

GROWTH AND YOUR 4 TO 5 YEAR OLD

Kids at this age are still very physical, but they learn in a very focused and less frenetic way than when they were younger. These kids typically gain about 4 pounds (1.81 kilograms) and grow about 2 inches (5.08 centimeters) per year.

They're still developing and refining their **gross motor skills**, using their arms and legs to get around and to get what they want, as well as their **fine motor skills**, using their fingers, hands, and wrists for small movements, like picking up objects. By age 4, kids can usually hop and eventually move on to skipping.

Play becomes increasingly imaginative and is an important part of your child's growth and development during this time. So it's important to make sure your child has time for creative play - whether that means drawing pictures, running around in the backyard, or playing house. This is the stage where you have the opportunity to establish a foundation for healthy habits and a level of activity that will help your child grow well for life.

Although kids come in all shapes and sizes, a healthy child should continue to grow at a regular pace. To monitor development, the doctor will weigh and measure your child at regular check-ups, then plot the results on a standard growth chart to follow over time and compare with other children of the same age and gender.

How Can I Help My Child Grow Normally?

Normal growth - aided by good nutrition, adequate sleep, and regular exercise - is one of the best overall indicators of your child's good health. Be aware, however, that your child's growth pattern is largely determined by genetics. Malnutrition severe enough to affect a child's growth rate is uncommon today in the United States and other developed countries unless the child has an associated chronic illness or disorder. Pushing a child with "short genes" to eat extra food or greater than recommended amounts of vitamins, minerals, or other nutrients will not make him or her taller.

It's important to make sure that your preschooler gets at least 60 minutes of physical activity each day. Kids at this age are naturally active, so it's up to you to encourage that activity and provide a safe environment for your child to explore. One way to do this is to limit the amount of screen time your child has each day. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that kids who are older than 2 spend no more than 2 hours each day watching TV, playing video games, or playing on the computer.

At the Doctor's Office

Despite data collected for growth charts, "normal" heights and weights are difficult to define. Shorter parents, for instance, tend to have shorter children, whereas taller parents tend to have taller children.

Although you may worry if your child isn't as tall as his or her peers, the more important question is whether your child is continuing to grow at a normal rate. If your child's doctor suspects a problem - such as a growth rate that had been normal but has recently slowed - he or she may track your child's measurements carefully over several months to determine whether the growth pattern suggests a possible health problem or is just a variation of normal. If you have any concerns about your child's growth, talk to your child's doctor.

You may be concerned that your child is too small or too heavy. A child who seems heavier than other kids of the same age, gender, and height may be consuming too many calories or not getting enough activity.

Most kids who are very short - at or below the 5th percentile on the growth chart - are usually following one of two normal variant growth patterns. The first is familial (genetic) short stature, in which kids have inherited genes for short stature but will grow at a normal rate, enter puberty at an average age, and reach a final adult height similar to that of their parents. The second is constitutional growth delay, in which kids grow at a normal rate but are smaller than their peers, enter puberty later, and continue growing after their peers have stopped, thus usually reaching a normal adult height.

However, there are medical conditions - like hypothyroidism - that also can affect a child's growth, so talk with your child's doctor if you have a concern.

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The information provided in this handout is a free service to the patients of Family Medicine Associates. Please consult with your Primary Care Physician for further explanation and questions.