

---

# Understanding Children

## *Fears*



To many parents, children's fears make no sense at all. Nevertheless, to children, monsters lurking in the dark or scary noises coming from the attic are quite real.

Around your child's second birthday, he or she may become frightened by things that did not cause fear before—the neighbor's dog, the dark, the bathtub drain, and loud noises.

Several factors contribute to a child developing fears by age 2. Children between the ages of 2 and 6 have experienced real fear or pain from being lost, injured, or bitten. They also have vivid imaginations and struggle with the idea of cause and effect. A toddler knows something about size and shape, but not enough to be sure that he or she won't be sucked down into the bathtub drain or into a flushing toilet. Older children also are aware of dangers that they hear about or see on TV. It's hard to know what is real and what is not.

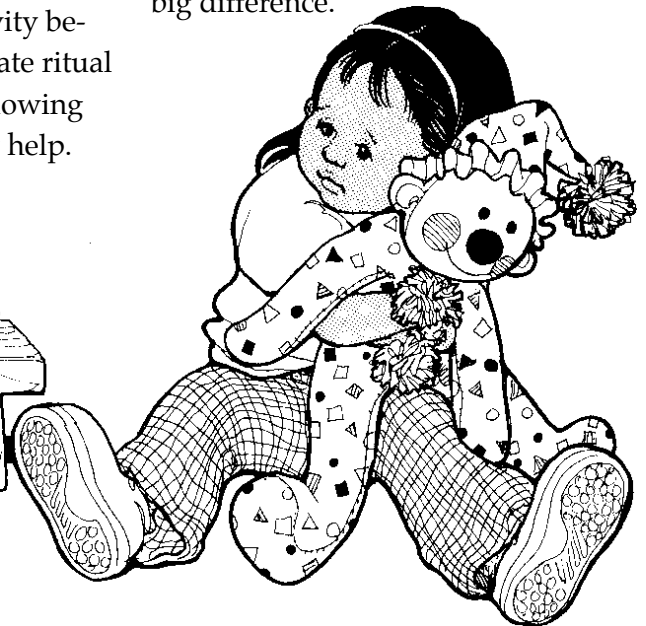
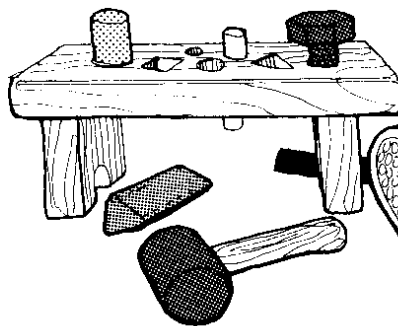
### **Common fears**

#### **Fear of separation**

Toddlers' anxiety about separation is an indication of growth. Before your toddler turned 2, he or she forgot you after you left, and settled down quickly. Now your child worries about and puzzles over your departure.

Always tell your child that you are leaving. Sneaking out decreases trust. It may help to get your child absorbed in an activity before you leave. An elaborate ritual of waving bye-bye and blowing good-bye kisses also may help.

Preschoolers are more self-assured than toddlers, but occasionally experience fears about being separated from a parent when starting a new school or child care arrangement, staying overnight with a relative, or moving to a new home. Ease into new situations gradually. Visiting the new school several times before the first day, or staying with your child for the first day or two can make a big difference.



---

## Fear of baths

Many young children worry about going down the drain with the water. No amount of logical talk will change this. Avoid letting the water drain out while your child is still in the tub or even in the bathroom. If your child seems fearful of water, you might try letting him or her play first with a pan of water, then in the sink, and finally over the edge of the tub (don't leave a child alone in the bathroom).

## Fear of dogs

Dogs are often loud, fast moving, and unpredictable. Many children fear them. Respect your child's fear of strange dogs; a child's instincts may be right. If you wish to introduce your child to a friendly dog, first try sharing pictures of the dog with your child. Next watch the dog from a distance, and finally approach the dog together. You may want to demonstrate how to pet the dog, but don't force your child to pet the dog, too. If he or she refuses, you can try again later.

## Fear of loud noises

Although your toddler loves to pound on a toy drum, the loud noise from a vacuum cleaner or a hair dryer may be very frightening. Even preschoolers can develop fear of loud noises. Try letting your child look at and eventually touch things in your home before you turn them on.

If the fear seems intense, save "loud noise jobs" for times when your child is rested and in a good mood, or better yet, when he or she is not around.

## Fear of the dark

Parents often sheepishly admit that their child sleeps with a night light (or the room light) on. Children can sleep with lights on without damaging their health. Many children sleep with a night light well into the school-age years.

Fear of the dark is usually one of the last childhood fears to be conquered.

Younger children fear monsters and snakes that lurk in the bedroom shadows. Older children may fear burglars and thieves. It is not at all uncommon for children who are 10 and 11 to still use a night light. A gradual reduction of light works for many families, while some children decide on their own to turn lights off. It is important not to rush your child.

## School-age children have fears too

During the school-age years, imaginary monsters disappear, but other fears begin to surface. School-age children often have to deal with bullies, the fear of rejection or embarrassment, and sometimes the reality of being home alone after school. School-agers also are aware of TV and news events that showcase murder, drug abuse, kidnappings, and burglaries.

About one-third of school-age children experience fears that re-occur. Often these children develop strategies that help them cope. One common strategy children use is to turn the TV on when they arrive home so they don't hear scary noises. Other strategies include hiding under beds or in closets, turning all the lights on in the house, and using the phone for comfort and companionship. Older kids often feel embarrassed about feeling afraid and are reluctant to share their feelings. Asking specific questions like "Do you have a special hiding place? Do you walk home a certain way? When you come home



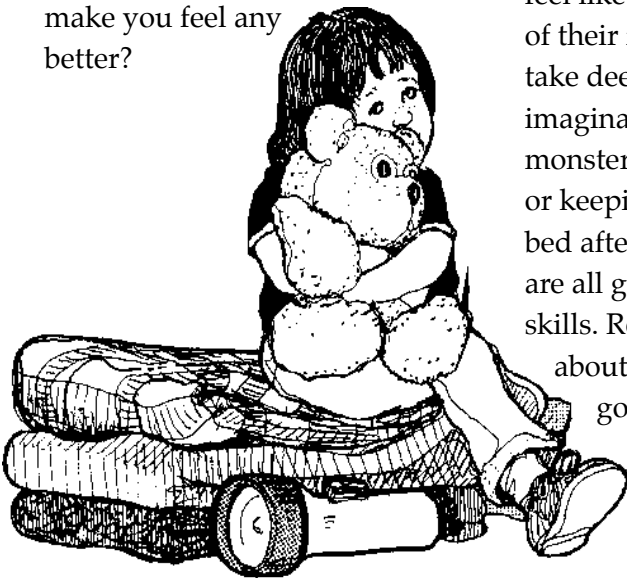
---

do you check the doors?" will help parents identify concerns that their children might have. A very elaborate plan for self protection may indicate that the child is feeling threatened and very afraid.

