



Phew! It's Normal. An Age by Age Guide for What to Expect From Kids – And What They Need From Us

Understanding what our kids are wrestling with and the developmental goals they are working towards will make their more 'frustrating' behaviours easier to deal with. Things will run smoother if we can give them the space and support they need to do whatever it is they need to. Of course, none of this means the total surrendering of boundaries around what's okay and what isn't in terms of behaviour. What it means is responding with greater wisdom, clarity and with more appropriate consequences. Life just gets easier for everyone when we are able to take things less personally.

Here are some important developmental stages and the difficult behaviour that might come with them. You'll often find that their behaviour, though unruly and baffling at times, is completely normal and a sign that your child is flourishing and making his or her way through childhood exactly as they are meant to.

The ages of the stages are just a guide. When checking to see whether your kids are on track, read the stages around the actual age of your child. The progression through the stages is more important than the age at which this happens. As long as kids are moving through the stages, it doesn't matter if they get there slower than other kids.

Infants & Babies (0-12 months)

- Everything will go in the mouth – hands, feet, food, toys, shoes – you name it.
- If they are crying, there is something they need – a sleep, a cuddle, food, changing. They don't yet have the words to communicate, but crying is a spectacularly effective way for baby humans to get big humans to move mountains for them. One of the beautiful things about babies is that they will never ask for more than they need.
- Wary of strangers and might get upset when familiar people aren't close by.
- Babies will stare. They love faces and will stare at faces in real life, in books and in mirrors. Oh to be at an age where staring at other people is socially acceptable – and cute.

The support they need

Babies have an important job to do – they need to learn whether or not they can trust the world and the people in it. For their part, they will work hard to give you the opportunities to show them how safe and secure they are. They might not have much of a vocabulary but they are masterful little communicators when it comes to letting you know when something isn't quite right. Be consistently attentive to their needs so they can feel the world as a safe and secure one for them. Feed them when they are hungry, comfort them when they are scared, cuddle them when they need to be with you. This will form the foundation for their exploration of the world, their independence, their confidence and self-esteem and their relationships.

1-2 years

- Will become more interactive.
- No understanding of intentionality – they see, they do without thinking about why or what it means. For example, when they bite, it is not to hurt, when they grab toys from other kids it's not to cause upset, it's to ... well, everyone knows that things are for grabbing, right. Or eating.
- Will follow their curiosity and will pull things down or apart to see what happens. Ditto with throwing anything onto the floor.
- Not developmentally able to share.
- Might seem bossy and selfish, but keep in mind that anything they are interested in or considers to be theirs will be seen as an extension of themselves. Of course nobody else is entitled to take it!
- Beginning to understand possession, and developing a strong sense of self.
- Two of their favourite words to say, 'Mine!' and 'No!'
- Two of their least favourite words to hear, 'Mine!' and 'No!'
- Will often wake during the night.
- Towards the end of this stage, they may become more defiant as they start to experiment with their independence. May tantrum because they become frustrated by their lack of words and their lack of ability to communicate.
- Tantrums will also be driven by their experience of big emotions (frustration, anger, sadness, shame) that they don't have the words for.
- Will be more likely to play alongside other kids, rather than with them.

The support they need

- Their attention span is still fairly short, so use distraction to direct them away from what you don't want them to be doing.
- When you give them a new rule or direction, it's likely that the old one will be forgotten. Sometimes you will love their short attention span. Sometimes you won't.
- Be positive when you see them doing the right thing.
- Start letting them know the things that aren't okay.
- Ignore the small stuff. There's so much to learn so it's best not to overload them. Let them get used to the important things first.
- Your child will be starting to understand what you are asking but for the sake of your own sweet sanity, let go of the expectation that they will do as you ask. Keep asking and guiding, but don't take it personally if it doesn't happen straight up. Or at all.
- Be kind and gentle when correcting. They are doing their very best with what they have. If you ask for too much you might end up with a more anxious or more defiant or less confident three year old.
- Help them put words to what they are feeling, 'It's upsetting when you have to pack your toys away and you want to keep playing isn't it.'



3 years old

- Will experiment with independence. May lead to tantrums.
- Will want increased control. May lead to tantrums.
- Will become frustrated when disappointed. May lead to tantrums.
- May see an increase in tantrums.
- Will flip between wanting to be independent ('I do it!', or 'by myself') and wanting to be treated like a little person ('carry me' or 'you do it').
- Will form a special attachment to the word 'no' and will practice it often. Even when they might mean 'yes'. (Ahhhh toddlers! Fortunately, evolution has given them a profound capacity for cuteness while they are sleeping. This is important for those catastrophic events, such as when you miss the notification that sandwiches are now to be served as little triangles, not little squares as was previously deemed acceptable. If this happens, just go with it – you'll need your energy for when they realise you haven't bought the toothpaste with Elsa on the tube.)
- Might stutter or stammer.
- Will start to assert control over their environment by wanting to plan activities, do things by themselves, try challenging things.
- Might keep calling you back when they are put to bed.
- Might develop sudden fears and phobias.
- May confuse real and make believe, so may have one or a collection of imaginary friends.
- Still won't understand sharing and will often assert ownership, 'Mine!'.
- Might show jealousy when parent gives attention to other children.

