

YOU & YOUR PRE-SCHOOLER



for
Women

Preschoolers, children aged three to five, are becoming individuals, learning to express emotions appropriately, playing cooperatively with friends, and getting ready to start school. At the same time, they still think the world revolves around them. What they see is more real than what they are told about.

These things are typical of children as they grow between ages 3 and 5. Which changes do you see in your preschooler?

- learning hundreds of new words and using longer sentences
- becoming aware of the differences between boys/men and girls/women
- being proud of doing things by herself (e.g., getting dressed)
- learning to play with other children, perhaps making mistakes once in a while, like hitting
- having fewer temper tantrums but more aggression directed at others such as same-age friends
- being tearful and anxious sometimes when left with babysitters or a child care provider
- having nightmares and being afraid of things like the dark and monsters in the closet
- needing structure, predictability, and routines, perhaps getting upset when a routine changes
- showing curiosity about how things work, and asking why, why, why
- having a short attention span and being easily distracted
- telling other people, even strangers, about things in your family you would rather keep private
- understanding “yesterday” and “tomorrow” and knowing time is divided into present, past and future

Each child is unique. Pick six words to describe your pre-schooler to someone who does not know him or her (e.g., stubborn, kind, shy, smart, musical, imaginative).

When a pre-schooler sees violence at home, she may feel and think things like this...

- she may worry about her own safety and about being hurt herself
- she may feel responsible because she thinks everything in the world is related to her
- she may hope that a TV character or super hero can come and save her
- she may “tune out” the noise by concentrating hard on something else
- she may worry about being arrested or taken away, if Daddy was arrested or left
- she may worry that Mommy will be taken away by the police if Daddy has been arrested
- she may have nightmares about being harmed
- she may try and make it stop by, for example, yelling at the abuser

What your pre-schooler may be feeling now

Children should not live with violence and getting away from abuse is the best thing you can do. However, pre-schoolers may have feelings and beliefs that seem strange to an adult.

- confusion** – confused why people are saying bad things about Daddy
– confused why Daddy cannot live with us anymore

- distress**
- distress over seeing Mommy upset
 - distress about unfamiliar surroundings in a shelter or new residence
 - distress over the loss of familiar routines and treasured possessions left behind
 - distress over floods of emotions and not knowing how to control them
 - distress you may see when she backslides on things already learned (e.g., using the potty)
- guilt**
- guilt because she blames herself
- grief**
- grief over missing Daddy, and maybe relatives on Daddy's side of the family
 - grief over missing old house/apartment, old friends, toys and possessions left behind
- fear**
- fear of abandonment: if Daddy left me, will Mommy leave me too?
 - fear for personal safety: if it happens again, will I get hurt?

These feelings and beliefs are all normal reactions to an abnormal situation. How do you think your pre-schooler is feeling and thinking now?

What you may be feeling about your pre-schooler...

- betrayal** ...if she misses her father
- confusion** ...if she is not upset about what happened to you
- concern** ...if you worry the violence has damaged her or caused bad behaviour
- guilt** ...if you regret that she does not have a responsible and loving father

Explaining the violence to your pre-schooler

Today is far more important to her than what happened in the past. In fact, she may not seem very upset at all (unless she sees you upset). If the abuser was a man to whom she was emotionally attached, if she saw him as "Daddy," she will experience the same emotions felt by children in divorce. Be careful about blaming her father for the violence or the separation. She needs only to be told in simple terms that Mommy and Daddy have to live apart. When she is older, she will understand things more like an adult does. Today she needs to hear that what happened was not her fault, she is still loved, and Mommy can and will keep her safe.

How to help your pre-schooler

- re-establish (or establish) familiar routines as quickly as possible: this will be comforting
- tell her you love her and give her lots of hugs and attention
- help her believe that nothing which happened between adults was her fault
- take responsibility for the decision to leave (if you and partner have separated)
- don't rely on her for emotional support: seek out friends, family or professionals for that
- have clear rules and consequences so she knows what you expect
- consider finding a high-quality child care program, to give you a break and help her prepare for school
- read a book with her designed for her age level (see page 45)
- teach "hands are not for hitting," hands are for tickling, drawing, making shadow puppets, etc.
- take care of yourself: she needs you