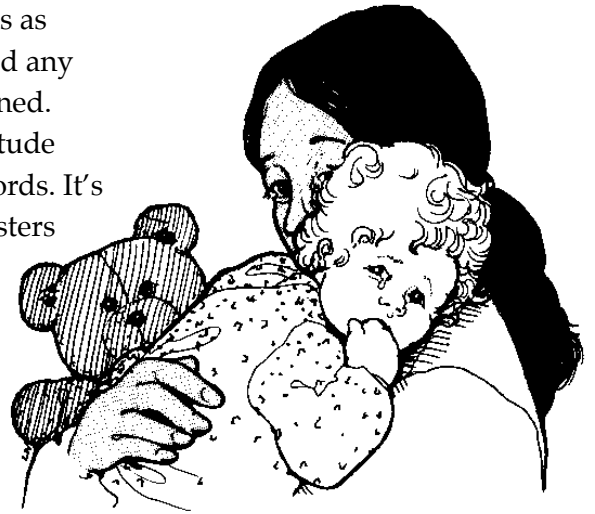
## ■ How parents can help

Your child's fears depend on his or her level of anxiety, past experience, and imagination. If any fears persist, give your child more time and try to avoid events and situations that can trigger them. Your child may be better equipped emotionally to deal with his or her fears in a few months.

- Avoid lectures. It is not helpful to ridicule, coerce, ignore, or use logic. Think back to your own childhood. How often did you hear phrases like: "There is no such thing as a monster," "Don't be such a baby," "There are no lions or bears for miles and miles from here," or "Pet the nice doggie, he won't hurt you." Did statements such as these really make you feel any better?



- Accept your child's fears as valid. Support your child any time he or she is frightened. Use a matter-of-fact attitude and some reassuring words. It's OK to explain that monsters don't really live under the bed, but don't expect your child to believe it. Remember that some fear is good. Children should have a healthy sense of caution. Strange dogs and strange people can be dangerous. As children grow older, they begin to have a better understanding of cause and effect, and reality versus fantasy. They also may gain some first-hand experience with the object of their fear and discover ways to control potentially dangerous situations. Eventually, most fears will be overcome or at least brought under control.
- Show your child how to cope. Young children can learn some coping skills that will help them feel like they have more control of their fear. Learning how to take deep breaths, using their imagination to turn a scary monster into a funny monster, or keeping a flashlight by the bed after lights are turned off are all good examples of coping skills. Reading children's books about scary situations such as going to bed in the dark or having an operation in the hospital also can be helpful. It



is best not to force a child into fearful situations all at once. Often the "shock" method will backfire and intensify the fear. A small dose at a time is the best way to help a child overcome fear.

## ■ A note about nightmares and night terrors

One out of every four children between the ages of 3 and 8 experiences either **night terrors** or **nightmares**. Both of these situations can be unnerving, but are generally short-lived.

*Night terrors* generally occur within an hour of falling asleep. The child awakens suddenly from a state of deep sleep in a state of panic. He or she may scream, sit up in bed, breathe quickly, and stare "glassy eyed." The child also may seem confused, disoriented, and incoherent. Each episode can last from 5 to 30 minutes. A child who experiences night terrors is not aware of any scary thoughts

---

or dreams and is usually able to go back to sleep quickly. In the morning, the child usually doesn't remember waking at all. Night terrors may occur for several years. Generally they go away with time and are not an indication of any underlying emotional problems.

*Nightmares* generally occur in the early morning hours. Children who experience nightmares can often recall the vivid details of their scary dream and may have difficulty going back to sleep. Nightmares will often center on a specific problem or life event that is troubling the child.

Parents can help by remaining calm. Hold your child close and talk in a soft, soothing voice. Comfort and reassure your child. If possible, stay close by until he or she falls asleep. Calm, consistent handling of nightmares or terrors will help your child feel safe and secure.

## ■ Books for children

*Are You My Mother?* P. Eastman  
*How Many Kisses Goodnight?* Jean Monrad  
*The Runaway Bunny*, Margaret Wise Brown  
*Goodnight Moon*, Margaret Wise Brown  
*Bedtime for Francis*, Lilian Hoban  
*Ira Sleeps Over*, Bernard Waler

## ■ Read more about it!

For more information about children and families contact your county extension office and ask for the following publications.

*Understanding Children: Disciplining your toddler*, PM 1529c  
*Understanding Children: Disciplining your preschooler*, PM 1529b  
*Understanding Children: Self-esteem*, PM 1529h  
*Growing into Middle Childhood: 5- to 8-year-olds*, PM 1174a (cost)

Also visit the ISU Extension Web site at:

[www.extension.iastate.edu](http://www.extension.iastate.edu)

### ... and justice for all

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office

of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jack M. Payne, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.



# Understanding Children

## Language development



What could be more exciting than hearing your baby's first word? As that first word grows into a sentence and later into conversation, you will be watching a miracle—the miracle of language development.

As a parent, you are your child's first teacher. When you take time to listen, talk, read, sing, and play games with your child, you help teach important language skills that last a lifetime.

### ■ Age 0 to 6 months Typical language skills

- Cries in different ways to say, "I'm hurt, wet, hungry, or lonely."
- Makes noises to voice displeasure or satisfaction.
- Babbles.
- Recognizes and looks for familiar voices and sounds.

### Nurture your child's language skills

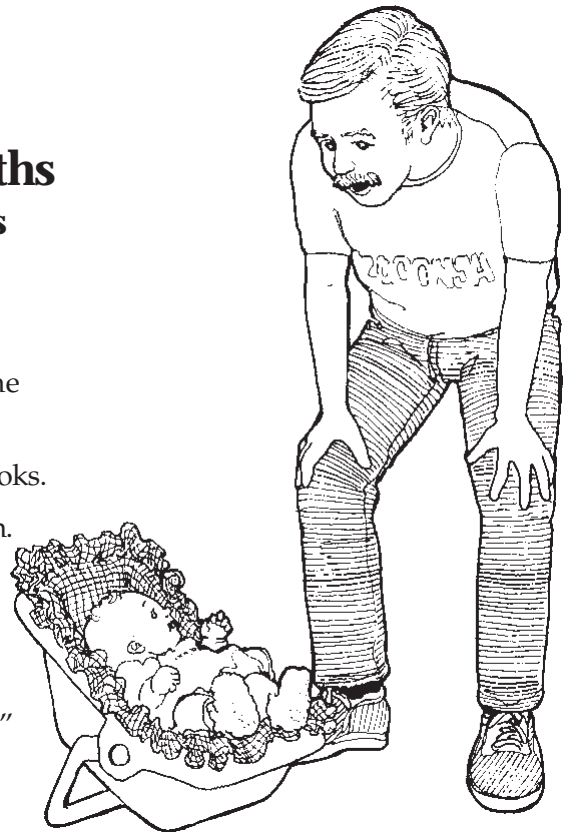
- When babies babble, gurgle, and coo, respond with the same sounds.
- Talk with infants when you feed, dress, or play with them.
- Sing songs.
- Play soft music.

