



# Understanding Children: The Five-Year-Old

Family and Consumer Sciences

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Five-year-old children are full of curiosity about the world. Because children's interests are expanding, they can talk with increased understanding about many subject areas. A child at this age can express more advanced thoughts. He or she may ask questions that require adults to provide thoughtful but simple answers: Why did my pet die? What happens to trees during the cold weather? How is bread made? Where do babies come from?

This is a time when children develop socially, physically, and emotionally. For instance, they are making new friends, cutting their first permanent teeth, and realizing that parents can make mistakes.

During this period, children grow, learn, and explore. Five-year-olds are energetic and eager to try new things. They also begin to work cooperatively. Children will often plan and carry out activities while expressing concern for the proper way to do something. A five-year-old will be developing both a sense of responsibility and achievement as he or she completes more complex tasks.

## Physical Growth and Motor Skills

Physical growth will be steady, though slower than the toddler and infant years. On the average, a child at this age will gain five to six pounds and grow two to three inches within a year.

There is a great deal of difference between individual heights and weights for children of the same age, similar to the variation observed in adults. Factors such as heredity, diet, and individual metabolism affect physical growth. It is very possible that two children who are very different heights at age five will be the same height when they are full-grown.

Children in this age group will also begin to develop the motor skills necessary for sports, games, and other childhood activities. As they master skills, such as running, jumping, and bouncing balls, they will become more confident in trying new activities. However, before a skill can be mastered, a child's muscles must be mature enough to allow developmental control and coordination. This



kind of physical maturity cannot be rushed, forced, or taught.

Some characteristics of physical development for average five-year-olds follow:

- Their weight will be between 35 and 55 pounds and height between 42 and 46 inches.
- Children require about 1800 calories every day.
- Cutting, drawing, coloring, and other small muscle tasks are generally enjoyed at this age. Some skill can be noted in their use of tools such as scissors and crayons; however, abilities will continue to develop well beyond this age.
- Five-year-olds have motor skills that allow them to manipulate small objects as they play or complete simple tasks at home. For example, they are able to stack blocks, unlace shoes, play with toy cars and trucks, and build villages with their toys. Dexterity skills will continue to improve over the next several years.
- Five-year-olds often express interest in learning to roller skate, jump rope, play jacks, ride bicycles, and other physical activities that require a greater degree of coordination. They may not be able to do all of these tasks well yet, but they will spend hours practicing.
- Most five-year-olds can throw different sized balls better than they can catch them. Few have the strength or balance to bat well.



- Some five-year-olds may not take their afternoon nap, so they may need an earlier bedtime if they seem tired in the evening.
- It is not unusual for children this age to delay going to the bathroom while they finish an activity. In such cases, accidents can happen.
- Many five-year-olds enjoy being involved in *real* activities, like raking leaves, sweeping a floor, or washing the car. These experiences will help children develop their coordination and gain a sense of responsibility within their family.

## Mental Growth

Children between five and six years of age are egocentric thinkers. This does not mean they are selfish. It means they have trouble understanding another person's point of view, because they lack the maturity to process thoughts like an adult.

Young children believe that everyone views the world exactly like they do. Five-year-olds are likely to believe you are seeing the book or picture, for instance, from the same perspective, even though you may be seated behind the object or the object is out of view altogether.

Some characteristics for a five-year-old's thinking abilities follow:

- Most children can easily distinguish their left hand from their right hand; however, they may show confusion when identifying another person's right or left hand.
- Five-year-olds tend to ask questions and answer them in concrete words.
- They define objects by their use. For example, a child may say that "a ball is for *bouncing*" or "the pink medicine is for *taking when I throw up!*"
- They often have a vocabulary of more than 2,000 words. Some five-year-olds seem to practice using all 2,000 of these words at the dinner table each evening.

However, children may only use select words in their daily conversations.

