

Preschoolers at play

Playing is how preschoolers learn, experiment and solve problems. In fact, play is vital for their overall development and wellbeing. Preschoolers love to play with parents and other children, and playing with others teaches them about social relations, sharing and taking turns. Here are some fun play ideas and games for preschoolers.

Play and games for preschoolers: what to expect

All children are different, and they all have individual likes and dislikes when it comes to play. But preschoolers generally love the following kinds of play:

- **Dramatic and pretend play:** preschoolers use games like dress-ups to act out confusing or scary scenarios, try out different roles like being a mum or a dad, and explore emotions.
- **Messy play:** play with paints, water, sand or dirt is a great outlet for children's emotions. Children also enjoy exploring different textures, smells, colours and so on.
- **Physical play:** jumping, running, kicking balls and climbing over playground equipment teaches preschoolers about coordination and balance, and how far they can push their physical abilities.
- **Songs, books, riddles and silly rhymes:** these help to improve your child's language and vocabulary. You'll get to see the funny side of your preschooler's personality through these activities!
- **Sorting games:** activities like sorting blocks, buttons or pegs help to build basic maths and numeracy skills – just make sure to pack away small objects after play to avoid choking hazards.
- **Simple board games:** these kinds of games give preschoolers a chance to learn about taking turns, following the rules, counting and playing fair. Although turn-taking can be a challenge for children, with practice your child can learn to enjoy this type of play.
- **Rough-and-tumble play:** this kind of play gives preschoolers the chance to test out strength, space and social relationships. But play is meant to be fun – if a child is being bullied, forced or hurt, it isn't play anymore. You can teach your child that when another child says 'stop', the game needs to end.

Your child needs plenty of time for unstructured play. This is play that just happens, depending on what takes your child's interest. Sometimes it might be something active like dancing. Other times it might be quietly sorting blocks by herself. Structured music or gym classes can be fun, but your child mostly just needs time and a [safe home environment](#) to explore and play in.

Preschooler play and games with others

By **four years**, your child will be much more interested in playing with other children and making up games and rules together. He might be better at [sharing](#) and taking turns, but he'll still need your support and encouragement.

At **five years**, children are much more aware of their place in the world and are keen to fit in with other children. In general, your child wants to follow the rules at home and at preschool or school.

Around this age preschoolers understand that other people have feelings too, and are beginning to develop empathy. This helps with [preschooler friendships](#).

Family and home are still at the centre of your child's world, and you're still the most important person in your preschooler's life. That's why play with you is still very high on the list of things your child wants and needs to do.

Play ideas and games for preschoolers

All children are unique. They all have their own interests and ways they learn best. That's why it's important to **follow your child's interests** when it comes to games for preschoolers.

Here are some play ideas to get you and your preschooler going:

- Give your child a **cardboard box**. Your child's imagination can turn it into a cubbyhouse, a boat or a car. A small table turned on its side covered with a blanket or sheet can also be just as good.



did you know



Growth and learning for preschoolers still happens mostly through play – even though school is just around the corner.

- Put together a **dress-up box of old clothes**, shoes, handbags and other odds and ends: an old backpack transforms your child into an explorer. A towel makes a superhero. Both boys and girls have a lot of fun playing dress-ups.
- Introduce **new challenges**. By four and five years, your child might want to try activities like bike-riding and simple card or board games like 'Snap', dominoes or 'Memory match'.
- [Read with your preschooler](#). When reading favourite books, leave out words and let your preschooler fill them in. Point out individual letters and words. You can also ask your child what she thinks might happen next in an unfamiliar story.
- **Sort blocks** or other objects by colour, size or texture (smooth, soft, hard or rough). Your child could also make repeating patterns – like red, blue, red, blue – using these objects. This can be fascinating play for young children.
- Make up an **art and craft box** for your child. You can fill it with pencils, crayons, glue, wool scraps, bits of different coloured and textured papers, small cardboard pieces and other odds and ends. Many children enjoy making their own creations from these simple materials.
- Let your child try lots of **different playthings**. For example, your child might like playdough, sand, plastic containers or any household boxes with lids, plastic spoons and cups, kitchen pots and pans (with smooth edges), Duplo, simple puzzles, jigsaws and coloured blocks.
- Involve your child in [simple household 'chores'](#). Let your child choose how he wants to help. But remember that it's more important for your preschooler to pretend that he's a grown-up than it is for him to get the job done.

Screen time

[Screen time](#) can be a fun, learning experience for your child. But it's important to balance screen time with other activities that are good for your child's development, like lots of face-to-face creative play or physically active time with you and other carers.

The latest guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) suggest that children aged 2-5 years should have no more than one hour a day of screen time with adults watching or playing with them.

More to explore

Thinking and play: preschoolers
Emotions and play: preschoolers
Imagining, creating and play: preschoolers
Developing early numeracy skills
Fair play for children
Physical activity for young children

Last updated or reviewed

19-03-2018

See references