### ■ Age 6 to 12 months Typical language skills

- Waves bye-bye.
- Responds to name.
- Understands names of some familiar objects.
- Shows interest in picture books.
- Pays attention to conversation.
- Says first word (maybe).
- Babbles expressively as if talking.
- Says "Da-da" and "Ma-ma" (maybe)

### Nurture your child's language skills

- Teach babies their names and names of familiar objects.
- Talk to them about what you are doing: "Now I am getting Sara's socks."



- Play peek-a-boo.
- Hold babies in your lap and show them pictures in magazines and books.
- Sing simple songs.

## ■ Age 12 to 18 months Typical language skills

- Identifies family members and familiar objects.
- Points to a few body parts such as nose, ears.
- Follows simple, one-step instructions.
- Says two or more words.
- Imitates familiar noises like cars, planes, birds.
- Repeats a few words.
- Looks at person talking.
- Says “Hi” or “Bye” if reminded.
- Uses expressions like “Oh-oh.”
- Asks for something by pointing or using one word.
- Identifies an object in a picture book.

## Nurture your child’s language skills

- Teach your child names of people, body parts, and objects.
- Teach sounds that different things make.
- Read simple stories.
- Make a scrapbook with bright pictures of familiar objects such as people, flowers, houses, and animals to “read.”

- Speak clearly and simply; “baby talk” confuses children who are learning to talk.

## ■ Age 18 months to 2 years Typical language skills

- Says about 50 words, but can understand many more.
- Echoes single words that are spoken by someone else.
- Talks to self and jabbbers expressively.
- Says names of toys and familiar objects.
- Uses two to three word sentences like “Daddy bye-bye,” “All gone.”
- Hums or tries to sing simple songs.
- Listens to short rhymes or fingerplays.
- Points to eyes, ears, or nose when asked.
- Uses the words “Bye,” “Hi,” “Please,” and “Thank you” if prompted.

## Nurture your child’s language skills

- Read at least one book to your child every day.
- Encourage your child to repeat short sentences.
- Give simple instructions. (“Give the book to Jon.”)
- Read rhymes with interesting sounds, especially those accompanied by actions or pictures.

## ■ Age 2 to 3 years Typical language skills

- Identifies up to 10 pictures in a book when objects are named.
- Uses simple phrases and sentences.
- Responds when called by name.
- Responds to simple directions.
- Starts to say plural and past tense words.
- Enjoys simple stories, rhymes, and songs.
- Uses two- to three-word sentences.
- Enjoys looking at books.
- Points to eyes, ears, or nose when asked.
- Repeats words spoken by someone else.
- Vocabulary expands up to 500 words.

## Nurture your child’s language skills

- Play word games like “This Little Piggy” or “High as a House.”
- Listen, talk, and read with your child every day.
- Teach your child simple songs and nursery rhymes.

## ■ Age 3 to 4 years Typical language skills

- Talks so 75 to 80 percent of speech is understandable.
- Says own first and last name.
- Understands location words like over, under, on, and in.



- Understands now, soon, and later.
- Asks who, what, where, and why questions.
- Talks in complete sentences of 3 to 5 words: "Mommy is drinking juice." "There's a big dog."
- Stumbles over words sometimes—usually not a sign of stuttering.
- Enjoys repeating words and sounds over and over.
- Listens attentively to short stories and books.
- Likes familiar stories told without any changes in words.
- Enjoys listening to stories and repeating simple rhymes.
- Enjoys telling simple stories from pictures or books.
- Likes to sing and can carry a simple tune.
- Recognizes common everyday sounds.
- Identifies common colors such as red, blue, yellow, green.

## Nurture your child's language skills

- Include your child in everyday conversation. Talk about what you are going to do, ask questions, listen.
- Play simple games that teach concepts like over, under, on, and in.
- Read books with poems, songs, and rhymes.
- Encourage your children to repeat favorite stories.

- Give children a few books of their own and show them how to take good care of them.

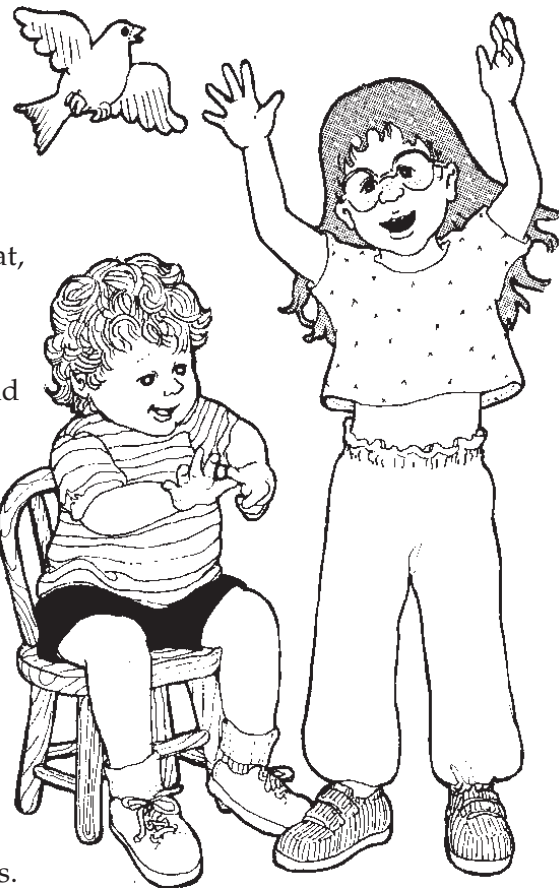
## ■ Age 4 to 5 years

### Typical language skills

- Recognizes some letters if taught and may be able to print own name.
- Recognizes familiar words in simple books or signs (STOP sign, fast food signs).
- Speaks in fairly complex sentences—"The baby ate the cookie before I could put it on the table."
- Enjoys singing simple songs, rhymes, and nonsense words.
- Adapts language to listener's level of understanding. To baby sister: "Daddy go bye-bye." To mother: "Daddy went to the store."
- Learns name, address, and phone number if taught.
- Asks and answers who, what, why, where, and what if questions.
- Names six to eight colors and three shapes.
- Follows two unrelated directions. "Put your milk on the table and get your coat on."
- Likes to talk and carries on elaborate conversations.
- Likes to shock others by using "forbidden" words.
- Loves to tell jokes that may not make any sense to adults.

