

# How children develop: 3-5 years: Play and safety

Every child is an individual. Every child develops at their own pace, usually through the same stages and milestones, and in the same order. Children grow and learn continually, but not in a smooth flowing pattern. Sometimes they practise skills for quite a while and seem as if they will never move on. At other times they learn many skills very quickly. This fact sheet is a general guide to child development. If you have any concerns about your child's development, seek advice from your child health nurse or doctor.

## Learning through play

Children learn about their world through play. They experiment with all sorts of situations and objects so that they learn how the world works. Between three and five years, children have lots of fun with make-believe play and imitating play. They act out roles of all sorts of characters, such as fire fighters, police officers, teachers and parents, and all of this is great practice for later life. Other children can begin to share in these games as everyone takes a role. Even parents can play minor roles, such as being a customer, a helper or finding play materials. At this age, children love to help with household jobs. These jobs can be turned into play. Children can assist with:

- Unpacking groceries
- Washing, drying and putting away dishes
- Preparing vegetables
- Making cakes and biscuits
- Sweeping and dusting.

## Safety

Although children of this age are improving their skills every day, they still need supervision to stay safe. They need the opportunity to practise their skills, but to do so safely. It is not possible to supervise your child every minute of the day, so you will need to teach your child about safety as they are growing. Children learn best by copying what they see others do. If you follow these steps, you will know when your child can manage safely alone. It is a good idea to explain to them:

- What you are doing
- Why you are doing it in a particular way
- What risk there is
- Allow them to practise it while you supervise.
- You can teach them about safety by:
  - Supervising play in parks and playgrounds and teaching your child how to safely use playground equipment.
  - Taking your child across streets and teaching them safe behaviour in traffic.
  - Teaching your child to use tools and kitchen equipment safely.
  - Keeping dangerous items such as matches and cigarette lighters out of your child's reach.

## Caring for your child

- Always know where your child is, whether indoors or outdoors.
- Never expose your child directly to the sun for the therapeutic treatment of nappy rash, jaundice or other medical conditions.
- Avoid being out in the sun between 10am and 3pm, and seek shade where possible from permanent or portable shade structures including strollers and pram covers.
- Always adopt sun safe behaviours whenever you and your child are outdoors:
  - Slip on protective clothing (long sleeve shirts with a collar, shorts and skirts)
  - Slop on sunscreen (a broad spectrum SPF 30+)
  - Slap on a hat (broad brim or legionnaire style)
  - Wrap on some sunglasses (Australian Standard – AS 1067).

## Around the house

- Fence your swimming pool with an approved fence and self locking gate. Maintain the fence and gate. When visiting places with swimming pools, ensure the fence and gate are adequate. Stay with your child at all times when he or she is in or near any body of water, such as a pool, spa, the ocean, a bath or a wading pool.
- Your child should not be left in the care of an older child, no matter how reliable they seem.
- Store medicines and pills, cleaning aids, pool chemicals and garden poisons - as well as any sharp or dangerous items well out of reach, or in a cupboard with a child resistant latch.

## Out and about

Every time your child travels in a car, they must be in an approved and properly fitted child restraint. Always check where your child is before reversing the car. Never leave your child alone in the car - not even for a minute.

## For more information

If you would like more information on your child's development or you are concerned about your child, contact your local child health nurse. You could also ask at your local library for books on child development. Remember these telephone numbers. You might like to store them in your phone's speed dial:

Emergency 000

Poisons Information Centre 13 1126

## Acknowledgement

This fact sheet is the result of input and effort from many health professionals in Queensland. Their assistance with the content is greatly appreciated.