- Five-year-olds enjoy learning basics, such as letters, numbers, and colors. Although few can actually read, it is not unusual for a child to be able to *recite* a favorite story word-for-word or to recognize favorite words in that story.

## Emotional Growth

Emotional growth is not easily identified, but there are many changes that will occur in the child's ability to express and control emotions. Children, like adults, can become angry, fearful, jealous, frustrated, or sad. They also can feel happy, elated, proud, delighted, excited, and overjoyed. It is important to remember that it is impossible to stop children from feeling these emotions; but, it is possible to set up guidelines for showing children acceptable ways to express them.

Emotionally, there is a dilemma that five-year-olds will begin to face. There is a strong conflict between a desire to act more grown-up and the needs of being a child. As children meet more people, see new places, and have new experiences, they will learn more about themselves and handle their emotions more skillfully.

People often refer to childhood as "*carefree and happy years.*" However, the pressures of growing up can be overwhelming for some children. Adults need to be sensitive to the child's intense feelings. The manner in which a child expresses his or her emotions and how others react to the child will help mold a child's emotional control and overall personality.

As five-year-olds mature, they will learn to behave in more socially appropriate ways. Children will continue to develop socially appropriate behaviors well into adulthood.

General characteristics of emotional development during the fifth year follow:

- Five-year-olds are both cooperative and helpful. They like to please the special adults in their lives.
- They may have great difficulty waiting for a special day, but become physically ill with excitement when the big day finally arrives.
- Once they have made up their minds, five-year-olds resist change. They often get upset with adjustments in routines or plans. They often cry if they are contradicted or scolded.
- Five-year-olds may express anger by saying, "*I hate you,*" and affection by saying, "*I love you.*" These statements may follow one another closely within a conversation.
- Five-year-olds release tension in a variety of ways including thumb-sucking, rhythmic movements, or genital touching.

## Relationships

By the age of five, children enter a period of self-discovery in establishing personal relationships with others. The social skills first observed during preschool may become more polished. Children find out about themselves by relating to the other people around them. Relationships form the backbone of this discovery.

The number, quality, and kinds of relationships constantly change during childhood. A peer group will become increasingly important as children spend more time with each other and less time with their families. A peer group gives children the chance to measure the development of their abilities and skills in relation to other children. It also contributes to how children feel about themselves.

As children grow and develop, interactions with parents change. Their struggle for independence versus dependence can be hard for parents to understand. However, throughout the fifth year, the home and family provide an important foundation for relationship-building. In the security of home and family, children know what is expected of them; they sense that they are valued, but can allow their true feelings to show outwardly.

Quarreling among siblings happens in every family group despite the children's ages or the number of family members. Some of the most quarrelsome children are the quickest to defend their brothers and sisters from outside attack. Arguing may be taxing on adults, but it contributes to a child's social development. Even negative interactions can teach a child valuable lessons in defending oneself, standing up for one's rights, and peace-making.

Several characteristics of a five-year-old's relationships follow:

- Many five-year-olds idealize their first teachers. They may "fall in love" with their kindergarten instructor or misinterpret the lessons. Although five-year-olds love their teachers, their closest ties are still to parents.
- One-on-one social interactions are best for five-year-olds. Children easily choose friends of either sex as playmates, but their playmates may change from day to day.
- Five-year-olds are competitive. They have a need to be first, to win, and to be the best. For example, a child may tell another, "*You are a dumb painter,*" or "*You run too slow to be on my team.*"
- Five-year-olds may bribe peers with grand promises. For example, "*If you let me go first, I will bring you gum tomorrow.*" However, by the end of the year, children begin to recognize who will follow through with promises and who is bluffing.
- Nearly every five-year-old reports at some time, "*No one likes me,*" "*Sarah never lets me play,*" or "*Every-*



*one is mean to me.*" These remarks are as apt to be expressions of fear as they are accounts of actual events.

- Young children like to role-play and be picked for special jobs. They are able to make choices regarding activities and friends more easily at this age than one year later.