## Nurture your child's language skills

- Visit the public library regularly.
- Play games that encourage counting and color naming.
- Encourage children to tell you stories.
- Help children create their own story books with magazine pictures or post cards.
- Read books with poems and songs.
- Take turns telling jokes.
- Record your child telling a story or singing a song.



## ■ Age 5 to 6

### Typical language skills

- Speaks with correct grammar and word form.
- Expresses self in pretend play.
- Writes first name, some letters, and numbers.
- Reads simple words.

### Nurture your child's language skills

- Read books with your child every day.
- Encourage pretend play. Help children create props from old sheets, cardboard boxes, and household items. Show children how to label their creations with simple signs like "Shoe Store" or "Tickets."
- Encourage children to put on simple plays and shows.
- Let children help you sort coupons and cut ads out of the newspaper.
- Ask your child to help you locate and find grocery items in the grocery store.
- Check how many store signs your child can identify when you are out running errands.

## ■ Try fingerplays and songs

Can't carry a tune? Don't have a piano? That's not a problem with young children. Kids love to sing!

You may not realize it but you probably know quite a few songs from your own childhood. Some familiar songs you might know are:

- "Hokey Pokey"
  - "Farmer in the Dell"
  - "Mulberry Bush"
  - □ "Hush Little Baby"
  - "Eensy, Weensy Spider"
  - "If You're Happy and You Know It"
  - "Old MacDonald Had a Farm"
- Children also delight in fingerplays like "This little piggy" and "Eensy, weensy spider." You also might like to try the following.

#### Old Owl

An owl sat alone on the branch of a tree (use arm as a branch, raise thumb for owl)

She was quiet as quiet as quiet could be

T'was night and her eyes were wide open like this (circle eyes with fingers and look around)

She looked all around; not a thing did she miss.

Some little birds perched on the branch of the tree, (fingers of other hand fly on tree)

And sat there as quiet as quiet could be

The solemn old owl said "Whoo-whooo-whooo," (wave hand away, fluttering fingers behind back)

And jumped at the birds and away they flew.

If you would like to learn more songs and fingerplays check with your local library for children's records and audio-cassette tapes.

## ■ Read more about it!

For more information about children and families, ask for the following publications from your county extension office.

*Understanding Children—Kindergarten Ahead*, PM 1529n

*Understanding Children—Learning to read and write*, PM 1529e

*Child's Play - Fingerplays Plus*, PM □ 1770b (cost)

*So Alive—Three to Five*, PM 1431a-f (cost)

## ■ Books for Children

*The Listening Walk*, Paul Showers

*The Snowman*, Raymond Briggs

*Baby's Favorite Things*,

Marsha Cohen

*My First Look at Colors*,

Stephen Oliver

*Gobble, Growl, Grunt*, Peter Spier

*Push -Pull, Empty -Full*, Tana

Hoban

*Are You My Mother?* P. Eastman

*Rosie's Walk*, Pat Hutchins

*Caps for Sale*, Esphyr Slobodkina

Written by Lesia Oesterreich, extension family life specialist. Graphic design by Valerie Dittmer King. Illustrations by Lonna Nachtigal.

File: Family life 8

#### ... and justice for all

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many

materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964. Issued in furtherance of

Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jack M. Payne, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa. 2/07





# Understanding Children

## Learning to read and write



Learning to read and write is an exciting adventure for a young child. This adventure can begin in infancy and last a lifetime.

As children learn that books are for reading — not chewing — and that pictures and words are different, they begin to lay the foundation for reading and writing.

### ■ Reading

#### Stage one Exploring

Although parents do not always enjoy it, touching, tasting, and even occasional tearing are favorite activities for infants and toddlers as they first discover books. It is never too early to show books or read to your child. Read to infants and toddlers and provide opportunities for them to explore written material.

Snuggling up in a comfortable lap while listening to a story sets the stage for a lifelong love of

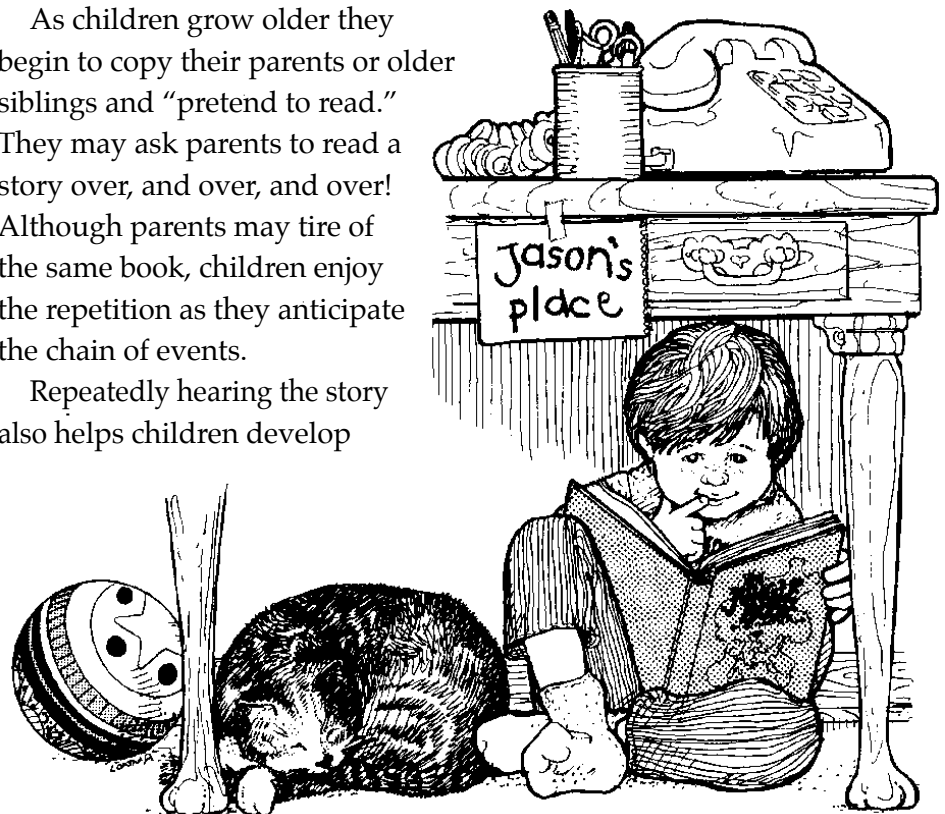
books and learning. Parents also might buy toddler “board books” -- books with pages made of heavy cardboard. Parents also can allow children to play with old magazines.

