paperclips.
- Assemble simple puzzles.
- Copy simple shapes, like a circle or square.
- Print some letters of the alphabet.
- Stack objects so they don't fall.

Encouraging physical development at home

Now that you understand some of the key physical/motor skills your child should have, you can reinforce her development and foster further progress where necessary. It's easy (and fun!) to practice physical skills with your child throughout the day. Here are some guidelines and activities to try:

- Give your child the space and freedom to use large muscles, through activities such as running, climbing and swinging on playground equipment.
- Make sure your child gets adequate sleep and nutrition to fuel her overall development and activity.
- Take your child to a pediatrician for regular well-child exams, and be sure to have her vision and hearing checked. Even small problems, caught and addressed at this age, can greatly enhance motor skill development and confidence.
- Collect toys and equipment that your child can use to help her develop large muscles. (For example: hula hoops, bean bags, tricycle, large beach balls and a

child-sized basketball hoop.)

- Set up empty water bottles like bowling pins, and let your child use a soft ball to “bowl.”
- Join your child in active play. Play catch, tag, or set up a simple obstacle course.
- Give your child opportunities to practice small motor skills using child safety scissors, Lego blocks, dice, and buttons.

Note: If your child has a regular babysitter or daycare provider, be sure to pass these tips along to the caregiver.

Promoting physical development skills at preschool

In preschool your child will be immersed in a world of structured learning and social interaction. She'll also learn to play games and activities that challenge and develop her physical abilities. To keep track of how your child's physical skills are developing, you'll want to:

- Ask your child's teacher how fine motor and gross motor skills are taught and practiced at school, and where your child is succeeding or struggling.
- Find out what physical skills your child will need to master to have a successful transition to kindergarten.
- Encourage your child to tell you about the physical games and activities played at school, try to gauge how she feels about them and her abilities, and replicate these or similar activities (in fun ways) at home.

Cause for concern? Where to turn for advice and assistance

Rest assured that physical skills don't develop in exactly the same way for all preschoolers; some variation is normal. However, you may want to seek help if your preschooler:

- Is awkward and clumsy. (For example: dropping, spilling, bumping, or knocking things over.)
- Has trouble with buttons, zippers, snaps, and learning to tie her shoes.
- Has difficulty using small objects (such as Lego blocks and puzzle pieces) and objects that require precision (such as scissors).
- Holds pencils and markers with an awkward grasp, resulting in poor handwriting and artwork that is immature for her age.
- Has difficulty coloring or writing “on the paper” or “within the lines.”
- Dislikes and avoids writing and drawing.

Discuss your concerns with your child’s preschool teacher, pediatrician, and, if necessary, a specialist (such as an occupational therapist).

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