

The Four-Year-Old Child

The world of the four-year-old begins to expand beyond home and the circle of family. The most intriguing new territory is social. Four-year-olds typically want to be around other children, especially if they do not have siblings. As a result of their new experiences, they may well “bring home” new behaviors and language. Four-year-olds still need regular rhythms and clear boundaries to give them the sense of security out of which to explore new areas and to counter influences that may not be consistent with what is happening at home.



They can participate for longer periods in structured activities, but still need even longer periods of unstructured time. They like to run, can walk longer distances on their own two sturdy legs, and may enjoy riding scooters or balance bikes. The family may have already gone on camping trips, but now the four-year-old can be a fuller participant.

Four-year-olds are ready for more complex stories and are particularly drawn to animal tales, stories with rhymes and repetition, and very simple fairy tales. In Waldorf nursery and preschool classes puppets are often used at story time, which help the children to experience the story more vividly.

While the two-year-old played primarily with things and the three-year-old moved those things around, the four-year-old will still do both and add a dramatic, imaginative element to his or her play. Creative play, especially with playmates, is what nourishes the child's development at this stage. Family life (of both humans and animals), daily activities, and the overcoming of household problems form the greater part of the content of this play. Dramatic play represents a healthy means of processing experiences that the child has witnessed and also of integrating new learning.

Younger fours may need help negotiating differences among play partners and finding “win-win” solutions. At this age, inclusion is an important theme. “There is room for everyone.” “Let's make our house bigger.” Helpful advice that adults can offer or model to playmates is to knock and ask, “May I please come in?” or “I have brought you a present.”

Four-year-olds can be exuberant about everything, especially at home. They often need guidance in how to express themselves in consideration of others. While good manners may have been modeled previously, making this a priority at this stage is important. “Please,” “thank you,” “excuse me,” and “I'm sorry” should be family currency. The

family meal is the perfect time for social learning and modeling care for others and practicing appropriate mealtime conversation.

Predictability in the environment and in daily rhythms were critical during the earliest years and continue to be, but now, clarity of expectations in social situations is equally as critical for the four-year-old child. Again, modeling is the best way to teach good manners and consideration of others. Long-winded preaching falls on seemingly deaf ears.

Challenges for the parents of the four-year-old may resemble those of the previous years and also include some surprises, such as the new behaviors and language learned outside the home or from new playmates.



The increased capacity of the four-year-old to focus may mean that transitions become tricky again. Many of the suggestions delineated in the description of the two-year-old will still be helpful, but parents will naturally need to adjust for the increased language skills and other capacities of the older child. Suggestions about limiting choices given for three-year-olds also hold for four-

year-olds. That the child's cooperative spirit in other settings is not always evident at home is what might seem new and puzzling.

Parents may need to ask themselves if their four-year-old has had enough unstructured, self-directed playtime during the course of the day. This need can be well supported by creating both indoor and outdoor play areas that have an array of open-ended play materials that invite inventiveness and creativity. It may also be that the child is looking for more flexibility and playfulness in communications from adults. That may be a tall order at the end of a long workday, but if parents can find the spark of inspiration, the results can be very rewarding. Modeling good communication and negotiation between parents or with older siblings can also be helpful in building skills in cooperative living.

One expression that engenders socialness is "Let's," for example, "Let's tidy up together." This takes the sting out of the child's having to stop their chosen activity to do something that is necessary for the good of the family. Another expression that seems to work magically is, "You may...(fill in the blank)." What is being communicated here is that the children are being allowed to participate in something important, and doing so is a privilege, especially if adults carry the same feeling inwardly. Parents have found that both

of these expressions can be used very effectively for younger children as well.

Potty talk, name-calling, and images that are developmentally inappropriate, whether from media or other sources, may well find their way into the life of the four-year-old. This requires a calm, even-keeled response by family members. Over-reacting will often escalate unwanted behaviors. Firm and clear statements beginning with, "In our family, we...(fill in the blank)" are the most effective remedy. This requires considerable self-discipline from parents, but is also an unavoidable yet valuable opportunity to clarify and communicate family values.

The gift of parenting a four-year-old is the opportunity to clarify family values and begin creating the family culture.

Links

[L. deForest, ed., *Tell Me A Story*, Introduction \(WECAN 2013\)](#)

[R. Long-Breipohl, *Supporting Self-directed Play*, Chapters 1-3 \(WECAN 2010\)](#)

Books

P. Bradley and B. Patterson, eds., *Beyond the Rainbow Bridge* (Michaelmas Press, 2000)

[L. deForest, ed., *Tell Me A Story* \(WECAN 2013\)](#)

A. Faber and E. Mazlish, *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* (Scribner 2012)

A. Kohn, *Unconditional Parenting: Moving from Rewards and Punishment to Love and Reason* (Atria Books 2006)

[R. Long-Breipohl, *Supporting Self-directed Play* \(WECAN 2010\)](#)

S. Oppenheimer, *Heaven on Earth: A Handbook for Parents of Young Children* (Steiner Books 2006)

K.J. Payne, *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids* (Ballantine Books 2010)