#### Stage two Repetition and anticipation

As children grow older they begin to copy their parents or older siblings and “pretend to read.” They may ask parents to read a story over, and over, and over! Although parents may tire of the same book, children enjoy the repetition as they anticipate the chain of events.

Repeatedly hearing the story also helps children develop

an understanding of connected events. As children discover that stories have a beginning, middle, and an end, they learn to memorize and retell stories with amazing accuracy. During this stage children become particularly interested



---

in details; if parents skip over a sentence or paragraph in a book, children will protest quite loudly.

## Stage three

### Words as symbols for ideas

During the third stage, children begin to develop a basic understanding that the pictures and words in their book have different purposes. Gradually, they understand that written words are symbols for ideas and thoughts.

## Stage four

### Identifying and matching words

In the fourth stage, children begin to identify and match words. Although they may not really understand the meaning of specific words or sentences, children often will run their fingers along the sentence or point to individual words as the book is read.

Following along with a finger helps children learn that words are placed in sentences from left to right and in a certain order.

## Stage five

### Focus on meaning

In this final stage of development, children begin to focus on the meaning of words. They may stop the story repeatedly and ask "What does this say?" They begin to recognize simple words from their favorite books in other reading materials or places. The word "STOP" on a corner stop sign can cause great excitement.

Reading, listening, and writing are important skills that parents can foster early in a child's life. The following are some suggestions for parents to help their children in the fascinating world of words.

- Establish a regular time every day for reading. Reading a story gives children a sense of what reading and writing are all about.

- Get your child a library card and make regular visits to the library. Take advantage of story times and special events sponsored by your library.
- Read to infants and toddlers. They learn to associate reading with the comfort and security of being held and with the wonderful sound of a parent's voice.
- Preschoolers enjoy hearing the same story over and over again. When reading books that repeat phrases, such as *The House that Jack Built*, give young children an opportunity to participate by letting them read the repetitive parts with you.
- Preschoolers love to "pretend" to read by telling a favorite story they have memorized. Increase your child's involvement by stopping occasionally to ask questions or talk about what is waiting for them at the turn of a page. Questions help children develop important language skills. Try "How many pigs are there? Let's count them together," "Why is the puppy dog sad?" "Can you show me everything in this picture that is red?" "What do you think will happen next?"
- Encourage older children to read aloud to younger siblings, or to read aloud a dramatic piece from a play or a poem. Most children love to put on a good performance.



- Help your child understand the structure of a book by making a “Me” book using a photo album. Collect pictures of family members, friends, favorite animals, toys, etc. Albums with sturdy pages are easy to keep clean and allow you to change pictures easily. You also can use snapshots, post cards, magazines, and catalog pictures.
- Explain the joy and importance of reading regularly. Before children can become readers, they must learn why people read and what people do when they read.
- Invite your children to help you read a recipe as you cook. Read cooking instructions out loud. Point out measurement markings on measuring cups and spoons.
- Show your children how you must read and write when you pay bills. Let them open your junk mail and decide what is to be saved or tossed. Encourage younger children to use junk mail in pretend play.
- Encourage older children to check the weather predictions and read movie commercials or comic strips in the newspaper. You also might want to help your child start a collection of newspaper and magazine stories about sports, nature, science, etc.

- Provide alternative reading materials such as TV schedules, old catalogs, and magazines. When traveling, read out loud traffic signs, road signs, and billboards. Check with your local librarian for a list of magazines written specifically for children.
- Record a favorite book on tape so that your child can read along. Older children frequently enjoy taping books as a gift for a younger child.
- For more information, ask for *Ages and Stages*, PM 1530a-g, at your county extension office.

## ■ Writing

When children write, they begin to focus on the details of written words. The following are some ideas to help you encourage your child’s writing skills.

- Let your children make grocery lists and greeting card lists, record birthdays on the family calendar, and make charts for chores.
- Let your child play with an old typewriter (provide a supply of typing paper).
- Write notes to your child about chores and errands and don’t forget to include a thank you. Encourage them to write letters and thank you notes to friends and family members. Take dictation for a child who cannot write and read the letter back for the child’s approval.
- Let children write with colored chalk on a sidewalk or basement floor.
- Give gifts of pens, pencils, stationery, or a crossword puzzle book.



- 
- Suggest they write for free pamphlets and samples. Supply them with postcards and stamps.
  - Set up a message center at home and let children fill out phone memo pads. Encourage older children to write down messages about their whereabouts or school activities.
  - Buy a diary for older children (promise to respect their privacy).

## ■ Read more about it!

For more information about children and families, ask for the following publications from your county extension office.

*Kindergarten Ahead*, PM-1529n

*Child's Play - Art*, PM 1770a (cost)

*Child's Play - Fingerplays Plus*,  
PM 1770b (cost)

*Child's Play - Pretend Play*,  
PM 1770c (cost)

*Understanding Children: Language development*, PM-1529f

For additional publications, also check the ISU Extension Web site at [www.extension.iastate.edu](http://www.extension.iastate.edu).

File: Family life 8

Written by Lesia Oesterreich, extension family life specialist. Edited by Carol Ouverson and Muktha Jost. Illustrations by Lonna Nachtigal. Graphic design by Valerie Dittmer King.

### ... and justice for all

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA,

Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jack M. Payne, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

---

# Understanding Children



## *Self-esteem*

---

Do you sometimes wish you could slip your child a dose of healthy self-esteem that would last a lifetime? A great idea, but hard to do!

The development of self-esteem is a lifelong task. From our first breath to the last, we are all developing, refining, and changing our sense of self-worth and identity.

Self-esteem involves developing a sense of self-worth by feeling lovable and capable. Children tackle this task differently at different developmental ages.

### ■ Ages and stages

#### **Infants**

Self-esteem for infants is nourished by attending to basic needs and building a sense of trust. When infants cry, they are telling you that they are hungry, sleepy, cold, wet, or lonely. The way you respond to those needs tells your baby a lot. Babies need to be held and cuddled. They need adults