The support they need

- Write this down, 'It won't be like this forever'. Now stick it on your mirror where you'll see it every day.
- Let them know when they do something well. They want to know that you're happy with them and that they're doing okay.
- Be gentle when they get it wrong. Your child wants to do the right thing but has things to do and places to be along the way. Don't come down hard on mistakes – they're still figuring it all out and they have a way to go. Treat mistakes as opportunities to teach them something valuable.
- Don't have too many rules and be consistent with ones that you have. Too many rules and consequences that are all over the place will only confuse them and will set the monkey on your back. If you teach them that sometimes they can get away with it, they're going to keep going. You'd worry if they didn't.
- Use 'no' gently and in moderation. You want to encourage their exploration and experimentation with the world and their place in it. Guide them, but don't take away their initiative. And don't give them any more reason than they have to use it at you.
- Give them the freedom and space to play and encourage their experimentation with physical and imaginative play. Support their efforts to initiate play so they can feel their own capacity to influence their environment.
- Encourage decision making but limit choices ('Would you like to have a bath first or choose your pyjamas first? Would you like to wear the red shirt or the yellow shirt today? Would you prefer corn or avocado with your dinner?' And then, maybe when they're bigger ... 'Would you prefer to make me a tea or a coffee?' Oh let's just indulge the glorious possibility of it all for a moment.)
- Don't feel guilty about taking time out for yourself to recharge. The battles will be easier when you're replenished.
- Have bedtime rituals. Bedtime at this age can be exhausting for everyone. Have a ritual and let it be lovely for both of you – a story, a cuddle, a spray of lavender around the room, a kiss, and the words, 'Love you. Night Gorgeous Boy,' – or something.

4 years old

- Will start to be critical and will define the world in simple terms. Things and people will be right or wrong, good or bad, nice or not nice.
- They will start to realise the power of their words and will sometimes use them to get their way or to control others. Their command of language will still be loose, so they will often back up what they are saying with actions (hitting, pushing, grabbing) or non-verbals (tone, volume, facial expressions, posture/stance).
- Will become competitive.
- Will still blur reality and fantasy sometimes. Might tell lies, extravagant stories, or have imaginary friend/s.
- Still building their sense of self and experimenting with independence, so might be stubborn, defiant and bossy.
- Will do all sorts of things to avoid bedtime.
- Might have bad dreams.
- Might **develop a fear** of the dark or become anxious thought of being separated from parent or caregiver.
- Will start to enjoy playing with other kids rather than simply alongside them.
- Will test their limits with you but will still be keen to please and help you out when they can.

The support they need

- When you set rules, talk to them about why the rules are important. They are curious and developing their ideas about how the world works. It doesn't mean they'll 'get it' straight away, or that they'll comply.
- Keep your requests simple.
- They desperately want to make you happy. Let them know whenever you see good behaviour.
- Don't argue with a four year old. Just don't. They'll out-do you any day and if they don't have the words or a sound argument, they'll just keep asking 'why'.
- When it comes to less-than-impressive behaviour, ask what happened but don't ask why they did it. Asking 'Why did you do that?' will just encourage a lie because the boundary between fantasy and reality in the world of a four year old is very – very – loose.
- When they do something wrong, apply gentle consequences but explain why the behaviour is wrong and that you know they can do better next time. They need to know you believe in them – they will do as you do.
- Be consistent. If you don't think it's always important to enforce a rule, your child will, understandably, think it's not won't always important to follow it.
- Encourage their independence but remember they are still young. Let them be little people when they are stressed or tired.
- Give them lots of kisses and cuddles, even though they are 'big people now.'

5 years old

- Will understand the importance of rules but might divert from the rules when playing. Rules tend to be 'flexible' – for them at least.
- May accuse others of cheating if they don't win a game.
- Will start to show empathy and an understanding that other people might have points of view that are different to their own.
- Will be able to share but might still find it difficult, especially when it comes to their special things.
- Might be afraid of failure, criticism and spooky things like ghosts or monsters.
- Attention span will start to increase which will impact on the type of discussions you are able to have with them.
- Might come across as being an 'expert' on everything.
- Will enjoy joking around and will start to develop 'potty' humour.
- Will be looking to make their own decisions, particularly around what to wear and what to eat.
- If starting at school, might be moodier, more sensitive or more tired than usual. It's exhausting having to sit still and concentrate for long periods.

The support they need

- Encourage anything that will get your child moving, particularly if it is in a group or a team with others. This will help your child to develop important skills like taking turns, getting along with others, working together, negotiating, compromising, and winning or losing graciously.
- Set aside time each day to play with your child or spend one on one time together. This will give your child the opportunity to let you into their world, which will always be one of the best places to be. From here you can get a feel for what is going on in their beautifully flourishing minds.
- Start to expand your child's emotional literacy by naming and discussing feelings.
- Connect rewards to responsibilities. 'How about you help me clear the table and then you can have dessert?'
- Continue to keep rules simple and try not to have too many.