## Questions Parents Often Ask

**Should five-year-olds be allowed to continue sucking their thumbs?** According to the American Dental Association, thumb-sucking does not damage baby teeth. Most five-year-olds will have outgrown this habit. For those who do not, however, gentle persuasion proves helpful. When the front baby teeth become loose, thumb-sucking can be painful, thus, the behavior will decrease or end altogether. After the permanent teeth erupt, continued thumb-sucking *can* affect the placement and spacing of a child's teeth.

**Will naps be outgrown during the fifth year?** Children have different sleep requirements. Many five-year-olds will no longer be taking afternoon naps, yet some will need up to an hour of rest sometime during the day. A quiet period is recommended for most children this age, whether they sleep or not, since it allows the child time to relax. It is important to observe children carefully and to adjust nighttime schedules as needed. A five-year-old child averages about ten to eleven hours of sleep per night. A busy day might require an earlier bedtime than usual, too.

**Is my five-year-old ready to enter kindergarten?** Since children mature at different rates, there is no particular age when it is best for all children to begin school.

Having a child begin school too early may lead to frustration and early school failure. Several authorities recommend that a child entering kindergarten have the ability to do the following:

- follow simple directions
- complete toileting procedures by themselves
- have some experience in using writing tools (pencil, crayon, etc.)
- make their needs known through language expression
- attend to a task for at least several minutes or until it is complete
- have the ability to work at tasks independently

**Why does my child seem afraid of the dark at bedtime?** The child may still be frightened by the unknown or the imagined. Fear of real objects can be possible also. It seems baffling to parents to observe their five-year-old jumping happily into bed and quickly falling asleep on some occasions, and then crying because the light has been turned off for bedtime on others. Fearful responses to the dark occasionally continue during this fifth year, and at times, beyond. A parent's reassuring words and a night-light can help to comfort a frightened child.

## Parents and Five-Year-Olds

The parents of a five-year-old hold the most important place in the life of their child. It is from the parent, *the child's first teacher*, that children will gain information and seek answers to questions about their world. Some suggestions for engaging your five-year-old follow:

**Listen to your child.** Five-year-olds can be quite chatty, but by listening carefully, parents can better understand how their child thinks in a given situation. Likewise, five-year-olds may need some gentle reminders about being good listeners themselves. Parents who demonstrate good listening skills with their children are more likely to have children who actively listen in social situations with others.

**Talk with your child.** Speaking with your child helps to express, "*You are an important person to me.*" Conversations also help establish long lasting communication habits and strengthen parent-child bonds. Set aside a time each day (away from the TV and radio) when discussions can be held about the day's events and activities.

**Read to your child.** Children enjoy having books read to them. They gain new information, have fun with the

story's characters and situations, and use their imaginations to think about what could have happened. Reading to children teaches them that books are important and that words can be put together to create ideas.

**Provide plenty of time for your child to play.** It is through play activities that children discover their surrounding world. Play time allows a child to freely explore the textures, sizes, shapes, colors, smells, and weights of objects in the child's environment. It is also tempting for adults to overstimulate their children. Activities like swimming, gymnastics, art, soccer, t-ball, language, and music classes may be available in many communities. However, young children need time to develop skills at their own pace. Unnecessary pressure to accomplish several different tasks and succeed at each of them can cause a child to experience undue anxiety or stress.

**Praise and reinforce your child for his accomplishments.** A "*spoonful of sugar*" helps young children feel good about themselves. When a five-year-old's self-esteem is high, he or she will be more likely to attempt more difficult or novel tasks. He or she will also feel less distressed if an attempt is not successful the first time and try again later. The following are examples of ways to praise youngsters for their accomplishments:

- Acknowledge your child for picking up after him or herself, i.e., "Thank you for helping to pick up the books."
- Compliment your child for finishing a task or displaying creativity, i.e., "I like the way you parked your cars in the blue box."

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