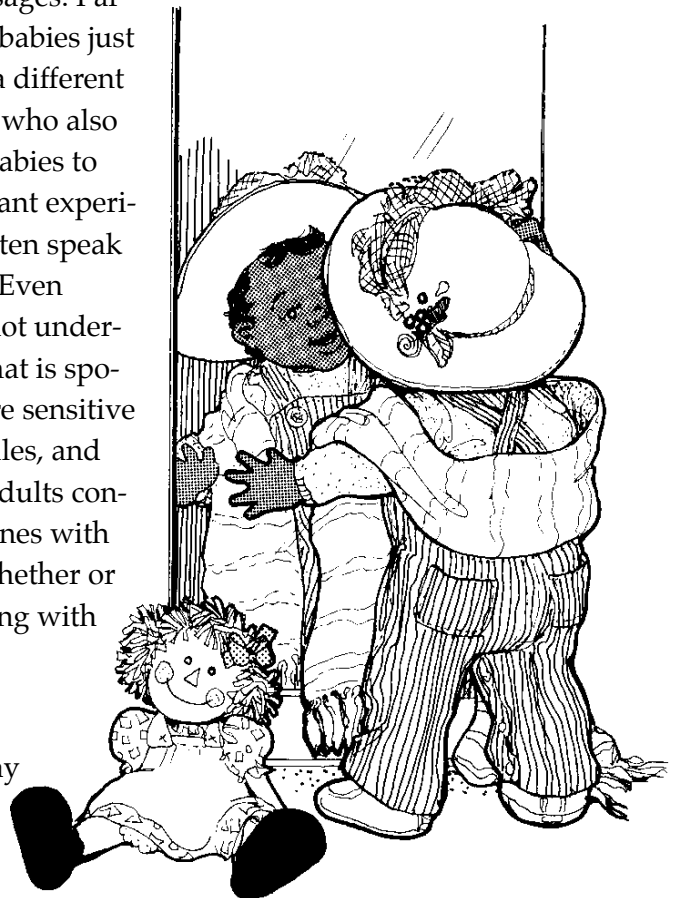
to talk, sing, and play with them. When basic needs are met, babies develop a strong sense of trust and security.

The manner in which needs are met also sends messages. Parents who feed their babies just to quiet them send a different message than those who also interact with their babies to make eating a pleasant experience. Our actions often speak louder than words. Even though infants cannot understand every word that is spoken to them, they are sensitive to tone of voice, smiles, and laughter. The way adults conduct everyday routines with infants tells them whether or not adults enjoy being with them.

#### **Toddlers**

The first step away from babyhood is a step toward independence.

Toddlers establish a sense of self by learning to do things for themselves and by touching, tasting, and feeling everything in sight (even when it is forbidden). At





---

times this new-found independence can make a toddler seem a bit bossy. “No,” “Mine,” and “Me do it,” are favorite words.

Creating a safe environment and letting a toddler explore fosters this sense of independence. When Billy’s parents encourage him to help by pulling off socks or wiping the table (even if it takes longer), they are letting him develop important skills and a stronger sense of self.

## Preschoolers

Preschoolers sometimes seem grown-up. They can feed and dress themselves, they love to imitate adults, and they are eager to please. Self-esteem is tied significantly with learning new skills. As they develop from an energetic 3-year-old into a more competent

5-year-old, they begin to develop an awareness of their own personal interests and skills.

For example, most 3-year-olds are not critical of their art projects. They are more process oriented than product oriented. When they use play dough, they care more about the experience of squeezing, pounding, rolling, and squishing than what they actually produce.

On the other hand, 5-year-olds are much more aware of details and pay more attention to the work of other children. They learn by comparing their work to the world around them. As they strive to polish their drawing skills, it is not uncommon to hear them express a great deal of dissatisfaction. They want their drawing to look like a “real bird” or “real truck.” This dissatisfaction doesn’t necessarily mean that they have poor self-esteem. It just means that they are beginning to learn more about themselves and their personal skills.

## School-agers

As children enter school-age they are very optimistic about their abilities. Often, they also have very high expectations about doing well in school. Such a positive attitude is wonderful. It is helpful, however, to remember that young children have not had many opportunities to dis-

cover their strengths and weaknesses in an academic setting.

It is not uncommon for school-age children to set standards that are frustratingly high or low. Children this age have not had much experience in setting and achieving goals. Also, they do not have the capacity to measure their own strengths and weaknesses.

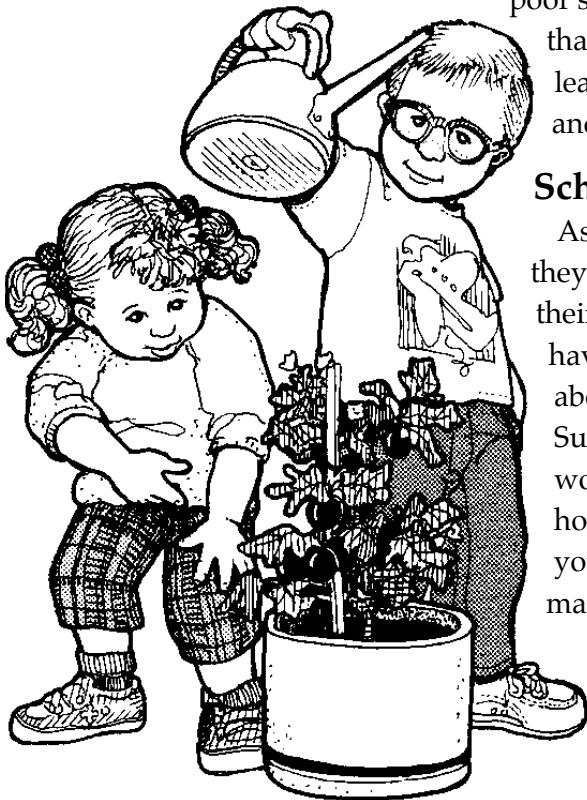
Adults can help by providing experiences that are challenging, yet achievable. Progressively learning new skills and becoming competent in those skills are sure ways to achieve a strong sense of identity and self-worth.

## ■ Tips for parents

### Help your child feel lovable and capable

The two key ingredients of self-esteem are feeling loved and capable. Billy’s parents can foster this in many little ways every day. It is important to Billy that they listen, take his feelings seriously, and spend time alone with him. You also can show your respect and support by allowing your child to make decisions, respecting your child’s possessions, and expressing love with words and hugs.

As children grow older, they begin to discover that they have special talents and interests. Parents can help by providing opportunities for children to



---

experiment with different activities. Children who enjoy sports might be encouraged to try out a variety of activities such as soccer, basketball, softball, or swimming. An interest in music might lead to piano lessons or church choir. A nature buff might wish to join Scouts or 4-H. Remember, the focus is to explore a variety of interests. Try not to push or over-do any one thing at a particular time. Childhood should be a relaxed, stress-free time for discovery and experimentation.

### **One of your most important roles is as a teacher**

Billy's parents take time every day to teach him a new skill. Everyday life skills are so important. Billy learns how to set the table, to cook with Mom and Dad in the kitchen, and to spray and wash the car windows. Look carefully for your child's hidden talents and abilities and nurture them.

### **Be a coach more than a cheerleader**

A cheerleader just cheers. A coach uses praise to foster behavioral growth and to instill self-worth.

Happygrams, stickers, ribbons, and behavioral charts with smiley faces are fun to receive, but they often give children an incomplete message. A better approach

would be to use specific praise. For example, when your child sets the table, you might say "You did such a good job! You put the spoons and forks in the right place and remembered the napkins!" When you notice your child reading to a younger sister you might say, "When you growled you sounded just like a bear! It must be nice for Sara to have a brother who is such a good storyteller." Specific praise means more to a child than a brief "You are great" or a smiley face sticker.

### **Low self-esteem can be good sometimes**

It's OK for children to feel badly about themselves at times, especially when their actions make them feel ashamed or guilty. For example, if Billy steals a piece of candy from a store it is usually healthy for him to feel bad about himself. Feeling guilty can stimulate a child to make amends. Confessing,

returning the candy, paying for the candy, and resolving never to steal again can help bring Billy's feelings of self-worth back into balance.

### **Set a good example**

Taking responsibility for your own self-esteem is important too. Children learn so much by watching and imitating their parents. Talk out loud about your feelings and the ways that you cope with life's problems. For example, a comment such as, "I'm feeling sad today because someone at work said some mean things. I think I'll take a walk after dinner to feel better," shows a child that individuals can have control over how they feel and think about themselves.



---

## ■ A final note

Positive self-esteem is possible for everyone, but it doesn't happen overnight. True self-worth is developed over a lifetime and most of us will experience many highs and lows as we journey through life. A parent's role is to help children feel loved and to teach them the skills they need to feel capable when faced with life's many challenges.



Written by Lesia Oesterreich, extension family life specialist. Edited by Carol Ouverson and Muktha Jost. Illustrated by Lonna Nachtigal. Graphic design by Valerie Dittmer King.

## ■ Children's books

*The Important Book*, Margaret Wise Brown  
*I Know What I Like*, N. Simon  
*Harold and the Purple Crayon*, David Johnson Liesk  
*Just the Thing for Geraldine*, Ellen Conford  
*Howie Helps Himself*, Joan Fassler  
*Ira Sleeps Over*, Bernard Waber  
*Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*, Judith Viorst

## ■ Read more about it!

For more information about children and families contact your county extension office and request the following.

*Ages and Stages*, PM-1530a-i  
*Understanding Children: Disciplining your preschooler*, PM-1529b  
*Understanding Children: Disciplining your toddler*, PM-1529d  
*Growing up Fit: Preschoolers in motion*, PM-1359a  
*Growing into Middle Childhood: 5- to 8-year-olds*, PM-1174a

File: Family life 8

### ... and justice for all

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office

of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964 Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jack M. Payne, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

---



# Understanding Children

## Toys



Fond memories of childhood usually bring to mind a favorite toy. A cuddly doll, colorful crayons, or a special wagon are all childhood favorites.

Toys bring a great deal of joy to children, but they also can be valuable learning tools. Exploring, pretending, and sharing are just a few of the important skills children develop when they play.

Toys don't have to be expensive. Cardboard boxes in the backyard and measuring cups in the bathtub are favorite standards. But parents who do wish to purchase toys may find it helpful to know what toys to choose and which to avoid for children of different ages.

### ■ Infants and toddlers

Infants and toddlers learn about the world through their senses. They are interested in the

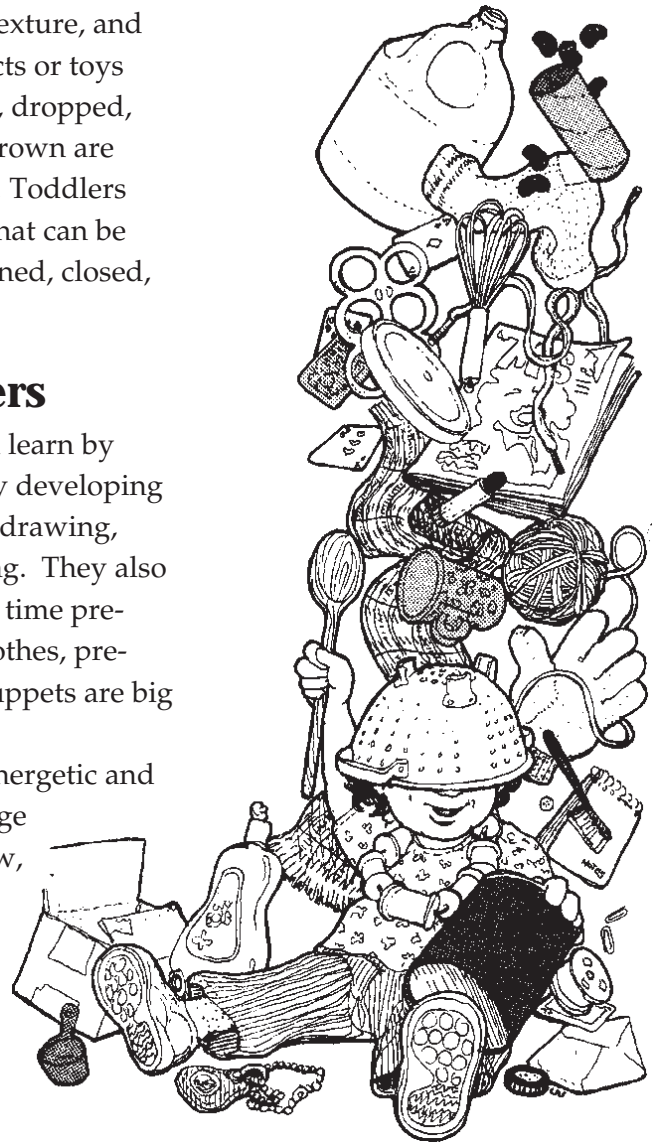
sight, sound, smell, texture, and taste of things. Objects or toys that can be squeezed, dropped, poked, twisted, or thrown are sure to cause delight. Toddlers also enjoy any item that can be stacked, poured, opened, closed, pushed, or pulled.

### ■ Preschoolers

Preschool children learn by doing. They are busy developing new skills. They like drawing, painting, and building. They also spend a great deal of time pretending. Dress-up clothes, pretend "props," and puppets are big favorites.


Preschoolers are energetic and active. They need large balls to roll and throw, wagons to pull, and tricycles to ride.

*(continued on p.4)*



Age	Toys to choose	Toys to avoid	Age	Toys to choose	Toys to avoid
<b>Newborn to 1 year</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• brightly colored objects</li> <li>• pictures within view but out of reach</li> <li>• mobiles that have objects attached with cords less than 12 inches long</li> <li>• unbreakable toys that rattle or squeak</li> <li>• washable dolls or animals with embroidered eyes</li> <li>• stacking ring cones</li> <li>• tapes or records with gentle music</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• toys with parts smaller than 1 ¼ inch (about the size of a half dollar)</li> <li>• toys with sharp edges</li> <li>• toys with detachable small parts</li> <li>• toys with toxic paint</li> <li>• toys with cords more than 12 inches long</li> <li>• stuffed animals with glass or button eyes</li> <li>• balloons</li> </ul>	<b>2 to 3 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• play dough</li> <li>• large crayons</li> <li>• peg boards with large pieces</li> <li>• low rocking horses</li> <li>• sandbox toys</li> <li>• soft balls of different sizes</li> <li>• cars or wagons to push</li> <li>• simple musical instruments</li> <li>• simple dress-up items like hats, scarves, shoes</li> <li>• sturdy riding toys</li> <li>• books that rhyme</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• toys with sharp edges</li> <li>• toys with small removable parts</li> <li>• small objects such as beads, coins, or marbles</li> <li>• electrical toys</li> <li>• lead soldiers</li> <li>• tricycles with seats more than 12 inches high</li> <li>• riding toys</li> </ul>
<b>1 to 2 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• push and pull toys</li> <li>• books with cloth or stiff pasteboard pages</li> <li>• nonglass mirrors</li> <li>• take-apart toys with large pieces</li> <li>• blocks—foam, plastic, or cardboard</li> <li>• nested boxes or cups</li> <li>• musical and chime toys</li> <li>• floating tub toys</li> <li>• pounding and stacking toys</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• small toys that can be swallowed</li> <li>• toys with small removable parts</li> <li>• stuffed animals with glass or button eyes</li> <li>• toys with sharp edges</li> </ul>	<b>3 to 4 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dolls with simple clothes</li> <li>• balls, any sizes</li> <li>• nonelectrical trucks, trains</li> <li>• building blocks</li> <li>• toy telephone</li> <li>• dress-up clothes</li> <li>• sturdy tea sets</li> <li>• plastic interlocking blocks</li> <li>• blunt scissors</li> <li>• play dough</li> <li>• washable markers, large crayons</li> <li>• sewing cards</li> <li>• simple board games</li> <li>• books</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• electrical toys</li> <li>• lead soldiers</li> <li>• flammable costumes</li> <li>• toys with sharp edges or small, removable parts</li> <li>• riding toys used in hilly or inclined driveways</li> </ul>



Age	Toys to choose	Toys to avoid	Age	Toys to choose	Toys to avoid
<b>4 to 5 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• building blocks</li> <li>• simple construction sets</li> <li>• modeling clay</li> <li>• nonelectrical trains, battery operated toys</li> <li>• puppets and puppet theater</li> <li>• finger paint</li> <li>• stencils</li> <li>• board and card games</li> <li>• simple musical instruments</li> <li>• small sports equipment</li> <li>• bicycles with 20-inch wheels and training wheels (all should wear bike helmets)</li> <li>• books</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• toxic or oil-based paint sets</li> <li>• flammable costumes or ones that can be easily tripped over</li> <li>• kites made of aluminized polyester film (this material conducts electricity)</li> <li>• electrical toys (unless battery operated)</li> <li>• shooting toys and darts with pointed tips</li> <li>• fireworks of any kind</li> <li>• lawn darts</li> </ul>	<b>6 to 8 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• construction sets</li> <li>• sled, roller skates</li> <li>• sewing materials</li> <li>• simple camera</li> <li>• printing and stamp sets</li> <li>• paints, colored pencils</li> <li>• sketch pads</li> <li>• kites</li> <li>• battery powered electrical toys (Underwriters Laboratory approved)</li> <li>• jigsaw puzzles</li> <li>• dominoes</li> <li>• board games</li> <li>• simple tool sets</li> <li>• dolls</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• kites made of aluminized polyester film (this material conducts electricity)</li> <li>• shooting toys, and toys with loud noises like cap guns</li> <li>• fireworks of any kind</li> <li>• sharp-edged tools</li> <li>• electrical toys run on household current</li> <li>• bikes or skateboards ridden without helmets</li> </ul>
	<b>8 to 12 years</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hobby materials</li> <li>• arts and crafts materials</li> <li>• musical instruments</li> <li>• sports equipment</li> <li>• camping equipment</li> <li>• construction sets</li> <li>• electric trains</li> <li>• bicycles (26-inch wheels for kids 10 and older)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fireworks of any kind</li> <li>• air rifles, chemistry sets, darts, skateboards, and arrows (unless used with parental supervision)</li> </ul>		

## ■ School-age Children

School-age children feel more grown-up and love activities that lead to “real products” such as jewelry, “designer” T-shirts, or stamp collections. They also develop a keen interest in sports and enjoy having adult-like physical equipment such as softball gloves, tennis rackets, or skates. They have a better understanding of rules and enjoy playing with others. Board games, cards, or dominoes teach math concepts and problem-solving skills.

### Think toy safety

More than 120,000 children are taken to hospital emergency rooms each year for treatment of toy-related injuries. Evaluate toys for your children from the standpoint of safety. The following are some guidelines.



Written by Lesia Oesterreich, extension family life specialist. Edited by Muktha Jost. Illustration by Lonna Nachtigal. Graphic design by Valerie Dittmer King.

- Choose toys appropriate to the child’s age. Some toys intended for children more than 3 years old may contain small parts, which could present a choking hazard for infants and toddlers. Toddlers should never play with any object that is smaller than a half dollar.
- Think BIG when selecting toys, especially for children under age three. Big toys without small parts can be enjoyed by youngsters of different ages. Keep toys intended for older children, such as games with small pieces, marbles, or small balls, away from younger children.
- Keep uninflated balloons out of reach for children under age 6, and discard pieces of broken balloons because of the choking hazard.
- Explain and show your child the proper use of safety equipment such as bicycle helmets. Studies show that helmets can reduce severe injuries from a fall.
- Check all toys periodically for breakage and potential hazards. Damaged toys can be dangerous and should be repaired or thrown away immediately.
- Store toys safely. Teach children to put toys away so they are not tripping hazards.

Periodically check toy boxes and shelves for safety.

Visit the following Web sites for more information.

**American Academy of Pediatrics**  
<http://www.aap.org/>

**Public Interest Research Groups**  
<http://www.pirg.org/toysafety/>

**Toy Manufacturers of America**  
<http://www.toy-tma.org/consumer/parents/safety/4toysafety.html>

**U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission**  
<http://www.cpsc.gov>

### Store toys safely

Toy safety involves choosing the right toy, checking it regularly for damage, and storing it safely. One of the greatest dangers in toy storage is the toy chest with a free-falling lid. Children are injured when the lid falls on their head, neck, or arms. Upright lids in trunks and footlockers pose this kind of hazard.

Open chests or bins, chests with lightweight removable lids, or chests with sliding doors or panels do not present the hazard of a falling lid.

Low, open shelves where toys can be reached easily and put away are a safer alternative and are often preferred by children. Small items such as building blocks or puzzle pieces can be stored in plastic tubs or boxes.

File: Family Life 8

1/04

#### ... and justice for all

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of

Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Stanley R. Johnson, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.